Audio Description and Film Experience: Design of a Reception Study

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Audio Description, Film Language, Film Experience

Film experience is a phenomenological encounter between film and viewer which happens through different modes and channels (verbal and non-verbal, audio and visual) at a sensory, sensual, cognitive and emotional level.

Film language is constructed through cinematic techniques and is expressed in how images are shown and combined between themselves and with the soundtrack. The connotative meaning conveyed by film language is at least as crucial for film experience as images themselves.

We are conducting a reception study on the film experience of persons with visual impairment (VIPS) in Catalonia, testing three AD styles: a conventional AD version and two AD versions where film language is included in the description. The AD styles to be tested can be positioned respectively towards the beginning, the middle and the end of Kruger’s description-narration continuum (Kruger 2010).

Methodological approach to AD design for the reception study

To test our three AD styles, we set up a framework to ensure that our variable – the inclusion of the meaning conveyed by film language – is the only parameter modified in the three AD versions.

Following the new {ADLab} audio description guidelines (Remael et al. 2014) we use a functional approach to characterize the three AD styles to be tested, which implies:

- Functional approach to strategic decisions at a macro and micro level (represented in Fig. 1).
- Target text oriented analysis of the source text (bottom-up matrix of AD related issues, Fig. 3).
- Cinematic analysis of the source text (phased analysis, Fig. 4).

We put this methodology into practice in our reception study using Nuit Blanche, by Arev Manoukian (Spy Films 2009), a short film that takes the spectator into a surrealistic fleeting moment between a man and a woman and where visual effects play a great connotative and aesthetic role (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Frames from Nuit Blanche’s denouement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragment number and name</th>
<th>TCR</th>
<th>Non verbal visual elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Return to reality”</td>
<td>00:03:26 – 00:03:37</td>
<td>She sits at the café; her glass of wine is intact. Her faces are very expressive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3 Bottom-up analysis matrix (last film fragment)

Music and sounds
- Sounds of the street
- Gestures and facial expressions
- Expressive faces
- Cinema techniques
- Dissolution

Spatial-temporal characteristics
- A restaurant (Café de Flore)
- The street, a corporate building
- Intratextual references
- Same place(s) as in the beginning
- Broken glass is sound again

Different AD styles for different audio described versions of Nuit Blanche’s denouement:

Explicitly descriptive AD style:

[…] Their lips come closer. … The woman sits back at the café with her glass of wine. The man stands in front of the corporate building. They look at each other and smile softly.

Descriptive-interpretative AD style:

[…] Their lips are about to touch … but reality takes over. The woman sits at the café while the man stands across the street. They look at each other and smile meaningfully.

Cognitive description and some interpretation of the facial expressions allow the audience to better grasp the meaning and feeling of the scene.

Narrative AD style (audio narration or AN):

[…] As they are about to kiss, the magic ends and reality takes over. They have not moved from their spot, yet the way they smile at each other reveals that, for an instant, the fantasy was real.

Narrative description with interpretation of film language and facial expressions, which narrates rather than describe the scene.

Experimental design, testing and evaluation

Further methodological aspects of the reception study concept reside in the hybrid experimental design, with the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect information.

For the quantitative data gathering, we opted for a semi-experimental design. VIP participants shall complete an online questionnaire after hearing one AD version. Their answers will be contrasted with the data gathered through a survey among sighted viewers who had watched Nuit Blanche without AD (results presented at the 10th Languages and the Media Conference, Berlin, November 5-7 2014).

In order to gather qualitative data on the film experience of VIPS with the tested AD styles, and gain insights into their preferences, volunteers will be invited to participate in focus group interviews.

References: