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## Highlight the lights: Towards strategies for audio describing lighting in film

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Cinema audio description requires the ability to provide comprehensive answers to many different questions regarding the translation of visual and auditory clues in a usually very limited time frame. The *who, when, what* and *how* are only some of the aspects that require audio describing in any given film. This paper focuses on the *how* of audio description, aiming to investigate the existing audio description strategies through which light and contrast are verbalized. First, the article presents the basic concepts of light and contrast as expressed within Film Studies literature. It then examines the relationship between a number of lighting properties, their effects and their implications for audio description. Next, it analyzes examples of audio descriptions relating to light and contrast encountered in a corpus of commercially audio described Tim Burton films. Kruger's descriptive-narrative continuum (2010) is used to label the relevant strategies, which are then brought together in an overview.

**Keywords:** audio description; light and contrast; film language; description strategies

### 1. Introduction

At the core of (cinema) audio description (AD) there are two fundamental questions: what to describe and how to describe it (Vercauteren, 2012, p. 209). Once the relevant elements of the image have been selected, the describer must decide on the strategy (s)he will use for their rendition. This paper aims to study a part of this decision-making process, in that it analyzes the strategies used in a corpus of seven English audio described Tim Burton films to verbalize aspects of light and contrast.

This research draws on two previous studies (Maszerowska, 2012, 2013). The former sets out to investigate the many functions of light and their position within the film narrative. The latter illustrates the results of a preliminary analysis of audio descriptions of light and contrast, which shows that the ADs of specific lighting patterns exhibit two major tendencies, property- and effect-oriented description. The present study is an attempt at further verifying this conclusion.

This article first provides an overview of some basic concepts regarding light from the perspective of Film Studies. Among others, Keating's (2010) lighting conventions, Bordwell and Thompson's (1990) features of film lighting, and Grodal's (2005) layout and effects of lighting are used to create a conceptual framework against which the paper

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develops its argument and establishes links both to media accessibility in general and to audio description in particular.

The article then moves on to the analysis based on a corpus of seven Tim Burton films, commercially audio described in English. The examples of lighting descriptions in the scripts are classified according to Kruger's (2010) descriptive-narrative continuum. Kruger originally used this scale to discuss the descriptions of cinematographic focalization, but the three strategies from his continuum (clinically objective audio description, audio description with narrative markers and subjective interpretations, and audio narration, [2010, p. 233]) can in fact be adapted for use with light. In the course of the analysis outlined here, some additional, mixed forms with respect to Kruger's scale were identified. On the one hand, they reflect the progressive nature of the relevant continuum. On the other, they corroborate the fact that it is impossible to draw the ultimate line between AD and audio narration (AN), and that when it comes to audio description, hybrid forms are the rule rather than the exception. Kruger (2010, p. 233) himself observes that any attempt to provide an exact classification of a given audio description as being explicitly objective or overly narrative is bound to fail. Even so, this article makes an effort to show significant differences between the two extremes.

Generally, this paper presents an in-depth study of how light is used in cinema. Specifically, it looks into ways in which lighting is audio described in a corpus of films of different genres where this particular cinematographic code plays a significant role. Based on Kruger's (2010) model, the strategies are classified according to whether they describe the visual information or interpret its effects. The analysis yields important insights into the possibilities, the difficulties, and the alternatives of describing light. Its findings are therefore a source of information for anyone with an academic and a practical interest in how AD works.

## **2. Lighting and audio description: from properties to effects**

As with many other components of film language, light and contrast can be examined from the perspectives of technology, physical parameters and image aesthetics, or in relation to the narrative. When it comes to AD, all these aspects play important roles: in order to capture and appreciate the narrative meaning of light, it is essential to know the technical expertise on which it is based. As Hurbis-Cherrier (2012, p. 318) advises, it is important to concentrate on the story and try to understand why and how a given lighting set-up was used in a given film.

In an attempt to link Film Studies with Media Accessibility, the following section briefly discusses the relationship between some lighting properties, their effects, and their implications for audio description.

### **2.1. Contexts and conventions**

In terms of light, much of mainstream cinema operates on the basis of established conventions, defined by Keating (2010, p. 1) as 'recommendation[s] about what to do given a certain cinematographic context.' In other words, it is the circumstances that largely dictate the use of a particular lighting set-up. For example, a murder scene may require low-key lighting with very high visual contrast to increase the drama, whereas a romantic kiss will be shot in diffused light in order to create a dreamy atmosphere.

However, the concept of lighting convention is not rigid. A type of lighting does not have a limited number or category of scenes in which it can be used. For instance, high-key lighting, which is characterized by low contrast ratio and so does not produce much

shadow, can also symbolize detachment or acuteness (Hurbis-Cherrier, 2012, p. 289). As Keating (2010, p. 2) observes, context is essential in order to accurately determine the meaning of a given lighting technique. He goes on to further argue that conventions are multifunctional, in that they can simultaneously influence more than one element of the scene and so create a globally coherent image (2010, p. 6). For instance, in a thriller, a setting lit with sporadic, hazy lights will automatically make the protagonists appear mysterious, which ultimately contributes to the authenticity of the scene. This observation creates an important opportunity for audio description. The describer could economize on words and still accentuate many different elements of the scene by taking advantage of the mutually determinant conventions. Examples of this are discussed in subsection 4.3.

That said, this paper argues that the audio description of light is likely to benefit more from a context-oriented rather than a genre-dependent approach. The latter may be indicative of the prevalence of a given lighting technique, but can fail to acknowledge the frequent changes of the visual mood in a given film, and so end up being imprecise.

## **2.2. *Properties and effects***

Certain physical properties of light create specific visual effects. According to Bordwell and Thompson (1990, pp. 134–137), depending on the ‘quality’ of lighting, an image can be defined by either pronounced shadows or a softer, diffused look; lighting ‘direction’ accentuates different elements of the object in the frame; lighting ‘source’ determines the degree to which an image is lit; and lighting ‘color’ can help convey the overall mood of the scene. In other words, a successful configuration of all these aspects will result in a convincing image. As Alton (1995, p. 50) argues, the role of lighting in film is parallel to the one it has in real life, namely that of evoking authentic emotions.

In terms of audio description, the command of the formal properties of lighting is very likely to result in more comprehensive and conscious descriptions that do not rely solely on the overall sensation that a scene transmits to the describer, but that instead fully appreciate and acknowledge the components of the look and feel of the film. According to Keating (2010, p. 1), ‘[e]ven the most unobtrusive image can accomplish a range of tasks, from storytelling to glamour, from expressivity to realism.’ This is not to say that all audio descriptions should be based on or revolve around light. Quite the opposite – a thorough knowledge of the tool and the cinematographic areas it influences can help create interactive descriptions in which many different elements of the film language work side by side and complement each other. For example, lighting is known to impact on the way in which the audience perceives the frame of mind of the characters. Knowing this, the describer can use an expression that would purposefully and accurately account for both features, thus creating a more versatile AD, rather than separately focusing on the relevant elements of the filmic narrative.

Grodal (2005) makes a very relevant assertion in this respect. Despite referring to the field of Film Theory, his argument can easily be extrapolated to audio description:

[d]escribing the physical or technical layout of a given type of lighting is fairly easy. [...] The problem of the intended effects is a much thornier one. To describe the cognitive effects of lighting – for instance, the way in which a given light enhances or impedes object recognition and object salience – in itself poses a series of problems for description. Mostly, however, the description of the effects of lighting is aimed at a larger endeavour, namely, to describe the way in which lighting aspectualizes the emotional experience of a given scene, resulting in sad, scary, or euphoric experiences. Although such moods may be analyzed in connection with an overall analysis of a given scene, it still raises the problem of how lighting contributes to mood. (p. 152)

A similar observation is made by Hurbis-Cherrier (2012, pp. 270–271), who claims that lighting is an indispensable element of shot composition and set design, and that it is only in tandem with these two aspects that the visual information can be successfully conveyed.

The ways in which the aforementioned effects can be accounted for in audio description are discussed in the following subsection.

### 2.3. *The audio descriptive ‘How’ and ‘So What’*

In the previous subsection we commented on Grodal’s (2005, p. 152) distinction between the technical layout and the cognitive effects of lighting. His assumptions to a great extent illustrate the dilemma lighting presents in terms of audio description. Rendering the actual physical configuration of lights is rather straightforward, but verbalizing the purpose and the outcome thereof can be more problematic. The present article draws on Maszerowska (2013), who evidenced examples of both more literal, property-oriented, and more interpretative, effect-motivated descriptions (e.g. ‘He watches from the darkness in the doorway of her apartment’ for low-key lighting as a vehicle of mystery in the AD for *Perfect Stranger* [2007] vs. ‘Frank cuts an imposing figure’ for the AD of the halo effect used to add a supernatural flair to the character in *The Punisher* [2004]).

These two approaches largely correspond to what Kruger (2010) labels as audio description (AD) and audio narration (AN):

[...] [O]ne may distinguish between traditional AD, where the emphasis is on description (although the narrative still plays a role in some genres – hence the term descriptive narration), and AN as a mode of audio access through an integrated narrative. [...] At the descriptive extreme the emphasis would therefore be on substituting the visual codes (what can be seen by the sighted audience), and at the narrative extreme the emphasis would be on creating a coherent narrative that corresponds more closely to the narrative effect of the visual codes than with the codes themselves. (p. 233)

Kruger codes these approaches on a three-tier descriptive-narrative continuum, where AD enhanced by the use of narrative markers and subjective interpretation is flanked by two extremes: overly descriptive AD and AN (Kruger, 2010). In a more illustrative manner, he stresses that film audio description is not only about the ‘HOW’ or the ‘WHAT’, but also concerns the ‘SO WHAT’ (2010, p. 234). An analogical observation is made by Delabastita and Grutman (2005). Even though their argument concerns the translations of multilingual texts, their conclusion also holds true for audio description:

Indeed, to the literary critic chiefly concerned with text interpretation, it matters relatively little in itself whether it is ‘national’, ‘dead’, or ‘artificial’ languages, slang, dialects, sociolects or idiolects, that make up the multilingual sequences. What matters more is their textual interplay. [...] Instead of dismissing foreign-language samples as mere comic relief [...], it might be more rewarding to see if and how they acquire a deeper significance with regard to plot-construction or even become a controlling metaphor governing character discourse and behaviour. (pp. 16–17)

These views can also be applied to the functioning of light and its AD. The way in which objects are lit in the frame (Kruger’s ‘HOW’ and Delabastita and Grutman’s ‘national, dead, or artificial languages’ etc.) conditions their narrative interpretation (Kruger’s ‘SO WHAT’ and Delabastita and Grutman’s ‘textual interplay’) and, consequently, their audio description. Put differently, behind every cinematographic code there is always an intended experience, and lighting techniques are believed to convey moods and

sensations that consequently imbue the story with a specific narrative meaning (Hubris-Cherrier, 2012, p. 284). Since light is credited with such a heavy load of story-telling potential, Kruger's conceptual framework seems the most appropriate for the analysis of lighting verbalization in AD.

### 3. Methodology, corpus, and objectives

The present paper aims to answer the following research question: How are light and contrast audio described in commercial mainstream cinema? Since this article is a continuation of prior research (Maszerowska, 2013), it largely replicates the methodology employed in the previous study. Namely, it looks into ways in which four major predetermined lighting functions (plot punctuation, setting perception, character perception, and eye guidance) are audio described, and tries to bring together any recurrent patterns that the scripts reveal. While the previous study was based on crime cinema, this present investigation examines the films of Tim Burton. At the time of the study, seven Region Two titles were available with English audio description (Table 1). *Nightmare Before Christmas*, directed by H. Selick, is included in the corpus because both the story and the characters were created by Tim Burton. Known in the literature as *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*, this film is based on a poem Burton wrote back in 1982.

The rationale behind choosing Tim Burton films is that this director uses elaborate lighting set-ups to support his story lines. The compiled corpus represents various genres, meaning many different lighting conventions are expected to be evident. For example, the

Table 1. Tim Burton films used in the analysis

Title	Year	Director	Studio	Audio description details	DVD release date
<i>Nightmare Before Christmas</i>	1993	Henry Selick	Walt Disney Studios HE	Written by Peter Wickham, narrated by Simon Russell Beale	06.10.2008
<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i>	2005	Tim Burton	Warner Home Video	ITFC audio description by Lonny Evans and Allan Blyton	21.11.2005
<i>Corpse Bride</i>	2005	Tim Burton/ Mike Johnson	Warner Home Video	ITFC audio description by James O'Hara	06.02.2006
<i>Sweeney Todd: The Daemon Barber of Fleet Street</i>	2007	Tim Burton	Warner Home Video	ITFC audio description by Alex Newman and James O'Hara	19.05.2008
<i>Alice in Wonderland</i>	2010	Tim Burton	Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment	ITFC audio description by Alice Sanders, read by James O'Hara	04.06.2010
<i>Dark Shadows</i>	2012	Tim Burton	Warner Home Video	ITFC audio description by Alice Sanders and James O'Hara	15.10.2012
<i>Frankenweenie</i>	2012	Tim Burton	Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment	IMS audio description by Michael Woodfed	25.02.2013

Note: Elements of the information provided in the above table were obtained from amazon.co.uk and imdb.com.

selection of films includes a number of musicals, which normally leave very few or only short pauses between songs and so present a challenge to describers. Burton is also known to follow a dark, shadowy style of filmmaking, used not only to depict settings, but also to illustrate the main characters. Even though he is considered by many to be an auteur director with a unique signature style (Bassil-Morozow, 2010, p. 7), in terms of lighting, his choices are largely traditional (e.g. color filters for joy and scale of greys for sadness and monotony in *Corpse Bride*). Even though his artistic vision of the world is unorthodox, its visual representation remains rather customary.<sup>1</sup> The fact that low-key and dull settings prevail in his productions only serves to make them more interesting from the point of view of audio description. How do the describers render the spooky feel of the films, what strategies do they pursue when dealing with such visual moods: these were some of the primary motives behind choosing Tim Burton's cinema.

All this considered, the analysis of the compiled corpus is expected to yield valid and conclusive results in terms of light description. All audio description fragments quoted in the following subsections have been manually transcribed from the relevant DVDs. Sometimes they are fragments of longer descriptions, but since this article deals only with light, the source material has been limited to those portions of the rendering where lighting was referred to. Where necessary, broader scene context is provided. All names and nicknames quoted in the following sections are names of the fictional film characters as used in the dialogues.

The purpose of the paper is not to carry out a critical analysis of the decisions made by the describers in each instance. Rather, the study has a descriptive aim. It analyzes the verbalizations of lighting set-ups, discusses their likely position on Kruger's (2010) continuum, and proposes additional commentaries with respect to alternative possibilities and optional fields of application. As such, the analysis offers insight into the many factors co-determining the describers' decisions regarding the quantity and quality of the ADs of light and contrast, as well as with respect to their ultimate form and content.

It should be noted that some of the audio description fragments quoted in the following subsections might have occurred repeatedly in the same shape throughout the corpus. Singular appearances are otherwise duly noted. That said, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide the exact number of all occurrences of light and contrast patterns and their ADs. Instead, the focus is on the degree and nature of AD variations encountered within each lighting category. The research interest behind this paper is in what ways can AD and AN be used, rather than how many times both strategies are actually employed. It should also be noted that the proportions between the occurrences of the relevant lighting patterns in the corpus material vary. For example, the eye guidance feature of light is less frequent than the one of setting perception. Therefore, no extensive quantitative analysis is conducted. Occasionally, for the purposes of clarification or comparison, references are made to previous research conducted within the field (Maszerowska, 2012, 2013).

The final outcome of this paper is an overview of strategies that are and can be used for the description of light. As is usually the case with such studies, it is constructed on a progressive basis and does not assume to be representative of all existing lighting patterns.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it demonstrates some of the available options, provides orientation as far as the rationale behind the choice of a specific strategy is concerned, and resolves some practical queries that can arise in relation to audio describing such elements of filmic language.

#### 4. Analysis of examples

The analytical part of the present article is divided into four subsections. Each corresponds to a specific lighting function (plot punctuation, setting perception, character perception, and eye guidance) previously selected by Maszerowska (2013, p. 170) on the basis of extensive Film Studies research. This organization structure is expected to allow for a clear overview of the individual examples, whilst at the same time leaving sufficient space for cross-referencing between the relevant sections.

##### 4.1. Plot punctuation

This category refers to the most basic function of lighting, namely the marking of the passage of time. Just as we wake up to the first rays of sun light, live through the day and past noon and go to sleep after dusk, so films play with lighting at differentiated times of day and set the action within these (see Maszerowska, 2013, p. 166).

In terms of audio description, this particular function of light gains importance as a signposting tool to help understand when the action is taking place. Its relative straightforwardness translates into rather informative, sometimes only one-word descriptions that largely oscillate around the explicitly descriptive end of Kruger's continuum. The most common examples from the Tim Burton corpus feature as follows:

- 'night'; 'day';
- 'morning';
- 'night turns to day';
- 'the next day dawns'.

At the same time, these ADs illustrate the inclusive description strategies discussed in subsection 2.2. and touch upon the multiple interpretations a lighting set-up may have. In this case, the quoted descriptions not only objectively render the change of light levels (from darkness to daylight), but also mark the new temporal setting (see Vercauteren, 2012).

Furthermore, in the corpus there are also examples of ADs slightly modified through the use of subjective interpretations:

- 'a sunny day on Parliament Hill';
- 'in the early morning';
- 'yellow dawn';
- 'the full moon hangs heavy in the night sky'.

In this way, apart from merely indicating the time of day, the describer also offers a comment on the story world, thus enhancing its narrative impact.

The least diversified strategy for describing the use of light for plot punctuation is audio narration. The only example of such an approach, though used repeatedly throughout the corpus material, is the word 'later'. This expression can be classified as an example of AN, since it does not directly reflect the (change of the) visual code, but instead leans towards a more abstract account of the narrative events.

There is no universal rule concerning when to employ which strategy. In the case of plot punctuation, it seems to be a question of the style the describer chooses to follow. While the explicit descriptions tend to be self-explanatory and can function very effectively as stand-alone pieces of AD (e.g. 'Her cry echoes through the night sky.

Morning.’), those that are subjectively marked can, for instance, be woven around the descriptions of settings (e.g. ‘Yellow dawn brakes over Jack’s tower.’), and thus better contribute to ‘the creation of the story world’ (Kruger, 2010, p. 240). It may also sometimes depend on the editing technique used to connect the new scenes. A cut from night to day is most likely to be announced by a ‘clinically objective’ AD (Kruger, 2010, p. 233), whilst a piece of time-lapse footage, a dissolution or a fade-in may require the use of some narrative techniques in order to more faithfully render the gradual nature of the change (e.g. ‘The sky becomes darker as night begins to fall’ used in the AD for *Sweeney Todd* to describe the time-lapse footage. Here, the simultaneity of actions is supported by the use of the verb ‘become’ and the conjunction ‘as’).

When considering the description of lighting as an element of plot punctuation, even the film soundtrack can be taken advantage of: for example, light music or the sound of the birds chirping may help indicate a cheerful morning (as in *Dark Shadows*, when after a cut from night to day Barnabas is shown talking to Carolyn about courting Vicky), whilst a moaning gust of wind can additionally announce the onset of a dark night (as in *Frankenweenie*, when the Frankenstein family is burying their beloved dog Sparky). In any case, time constraints will also play a significant role in dictating the most suitable strategy to use.

The category of plot punctuation seems to bear close relation to another use of lighting, namely setting perception. The temporal circumstances in which a given scene takes place can to a large extent determine the mood it conveys. For instance, scenes shot at night can occur in dingy, suspicious-looking interiors and thus reveal an element of mystery. More examples of lighting and its influence on the way we perceive a scene are discussed in the following subsection.

#### 4.2. Setting perception

Lighting in cinema is used to create (visual) feelings, as well as to evoke moods and emotions in the audience (see Maszerowska, 2012, p. 75). Viewers’ expectations of and their emotional response to a scene can be influenced by the way in which it is lit. In this respect, Tim Burton films are emblematic. Whenever they depict melancholy, decay or social festering, his scenes are full of dark interiors, dull settings and dreary locations (consider, for example, the visual representation of London in *Sweeney Todd*). Conversely, happiness and joy are conveyed by means of an extensive use of color backgrounds and high-key lighting (e.g. the land of the dead in *Corpse Bride* or the Christmas land in *Nightmare Before Christmas*). Considering how a given setting will affect the viewer is crucial in terms of maintaining a coherent and authentic narrative. The strategies used by audio describers to render these qualities are discussed below.

As is the case with plot punctuation, the audio descriptions of the setting perception category cover all three levels of Kruger’s continuum. The examples corresponding to the explicitly descriptive end do not exhibit great diversity and mainly concentrate on the color of light. This could be dictated by the fact that overly objective descriptions of lighting for mood could sound unnatural and would occupy much of the space between the dialogues, which in Burton’s films is already somewhat scarce. Five of the most prominent examples of this type of AD follow:

- ‘the ship docks in semi-darkness’;
- ‘the grey town’;
- ‘in the grey land of the living’;

- ‘the grey forest’;
- ‘grey, cobble-stoned street’.

All these expressions render dullness and lethargic, apathetic settings. One more example of an objective AD reads as follows:

- ‘a soft light emanates from a dilapidated windmill with bent and broken sails’.

Note the explicit reference to the quality of light (‘soft’) here. It refers to Hatter’s windmill in *Alice in Wonderland* with streaks of golden light pouring out of the windows.

When it comes to conventions concerning the use of lighting as a vehicle for mystery (Alton, 1995, p. 47), the descriptions from Tim Burton films maintain extreme faithfulness to the visual code. In order to add to the atmosphere of suspense, Alton (1995) proposes employing ‘searchlights of prisons or concentration camps’, ‘the light of a passing streetcar on an otherwise dark street’, or ‘the revolving light of a lighthouse’. These effects are described in the corpus as follows:

- ‘searchlights and guns pinpoint them’ (Jack and his sleigh in *Nightmare Before Christmas*);
- ‘headlights from a passing car shine on Victor lurking in the shadows’;
- ‘a distant lighthouse illuminates them as they stop and Willie rolls the body overboard’ (them referring to Barnabas and Willie in *Dark Shadows*).

A slightly larger portion of examples of setting-defining lighting are audio described with the use of qualitative judgments, which positions them around the middle of Kruger’s scale. The ADs are still rather objective, something which could be explained by an adherence to audio description guidelines which generally advise against the use of subjective interpretations, but reveal slight modifications. For example, the stark visual contrast between dark Victorian London and bright flashbacks to Sweeney Todd’s happy past with his wife and daughter is described as follows: ‘in vibrant color, he reminisces upon a visit to a street flower market’. Ten more examples of narrative marked descriptions include:

- ‘the gloomy forest’;
- ‘the land of the dead is a riot of color’;
- ‘dimly lit attic room’;
- ‘dark graveyard where strange shadows flicker on crooked tombstones’;
- ‘magical technicolored landscape’;
- ‘wonderful colors: yellow, pink, red, green, purple, orange and blue’;
- ‘the moon shines through clouds in a charcoal sky’;
- ‘shadowy silhouette of the chocolate factory in the distance’;
- ‘the inside of the Bucket’s house is lit by a cozy glow’;
- ‘the morning sunshine is bright and golden, painting the underbellies of the clouds a warm, rosy pink’.

All of the AD examples listed above maintain the basic reference to a certain lighting property (be this the quality – as in ‘warm’, the direction – as in ‘shadowy silhouette’, or the color – as in ‘yellow’), but employ qualitative indications (‘magical’, ‘wonderful’, ‘strange’, ‘cozy’ etc.) in order to adapt the style of the utterance to better fit the narrative.

There are also instances of audio narration which to a great extent focus on rendering the effect a given visual code was expected to convey. Two examples include ‘the blanket of fog’, and ‘a swirling mist envelopes the city’. However, an even more interesting strategy is the verbalization of the visual mood of a setting by means of combining audio description with audio narration in one utterance. In these instances, explicitly interpretative descriptions are either preceded or followed by more objective accounts. Six prominent examples of such combination feature follow:

- ‘dark, foreboding sky’;
- ‘dismal, dark, foreboding London and the ominous cloudy sky above them’;
- ‘with Collinwood manor silhouetted against a dark, looming sky’;
- ‘the ominous cliffs, the dark sea frothing below’;
- ‘a bank of fog lit by an eerie glow from Nassar’s torch hangs heavily around the entrance to the mausoleum’;
- ‘the place is ominous under the foggy grey sky’.

In some of the examples listed above, the suspension factor is gradually revealed by increasingly subjective descriptions (e.g. from ‘dark’ to ‘looming’) or, conversely, the effect is rendered first and then explained by a more objective utterance (as in ‘ominous cloudy sky’).

At this point it should be noted that audio description and audio narration of lighting cannot always be used arbitrarily. Even though Kruger (2010, p. 233) rightly states that ‘AD will already contain narrative elements just as AN would contain descriptive elements’, sometimes the convention may call for a more objective account (as in plot punctuation), whilst in other instances the context will dictate a narrative strategy. For example, when the setting itself becomes a protagonist (as with the hostile London in *Sweeney Todd*), AN can be used in order to better render the narrative character of the city. However, where mere spatio-temporal circumstances are introduced (as in one of the scene changes in *Sweeney Todd*, where the script reads ‘dark clouds gather over a courthouse’), objective AD seems to suffice. It is up to the describer to then decide on the function of a given lighting set-up. The knowledge of individual conventions and their usual fields of application in film can be helpful in making the final choice.

It is important to note that Tim Burton films offer very little space between dialogues for introducing comprehensive descriptions of lighting. As a matter of fact, in the musicals examined, the lyrics hardly allow for any description whatsoever. While this could be a reason for more extensive use of AN – which can be punchier than AD – it also serves as a reminder of the importance of the voice of the describer when delivering the actual script. In the corpus, the voices often modulate the intonation to better fit the narrative. Where there is no time in the description to introduce elements of light and its effects, the describer utters the remaining portions of the script with a matching vocal tone (e.g. deep and emphatic for mystery, and light and uniform for neutral sequences). As proved by Cabeza-Cáceres (2013), intonation may not influence the target audience’s comprehension of the scenes, but it does impact the enjoyment of the relevant fragments. When it comes to lighting description, even the film soundtrack can convey part of the mood. For example, in *Sweeney Todd*, howling wind and sinister music are used to intensify the visual drama and state of tension.

All of the above aspects are pertinent when describing lighting as a character-molding tool. The following subsection deals with this particular function.

### 4.3. Character perception

Investigating virtual characters, Heloir, Kipp, and Kipp (2011, p. 117) observe that a ‘character’s affective state and personality can also be expressed through environmental aspects like lighting, as is evident in paintings and movies’. In movies, lighting is believed to be so powerful that it can sometimes take on functions normally performed by actors (Bordwell and Thompson, 1990, p. 137). Certain light configurations can convey the personality traits, emotional states, and affective qualities of the characters. The ways in which these aspects are rendered in audio description are discussed below.

In the corpus, the explicitly descriptive ADs of character-defining lighting tend to focus on the color of light. As is the case with setting perception, it may be that more objective descriptions would again seem unnatural and somewhat unengaging. Here follow five representative examples:

- ‘a figure casting a shadow approaches’ (when the character David Collins appears in the doorway to the crypt where Barnabas is buried in *Dark Shadows*);
- ‘Emily is bathed in a white light’ (for pools of light in *Corpse Bride*);
- ‘Josette is translucent. She glows briefly with a bright light, then fades’ (when the ghost of Barnabas’s lover appears in the house);
- ‘grey-faced Alice glances at her mother’ (for high-key lighting used as a means of showing detachment and isolation);
- ‘the grey-faced Todd’ (where hard lighting serves as a vehicle for misery and sorrow).

Descriptions with subjective interpretations are infrequent. One of them reads:

- ‘the candlelight throws a looming shadow of Victor performing his macabre needlework onto the sloping attic ceiling’.

In this instance, the adjectives ‘looming’ and ‘macabre’ add to the terrifying, Frankenstein-like effect of the shadow cast onto the wall. Three more examples include:

- ‘an ever-growing shadow lurches along the mausoleum wall as it nears the doorway’ (where the verb ‘lurch’ intensifies the horror of the events);
- ‘Nassar lumbers out of the shadows holding his bandaged hamster’ (where the choice of the verb ‘lumber’ also helps convey the zombie-like feel);
- ‘she spots Sparky’s large sinister shadow from the other side of a sheet and flees’ (the dog’s hunch-back silhouette with long teeth and pointy claws is very scary, and the adjective ‘sinister’ reflects this).

In the case of character lighting, there is no clear distinction between the effects brought on by light and those caused by acting. In fact, the way in which a protagonist’s mood is perceived will depend on a wide range of many different variables, such as their facial expressions, gestures, the setting, and the overall ambience of the scene, not to mention the dialogues and the plot itself. Therefore, when considering light to be one of the determining agents in the perception of a character’s personality, the describer should consider all these elements. In such cases, (s)he could make use of inclusive strategies, i.e. approaches that account for the multifunctionality of a given lighting convention, and

so approach the narrative end of Kruger's continuum scale. Consider this one illustrative example from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*:

- 'a shifty looking male employee leaves the factory for the night [...] then sidles down the street to where an equally shifty-looking man in a long dark coat is waiting'.

The text describes the spies who used to work in Willy Wonka's factory. 'Shifty' refers to the hard side lighting in which the character was shot. His face, partially obscured by the shadows, the light of the street lamp under which he stands, and his uneasy body posture all combine to create a feeling of mystery and suspicion. In this case, the describer decided to unify these aspects into one utterance, while saving time. The second example of audio narration, from *Alice in Wonderland*, reads:

- 'the Hatter cuts a forlorn figure alone in the prison cell with crooked bars, his hat next to him'.

The expression 'cuts a forlorn figure' intends to render the use of top lighting which, cast on the Hatter who sits with his legs crossed and his head bowed, makes him look unhappy and abandoned. Thus, the AN implies a certain frame of mind and combines the many (visual) sources to achieve this particular effect.

As the above examples illustrate, there is no universal strategy for character lighting. At most, it is possible to make recommendations as how to proceed in specific contexts and cinematographic circumstances. Whilst audio narration aims to pin down the final effect, it is not free from the risk of misinterpreting or over-interpreting the look and the feel of the image. Therefore, the command of lighting techniques and their conventional uses could help describers create ADs which would reflect the physical property of light whilst remaining narrative-adjacent. Two examples of such ADs can be found in *Sweeney Todd*, wherein the main character is described as 'stony-faced' or as having a 'cold face'. Both descriptions correspond to scenes shot in hard ('stony'), acute ('cold') light, which, combined with Todd's blank stare and expressionless countenance, create the impression of austerity and emotional isolation.

A careful consideration of the dialogues and the film soundtrack can indicate to the describer the strategy to adopt (see Kruger, 2010, p. 246). For instance, the spies from Wonka's factory were explicitly referred to as such by the off-screen narrator. A matching voice intonation can sometimes complement the description too. For example, a slightly accelerated pace of AD can be used in scenes where hard light serves to convey tension. In *Sweeney Todd*, where the AD says 'Todd's face is grimmer than ever', one can discern in the voice of the describer a certain anxiety, one that matches Todd's impatience and concentration as he is waiting for the judge to appear. On the other hand, a slower pace can arguably better reflect the dreamy atmosphere of a soft diffused light, as in 'Alice sits in the dim light staring thoughtfully into the distance. She falls asleep...'<sup>3</sup>

#### 4.4. Eye guidance

The eye guidance category remains closely related to those of setting and character perception. According to Altman (1995, p. 49), '[s]urroundings can help a great deal in establishing a mood of mystery. Slums, bars, gambling joints, where the filament of a lamp is the only bright spot, and other dimly lit places are good'. This quotation illustrates the

phenomenon of mutually determining conventions, as discussed in subsection 2.1. While the single-lit spot will fix the attention of the viewers on a particular element, it will also denote the remaining constituents of the image as less relevant, thus adding to the atmosphere of suspense. According to Alton (1995, p. 44), ‘where there is no light, one cannot see; and when one cannot see, his imagination starts to run wild. He begins to suspect that something is about to happen. *In the dark there is mystery.*’ This is why the discussion of the eye guidance function of lighting forms the final part of the analysis, tying together some of the arguments and statements considered in the previous subsections.

When audio-describing scenes in which lighting is used to guide the eye of the audience, describers often opt for strategies that maintain a high level of literalness with respect to the visual code. They apply these to the following ends:

- to verbalize the existence of single-lit objects in an otherwise dark setting, as in ‘his eyes glow in the dark’ or ‘the cat’s huge green eyes gleam in the night’;
- to render the use of light as an indicator for where action is taking place, as in ‘where a hazy light is shining through the frosted glass-door panel’, ‘A large house. Light emanates from a window with the curtains drawn’, ‘outside Sally’s window the light from Jack’s tower glows in the black night sky’;
- to describe light indicating the path to freedom, as in ‘the light of his left eye becomes the light of the top of the tunnel. Alice shoots up the tunnel heading towards the light’.

Slightly fewer examples feature descriptions with subjective interpretations. There are only two instances of such strategy in the corpus:

- ‘towards the lighted ground floor of his house shining out like a beacon’ where lighting serves as a vehicle for orientation;
- ‘the clock face glows with an ochre light’ where the adjective ‘ochre’ highlights Big Ben’s visual appearance against the background of the ‘murky silhouetted buildings of London surrounded by mist’.

Two interesting audio narrative interpretations can also be observed. These are employed in scenes where, after a change of setting, a building with a single-lit window is depicted. They read:

- ‘at the Everglot’s’;
- ‘next door’.

While no explicit mention of light is made in either, the descriptions already locate the viewer within the plot, an approach that can prove useful when time is scarce.

## 5. The overview of the strategies

The examples of audio description strategies discussed above can be grouped into a taxonomy which gives orientation as to what action to take when faced with a certain lighting context/convention, and so provides guidance for describers.

Since films are dynamic media and do not necessarily follow all the traditional norms and trends, the following overview should be treated as a flexible set of strategies that need to be carefully considered and applied to each audiovisual material. It is based on

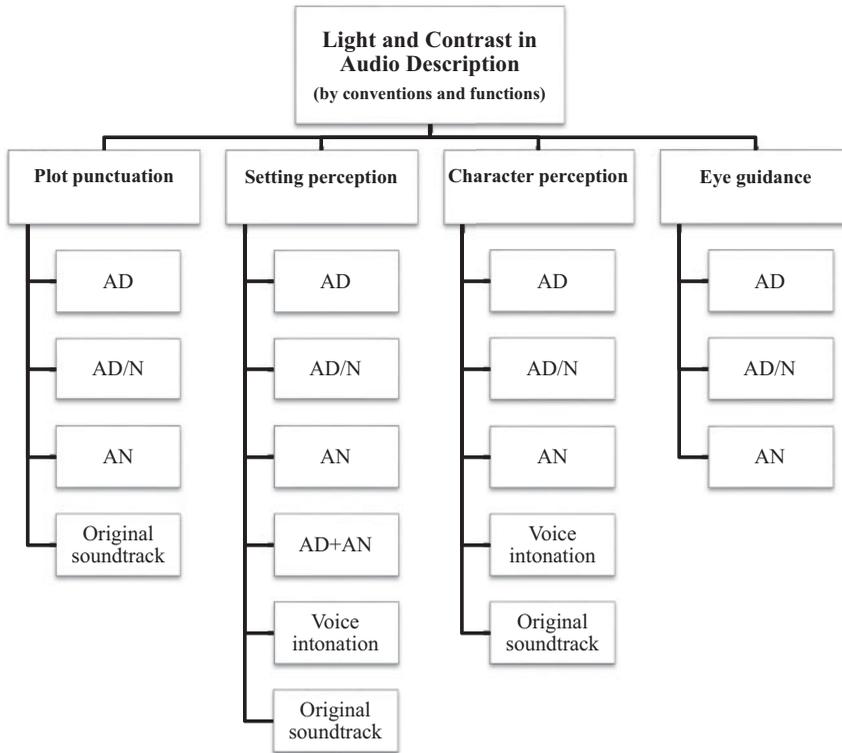


Figure 1. An overview of strategies for light and contrast audio description.

examples from mainstream cinema, and for this reason it should be noted that the same research conducted in the field of, for example, the scenic arts, might yield different results. While the corpus material is believed to cover a wide array of lighting set-ups (according to the classification by imdb.com, amongst the films analyzed there are musicals, thrillers, dramas, horrors with elements of comedy, animations, fantasy, as well as family films with elements of adventure), the richness of filmic language makes it impossible to consider this type of proposal complete (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

Although the above overview contains many different options from which to choose, their application in the actual audio description is by no means random. It will depend on the cinematographic context, the time available, the composition of the frame and the development of the dialogues, to name but a few variables. It is up to the describer to comprehensively evaluate the scene, decide on the position that the information concerning lighting will assume in relation to other elements of the filmic language and the narrative, and to select the most appropriate strategy.

Some strategies are more common than others. Audio narration is less common in plot punctuation and eye guidance categories (one and two examples respectively). Conversely, for setting and character perception this strategy is used more readily (eight and four occurrences respectively). Furthermore, some features of lighting can be described using a greater variety of strategies (six for setting perception and five for character perception), while others enjoy less diversity (four for plot punctuation and three for eye guidance). This can be explained by the fact that aspects of characterization usually play a more complex and multifaceted role in the creation of the fictional world than temporal circumstances do. When it comes to setting and character perception,

features of lighting can be expressed with reference to facial expressions, body posture, or even gesticulation. The ‘SO WHAT’ effect of lighting for plot punctuation and eye guidance is in this respect limited.

All this considered, it should be noted that not every scene will contain important lighting features. While it is true that light is a ubiquitous element in films, it is not always relevant to the narrative and so does not necessarily need to be verbalized in the audio description. The lighting functions discussed in Section 4 present some of the most important examples of narrative-relevant light. However, the describer will again have to decide whether any part of the tenor of a given scene can be attributed to light and contrast.

The strategies can be further developed. In this respect, a command of the technical parameters of lighting constitutes a valuable asset. For example, the combination of objective AD with audio narration used in setting description could be implemented for character depiction. Its use in the Tim Burton material can be considered anecdotal (the example from *Sweeney Todd* reads ‘grim-faced Todd with dark shadowy eyes’), which is why it was eventually excluded from the general overview.

This could also be extended to contain strictly linguistic strategies. For instance, both the previous study (Maszerowska, 2013) and the current investigation revealed that the play on light and shadow can be verbalized by means of syntax (see also Mascarenhas, 2013). In the case of eye guidance, for example, the information pertaining to the lit object is placed at the beginning of the sentence (*thema*), and that concerning the remaining scene constituents is shifted towards the end (*rhema*), as in ‘a chair that sits empty in the moonlight’.

Moreover, the description of lighting can also be examined from the perspective of intertextuality. Certain lighting set-ups could be described by using references to other audiovisual icons – this is particularly the case of Tim Burton, who finds inspiration in German Expressionist cinema and in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (Solaz Frasset, 2001, p. 10). Such instances of intertextual AD occur in *Frankenweenie*, where Mr Rzykruski is described as ‘a lot like a horror-film actor Vincent Price’.

Last but not least, even though it has not become an established practice in film AD, the intended effects of lighting could be explained in an audio introduction (see Fryer & Romero Fresco, 2014). Some space could be dedicated to the description of the technical details of lighting. This would allow the listener to work out the link between the properties of lighting and their final effect(s) for themselves.

## 6. Discussions and further research

Lighting has multiple applications and often conditions the tenor of a whole scene. In terms of audio description, it provides the answer not only to *when*, but also to *how*, and thus assumes a high position on the scale of AD relevance (see Marzà Ibañez, 2010, p. 147).

Despite this, there will be instances – and indeed the corpus confirms this – when a given lighting set-up, although important for the narrative, cannot always be verbalized by the describer. In the Tim Burton films, many instances of omissions and generalizations were caused by lack of time, off-screen narration, and songs with lyrics that barely allow time for the description of even the essential aspects. For example, in *Dark Shadows*, a flashback to Victoria’s adolescence reveals the girl dressed in a straight jacket, sitting on the floor of a psychiatric ward. A hazy light is cast onto her body from above, making her eyes appear to be surrounded by dark circles and thus creating an overall sensation of being either possessed or insane. These images are accompanied by

an off-screen narration that leaves no space for any additional description apart from the words ‘she sits in a straight jacket’. On the other hand, some descriptions lack consistency. For example, in *Dark Shadows*, not all the changes from night to day are explicitly announced, even if there is sufficient space to do so. One could perhaps wonder whether, particularly in the case of plot punctuation, such selective descriptions benefit the audience, or if this should in fact be avoided (see Vercauteren, 2012, p. 227).

This study also serves to clear up some important questions concerning the film genre to be audio described. One of the research-related questions of the investigation was whether animations use lighting differently compared to feature films, and whether they require separate analysis in terms of their ADs. The Tim Burton corpus includes three animation movies, one in black and white. However, none of these presents any significant cinematographic peculiarities with reference to lighting conventions. In the audio description scripts, the only reference to the genre is made at the very beginning of each film (‘in animation’ and ‘an animated film by Tim Burton’). In the plots themselves, many of the lighting set-ups match those identified in the remaining corpus films (e.g. the use of exaggerated shadows to highlight the spooky mood in *Frankenweenie*, and the sporadic pools of hazy light to stress the loneliness and unhappiness of Jack in *Nightmare Before Christmas*). As such, all three movies are included in the corpus and analyzed on a par with the other films.

The analysis opens a number of future research avenues. One of these could consist of checking whether similar outcomes can be established across different languages. It could be interesting to see whether different cultural landscapes reveal different linguistic preferences for describing light and contrast. Another line of research might explore other audiovisual formats from the point of view of lighting description, theatre, opera and dance being the most relevant. In addition, reception studies involving end users could be carried out in order to establish whether the existing strategies fulfill the intended cinematographic intentions. Furthermore, it could be investigated whether the strategies pertaining to lighting bear any resemblance to those compiled for other elements of filmic language (see Pérez Payá, 2007; Jiménez, Rodríguez, & Seibel, 2010; Jiménez Hurtado & Soler Gallego, 2013; Perego, 2014).

All in all, and to paraphrase the words of Keating (2010, p. 4), the examples illustrate that audio description is about striking the right balance between the needs of the story and the reality at hand. When necessary, the AD of lighting can and should meander between the many conventions, contexts and elements, possibly even fulfilling two or more functions simultaneously. As shown in Section 4, there is no correct or universal strategy. Explicit audio descriptions, subjective interpretations and audio narrations, even concerning the same lighting function, coexist within the scripts. More research in this field is needed before prescriptive approximations can be proposed.

In summary, this research has highlighted the role of a well-versed describer and the importance of making conscious, motivated choices. As Haig observes (2002, online), ‘[t]o do the job properly means understanding the essential elements of “story” and how the film medium works in different ways to build a flow of narrative, or abstract, moments’.

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## Notes

1. 'Tim Burton is the personification of (if such a thing can exist) the mainstream outsider, at least in terms that Hollywood will tolerate'. (Camus, n.d.)
2. The analysis does not cover, for example, art house films or unconventional uses of lighting.
3. The three dots indicate where the describer slows the pace of utterance.
4. The abbreviation AD/N used in the overview stands for Kruger's 'AD that supplements description with some narrative markers and subjective interpretation' (2010, p. 233).

## Biographical notes

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