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**Audio-description Reloaded. An Analysis of Visual Scenes in 2012 and Hero<sup>1</sup>**

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This article explores whether the so-called new “cinema of attractions”, with its supposed focus on visual effects to the detriment of storytelling, requires a specific approach to audio-description (AD). After some thoughts on film narrative in this type of cinema and the way in which it incorporates special effects, selected scenes with AD from two feature films, *2012* (Emmerich 2009) and *Hero* (Zhang Yimou 2002), are analyzed. *2012* is a disaster movie aiming to thrill the audience with action. *Hero* is an equally visual movie but its imagery has an aesthetic purpose. The analysis investigates how space, time and action are treated in the films and the ADs, and how

the information is presented in terms of focalization, timing and phrasing. The results suggest that effect-driven narratives require carefully timed and phrased ADs that devote much attention to the prosody of the AD script, its interaction with sounds and the use of metaphor.

**Keywords:** Media accessibility, audiovisual translation, audio-description, cinema of attractions, film narrative

## 1. Introduction

The success of mainstream fiction films heavy on special effects sparked a discussion in film studies about a decade ago, centring on Wanda Strauven's 2006 book *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Strauven's title refers to *The Matrix Reloaded*, the second instalment of the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), a successful series of science-fiction films that some scholars have viewed as an updated version of the traditional "cinema of attractions" (Gunning 1986). This article begins by looking at film narrative, responding to the question of whether or to what extent this cinema indeed signals the demise of traditional narrative or not. Its main aim, however, is to look at how films that depend more on visual effects than narrative are treated in audio-description (AD) for the blind and visually impaired. Might the AD, which translates visual images into a verbal aural description inserted into the silent spaces between the film dialogues, have to set itself different priorities in order to convey the effect of the visual effects verbally? We give a brief survey of what strategies AD scripts use today with a view to assessing if these are transferable to the spectacular genre under discussion.

We then analyse selected scenes from the described versions of two films exemplifying two very different aspects of the genre: *2012* (Emmerich 2009), a disaster movie with continuous action that aims to thrill, and *Hero* (Zhang Yimou 2002), a martial arts

epic in which effects have an aesthetic function. The article investigates if the AD strategies used in the descriptions of the two films are also *reloaded*, or adapted, to fit the films' different styles. After a preliminary analysis of both audio-described films, we identified one scene from each film on which to focus, selecting features that are considered to be most relevant in audio-descriptions of mainstream cinema because they are usually viewed as central to the filmic narrative (ADI 2002; Kruger 2010), namely *what* is done, *where/when* by *whom*, or how space, time and action are treated; and *how* the information is presented in terms of (a) perception of events or focalization, (b) timing, (c) phrasing. Some concluding remarks and suggestions for future research round off the article.

## **2. Film narrative and the cinema of attractions**

Today's commercial films are often much more creative, experimental and narratively or structurally complex than their predecessors (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985).

However, on the whole, they still adhere to classical story-telling rules or variants thereof.

This means that they usually present highly structured and well-paced stories based on cause-effect relationships in which heroes and antagonists are the narrative-propelling actors, depicting events that occur in a given time and space (Bordwell and Thompson 2008, 95-97).

Branigan (1992, 3) defines narrative as a way of organising "spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle, and end that embodies a judgment about the nature of events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events". For a verbal or visual sequence of events to become a narrative both cause-and-effect logic and verbal and/or visual cohesion are required. In addition, a narrative is not only a finished product written or filmed in accordance with given narrative traditions but also the result of a process of construction undertaken first by its creators and subsequently by its readers or viewers. There are, broadly speaking, two approaches to the study of narrative: the classical, structuralist approach, following Barthes, Genette, Greimas,

Todorov and others; and the more recent cognitive approach, which “can be defined as the study of mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices, wherever – and by whatever means – those practices occur” (Herman 2009, 30). The originator of the narrative takes care of the top-down process of narration. The readers or viewers work their way up from the text to process the narrative using their knowledge of the world and of narrative conventions creating a mental model of “who did what to and with whom, when, where, why and in what fashion” (ibid., 9). As Vercauteren and Remael (forthcoming) also write, “[t]hese mental models are highly complex constructions, containing information on the events taking place in the narrative, on the characters performing and undergoing them, on the spatio-temporal settings in which these events take place, and on the various relations between the events, characters and settings”. For AD, insight both into how authors build stories and into how audiences reconstruct them using more or less explicit cues is essential. However, if AD of conventional films draws on classical narrative logic, what will happen with films in which this narrative logic can only be used to a limited extent by the AD because the focus is on spectacle rather than on storytelling?

The term “cinema of attractions” was originally used to define early cinema in which the “story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema” (Gunning 1986, 65). In cinema before 1906, the urge to fascinate the audience by exhibiting the new possibilities of the medium meant that most films were virtually plotless sequences. This is the case, for example, of Méliès’ famous *Trip to the Moon* (1902). More recently, the term has also been used to refer to a mode of representation found in contemporary special effects cinema. As Gunning writes (1986, 70), “[c]learly in some sense recent spectacle cinema has re-affirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects”.

Schmidt (2011) agrees that postclassical cinema “enhances the aesthetics of visual and auditory effects by means of digitization, computerized cutting techniques, and a strategy of

immediacy that signals a shift from linear discourse to a renewed interest in spectacular incidents”. Paci (2006, 125) argues that even if postclassical cinema remains narrative overall, “narration pauses at a ‘peak moment’ whose function is to address viewers directly and present them with a moment of pure spectacle”. Tomasovic also claims, in his discussion of *Spiderman*, that their fast-paced images, their exhibitionism and their continuous address to the spectator link current blockbusters to the old cinema of attractions. He sees in such cinema a “continuity of strong, dynamic and colourful images, [...] shown without any concern of narrative or chronological organization. These images tell nothing, their dazzling flashes bewilder the eye” (2006, 313). Tomasovic comes to the conclusion that special effects films “propose [an...] exhibitionist system [in which] it is always a question of giving to see rather than of telling” because “the stories do not have much to tell” (ibid., 314). And he concludes that both the thundering soundtrack and the camera's movements “interrupt the process of identification of classical narration” (ibid., 316). Finally, Sobchack (2006, 339) believes that the *raison d'être* of the new cinema of attractions is “to thrill, shock, stun, astonish, assault, or ravish an audience, now less interested in 'developing situations' than in the 'immediate' gratification offered by a series of momentous - and sensually experienced – ‘instants’ to which narrative is subordinated.”

Not all film studies scholars are in agreement, it should be said, and the jury is still out on the degree to which special effects films of the type under discussion actually imply the end of narrative. King (2000, 2), for instance, thinks that narrative “is far from being eclipsed, even in the most spectacular and effects-oriented of today’s blockbuster attractions. These films still tell reasonably coherent stories, even if they may sometimes be looser and less well integrated than some classical modes.” Even though attraction and narration may seem to be pulling a film into opposite directions, they can also cooperate well (Gaudreault 2006, 96). Lavik (2009, 144) contends that “the argument is clearly not that narrative has ceased to exist, but rather that it is somehow not as fundamental to our appreciation of contemporary

Hollywood cinema as it used to be”, while McClean (2006, 5) stresses that effects always derive from a story and that they support the kind of story being told.

On the basis of our personal viewing of special effects films and the more detailed analysis of the two films under discussion, we tend to side with the second group of film scholars: story lines may be looser in special effects films and the effects in themselves attract (and are meant to attract) a lot of attention, sometimes pushing the traditional narrative cause-effect chain into the background, but the story is never completely obliterated and quite often the effects support the story because of the way they have been integrated. This means that the *how* of story-telling that structures the use of special effects, i.e. techniques such as focalization and timing, become especially important for the connection between the effects and narrative progression, or between the *how* of story-telling and the *what, when, where* and *who* of story-telling. However, this may also confirm that the AD of such films will only be able to make limited use of classical narrative logic and its usually redundant narrative clues to reconstruct the visual (narrative) information in a verbal form (see Vercauteren 2012) since the visual (and aural effects) do not only have a narrative function but also a spectacular one. Additionally, some of the seemingly “gratuitous” visual and aural effects must be integrated into the purely aural form of AD as well, if the accessible film is to become a special effects film in its own right, while continuing to provide clues for story reconstruction. We look into these issues in greater detail in our analyses below.

### **3. Guidelines and research into the *what & how* of AD: focalization, timing and language**

Film audiences receive both visual and aural narrative input when they are watching films, and they integrate this input into their previous world knowledge, filmic knowledge and mental representations more generally, to reconstruct the filmic story in their minds (see section 2). When the original visual input is not accessible, as is the case for blind and visually impaired audiences, AD<sup>2</sup> aims to reproduce this content in a verbal aural form. First,

a carefully timed script is written, which is then recorded with voice actors and integrated into the sound track of the film, where it interacts with the dialogue and sound effects while filling the gaps with verbal descriptions of the visual. It is through the combined aural input that the new target audience reconstructs the filmic story.

AD guidelines (Rai, Greening and Petré 2010; Vercauteren 2007) state that the description must cover *what* is happening on screen, *when* and *where* the action is taking place and *who* is involved, reproducing the four key elements from classical (film) narration. Translating images into words entails a selection from what is shown on screen, and models for information selection based on (cognitive) narratology are in development (Benecke 2012; Kruger 2010; Vercauteren 2012).

However, whereas in classical narrative cinema the *how* often tends to dissolve to better show the *what/when/who*, in the cinema of attractions attention is diverted to the visual form of the images, and the *how* is often foregrounded. This means that Thompson's claim that the most fundamental function of film style is to promote narrative clarity may no longer hold, and yet, if the guidelines are to be followed closely, describers are expected to limit themselves to describing only the narratively relevant results of the film techniques when describing *what* is happening on screen, not *how* this is achieved (Thompson 1999, as quoted in Vercauteren 2012, 223).<sup>3</sup> It would seem that for the cinema of attractions the AD covering the *what* of storytelling will have to incorporate more of the *how*, reckoning with both visual and sound effects since the two are inextricably linked (Remael 2012). In fact, a first viewing of our selected scenes indicates that some crucial narrative tools used for the operationalization of the *how* as part of the story itself also ensure that the narrative movement is not completely lost. These tools are focalization and timing. The question then is: can AD rephrase the effects verbally while respecting the narrative's focalization and timing of events, within its own temporal constraints?

### 3.1. Who's looking? Focalization in AD

In narratology, focalization is “a term coined by Genette (1972), [that] may be defined as a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the story world” (Niederhoff 2009, 115). The concept has been the subject of much debate, notably in relation to access to knowledge versus access to point-of-view, i.e. what a character can “know” or “see” at a given point in the narrative. We will adopt the definition given by Jan-Louis Kruger, who sees focalization as referring to

the positioning and orientational restrictions of narration [...], not only WHAT is shown, but from which (audiovisual, psychological, emotional, ideological, etc.) angle, or HOW it is shown. This may include focalisation through an identifiable character or, if not, through the filmic narrative origo” (Kruger 2010, 236)

He adds that, in film, focalization can be more noticeable than in written works because the camera “shows aspects of the fictional world from different (often rapidly shifting) positions” (236). Deleyto (1991, 174) confirms some formal differences in focalization in the novel and in film that are of interest for the present study, highlighting that in film “the relationship between internal focaliser and focalised can be established through editing (eyeline match, shot/reverse shot, subjective shot), framing or mise-en-scene”. Genette’s concept of *zero focalization*, which corresponds to that of the omniscient narrator, will also be used, as will Kruger’s concept of *subjective focalization* (2010, 237), a variant of Genette’s *internal focalization*, in which the narrator/film says or shows only what the characters know or see (Niederhoff 2009, 115).

Since the way in which knowledge is conveyed and distributed through focalization in a given film has an impact on how the sighted audience interprets what is shown and positions



the audience in relation to the fictional world, this must be taken up in the AD (Kruger 2010, 236).

### **3.2. Choosing the right tempo: Timing and narratological time**

Careful timing and interaction between dialogue, sound and the AD track are always crucial, as various guidelines stress. First, the script must be well timed to fit in between the dialogues and other sounds, and later the recording and sound mix must ensure that the AD voice is well integrated into the sound track. This may be even more relevant in films with lots of action that generates noise, or films in which music and sound produce an aesthetic experience in the audience. Most guidelines devote due attention to the importance of the sound mix, but important for our present purposes is that the AD text “should not encroach on dialogue, important or complementary sound effects, or critical sound effects unless really necessary” (Ofcom 2010; see also Mikul 2010; Georgakopoulou 2008).

In timing the AD, the describer must reckon with diegetic narratological time, which also has a rhythm of its own. Vercauteren (2012) explores the different aspects of narratological time that are relevant for the audio-describer, suggesting practical strategies for dealing with them. There is the spatio-temporal setting: the audio-describer must indicate when and where an event is taking place if this is also known to the sighted audience. Temporal relations between scenes must also be rendered since a lot of variation is possible in the order in which events take place, the duration of the events and their frequency, all of which must be communicated if it is narratively relevant. What appears to be missing from Vercauteren’s (2012) account however, is the rhythm of actions *within* a scene rather than only *across* scenes, a time-action feature that may be more central to the functioning of the narrative of the modern-day cinema of attractions relying on thrills than to classical narrative cinema.

### 3.3. Selecting the right words: The language of the AD

Considering the importance of the *how/what* mix in the cinema of attractions, the way in which the narrative is phrased, including the use of similes and metaphors, can be expected to be of major importance in the AD of such films.

Rai, Greening and Petré's 2010 comparative study of AD guidelines in Spain, Germany, France, Greece, the UK and the USA provides a starting point for looking at recommendations on the language used or to be used in AD. In their analysis the authors observe that these guidelines limit themselves to generalizations; for example, they advise describers to opt for a fluent and simple style that ensures listeners will not lose input due to either saturation or lack of information. The description should also be adequate for the target audience and tone of the film, and the use of a rich variety of verbs is recommended, as is the use of specific adjectives and adverbs as long as an excessively subjective perspective is avoided.<sup>4</sup>

ADI's (2002) proposed guidelines are more specific. They consider AD "a literary art form", advising the use of succinct, vivid and imaginative language. They also have a subsection on metaphors and similes, where they offer suggestions on how to use comparisons, and they make recommendations on verbal choices and the use of adverbs/gerunds. ITC (2000) gives specific instructions on the use of descriptive adjectives, adverbs and verbs. Australia and Canada have produced recommendations too but their remarks on writing style remain rather limited. They confirm the trend summarized by Rai, Greening and Petré (2010) (see also Mikul 2010; DVBP 2013).

The Canadian Described Video Best Practices. Artistic and Technical Guidelines (DVBP 2013) have a specific section on visual effects, although recommendations focus on the inclusion of descriptions of colour, dancing and choreography, lighting, setting and branded products. The phrasing to be used when rendering visual effects is not covered. A more general section recommends that descriptions should be created following the style and

tone of the show. The LARSS guidelines (2013) issued by The Los Angeles Radio Service take a very different approach, explicitly advising against using metaphors, similes and similar literary devices on the grounds that AD “is not an opportunity to show off your education or vocabulary.”

Research into the phrasing of AD, as opposed to guidelines based on practice, is limited (Piety 2004). Having studied the language used in four film productions, Philip J. Piety concludes that little is known about the influence of writing style on the effectiveness of AD. Some corpus-based studies (e.g. Salway 2007) are beginning to yield interesting results. Jiménez, Rodríguez and Seibel (2010) present the results of the TRACCE project, in which a tagged corpus of some 300 audio-described films was assembled. An interesting article by Rodríguez Domínguez (2010) analyses how visual poetic language is translated into oral poetic language in three films by Almodóvar. Specific examples are provided of comparisons, hyperbatons and metaphors being used to translate filmic techniques. Other corpus-based research e.g. by Arma (2011) suggests future avenues of investigation. Metaphors would seem to be a key area to look at (Braun 2008) but present considerable challenges because of the difficulties of tagging. Comparisons of ADs in various languages have been carried out by Bourne and Jiménez Hurtado (2005) and Matamala and Rami (2009), but it remains to be seen whether the divergent stylistic choices observed in their analyses in terms of lexicon, syntax and pragmatic coherence are language and culture-related or are more directly linked to the describers’ personal style.

In conclusion, research has shed some light on recurrent linguistic patterns in the AD of films following a classical narrative structure – but specific analyses of the phrasing used in the AD of special effects films have not been undertaken. We aim to make a start with this qualitative analysis of the excerpts from *2012* and *Hero*, exploring how the AD deals with the verbal rendering of the special effects and with the role played by focalization and timing.

#### **4. Audio-describing the cinema of attractions: *2012* and *Hero***

Two scenes from two films that make prominent but contrasting use of visual and sound effects, *2012* and *Hero*, have been selected for the analysis.

##### **4.1 Analysis of the selected scenes**

###### ***2012***

The action scene from *2012* tells the story of a family escaping from a disintegrating city. More specifically, a mother (Kate), stepfather (Gordon) and two children, a boy (Noah) and a girl (Lilly), are rescued by the children's biological father (Jackson) from their collapsing house as a major earthquake hits. Jackson is a chauffeur who has inside knowledge about an imminent tsunami. He has rented a small plane and a pilot to rescue the family. The sequence follows the family's drive from their house to the airport, and consists of three parts. When Jackson arrives at the house where his former wife, children and their stepfather live, the house is shaking and it collapses as they escape, dodging the falling debris. A journey by car ensues through the disintegrating city, with cars, trucks and other objects flying through the air, and buildings and freeways collapsing around them. When they reach the airport, they find that the pilot is dead. The stepfather, an inexperienced pilot, is obliged to fly them to safety.

The attention of the viewer is undoubtedly captured by the spectacular visual and sound effects that render the earthquake and its consequences. However, the destruction is orchestrated along classical story lines and events are organized in accordance with the "rules" of suspense, in the sequence as a whole and in its three constituent parts. In each sub-scene, danger erupts, the protagonists run/drive/fly for safety, but the progressively more formidable effects of the earthquake threaten to block their route out of the house, out of the city and out of the airport. The family, with whom we identify, is the driving force of the narrative, or at least partly so.

The scene combines visual and sound effects showing the breathtaking scale of the destructive force of nature with a simple causal narrative, building up suspense around the actions of the family. The natural disaster, rendered through special effects, becomes their antagonist. Together, antagonist and protagonists propel the story. The villain tries to kill them while the heroes bravely take their fate into their own hands. Hence, in narrative terms, the thrill derives from the family's centrality in a disaster of unimaginable scale. The larger the scale of the destruction represented through special effects, the more remarkable the escape.

In other words, the narrative in this sequence is both subordinated to the effects and supported by them. This means that the AD still has to render the *where, when, what/who* (space, time, action) of the scene, but rendering its *how*, in terms of effects timing and focalization, will be just as essential.

### ***Hero***

The second scene under scrutiny is a highly visual, aesthetic and symbolic one from the Chinese martial arts epic *Hero*. It takes place near and *on* a lake, and depicts a duel between Broken Sword and Nameless. These two warriors are accomplices of Falling Snow, Broken Sword's lover, in a plot to overthrow the King of Qin. At the beginning of the scene, Snow's body lies in state in a small pavilion in the middle of the lake, surrounded by a mountainous and wooded landscape.

This scene combines visual effects showcasing the breath-taking beauty of the scenery and the ballet-like, gravity-defying movements of the warriors with a minimal narrative driven by the question of who will win. This question maintains some degree of suspense throughout the fight, which, however, also has implicit symbolic functions. The choreography of the fight is expressive of the purpose of the warriors, which is not to kill each other but, since they are accomplices, to avoid killing each other. There is no dialogue, but the sound

effects, ethereal music and some paralinguistic features e.g. shouting, weave a web of meaning. Water is an age-old symbol of purification and of life, and in the course of the fight, the warriors douse their swords in the water to the hilt, they slice the surface of the lake with their swords, they run across its surface and dive into it. They appear to be battling with life itself but in the end they do not kill each other. At the same time, martial arts are explicitly presented as an art in the film (in other scenes in the film, the moves of the warriors are likened to music and to calligraphy).

The AD still has to render the *where*, *when*, *what/who* (space, time, action), but rendering the *how* will, again, be just as essential in order to ensure that the *what* of the story comes across since it has become part of that story. The delicate digitized sound effects (e.g. drops of water falling from a sword), the visual beauty of the scenery and the ballet-like movements of the fighters interact to render the reluctance with which the warriors fight and hence the symbolism of the scene.

The following analysis focuses on the way the ADs of the films deal with the key elements of focalization, timing, and phrasing. For reasons of space, our analysis will centre more on examples of focalization and timing in *2012*, more on language and phrasing in *Hero*.

#### **4.2. Audio-describing *how* as well as *where/when*, *what/who*: *2012***

Space and time (*where* and *when*) are two fundamental elements in film narration along with action (*what* is done *by whom* to *whom*). Space in narrative can be simply the site where the action takes place or it can have a symbolic function (Vercauteren and Remael forthcoming). In the present scene, space fulfils both these functions. It is the site where the disaster hits and from which the characters try to escape. It has also become an antagonist. The AD must therefore give it more attention than it would if it were merely the site of the action, which can often just be named. Timing is a central feature of any fight; and time, or the shortage

thereof, co-determines the battle between this antagonist and the protagonists. However, the AD's own timing (see section 3.2) and its temporal constraints limit the extent to which it can reconstruct the interaction between all the (human and non-human) players in the escape.

***Example 1***

AD: The whole house shakes violently. Gordon, Kate and the kids climb under the table. On the TV the press conference is similarly affected.

[AD over sound effects: brakes screeching and other sound effects, unintelligible shouts from the family]

AD: Jackson pulls up outside. Jackson heads indoors. The house rocks unpredictably.

Jackson: Let's go!

Kate: It's safer under here.

Jackson: Get into the fucking car.

Kate: Let's go!

Jackson: Come on, move, move. Quick, quick. Move!

Lilly: Dad, get us out of here!

Jackson: Go, go, go! Come on, let's go!

Kate: My house!

AD: The house collapses. They board the limo as the trees fall up ahead.

In example (1), the first scene of the action sequence, the AD clearly states *where* the action is taking place and narrates *what* is happening, but references to *how* things are seen by the sighted audience remain limited.<sup>5</sup> As the AD says “Jackson heads indoors. The house rocks unpredictably”, the house is already falling apart, flying debris threatening to hit the characters hiding under the table. The AD target audience knows that the family are hiding under a table and can hear the family's screams and the tremendous noise of destruction, but

cannot identify what exactly is happening. The AD is very sparse and the dialogue very difficult to understand, but when the little girl screams “Dad, get us out of here!” and he replies “Go! Go! Go!”, this stands out. When they all run for their lives, the AD says “The house collapses” and “They board the limo as the trees fall up ahead.” However, the house has been collapsing for some time. The process is gradual and continuous, and the combination of visual and sound effects shows that the threat is imminent and ubiquitous. Since the AD is constrained by the dialogues and especially by the continuous noise, it can only select events in order to render the narrative continuity of the scene. It focuses on the family members’ subsequent actions and does not refer to the causes or sources of the sounds. There is an obvious discrepancy between “The house rocks unpredictably” and what is actually happening on screen. The scale of the destruction does become apparent when the AD says “The house collapses”, but its force can only be derived from the sounds. Suspense is maintained into the second part of the scene (the drive through town) through “They board the limo as the trees fall up ahead” (our emphasis), which suggests that more trouble is afoot and indicates that the family have little time. In other words, the pace of the narrative, the time-action feature of the narrative, is suggested. On the other hand, the AD does not incorporate any focalization: the scene is narrated without explicit reference to the perspective of the characters.

In example (2) we move to the third scene of the action sequence, at the airport.

### ***Example 2***

AD: At Santa Monica airport, the light plane pilot lies dead beneath a petrol pump.

Jackson’s limo pulls up.

Kate: Hold my hand. Stay close to me.

Gordon: Come on! Who’s that?

Jackson: Our pilot.



Gordon: Oh jeez. It's our pilot. It's our pilot.

Kate: Gordon, Gordon, you can fly! [more dialogue]

AD: Jackson grabs his case from the limo. A giant fissure wreaks havoc and destruction as it arrows towards the airport. The runway starts to collapse. Aboard the light plane bespectacled Gordon eyes the controls nervously.

Gordon: T's and P's. T's and P's

Jackson: T and P?

Gordon: Temperatures and Pressures.

Jackson: Go!

Gordon: I've gotta do my pre-flight check!

Kate: Let him concentrate, Jackson. He has no experience.

Gordon: Thank you!

AD: The fissure approaches.

Kate: Gordon. Go!

We have picked this example because of the very different interaction between AD and dialogue in this excerpt, which occurs towards the end of the sequence. Again, *when* and *what/who* are clear, as is the time at which the scene takes place within the sequence.

However, in this scene there is a clearer time line to the threat itself: the violent antagonist is depicted as approaching the family's temporary safe haven (the plane/airport). In other words, what drives this scene forward on a narrative and suspense level is that the family must be airborne before the concrete shape which the antagonist has assumed, a giant fissure, reaches them. As the fissure approaches the airport, visual and sound effects show how it destroys everything in its wake. The characters are aware of this and the dialogue therefore carries a lot of the narrative and urgency or timing of the action, as the characters nervously express their concern. The AD, "Jackson grabs [...] [B]espectacled Gordon eyes the controls nervously",

interacts with their talk and confirms this concern. In addition, it tries to render an instance of focalization, as it describes how Jackson “eyes the controls nervously”, and the language of the AD almost literally personifies the fissure, presenting the space as an antagonist that “arrows toward the airport” and “approaches” the family. Overall the AD respects the narrative continuity of the scene, the importance of its timing and the information contained in the dialogues, while describing the space that threatens the protagonists as their antagonist (phrasing) and from their perspective (focalization).

The next excerpt has no dialogue; sound effects and AD carry both the narrative and the effects.

### ***Example 3***

AD: Gordon pilots the plane between tumbling sections of freeway then rolls to the right and flies lower over the collapsing, devastated centre of town. People run helplessly over jagged sections of broken road and pavement. Gordon struggles for height as the street rises. Lilly sobs as people and cars are thrown to their doom below. Kate covers Lilly’s eyes. As the plane dips into the rising canyon, a train arcs overhead, hits the wall and explodes. The plane clears the canyon.

The plane is now airborne, but the threats the antagonist poses remain. Since there is no dialogue, the AD has more time for description, even though this is a relative statement: so much is happening on screen that choices must be made. The AD alternates between the actions of the characters and the actions of the earthquake-antagonist, following the overall internal narrative timing of the scene. We pointed out in section 4.1 that the violent special effects in *2012* are always related to the protagonists, with whom we identify. And it is because of the functioning of such classical narrative features, which both support the effects and are supported by them, that the carefully timed AD works. It continuously makes the link

between the disaster (the effects) and the characters' placement in the middle of them: as "Gordon pilots", "the freeway rolls", as "Gordon struggles for height", "the street rises" and "as the plane dips", "a train arcs overhead". Conjunctions are used to express visual simultaneity. In addition, the AD again incorporates some of the use the film makes of focalization. Sometimes this is done explicitly, when the AD describes accurately how "people run helplessly", and then how Kate "covers Lilly's eyes", reflecting what the family see happening from the plane. Sometimes, such subjective focalization is more implicit, for instance, when "Gordon pilots the plane between tumbling sections of freeway." The AD also contains references to the sound effects which render some of the more visually spectacular events in the battle as in, for instance, "a train arcs overhead, hits the wall and explodes", which is another instance of subjective focalization in that it establishes the point from which this is seen. Conversely, when the plane "clears the canyon", the violent sound effects are replaced by triumphant music, which confirms what the AD has just described. In brief, it incorporates sound effects, describes the visual effects and actions as accurately as possible, and, most importantly, makes good use of the narrative elements of timing and focalization, following the rhythm of the film in as far as its own temporal constraints allow.

All the examples suggest that timing and focalization are important for the visual and sound effects to function narratively in the sequence and that they are therefore equally important for the AD, especially in films of this genre, to allow for audience identification. It is, however, important to keep in mind that the temporal constraints typical of AD and the overwhelming aural and visual input of the film limit its possibilities from scene to scene.<sup>6</sup> Example (1) provided one example; example (4) from the second scene, in which the family is driving across the collapsing city, provides another.

#### ***Example 4***

AD: A giant doughnut sign rolls across the road.

Jackson: We've got to get to Santa Monica airport.

Gordon: We'll take the freeway, it'll be half the time.

AD: The raised freeway breaks in half.

The AD carefully times and selects information, explaining the *what*, if not always the *how* of the special effects, as the last line of dialogue and the subsequent line of AD in this example demonstrates. We know that one escape route has just collapsed but do not know how this has happened. The timing of the AD suggests that the characters see what it is describing, due to its juxtaposition to “We'll take the freeway, it'll be half the time”, but the AD cannot always incorporate the subjective focalization of the characters, nor can it fully render the physicality of the disaster visualized by the special effects.

In the same excerpt, the giant concrete doughnut that falls on to the road is seen both with zero focalization and with subjective focalization from the characters' point of view in the film, since it literally crosses their path. The impact of “A giant doughnut sign rolls across the road” is probably not the same. The fact that the characters see it is no doubt understood but certainly not explicit, and what is also missing is the disproportionate size of the object (“giant” in comparison with the car), its texture, speed and obvious weight. The physicality that the special effects manage to give to the disasters happening around the protagonists and that heightens their impact is salvaged to some extent by the sound effects, but cannot be rendered fully in the linear verbal story told by the AD, even if it chooses its words very carefully. Another difficulty resides in the rendering of the relations between objects and events. For instance, when the AD in example (3) says “As the plane dips into the rising canyon, a train arcs overhead, hits the wall and explodes”, it might be difficult for the audience to visualize where the wall is or what kind of wall the train is hitting.

The phrasing of the AD will be taken up in greater detail in our discussion of *Hero*. Throughout the AD of *2012* the wording aims to render the havoc that the earthquake wreaks,

although the result necessarily remains uneven (see previous paragraph). Example (3) provides an excellent example of the creativity with which the AD describes or narrates the myriad of actions and events on screen, mostly through the use of adjectives or adjectivized verb forms (“tumbling”, “collapsing”, “devastated”, “jagged”, “broken”) and verbs (“rolls”, “struggles”, “sobs”, “dips”, “arcs”). The distribution of the types of words that dominate in the AD of cinema of attractions may well differ from that used in other, more traditionally narrative films, but it is obviously impossible to draw any quantitative conclusions from a few examples. That the diversity in the vocabulary used is crucial and contributes to the AD’s efficiency, on the other hand, is obvious to us. At the same time, due to its use of timing and focalization, as well as the description of space as an antagonist, the narrative movement of the film seems to be more marked in the AD than in the visual version of the film. One underlying reason for this is that the AD cannot describe everything; another reason is the linearity of verbal narration, and yet another the very personification of the earthquake, which comes across more explicitly in its verbal rendering. In selecting what (s)he considers to be the most relevant events in terms of the spectacular narrative of the film, the audio-describer highlights some of the actions of the protagonists and their personified antagonist, rendering the sequence of these actions, their rhythm and focalization in a chronological and logic-driven verbal (and therefore linear) narrative. Redundant visual information that detracts from the story line is not included and the more explicit personification of the earthquake gives anthropomorphic purpose to the violence of nature, which thereby becomes more of a “battle” or “conflict”: one of the basic driving forces of narrative movement.

#### **4.3 Audio-describing *how* as well as *where/when, what-who: Hero***

In *Hero*, the time and place of the action are established by the AD at the beginning of the film. After a brief introductory scene, in which Nameless, the warrior who has supposedly vanquished the King’s three arch-enemies (Sky, Falling Snow and Broken Sword), reports to

the King, the story of how he managed to do this unfolds in three subsequent versions, all told by a different character. Within each of these narratives, events develop largely chronologically with occasional flashbacks. Time and space are always connected and duly identified by the AD throughout the film. For our analysis we have chosen a scene without dialogue, in order to have an example in which the constraints on the AD are limited. Example (5) shows how the AD introduces the site of the scene, places it within narrative time, names the characters that feature in it and devotes ample time to the description of the idyllic surroundings.

### **Example 5**

From the dust-blown desert to a serene lake surrounded by wooded hills. The myriad colours reflected in its unruffled glassy surface. In the lake stands a pavilion, just big enough to shelter Snow's dead body. Broken Sword gazes down at her as the King continues telling his version of events.

This AD precedes a short narrative intervention in which the King's voice is heard in voice-over, explaining that he believes the fight between Nameless and Broken Sword was a staged one (see section 4.1). Then Nameless appears at the lake. Example (6) renders the first half of the scene, transcribing not only the AD but also the sounds that accompany it.

### **Example 6**

AD: Nameless appears at the lake. He and Broken Sword fight, skimming over the water, defying gravity and soaring into the air.

[Sound of something hitting the water followed by the sound of blades hitting each other. A shout from one of the warriors.]

AD: They swoop down towards the lake, slicing the water with their blades.

[Sound of one object, then another, ‘slicing’ water.]

AD: And run at each other across the mirrored surface.

[Sound of something touching the water lightly, shouts.]

AD: Their swords dip into the water.

[Sound of something being ‘dipped’ into the water, accompanied by eerie music.]

AD: Their feet keep spreading ripples in their wake as they skim and fly over the placid surface of the lake.

[Sound of the movement is accompanied by a screaming voice, or a voice expressing physical effort. Repetition of the sound of blades hitting each other violently.]

AD: Again, they dive towards the water dousing their swords to the hilt.

[Sound of swords going into the water.]

AD: From a distance, and framed by a bough of autumn leaves, their twisting and turning looks like the courtship dance of two slender water birds.

[Sound of water splashing and blades touching in the distance.]

The AD pays meticulous attention to the graceful movements of the warriors, now gentle, now violent, describing them as a courtship “dance” rather than a fight. The way in which the AD chooses what to describe and how ensures that the most important sounds are also explained. Whereas in *2012* the sound effects were loud and the sources of the sounds so varied and ubiquitous that it was impossible to pinpoint them all in the description, in this film, a very different type of sound effect is used. The spectator can even hear the drops of water that fall from the warriors’ swords or the light touch of their feet as they skim the water. The AD does not always repeat each sound as it reoccurs, but with each new move of the warriors, it puts words to the sound that movement produces.

In this way, the AD tries to incorporate a sense of delicacy as well as the sounds of the swords hitting each other. It is its poetic language, in combination with the careful timing of

the AD against the sound effects, which allows it to render the “art” element of martial arts and the staged aspect of the fight. This contrasts with what happens in *2012*, where the violence of the battle is topicalized and the AD must focus on inserting itself between extremely loud and ubiquitous sound effects in order to give them meaning. Example (6) shows how AD and sounds alternate in *Hero*, identifying each other. The words that predominate in the description are mostly verbs (“skim”, “slice”, “dip”, “swoop”, “douse”, “twist”, “turn”, “pirouette”, “soar”) related to the warriors and how they interact with the water. There are also adjectives and adverbs (“placid”, “slender”; “violently”). What stands out in this AD, however, are the similes that the describer uses to render the visual effects (see examples 7a, 7b and 7c from various points in the AD of the scene).

### **Example 7**

- (a) From a distance, and framed by a bough of autumn leaves, their twisting and turning looks **like the courtship dance of two slender water birds**.
- (b) The two warriors pirouette through the air **like spinning tops**.
- (c) With an outstretched hand he vaults clear of the surface of the water, tumbling uncontrollably **as if fighting an invisible demon**.
- (d). **In slow motion** in an unearthly aerial tennis match, they swat a drop of water back and forth between their blades
- (e) **Seen from below the water**, they race across its surface.

In other words, the AD devotes as much attention to rendering the visual beauty of the scene in words as to describing what is happening since the two are, indeed, inseparable. Unlike the AD in *2012*, the present AD even resorts to the use of filmic terms now and again (“in slow motion”) in order to render the surreal visual ballet as accurately as possible. It also positions



the audience in relation to the action in a filmic manner, as it renders an example of focalization verbally (“seen from below the water”).

As the AD follows the slow rhythm of the film, the description stresses the often gentle interaction of the swords (death) with the lake (life). The suggestion seems to be that the warriors are performing a kind of calligraphy, a form of art, as they are fighting to save their lives rather than to kill each other. The perspective in the scene changes from close to medium and long shots, from above to under water, but never uses subjective focalization, nor does the AD. On the other hand, the AD does take the varying camera positions into account. The long shots allow the film to display the stunning beauty of the landscape and the relative insignificance of the two warriors and their senseless battle. When the camera moves away, the sound of the swords and of the water also becomes slighter. The AD tries to capture this contrast between the vastness of nature and the tiny figures of the warriors in various instances, e.g. where it compares them to “two slender water birds” (example (6)). Still, as in *2012*, relative proportion may be the most difficult aspect of rendering visual effects in words. The contrast between the grandeur and power of the landscape and the insignificance of the warriors may not come across.

Both in the sequence from *2012* and in the scene from *Hero*, visual effects are very prominent but never completely detached from the narrative. In fact, the narrative component of the lake scene is less pronounced than that of the action sequence from *2012*. However, this does not mean that *Hero* does not have a strong narrative: it is maintained by the voice-over narration, and by visual narrative and dialogues in many other scenes. In the lake scene the narrative slows down (cf. section 2), and that is exactly what the AD also attempts to render.

## **5. Conclusions**

Some scholars view special effects movies as commercial products aiming to engage the audience at the expense of the story, as a “reloaded” version of the cinema of attractions, a

string of special effects sequences without a coherent narrative. Others claim that narration does not disappear in such films, although it can be weaker in the films as a whole, or slow down in some scenes. This is supported by our analysis of the two excerpts from *2012* and *Hero*.

The special effects in our scenes do attract much attention and can stall narrative movement to different degrees, but they are also supportive of the narrative, indeed they become part of the narrative itself. In *2012* “space” becomes an antagonist, in *Hero*, the gracefulness of the warriors’ movements and their interaction with the surroundings slow down the action purposefully and take on symbolic meanings. In addition, the internal action-related timing of the scenes, whether slow or fast, incorporates the effects into the linear narrative flow of the films, whereas the use of focalization positions the characters with respect to the threats or challenges they face and may contribute to identification by the audience. The AD is determined, and its effectiveness possibly limited, by its own temporal constraints, by the necessity for prioritization and by the limits of verbalisation, especially with respect to rendering proportions and spatial layout, but it tries to respect the films’ use of timing and focalization. In this way, the AD too attempts to incorporate the *how* (or “form” in more traditional terms) of storytelling into the *what* (or “content”).

In other words, in many ways the challenges for the audio-description of the cinema of attractions, and related genres, seem similar to those posed by other, more straightforwardly narrative films, but some features appear to become more important. As content and form are more closely linked than ever, at least in the films under discussion, the AD follows suit. The careful selection of descriptive verbs, adjectives and adverbs as well as the richness of similes and metaphors contribute to rendering the threat or beauty of the visual effects and sound effects. Furthermore, the timing of the interaction between effects and character-motivated action within and across scenes is crucial, as is focalization because of the way in which it aims to achieve audience identification.

This study offers a first qualitative analysis that obviously needs to be expanded. It is limited in scope due to the fact that only two scenes have been selected. It can be viewed as a first step towards more complex analyses in which larger corpora are considered. A non-exhaustive list of additional possible research topics includes: the use of figures of speech (similes, metaphors, etc.) in AD, in the so-called cinema of attractions or related genres, the interaction of AD with visual and sound effects, and dialogue, and especially its narrative timing and use of focalization. A comparative analysis of audio-descriptions created by various describers in different languages would also be especially relevant to contrast strategies when faced with visual scenes. All these issues can be approached from a descriptive perspective first but it would also be highly worthwhile to investigate how audiences receive and assess various alternatives. Descriptive research is a start but it should ideally be accompanied by experimental studies testing the effect on actual audiences of an audio-described and possibly “reloaded” cinema of attractions.

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<sup>2</sup> In this article only recorded AD for film (cinema, TV or DVD) is discussed. For other forms of AD see Matamala and Orero (2007) or Orero (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The question of whether or not to use cinematic terms will be covered by the guidelines issuing from the European ADLAB project ([www.adlabproject.eu](http://www.adlabproject.eu)). Romero-Fresco and Fryer



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(2013) have suggested the use of audio-introductions to address film techniques, allowing the AD to focus on the story.

<sup>4</sup> It is outside the scope of this article to go into the (im)possibility of remaining objective when audio-describing films; generally speaking, we hold that “full” objectivity is an illusion in AD as in other contexts.

<sup>5</sup> *When* the action is taking place does not need to be included here because there is temporal continuity with the previous sequence.

<sup>6</sup> Since we are focusing on the AD script, and sound design lies outside our expertise, we cannot go into the impact of the recording and sound mix on how the AD comes across. This would be worth a study in its own right.