

# The audio description of blindness in films: visual pleasures or “blind nightmares”?

Eva Espasa – UVic-UCC  
([eva.espasa@uvic.cat](mailto:eva.espasa@uvic.cat))

Montse Corrius – UVic-UCC  
([montse.corrius@uvic.cat](mailto:montse.corrius@uvic.cat))



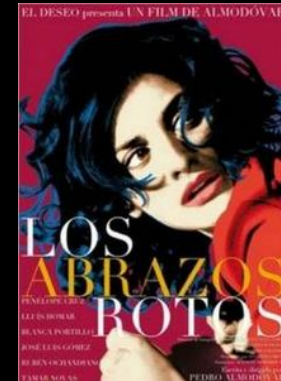
## INTRODUCTION

- Visual impairment has been portrayed in films mostly through stereotypical descriptions of blind characters (Norden 1994, Hartnett 2000).
- Current research has addressed the visions of disability and visual impairment in films (Norden 1994).
- Feminist film criticism and the notion of visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975) have been used in “Blind nightmares” by Kleege (1999).

- Kleege denounces the depiction of blind characters in films as other, as objects to be looked at, and ponders how they would be audio described.
- What is the role played by AD in the depiction of blindness in films?
- Does it add or challenge stereotypes?
- To answer these questions, this paper analyses visual impairment in films that have been both previously analysed and audio described.

# SELECTION OF FILMS

- *Dancer in the Dark* (2000)
- *Broken Embraces* (2009)
- *Notes on Blindness* (2016)
- *Radiance* (2017)
- *Bird Box* (2018)



# DANCER IN THE DARK (2000)

Crime, drama, musical

Director: Lars Von Trier

Selma, a Czech woman, travels to America with her young son, to earn enough money for an operation for his inherited blindness.



# AUDIOVISUAL TEXT

- Contradictory views of blindness.
- Selma devotes her life to healing her son's congenital blindness, but accepts her upcoming blindness and disgrace as necessary sacrifice.
- Reflections on inbetweenness between sight and blindness.
  - Narrative importance (challenges to her credibility in her trial).
  - Social consequences of “passing” as sighted (Kudlick 2011).

# AUDIO DESCRIPTION

- Music is a structural and narrative force in the the film and its AD.
- Film as a meta reflection on musicals.
- Spanish audio introduction explicitates connection between narrative and camera use:
  - Use of hand-held camera in most parts of the film, giving the feeling of viewing a documentary.
  - In musical numbers, fixed camera is used, which allows for more plasticity to the protagonist's fantasies.

- Selma takes off her glasses in musical / dreamlike scenes and puts them on when going back to realistic scenes (reflected in AD).
- Musical numbers: challenges of prioritizing the description of choreographies or translating lyrics in Spanish AD (cf. Igareda 2012).



- Intradiegetic descriptions.
- In the cinema, Kathy describes in whispers images of musicals. When a viewer complains, she looks for alternative descriptions (reproduced in Spanish and English AD).
- “Kathy uses her fingers to mimic the dancer’s movements on the palm of Selma’s hand.”



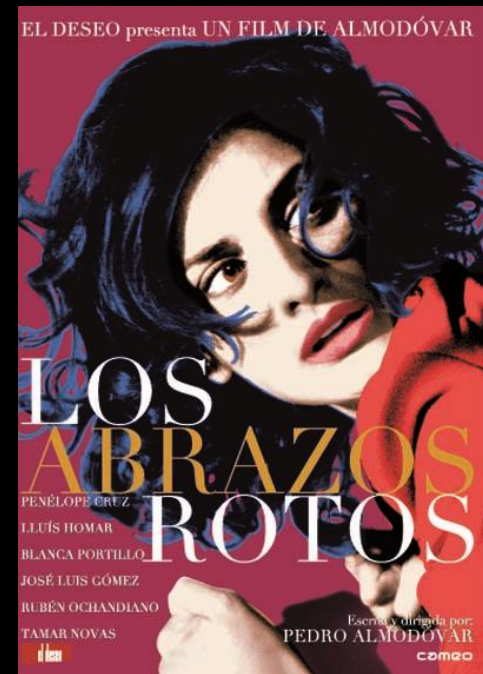
- Initial 2 minutes of film: abstract paintings described in Spanish and English AD.
- Everywhere *except* in the United States, *Dancer In The Dark* opens with a **musical overture sans image**. When von Trier learned that many movie screens in American theaters didn't have curtains, he added a montage of paintings sequence to accompany the opening overture for American audiences. However, **his original idea was that the overture would play out in darkness** with the theater curtains drawn. They would open dramatically at the close of the overture (Cole, 2002).

# BROKEN EMBRACES (2009)

Drama, romance, thriller

Director: Pedro  
Almodóvar

Harry Caine, a blind  
writer, [...] has to heal  
his wounds from 14  
years back. He was  
then still known by his  
real name, Mateo  
Blanco, and directing  
his last movie (imdb).



# AUDIOVISUAL TEXT

- Contradictory views of blindness at narrative and discursive levels.
- Narration: careful representation of blind character and his daily experiences (e.g. use of braille and reading software).
  - Harry: “I’ll hold onto you” (to a woman offering her guidance).
  - Assessment of ONCE (Spanish organization for the Blind) is credited in film.

- Discursive metareflection on blindness.
- Cinema as a metaphor for sight (Kleege, 1999)
- Mateo (film maker) changes name to Harry when he becomes blind (and script writer).
- Equation of blindness to death: “Mateo is dead”.
- Final “resurrection” of Mateo’s name, when he accepts his past.
- Explicit play with name of character, in connection with narrative, kept consistently in English AD (not in Spanish AD).

## AUDIO DESCRIPTION:

- Intradiegetic descriptions
  - Harry asks other characters to describe images for him:
    - (to young woman): Do you mind describing yourself?
    - (to Diego): Describe the photo [...].What are you seeing now?

- Diverse criteria in Spanish and English AD.
- Spanish AD interprets characters' intentions or contexts:
- Spanish AD: "Mateo's hands slowly caress the image of Lena **as if for a moment he could recover her**".
- English AD: "Mateo caresses the screen on which a close-up blurred footage of his last long embrace with Lena plays on slow motion."



Play it frame by frame,  
so that it lasts longer.



# NOTES ON BLINDNESS (2016) DOCUMENTARY FILM

## Directors

Peter Middleton

James Spinney



# AUDIOVISUAL TEXT

- Based on the homonymous short film and on John'Hulls audio recordings of his process of losing his sight.
- John's deteriorating sight illustrated by the shots created by the film-makers (John filmed from dark, landscape in soft focus, shots streaked by shadow, much use is made of silhouette).
- Audio is everything on the film.
- Film described as a kind of "visual dubbing".
- John's intense period of dreaming is also represented in the film.

- References to other senses illustrated by natural elements (e.g. wind rippling fields of long grass).
- Faded photos incorporated.



# AUDIO DESCRIPTION

- Clear and useful AD introduction.
- reinforces the film-makers purpose (e.g. “John sits in bed in semi-darkness”).
- describes elements of blindness (e.g. “His fingers seek out the controls”).
- describes the natural elements that illustrate other senses (e.g. “the wind ripples his shirt”).
- describes some camera angles and shooting.

## **RADIANCE (2017)**

**Romance, drama**

Director:

Naomi Kawase

A passionate writer of film versions for the visually impaired meets an older photographer who is slowly losing his eyesight (imdb).



# AUDIOVISUAL TEXT

- Thematizes audio description.
- Difficulty of creating AD transmitted in the film.
- Photography is recurrent in the film: Nakamori is a photographer and uses a Rolleiflex camera.
- Nakamori seems to be accepting his blindness condition as the film advances.

## **AUDIO DESCRIPTION:**

- provides detailed information (e.g. “is eating noodles with two chopsticks”).
- describes elements of blindness (e.g. “is walking touching the walls”, “the cane slides over the platform and hits its side”).
- Describes Nakamori’s clumsiness (e.g. “spills milk”, “hits against a restaurant sign”).
- Refers to other senses (e.g. “He strokes her lips with his thumb. He strokes her cheeks”).

# BIRD BOX (2018) SCI-FI-THRILLER

Director  
Susanne Bier





# AUDIOVISUAL TEXT

- Vision and blindness are addressed in an apocalyptic world.
- Blindness is portrayed as a tool for survival.
- It is represented as a strength: blind people can adjust to their surroundings and new reality.
- The real focus on blindness comes at the end: at the refuge *Janet Tucker School* for the blind.
- Empathetic descriptions of blindness have been generated.

# AUDIO DESCRIPTION

- makes constant reference to the blindfolds used to cover the characters' eyes.
- also refers to the windows and curtains used to prevent light from coming in.
- indicates when characters use the cord as guide.
- describes other senses, particularly sound.  
(e.g. "Malory holds the kids hands and walks along the path. She stops to listen").

# CONCLUSIONS

Blindness in films challenges standard practices on what and how to describe:

- Blindness (and audio description) as a theme
- Blindness as portrayed in film language
- Blind characters
- Different experiences of blind vs. sighted viewers, and of different sighted viewers (e.g. different describers).

- Attention to film language in some AD, in connection with the depiction of blindness or sight. Audio introductions to:
  - *Dancer in the Dark*
  - *Notes on Blindness*.
- Intradiegetic descriptions: driven by the presence of blind characters within the film, allow for similar viewing experiences in blind and sighted users (Thompson 2018).
  - *Dancer in the Dark*
  - *Broken Embraces*

- Most of the films analysed show more empathetic views of blindness.
- Most of the negative stereotypes used in films in the past (G. Kleege) are not present in the films analysed.
- All films include explicit references to photography or cinema.
- AD is more than a technique used to help understand the film; it also enhances cinematic experience.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Should films portraying stereotyped visions of blindness be audio described?
  - “It seems counterintuitive to invite blind beholders to watch a film [...] which has nothing positive to say about blindness.” (Thompson 2018)
- Should stereotypical images of blindness be edited out by audio describers?
  - "At what point would the [describers or voice talents] begin to gag on their words?" (Kleege 1999: 65).

# Thank you!

[montse.corrius@uvic.cat](mailto:montse.corrius@uvic.cat)

[eva.espasa@uvic.cat](mailto:eva.espasa@uvic.cat)

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# FILMOGRAPHY

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- *Dancer in the Dark*, dir. Lars Von Trier, Zentropa Entertainments, 2000. English AD: IADA. Spanish AD: José Antonio Álvarez.
- *Notes on Blindness*, dir. Peter Middleton and James Spinney, Netflix, 2016. AD: Louise Fryer.
- *Radiance [Hikari]*, dir. Naomi Kawase, BTEAM Pictures, 2017.

# ABSTRACT (1)

Visual impairment has been portrayed in films mostly through stereotypical descriptions of blind characters, who not only allow us to analyse their representation in the film but also to provide a more general reflection on blindness, vision and, by extension cinema. Portrayals of diverse types of disability in the cinema are also stereotypical and extreme, showing characters who are either “evil avengers” (Norden 1994) or “supercrrips” (Hartnett 2000).

Current research has addressed the visions of disability and specifically of visual impairment in films. Quantitative studies have given a general account of the attention paid to blindness in films (relatively higher than to other types of disability), and have reported the negative stereotypes of blind or visually impaired characters (e.g. Norden 1994). Qualitative studies have provided in-depth analyses from cinema, gender and disability perspectives. Some have explored the filmic reasons and social consequences of including blind characters in films. Gender analyses have pointed at the different depictions of male and female blind characters. Feminist film criticism and the notion of visual pleasure (Mulvey 1975) have been used in “Blind Nightmares” by Kleege (1999), to denounce the depiction of blind characters in films as other, as objects to be looked at.

## ABSTRACT (2)

Georgina Kleege reflects on how, by representing blind women, the cinema continues to present generally stereotyped positions in line with what Mulvey points out about the classic cinema. Moreover, women are still represented as more passive in so far as they depend, to an even greater degree than the sighted ones, on the other's gaze. In the case of men, their visual impairment usually translates into a feminization and asexualization of the character.

What, to our understanding, has been less explored so far is the role played by audio description in the depiction of blindness in films (cf. Thompson 2018). It is important to see to what extent audio description challenges other perspectives. Does it add or challenge stereotypes? To answer this question, this article will analyse visual impairment in a set of films that have been both previously analysed by film or disability studies, and that have been audio described. The analysis incorporates the notions of “visual pleasure” and of “normalism” (Rius 2011). It intends, finally, to incorporate its findings into the reflection on audio description policies, ethics and practices.