

# **Audio description for (postdramatic) theatre. Preparing the stage.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Audio description (AD) is a specific form of media accessibility for all and especially for blind and visually impaired people. The service can be pre-recorded or delivered live. In this article, we focus on live AD for a live performance, more specifically for (postdramatic) theatre, a movement in theatre which brings along specific needs for AD. Given the nature of theatrical signs, AD does not and cannot replace all visual theatrical signs. However, it becomes a sign in its own right. Our hypothesis is that the AD should translate the unique interaction and movement of all the relevant theatrical signs and describe how they affect each other.

The article proposes a different place for AD creation, namely during the production process of the performance. This approach accommodates the integration of directorial input. Eventually, we want this research to produce a useful working document that can serve as a guideline for describers. After explaining the concepts of AD and postdramatic theatre, this paper deals with several methodological challenges specific to the theatrical context, which are further illustrated with examples from the theatre in Flanders today. In the conclusion, semiotics are suggested as an appropriate framework for AD.

## **KEYWORDS**

Audio description, audiovisual translation, accessibility, postdramatic theatre, accessible theatre, adaptation.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper combines the study of two specific cultural phenomena: audio description (AD) and postdramatic theatre, applying in its analysis expertise from both translation and theatre studies. AD serves as a means for making theatre accessible for visually impaired people (VIP), and we focus on the challenges for this particular form of audiovisual translation (AVT) in a circumscribed theatrical context. As Braun (2008: 14) writes:

In a society which relies increasingly on audiovisual content as a source of information, entertainment and education, visually impaired people are at risk of being excluded from socially and culturally important discourses. Audiodescription [sic] (AD), a growing arts and media access service for blind and partially sighted people, tries to reduce this risk.

While the target group of VIP is appreciative of the efforts that are being made, there is still a lot to be done to improve access, to raise awareness of its existence, and to improve its quality. VIP should be able to participate in cultural events without experiencing obstructions, just like their sighted friends and family. Below we detail some of the challenges to overcome in theatre, more specifically in postdrama, and offer some first tentative solutions. A semiotic framework and the cooperation between describer and director are offered as tools to work on a more qualitative description. As an outcome, we reach for the most complete, yet comprehensible and

enjoyable description possible. The point of view from which the research starts is one from theatre studies. The first outlines of a theoretical frame of AD offered by AVT are coloured with theatrical specificities. Theatre has the potential to create meaning within a certain combination of elements or even to talk through silence. Translating this fragile communication between a director and his/her audience calls for a careful approach. In Flanders, at the moment, the service is mostly used as a pre-recorded mode for film and television. About three television shows a year are available in Flanders with pre-recorded AD, two of them required by the government. In Belgium and in the Netherlands there are about fifteen movies with AD available on DVD, and just under fifty ADs for Dutch movies are available online. However, some progress is also being made in the theatre, for example in Ghent and Antwerp, where NTG and Toneelhuis respectively, organise matinees with AD.

This study assembles all performances offered with AD during the 2015-2016 season by Toneelhuis Antwerp and NTGent. The majority of their performances can be labelled as postdramatic. In addition, these theatre houses are the only ones at the moment in Flanders that offer performances with AD on a regular basis. On average, they each offer about five performances with AD per season.

## **2. Audio description for (postdramatic) theatre**

Audio description for the theatre delivers a verbal translation of the visual elements shown on stage, that VIP miss. This can be classified as AD for dynamic art according to Braun (2008). There is a significant difference between the requirements for describing static art, such as paintings and sculptures, and dynamic art. It would seem that the description of dynamic art needs to provide links to modes of expression which go beyond the visual sign, for in dynamic art many more elements are creating meaning. In addition, the translation of visual information also has to be absorbed in the source material. Content, style, atmosphere and timing of the AD all have to match and intertwine with the performance. In brief, in the case of dynamic art, AD may need to be part of the performance rather than function as a sign system that is separated from it.

AD should also be a well-dosed cluster of information that opens up the theatrical experience without overwhelming the audience. Before detailing all that can be included and that can be of importance in the AD as a whole, we must emphasise that choices have to be made in the theatre as well. AD users often compliment describers on the fact that the description was not 'all talking' and that it only described what was needed. It is obviously not feasible to describe every single aspect of a performance, for that would create an overload of information and make VIP actually miss out on the play itself. A recent study by Gert Vercauteren (2016) partly questions how much information in AD is too much information, suggesting that cognitive reception research is required to determine this. In his current research he

uses narratological mental frames, distinguishing the information that is already present in our mind from new information, offered in a given image. He notes that once a mental frame is formed, this information can be considered as present in our mind and does not need to be repeated again. The describer only mentions new or changed information.

Taking the performance as a semiotic given, a collection of sign systems, the risk of the audiodescriber endlessly referring and interpreting is a real one. This is, however, exactly what AD should avoid, and it is our hypothesis that a semiotic approach can be useful if one is aware of this pitfall. Some of the internal interpretations can still be left up to VIP, in much the same way as a sighted audience, to an extent, is granted the opportunity to construct their own meaning. As noted by Aline Remael (2007: 32), during a film's production process the images arise from words, while the production process of AD runs in the opposite direction. This is not necessarily the case for theatre practice, where it is increasingly common that an image is the result of another (existing) image. Expressing those images in words is only a required intermediate step for theatre directors, especially in postdrama. This demands a different approach to AD than the one we know from film or television.

Braun (2008), while talking about AD for dynamic arts, adds that "unlike the description of paintings, the descriptions inserted into films, theatre plays, dance and opera performances need to link up with other modes of expression beyond the visual." The importance of this 'linking up' with the complex cluster of meaningful elements cannot be stressed enough: it touches on the very core of a director's creative task. In the next section, which discusses the non-verbal movement of postdramatic theatre, this connection will be explicated further.

## **2.1 Postdramatic theatre**

Postdrama is a movement in theatre described by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) as theatre that no longer focuses on the dramatic text. The dominant position previously assigned to the dramatic text is no longer valid. In postdrama, dramatic text is just one of the many possible sources theatre can draw from. This implies, furthermore, that the meaning of images, sounds and the way these elements interact carry out a greater meaning-making operation. One of the challenges for describing this kind of theatre is to relativise the weight of spoken words. Where AD goes from visual information to verbal information, postdrama goes about it the other way round. Postdrama moves away from the authoritative position of text. The overall image may or may not include text; either way, the weight of the performance still lies in its visual information.

Up until now, a large part of AD research has focused on how to make a given narrative understandable, for example, using narratological approaches to text analysis and text production (Vercauteren, 2016). David

Herman (2002: 1), for example, uses the concept of mental frames. He says that “story recipients [...] work to interpret narratives by reconstructing the mental representations that have in turn guided their production.” To be able to comprehend a narrative, readers and viewers rely on their own complex linguistic and cognitive structures. Their own acquired knowledge is integrated in an interpretative frame. By moving away from the dramatic text as the origin of theatre, postdrama also distances itself from the importance of narrative structure. This does not mean that narrative comprehension is no longer part of the theatrical experience. It intimates, however, that one can appreciate a performance without being able to rephrase the narrative. One can go to the theatre without feeling the pressure to ‘get the story’ and, if one pleases, should be able to enjoy the performance without getting it, but preferably not the other way around.

Theatre is a multi-sensorial experience that utilises exactly this entangled reception of different impulses. It appeals to all our senses simultaneously. Meaning is formed through the viewer’s construction by which all the signs that reach them are interpreted. Replacing the sense of sight with a verbal expression, AD therefore clearly brings along very specific challenges. Nevertheless, the need to combine AD and postdrama does not have to result in a loss of strength.

John Patrick Udo and Deborah I. Fels (2009: 5) see AD as an artistic element where both comprehension and appreciation are set as goals. The authors experimented with alternative forms of AD for the theatre. In one of the experiments, for example, they tried out an AD written in the first person as if its describer was one of the characters in the play. Though the experiment was appreciated by the users, most of them preferred a more objective description, delivered by an outsider instead of one of the characters. However, the work of Udo and Fels contains experiments and reactions from AD describers as well as AD users. They write about creative AD and give an overview of the working process of describers in the form of the describers’ journals. Exposing the many possibilities of AD opens up the discussion about the existing general, more traditional, guidelines. In the vision of the two authors, AD does not need to describe the sign systems that are already there, instead it can become a sign system in its own right with a very specific relationship to the other clusters of signs. Seen as equal to the other sign systems, AD needs to be aware of how it relates to the other signs. If one sees a performance as an interaction between signs, all signs become valuable. We therefore contend that postdrama in all its specificity asks for a differentiated reading of the current European guidelines for AD such as ADLAB<sup>1</sup> (Maszerowska et al 2014).

Those guidelines state, for example, that no theatrical terms should be used, to avoid disturbing the theatrical illusion. However, VocalEyes, a charity working across the UK which offers some AD guidelines to describers for the performing arts, mentions on their website that an exception to that rule can be made when “[...] the stage *is* a stage for example, or where the play’s designer seeks to draw attention to the set’s theatricality.” Such ‘exceptions’ are increasingly becoming the rule in postdrama. It is more common today that theatre itself shatters the theatrical illusion on purpose.

This can also be noted in the theatrical landscape in Flanders which has mostly followed the postdramatic turn. Big theatre houses programme performances that question the status of the text and it is quite common for all theatrical signs to be used to their maximum capacity.

### **3. Semiotic analysing system**

To analyse the performances of the corpus and discuss AD for theatre more generally, we combine the fields of semiotics and AVT. Semiotics talks about a theatrical performance in terms of sign systems. A sign system is a cluster of signs, meaningful elements, endlessly referring to something else and generating meaning. A model of the construction of theatre signs developed by Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992) helps individuals to construct their own theatre experience. Categorising the verbal and visual information first of all gives a better overview of the overwhelming quantity of information during a performance. It helps one to construct a personal experience. In other words, the model separates signs using light as a physical property from, for instance, signs using the proxemics of the characters. It shows that meaning can be constructed from the activities of the actor, the appearance of the actor, the theatrical space and its acoustic aspects. Those categories are further divided into sign systems such as linguistic, gestic, costume, props, light, music and so on.

We must note, nevertheless, that a purely semiotic approach for analysing performances is undermined by a number of profound flaws that Fischer-Lichte herself acknowledges in her later work. The way signs and sign systems interact with each other is often pushed to the background in semiotics. The overall movement through the performance as a whole is sometimes added as a last-minute comment. This paper, however, is not the place to criticise the field of semiotics, as many others have done.

That is why, here, the semiotic approach will not be used as a model to analyse the residue of a past performance, but to provide a basis for the construction of an AD script. This will prevent the AD from being purely intuitive and ensure that the script deals with a large number of meaningful elements, side by side with the most prominent actions on stage. And, yet, even though Fischer-Lichte (1992: 21) herself says that “linguistic signs can

replace all the other signs possible in theatre,” we must keep in mind that there is a reason why nonlinguistic signs are preferred to or combined with linguistic variants. From the outset, challenges arise when applying the semiotics of theatre to AD as a verbal translation of theatre, since semiotics are used to look at and interpret different forms of art, theatre being just one of them. Even though current studies in theatre semiotics go way beyond the elementary statements on what a semiotic approach is, here it will prove useful to ‘look back at the start’.

Fischer-Lichte (1992: 130-131) talks about the specificity of theatrical signs compared to other aesthetic signs. In real life, signs cannot be replaced by any other sign system. Objects, for example, have a certain function that cannot be transferred to another mode of expression. In theatre an object can be used as the object itself, but it can just as easily be used as something completely different without making any changes to the object itself. “The great mobility of theatrical signs results from this capacity to function as a sign of a sign. [...] A theatrical sign can [...] function as the sign of a sign which may belong to any other sign system at random.” This goes for all sign systems. A “carried meaning” is transferable from one sign system to another. “Every theatrical sign can in this manner fulfill numerous functions and accordingly generate the widest variety of meaning.” AD is considered a form of translation, more specifically a form of AVT. When Willis Barnstone (1993: 16) discusses the poetics of translation, he refers to the origin of the word ‘translation:’ “Translation is the activity of creating a metaphor.” Generally speaking, translation and theatre both create a metaphor. Translation is a metaphor for its original source, theatre a metaphor for real life. They both deliver an interpretation, because director and translator alike impose their own interpretation upon the material.

Translation is traditionally seen as a transfer of meaning between linguistic signs. Postdrama can be seen as a transfer of meaning between signs in a more general way. By linking both activities to the concept of creating a metaphor, AD also becomes part of the creative process of the performance. Barnstone says that in a translation, “the new thought becomes so dominant that it assumes its own authority. What is crucial is the movement of initial thought (a reading of source text) to the new thought (the mental translation).” AD as a form of interpretation is a mental translation of the director’s initial thought and thereby becomes part of the creative process. In applying the previous comments to AD, we were led to the challenge of choosing whether to describe the sign itself or rather what it is referring to. Even though the ‘meaningful references’ are in theory endless, for a spectator the interpretation stops at some point. By providing a large offer of different signs in the AD, VIP can make their own links and give priority to the signs of their choice. Iwona Mazur (2014) highlights in her work that we are expecting the AD to relay more than just the storyline. Therefore it is important not only to describe different signs, but also to mention the

interaction and the bigger movement between signs, making AD, in fact, more than a rendering of the storyline.

When Keir Elam (1980: 32) talks about the semiotic view on theatre, text and language remain very prominent in his work. The section on theatrical communication opens with: "theatrical signification is not reducible to a set of one-to-one relationships between single sign-vehicles and their individual meanings." When talking about theatrical communication, text and 'the meaning of space' are dealt with separately. However, this study suggests that for AD, instead of separating the systems like Elam does, it is more useful to include all elements and focus on their mutual communication. By way of example, one challenge in any kind of theatre adaptation that is not to be overlooked is how to deal with the concept of the body. Different views on theatrical analysis, semiotics being one of them, struggle with 'the body' and the same struggle presents itself when describing a performance. The AD has to find words to talk about a body that already possesses its very own and irreplaceable kind of language. Words can be seen as clear signs while the meaning of a body is always layered. A body always carries unintentional meaning that can be interpreted as meaningful. In theatre, we see both actor and character at the same time. The transformation and tension between actor and character can be highlighted on purpose by the director.

In addition to the complexity of the body, in postdrama it is common for the actor to leave the theatrical frame and question the medium itself. There is a phenomenological and a semiotic body on stage at the same time. Umberto Eco (1997) is one of the semioticians who sees the phenomenological body only as a step towards the semiotic body. He describes it as an 'empty' body that needs to be filled with meaning. The tension between the phenomenological and the semiotic body is important for AD and calls for a certain language to describe body language. Through several talks of mine with directors, it became clear that theatre is not developed as a semiotic given, nor does it need to be incorporated in a theatrical analysis. The director considers the reception of his/her work, but not in terms of semiotic sign systems. Semiotics claims that a sign endlessly refers to something else. Though analysing a play from a semiotic point of view can develop new insights, some clusters of signs can provide the spectator with a basic knowledge that does not call for further interpretation. The director can help the describers to find a balance in their interpretation, as they are often forced to make a distinction between the intention of, on the one hand, unveiling and creating deeper meanings and, on the other, the intention to instill some of the specific motions of the performance into their AD. We will come back to this point when talking about the director's vision.

Given the overload of potentially meaningful elements in a performance, describers feel the need for more structured ways to look at a performance

and guidelines can prove more than useful. It seems logical that since AD provides a specific way to 'look' at a performance, it is also in search of a structured model to guide this 'look.' Semiotics can provide a solution to the question of how to structure the perception of the performance.

#### 4. The director's vision

Many guidelines for any kind of AD point out that the description should remain objective. They ask the describer to talk only about what there is to be seen without giving a further interpretation. In theatre, however, a lot of information gets lost when one follows this guideline too strictly. Sometimes references and interpretation are mandatory to construct meaning. If these references are lacking, the whole performance remains superficial, supported only by the narrative, which may be very tenuous. Of course, allowing users to keep up with the narrative is part of the reason why AD exists. Nevertheless, the description gets a whole other dimension if the describer is willing not only to look at what is being told, but also at how it is told.

If the AD leaves no room for interpretation, then the individual signs have little chance to meet and interact with each other. Sometimes it is simply necessary to describe what a cluster of signs is referring to instead of mentioning the sign itself. In *'Caligula'*,<sup>2</sup> for instance, there is an image that reminds us of the last supper. There is no time to describe the visual information of all the individual elements that make up this reference. It is much more useful to say, right away, what the image is referring to. To make these kinds of references, it is important to include the director in the creation of AD since they may not always be equally obvious. When we accept the fact that there can be room for interpretation in AD, the point of view of the director can be supportive, for his/her view is the most objective form of subjectivity. The director can point out a certain hierarchy in the signs he/she has created that helps to construct the description. When discussing AD for television and film, Pablo Romero Fresco (2013: 218) calls AD an afterthought. He, too, refers to the advantages of including a director during the creation of AD and even suggests manners to make a film more accessible from the start. He points out the remaining gap between the creative process and the creation of AD, reaching the conclusion that AD is part of a vicious circle:

As good as translators may be, the quality of their translations (and thus the overall vision of the filmmaker) inevitably suffers because of this system; at the same time, the structures in place tend to prevent the filmmaker from becoming aware of the problem.

The same point of view can be used to talk about AD for postdramatic theatre.



Incidentally, including the director's vision is not the same as letting the director explain the performance. The director does not need to explain why certain choices were made, nor point out internal references. As was mentioned above, the audio describer has to make a lot of decisions regarding what and how he/she will describe. The director or a member of the creative team can guide the describer through the decision-making process. The visual elements of the performance can be described under the influence of the director's point of view in the course of the production process. This is, in fact, an opportunity for the director to influence the way his/her work is shown to VIP. Udo and Fels (2009: 3) make a similar comment by saying that "live integrated AD gives the director the opportunity to oversee the development and execution of the AD in much the same way as any other aspect of the production including, for example, costumes, props and sets."

The performance and AD can both be seen as forms of translation of the director's idea; they draw from the same source. The director puts his/her own images into words so the artistic team can transform these words in turn into other images. So, simply put, the performance is shaped from image to word to another image. Writing the AD only after the final stage of this process makes it a translation of a translation, whereas we know from translation studies that ideally one starts a translation from the original work. Even though there is no original work in theatre, no clear starting point, the translation can still share a similar origin. If AD is developed during the final transformation from word to image, then it becomes a much closer translation of the director's idea. Barnstone (1993: 47) says in his work that "it may be tautological to claim that the artistic translation exists when, and only when, the translator brings the same art to the translation process as the earlier artist brought to the source text." Even though AD is more a potential expression of an artistic work, rather than being one in its own right, the previous statement does attach a certain artistic value to AD. Maybe it suffices to integrate the AD creation as closely as possible into the artistic process to enhance its artistic value.

Generating awareness of the possibilities of AD with directors can already make a significant difference. Ensuring that directors know that there will be a verbal translation of their work may seem obvious, but it is actually an important first step. If directors are confronted with AD, they are forced to rethink their audiovisual work in terms of language; whilst they probably did their best to find ways to express certain things in other ways than through words, now they are being asked to rephrase those other modes of expression, keeping the same meaning exactly. In fact, the presence of the describer during some moments of the production process would be beneficial, for example in the form of a few preparatory talks between describer and director in the run-up to the premiere. One big advantage of the theatrical context is the fact that the director of a theatrical performance is usually easier to reach than, for example, the director of a movie. In most

cases, a performance takes place close (both in time and space) to where it is created, or, the director is most of the time physically present close to the performance. Bringing about an alteration of the preparation process of AD is, in our opinion, a first step towards a more qualitative verbal description of theatre.

It is important to know how AD nowadays is formalised and how it is received by users. Since AD is considered a part of the creative process in this research, we want to offer a prominent space for the reflection and opinion of both AD users and the creative theatre team, even though today neither the director nor the creative team are included in the creation of AD. In order to make a start with this inclusion, feedback sessions were organised before and after some performances, as the current study builds on the importance of this interaction, the concept of AD and the question of how to implement it in the performance. This question was also submitted to the directors of the plays in the corpus.

## **5. AD for theatre practice in Flanders**

The creation of an AD script for Toneelhuis and NTGent usually starts the night of the premiere or the night of the dress rehearsal. The describers attend and record the performance, making their first notes. Most often, the premiere is staged on a Thursday night and the performance with AD is on a Sunday matinee. This gives the describers a few days to write their script. The material that is put at the disposal of the describers for the writing of the script consists of the director's script, a live performance and a recording of that performance. Under ideal circumstances, the describers attend other programmed performances before the Sunday matinee to rehearse and adapt the script to the timing of the live performance. At both theatre houses, the AD users and their accompanists gather one hour before the start of the performance. This allows time for a technical test of the material, i.e. ensuring all headsets clearly receive the describers' voice. During this hour, a 15-minute live audio introduction (AI) is delivered by the describers. An AI provides the VIP with the framework of the performance. It contains an overview of the program and the credits, as well as a summary of the story. The stage is also described so the VIP can mentally picture it before the actual performance starts. The actors introduce themselves by describing their appearance and their role in the performance. Again, the VIP can create a mental image of the different characters for themselves and link a certain voice to a certain character.

AI has the unique potential of relieving the pressure some users experience in trying to keep up with the AD. Important information that is given in the AI gives the AD some breathing space and prevents an overload of information in a limited amount of time. A couple of minutes before the start of the performance and the AD, a quick summary of the AI is given once again.

## 6. Challenges

We would like to conclude with a few concrete examples that illustrate the challenges of AD for postdramatic theatre. All examples are taken from scenes from the performances in the corpus mentioned above, which includes all the professional theatrical performances mentioned earlier. The examples offer specific illustrations of the challenges discussed above in more general terms and they function independently, i.e., even if one has not seen the performance. A first challenge AD must deal with is the presence of actors on stage. Here, the meaning to be conveyed does not lie so much in the separate actions the character undertakes as in his/her overall presence. In *'De Fietsendief'*<sup>3</sup>, for example, there is a male dancer who is present on stage for almost the entire performance. Even though there are only a few moments where his role is of crucial importance to the narrative, his presence is always an important part of the motion that the director evokes. The dancer stays in the background most of the time, almost unnoticeable in his dark clothes. The main action on stage takes place simultaneously. Therefore it is impossible to describe his dance and the more narrative action at the centre of the stage at the same time. However, the point is not to capture every dance movement, for that is impossible. The point is to make the VIP aware of this shadowy presence. One of the actresses mentions during the AI that the dancer not only plays the small role of the thief, but also expresses the other characters' demons. With this simple clarification, she accounts for his whole presence. The concept of the dancer in the background becomes comprehensible. It gives the describer the luxury to refer to his presence instead of describing all his individual movements.

A prominent challenge relating to mimicry is actually whether or not to describe it. Mimicry in theatre is recognisable most of the time. It rarely gives completely new or different information from what is already present in the rest of the situation or the text; in other words, most of the time mimicry accentuates the information that is already there. VIP are used to supplementing mimicry in their mind according to what a person says or does. After a performance of *'De Fietsendief'*, a blind member of the audience remarked that he could easily fill in when one actor was mimicking another, because their speech was so similar to the speech of daily life. However, this does not necessarily mean that mimicry should be left out of the description in such cases. Just like the use of light, it gives theatre a certain elusiveness, something beside the storyline. Mimicry is a part of the total image, just as much as the words that go with it.

Information regarding the gestic and the proxemic is another challenge that is not automatically included in an AD. The gestic of the body can support or replace language. The proxemic contains gestic signs, but is more about the relation between the characters. In *'Hedda Gabler'*<sup>4</sup> Hedda's gestic

information does not always give the same information as what she is saying at the same time. The physical relation with the men around her, for example, can almost never be deduced from the linguistic signs. At one point, her lover puts her down on the floor and gets closer and closer to her; she continues talking to him as if they were simply sitting at the dinner table. This contrast between language and the proxemic has to be pointed out in the AD.

The cluster of signs regarding light is a challenge that is often only briefly mentioned in AD. Light fulfills a mostly supportive function and is therefore easily incorporated with other signs by mentioning them in the same sentence. Maszerowska (2013: 177) dedicated a paper to light and contrast in audio description, referring to AD for film. First she situates the sign system of light in film studies, adding that it should be described with these studies in mind. With regard to AD, she concludes that "it is safe to say that the rendition of lighting in audio description requires more rigour, consistency and attention. Raising awareness amongst the describers about the variety of functions and set-ups of lighting could prove helpful when drafting future AD scripts." In '*Dit zijn de namen*<sup>5</sup>', the director chose a very well organised pattern and choreography to set down his characters. At one point, five seated figures appear against a sloping bare wall. Their position can be drawn out in lines. The level on which they sit shifts and their pose is mainly mirrored. The image, almost a tableau vivant, is enhanced by a specific use of light. The man who is closest to the audience sits outside of the light and stares at those who are coldly lit, whose shadows are clearly and sharply drawn on the floor. By including the use of light in the description, the AD attains another dimension and becomes more vivid.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has raised important questions about the nature of the verbal translation of a multi-sensorial theatrical experience. The line between the meaning of images that can be translated and the meaning of images that are 'lost in translation' is fascinating. The question of whether there is 'something,' a certain layer in theatre, that cannot be put down in words, therefore arises. More concretely, the present paper points out several challenges for AD for (postdramatic) theatre and proposed to deal with these challenges through the use of semiotics. The basic semiotic view on theatre may help to construct a theatrical experience, i.e. it structures the translation of that experience. Semiotics provide a framework to build the description on. The director gives insight and provides the right bricks to build the AD script, modelling it on the performance. Performance and AD here draw from the same source, with both becoming a close translation of the director's idea. Next to *what* to describe, there is still the question of *how much* to describe. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the quality of AD lies mostly in the choices a describer makes. Some images are wrapped in silence and deserve to preserve this

silence.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that AD can be seen as a theatrical sign in its own right with a specific relation to the other sign systems. It becomes a part of the creation process and a part of the performance as it is staged. More broadly, further research into the idea of adapting the production process of AD, by including the director and enhancing its scope is necessary. Future research will work towards guidelines for the describer from that perspective, using a semiotic structure as a framework for the description. It will attempt to structure the view of the describer and help him/her to have an 'overall' view of the performance. This structure can also include the director's vision, enabling him/her to point out important moments, accents and choices. This way, describers know more precisely what the focal points of each scene are. Udo and Fels (2010) refer in their work to Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl (1985) in which the camera serves as a metaphor for subjectivity: the describer fulfills a similar role as the lens of the camera in film. To us, it follows that the director can be the one who operates the camera.

Even though AD for the theatre is a given in Flanders, there is still a lot to be done. Theatre houses and describers have only very few connections at present and there is no specific training for theatrical AD in Flanders. There are some private courses and there is a course on AD which is part of the more general AVT training at the universities of Antwerp and Ghent. Current research mainly focuses on AD for film and television. It would be interesting to assess the effects of AD in the specific field of theatre and on the style and technique of AD in that context. Udo and Fels (2010: 199) have already underlined the importance of the elaboration of the interaction between a director and a describer. In much the same way as we have shown in the article above, they make a case for including the AD in the creative process of a performance:

Due to the absence of the director from the AD process, describers are forced to work on their own without any directorial input. As such, describers have developed their own understanding of what brings about effective communication; a definition that is likely to be markedly different from that of a director.

Here we must keep in mind that the article deals with AD for television and film, where the director is more difficult to reach than in the case of theatre. In the theatrical context in Flanders, directors are often not fully aware of the AD service provided and more often than not they are open to a conversation with the describer when they realise what impact AD can have. The AD can also be allowed to be more interpretative by making it a part of the creative process. It can then be seen as a sign system in its own right with a very specific relationship to theatre sign systems. By making AD part of the creative process, it becomes a translation of what the director wants to tell instead of a translation of what has already been told.

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### Biographies

**Hanne Roofthoof** started a one year pilot study in August 2015 on audio description for post-dramatic theatre, financed by the University of Antwerp. A follow-up study started in 2017 and focusses on audio description and audio introduction for contemporary theatre. She is currently preparing a PhD at the Departements of Theatre, Film and Literature Studies and of Applied Linguistics/Translators and Interpreters.



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**Prof. Dr. Aline Remael** (TricS research group) is Department Chair, and Professor of Translation Theory, Interpreting and Audiovisual Translation at the Department of Applied Linguistics/Translators and Interpreters, UAntwerp. Her main research interests and publications are in AVT/media accessibility, including AD and live subtitling with speech recognition. She was a partner (2012-2014) in the European ADLAB-project and currently a partner in the Erasmus+ ACT project (Accessible Culture and Training). She is a member of the TransMedia research group.



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**Luk Van den Dries** is Full Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). His research deals with contemporary theatre, with a focus on postdramatic theatre. He was editor of the Belgian theatre magazine *Etcetera*, organiser of the Flemish-Dutch Theatre festival, president of the jury of the Flemish-Dutch Theatre festival and president of the Flemish Arts Council. He co-founded the postgraduate academy in theatre Apass and the arts centre for starting theatre artists in Antwerp De Theatermaker. He is co-convener of the working group Les processus de création (International Federation of Theatre Research). His latest book publications are (eds with Thomas Crombez) *Mass Theatre in Interwar Europe* (Kadoc 2014); *Het geopende lichaam. Verzamelde opstellen over Jan Fabre* (De Bezige Bij 2014); (eds with Thomas Crombez, Jelle Koopmans, Frank Peeters, Karel Van Haesebrouck) *Theater. Een Westerse geschiedenis*. (Lannoo Campus 2015). He also works as a freelance dramaturg for Jan Fabre (*Tannhäuser*, *Requiem für eine Metamorphose*, *Mount Olympos*).



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The ADLAB project involved seven European partners (universities, broadcasters and organisations for the blind and visually impaired). The ADLAB project first mapped the AD landscape in Europe. Next, an elaborate analysis of a very complex AD for film identified the main challenges with regard to AD and led to an academic publication (published with Benjamins in 2014). The insights gained from the analysis and the inventory of AD crisis points served as input for the third stage of the project, namely reception research with AD fragments written by the project partners (Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal and Flanders (UAntwerp and VRT)). The results of all three stages were translated into an e-book of ADLAB Strategic Guidelines for Audio Description, which can be downloaded from the website. This e-book is a manual based on the insights gained from the ADLAB research, narratology and Functional Translation Studies, and formulates guidelines for translating images into words and writing an AD script for film and television.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Cassiers, *Caligula*, 19 November 2015. Antwerp, Toneelhuis.

<sup>3</sup> Bart Van Nuffelen, *De Fietsendief*, 28 April 2016. Antwerp, Toneelhuis.

<sup>4</sup> Bart Meuleman, *Hedda Gabler*, 18 February 2016. Antwerp, Toneelhuis.

<sup>5</sup> Philipp Becker, *Dit zijn de namen*, 20 January 2016. Ghent, NTG.