

## Audio description of theatre and cinema production in Lithuania: experiences and needs of users

By Laura Martinkutė (Vilnius University, Lithuania)

### Abstract & Keywords

#### English:

The audio description service in Lithuania is still relatively new phenomenon. Although there are general guidelines for audio description valid worldwide, it is undeniable that the specificities of audio description also depend on the language or culture of a particular nation. To maximise audience satisfaction with audiovisual content tailored to their needs, research is being carried out to discover the experiences and needs of blind and partially sighted people regarding access to cinema, theatre, and other cultural content. This article aims to internationally present one of these studies conducted in Lithuania.

**Keywords:** accessibility, audio description, cinema, theatre, blind, partially sighted, Lithuania

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### 1. Introduction

Audio description can generally be understood as verbal commentaries of the visual layer of an audiovisual (or static visual) product. The Lithuanian audience of blind and partially sighted people experienced a notable surge in the availability of audiovisual content with audio description only in recent years. Previously, cinema or theatre screenings with commentaries covering visual information were rare occurrences, rather than the norm in our country. The first screening of a film with live Lithuanian audio description dates to 2000, and only in 2018 audio description made their debut on Lithuanian television, marking a significant milestone in the development of this field in Lithuania. Although the target audience has a relatively limited experience in viewing the content with audio description, a recent investigation has revealed interesting and valuable trends, which this article aims to reflect on.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the experiences and needs of Lithuanian audience with visual impairments, as revealed by the research conducted in Lithuania during the time span from the beginning of 2021 to the end of 2022. The investigation was related to accessibility of cinema and theatre as well as the application of audio description (hereinafter AD) in this field in Lithuania.

The objectives are as follows:

to give a brief overview of the history of film and theatre AD in the world and in Lithuania;

to convey the results of the implemented project “Kultūrinė įtrauktis: audiovizualinių produktų pritaikomumo klausos ir regos neįgaliesiems tyrimas” [Inclusive culture: the study on accessibility of audiovisual products for the visually and hearing impaired] (hereinafter abbreviation “KlaRega”) regarding the needs and experiences of the blind and partially sighted audience[1] in relation to theatre and cinema AD in Lithuania.

The article links critical content analysis with diachronic and statistical analysis as methods for research. The research set out in the project “KlaRega” used a complex methodology. In this article the anonymous survey on the Google Forms platform is relevant, which consisted of several groups of questions and helped both to identify a typical visually impaired user profile and to identify very individual experiences and needs regarding access to cinema and theatre. A direct unstructured interview-discussion method was also used during the research. This step was necessary to find out about the experiences and needs of those blind and partially sighted people who, for some reason, were not able to fill in the above-mentioned electronic questionnaire. This paper explores the main aspects and trends that emerged from the survey and from the live discussion with the blind and partially sighted.

The article consists of several structurally important and logically interlinking parts: a brief historical overview of the Lithuanian film, theatre, and television AD in comparison with foreign countries, a presentation of the previous research on the adaptation of audiovisual content for blind and visually impaired audiences in Lithuania, and the analysis of the process and the results of the newest project “KlaRega”.

### 2. Audio Description as a mode of Audiovisual Translation

Talking about audiovisual (hereinafter AV) content we clearly understand that the processes of globalisation force the creators to very “traditional” transformation of the products created by them – to the interlingual translation. Sound and image form the unity of an AV work, and if a person does not have access to one of these essential components, the content of the AV product may be extremely limited or inaccessible. In such cases, translation from one sign system to

another is used – intersemiotic translation, where, in the strict sense, non-linguistic signs are transformed into linguistic signs. This mode of AV translation is called AD and defined by Bernd Benecke (2004: 78) as “the technique used for making theatre, movies and TV programmes accessible to blind and visually impaired people: an additional narration describes the action, body language, facial expressions, scenery and costumes. The description fits in between the dialogue and does not interfere with important sound and music effects”. For blind and partially sighted people, the dialogue / monologue / polylogue, music and sounds that accompany the action help them understand a film, play or TV programme, but this is usually not enough. The objective verbal descriptions (the AD[2]) of the visual layer of movie / theatre performance (its’ action, place of action, appearance and body language of characters, camera angles, colours and lighting, on-screen texts, etc.) are crucial for the qualitative understanding of AV products.

The style and content of the AD is determined by information about the audience: it is not only the age, education, or level of proficiency in mother tongue and foreign languages that matters. The nature of the visual impairment is a key parameter. The list of visual impairments is extensive, and the causes of poor eyesight or sight loss are wide-ranging: from birth defects, genetic disorders, disease to trauma. It is therefore particularly important to recognise that the target audience of AD is also heterogeneous: some people were born blind, while others lost their sight at an early age and simply do not remember seeing. In fact, they try to transmit visual information to their other senses, associating certain visual things (such as colours) with other senses, for example, with smell, taste, sound, and touch of the object or other familiar objects, associated with that colour. The second important group is the audience, who are currently blind, but still have visual memories (can remember images, colours). The third category is partially sighted: they still remember images and have residual sight. This group is large compared to the blind: according to the European Blind Union (EBU 2022), there are four times more partially sighted than blind people. The diversity of the last group is exceptional: those people may be partially sighted from birth, or they may become visually impaired later in life for various reasons (disease, injury, aging, and so on). These factors determine not only their personal health histories, but also their attitudes towards and access to the environment around them including the cultural content (for example, AV material). This was also revealed by the research carried out during the project “KlaRega”, focusing on AV content with Lithuanian AD.

### 3. History of filmic Audio Description

In world history, the AD methodology has been used since the beginning of the 20th century. As witnessed by the National Institute for the Blind’s journal, “The Beacon”[3], the first official attempt to audio describe the film took place in the UK in January 1917. In Spain AD of films started to be provided after the Civil War, in the late 1940s. The commentaries provided by journalist Gerardo Esteban were transmitted on radio frequencies once per week (Orero 2007: 179). As Marc Vighetti states, the first known attempt to audio describe cinema in France was documented in 1988, and consequently in 1989 the first official presentation of the process of AD at the Cannes Film Festival took place (Vighetti 2021). Inspired by the festival, a group of German enthusiasts known as “Münchner Filmbeschreibergruppe” [Munich film describers’ group] also prepared commentaries for some American comedy movies in the same year in Germany (Kirf 2008: 19–20; Arma 2011: 45). According to Saveria Arma, the first screening of a film with AD in UK was organised in 2002 (Arma 2011: 44). In Baltic states Estonia and Latvia, who together with Lithuania belong to the Baltic Sea region and share relevant historical moments, AD services for films started accordingly in 2009[4] and in 2022[5].

Any AD events were officially recorded until the very end of 20th century in Lithuania. The first documented live AD attempt of a film and of AD in general dates back to the year 2000 – in April the film “Tylos ir tamsos šalis” [Land of Silence and Darkness] (1971, directed by German film director Werner Herzog) was live audio described by the Lithuanian filmmaker Audrius Stonys at the cinema Lietuva in Vilnius (Mykolaitytė 2000). In 2006 the second attempt of cinema AD followed – the film “Black Sun”[6]. In 2012, the first Lithuanian film with pre-recorded AD was screened in the former Lithuanian Library for the Blind in several Lithuanian towns: this film – “Anarchija Žirmūnuose” [Anarchy in Žirmūnai] by Saulius Drunga – can also be viewed on DVD, giving the opportunity to experience the adapted product repeatedly, and not only, as before, to attend a one-off screening. To date, 8 audio described films (7 of them with pre-recorded AD) have been screened at Lithuanian film festivals (for more details read Niedzviegienė 2023: 7–8).

Already in year 2000 Lithuania was aware of the progress of other countries and intended to introduce AD into television, but it was not enough for the television authorities to take the initiative alone. The availability of improved consumer electronics such as TVs with stereo sound was essential to meet the needs of viewers (Mykolaitytė 2000). Until autumn 2012, Lithuanian television was analogue. This was the main obstacle preventing TV broadcasting with AD in Lithuania although some other countries counted the history of TV programs with AD for more than 10 years. The introduction of digital TV in Lithuania did not change anything for the next 5 years (2012–17): our TV content remained without AD until the beginning of 2018, when the first attempt of the AD of a TV product took place – the film “Gražuolė” [The Beautiful Girl] (directed by Arūnas Žebriūnas) was audio described and made public. The very detailed overview of the TV production with AD in Lithuania can be found in the other article of the author (see Niedzviegienė 2023). Only in the last years, Lithuania has made significant advancements in its efforts to offer real-time ADs for movies. It should be highlighted that there is a growing availability of films through Lithuanian National Radio and Television (hereinafter LRT), as they now broadcast movies with AD (about 25 hours annually).

### 4. Audio described theatre performances

Till 2000, the technical possibility of providing live commentary in Lithuanian theatres using devices for simultaneous interpretation did exist. During this time, the Lithuanian blind and partially sighted community harboured a desire to experience at least one audio described theatre performance annually. At the time, the process of adapting such performance seemed easier, requiring fewer technical resources, and relying more on human skill (Mykolaitytė 2000). However, there has been no tangible action.

Meanwhile, in other countries, theatre AD has been performed for some time. The official start of theatre AD can be traced back to the USA: during a briefing on theatre accessibility held in 1980 by Wayne White, the manager of the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., an important development took place. Margaret Pfanstiehl, who was blind and managed the

Metropolitan Washington Ear (a radio reading service for the blind), along with her husband Cody, initiated the world's first AD program for performing arts as a result of this briefing. Remarkably, this program is still active today (Snyder 2008: 192). According to Arma, theatrical performances with AD took place in the UK in the mid-1980s for the first time (Arma 2011: 43–45). In Baltic state Estonia AD services for theatre performances started in 2010; no data about theatre AD in Latvia found.

Since 2012, the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired has been running the project “Audio Description in Theatre”, which aims to adapt the cultural environment for people with visual impairments and to provide them with the opportunity to experience professional theatre art: in 2012, for the first time in Lithuania a performance with live AD – Chekhov's “Uncle Vanya” – was presented for the blind audience broadcasting the AD through wireless headphones. The audio describer of this performance was the Lithuanian actress Adrija Čepaitė. In direct cooperation between Vilnius theatres and the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired, a total of 6 performances were adapted. Five theatre performances were shown in cooperation with the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre (Vilnius): the above mentioned “Uncle Vanya” (author A. Chekhov, directed by E. Lacascade), “An Enemy of the People” (author H. Ibsen, directed by J. Vaitkus), “Liliom” (author F. Molnár, directed by L. Bagossy), “Cathedral” (author J. Marcinkevičius, directed by O. Koršunovas), “Divine Comedy” (author D. Alighieri, directed by E. Nekrošius). One another performance with AD was shown at the Russian Drama Theatre in Vilnius – the tragedy of V. Shakespeare “King Lear” (directed by J. Vaitkus). All above mentioned ADs were performed by the actress Adrija Čepaitė.

This was followed by the involvement of the Kaunas Faculty of Vilnius University in 2015, which is the only educational institution in Lithuania that teaches and researches the intricacies of AD. All other performances so far adapted for the blind and partially sighted audience in Lithuania appeared in collaboration between the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired and Vilnius University Kaunas Faculty members or alumni (for systemised information see Table 1).

Nr.	Year	Title of the Theatre Play	Director	Theatre	AD Text Author	Size of the Target Audience
1.	2012	Anton Chekhov “Uncle Vania”	E. Lacascade	LNDT <sup>[7]</sup>	Theatre and film actress A. Čepaitė	48
2.	2013	Henrik Ibsen “An Enemy of the People”	J. Vaitkus	LNDT <sup>[7]</sup>	Theatre and film actress A. Čepaitė	80 (50 impaired pers., 30 accomp. pers.)
3.		Ferenc Molnár “Liliom”	L. Bagossy			
4.	2014	Justinas Marcinkevičius “Cathedral”	O. Koršunovas			80 (55 impaired pers., 25 accomp. pers.)
5.		Dante Alighieri “Divine Comedy”	E. Nekrošius			
6.	2015	William Shakespeare “King Lear” (the play performed in Russian; AD in Lithuanian)	J. Vaitkus	LRDT <sup>[8]</sup>	L. Niedzviegienė and a group of AVT students	82 (60 impaired pers., 22 accomp. pers.)
7.		Max Frisch “Biography: A Game”	G. Varnas	NKDT <sup>[9]</sup>		
8.	2016	Agnė Dilytė and “Solė and Grandmothers”	A. Dilytė	JMDT <sup>[10]</sup>	AVT student K. Meilūnaitė	19 visually impaired pupils + 11 sighted teachers
9.		Laura Ruohonen “Cherry Chocolate” in	L. M. Zaikauskas		L. Niedzviegienė and a group of AVT students	About 80 visually impaired
10.	2017	William Shakespeare “Hamlet”	V. Bareikis	NKDT	L. Niedzviegienė and AVT student K. Meilūnaitė	About 160 visually impaired

Nr.	Year	Title of the Theatre Play	Director	Theatre	AD Text Author	Size of the Target Audience
11.		August Strindberg "Father"	M. Ķimele	KDT <sup>[11]</sup>	L. Niedzviegienė and a group of AVT students	About 300 visually impaired (2 sessions)
12.	2018	Molière "I – Moliere"	I. Paliulytė	NKDT	AVT students K. Meilūnaitė and E. Jonaitytė	About 430 visually impaired (2 sessions)
13.		Antanas Škėma "White Shroud"	J. Jurašas	NKDT	AVT student K. Meilūnaitė	About 220 visually impaired
14.	2019	Nikolai Gogol "The Government Inspector"	A. Giniotis	VŠDT <sup>[12]</sup>	AVT graduate K. Meilūnaitė	About 170 visually impaired
15.	2020	Tadeusz Słobodzianek "Our Class"	O. Koršunovas	KDT	L. Niedzviegienė and K. Meilūnaitė	Remotely demonstrated
	2022					Live AD; the number of viewers unknown
16.	2021	Mika Myllyaho "Panic"	K. Gudmonaitė	NKDT	L. Niedzviegienė and AVT student E. Švenytė	169 visually impaired and accomp. pers.
17.	2021	Jean Anouilh "Antigone"	M. Ķimele	KDT	L. Niedzviegienė with AVT students I. Zasčiurinskaitė and G. Vainilaitytė	124 visually impaired and accomp. pers.
18.	2022	August Strindberg "The Great Highway"	J. Vaitkus	LNDD	L. Niedzviegienė and AVT student L. Garbonytė	Nearly 130 visually impaired and accomp. pers.
19.	2023	Rimantas Kmita "Remyga"	O. Koršunovas	VŠDT	L. Niedzviegienė and AVT student U. Pužaitė	Number unknown
20.	2023	Agota Kristof "Thick Notebook"	J. Brazys	KDT	L. Martinkutė-Niedzviegienė, AVT students V. Joneckytė, M. Mačiukaitė, E. Sulikaitė	227 (154 impaired pers., 73 accomp. pers.)
21.	2024	Iwan Wyrpajew "Drunks"	Iwan Wyrpajew	LNDD	L. Martinkutė, AVT student S. Butkutė	150 visually impaired and accomp. pers.

**Table 1: The statistics of theatre performances with AD in Lithuania<sup>[13]</sup>**

Until beginning of 2018 theatre AD was the most developed AD field in our country with more than ten audio described performances since 2012. The national broadcaster LRT later came to dominate with audio described films.

At this point switches the article from practical activities of AD to a scientific context and seeks to overview the research on the topic of cinema and theatre accessibility for the Lithuanian blind and partially sighted audience carried out by various national cultural and educational institutions.

## 5. Cinema and theatre Audio Description research in Lithuania

Research on the accessibility of AV material in Lithuania has been increasing recently. Several small-scale studies were carried out by the Lithuanian Audiosensory Library (formerly the Lithuanian Library for the Blind) in 2018<sup>[14]</sup>. In the same year, 2018, a large-scale study focusing on the needs of persons with disabilities (including the needs of the blind

and visually impaired community) in the field of culture was carried out by the program “Kurk Lietuvai” [Create Lithuania] [15]. Vilnius University, the largest and oldest university in Lithuania, has also been involved in practical and scientific activities and research related to AD since 2014: research on cinema and theatre AD is carried out here by BA and MA level students, as well as by lecturers. To date, a number of bachelor’s and master’s theses have been successfully defended, and several scientific articles have been published in Lithuanian and English, for example, thematising the adaptation of AV content to the visually impaired audience (Niedzviegienė and Kirejeva 2015), discussing the development of AD in Lithuania and in German-speaking countries (Alosevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2017), analysing the history and peculiarities of theatre AD with special regard to audio introduction guidelines (Niedzviegienė 2017), and extensively overviews audio described cinema and TV production in Lithuania (Niedzviegienė 2023). The concept for the project “KlaRega” originated exactly at the above-mentioned Vilnius University, and it was subsequently executed with success by two lecturers and researchers of this educational institution.

It is stated that linguistic and cultural peculiarities of each country, as well as the specific needs of the target audience determine partially the methodology of AD. This has been proven during a scientific study conducted from February 2021 to December 2022 in framework of the Lithuanian project “KlaRega”, funded by the Research Council of Lithuania [Lietuvos mokslo taryba]. The qualitative and quantitative research conducted by Assoc. Prof. Dr L. Niedzviegienė (Vilnius University, specialising in AD) and Assoc. Prof. Dr Jurgita Kerevičienė (Vilnius University, specialising in SDH) has reflected the experiences and needs of the audience as well as demonstrated the importance of national AD guidelines. As a result, national AD and SDH guidelines for accessible films and theatre performances were prepared (see Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022a) and publicly presented during the national seminar to the Lithuanian cultural and art authorities (film and theatre makers and professionals involved in its adaptation process or specialists of film and theatre AD). In addition, a scientific study has been written (see Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b). The most relevant findings and outcomes of the research related to the visually impaired audience will be presented in this article.

## 6. The scope of the study presented in this article

This paper will analyse data gathered through online questionnaire[16] (consisting of 50 questions) on the framework of the project “KlaRega” to get insights from blind and partially sighted individuals regarding their needs and experiences related to the adaptation of AV products in Lithuania.

The main part of the questionnaire was related to the qualitative and quantitative analysis of AV products adapted to the audience and available in Lithuanian theatres, as well as on TV and various film platforms. This part presented short (up to one minute) AV product examples adapted for the target audience according to the general rules of the AD methodology. The AD texts of the selected theatre play and films were created by the author of this article in cooperation with some co-authors. The screening of the excerpts should have allowed an assessment of audience needs, preferences, and interests. Based on these, guidelines for the adaptation of AV products for the target audience should have been drawn up.

The research inquired about participants’ experiences and opinions regarding the dissemination of information about adapted AV products as well as common challenges related to the physical and social environment. However, issues of accessibility of the information (cinema or theatre websites, social media, etc.), physical environment (in terms of physical location and building of particular cinema or theatre) and social environment (the skills and knowledge of the cinema / theatre staff about how to communicate with the blind or partially sighted and how to help them) will not be discussed directly and extensively in this article. For obvious reasons, this paper is limited to an analysis of the issue of accessibility of AV content through AD.

Links to the online questionnaires were shared with the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired and the former Lithuanian Library for the Blind as well as through the particular social network Facebook group of Lithuanian blind and partially sighted[17]. Additional live meetings-discussions were held to collect additional feedback. However, the data from these meetings (with over 20 participants) will not be addressed here. Instead, only the data from online surveys will be discussed, as these surveys follow a structured format with fixed questions. The number of people involved in the online questionnaire was very small – 37 people. It has been observed in practice that the community tends to be passive in contributing to AD research. In addition, there are not many people in Lithuania who officially[18] consider themselves part of the blind and partially sighted community.

Having explained where the limits of this research lie, it is now possible to turn to the core of the analysis.

## 7. Lithuanian audience needs and experiences: films

The survey for people with visual impairments asked about their general information, habits, experiences, and preferences related to watching films and attending theatre. It also investigated how easy it is for them to access cinema and theatre by giving examples of movies and plays with AD and asking for their feedback. The last section of the questionnaire allowed participants to share additional insights.

The questionnaire’s initial section addressed demographics, education, and disability levels. Questions about specialised education for the blind aimed to gauge adaptability to the modern information environment and explore the correlation between social adaptation and AV product use. The general section of the survey enabled us to construct a profile of a typical participant, revealing that the survey was mainly attended by individuals who were over 50 years old (45.9 per cent), predominantly women (78.4 per cent), and mainly residents of the capital city, Vilnius (40.5 per cent). Additionally, respondents were uniformly Lithuanian speakers, with the majority (56.8 per cent) having attended regular schools for sighted individuals and possessing higher education qualifications (59.5 per cent). A significant portion of participants were partially sighted (54.1 per cent), visually impaired from birth (43.2 per cent), and raised in sighted families (94.6 per cent) (Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b: 51–52).

While a considerable proportion confirmed that they like watching films (67.6 per cent), a majority rarely visited cinemas, with 45.9 per cent doing so only every few years. The TV content was more popular among blind and partially sighted

individuals, with 37.8 per cent watching TV for more than 2 hours daily, favouring informative programs (40.5 per cent). Feature films, social documentaries, talk shows or educational shows as most loved genre were mentioned by three participants each (for each genre 8.1 per cent of the respondents).

Regarding viewing habits related to AV production equipment, certain trends emerged. A notable 37.8 per cent reported not watching films on a computer at all, and 40.5 per cent never used online platforms for film and program viewing. Among those who did use such platforms, the LRT media library[19] was the most popular, mentioned by 43.2 per cent of respondents (Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b: 52–53).

Summarising the second survey section on film-related habits and preferences, around two-thirds (67.6 per cent) of respondents enjoy films, but almost half (45.9 per cent) rarely go to the cinema, opting for occasional visits every few years. Daily television consumption exceeds two hours for 37.8 per cent of participants, with a preference for informational programs (40.5 per cent). Additionally, 43.2 per cent access films and recordings through the LRT media library, while 40.5 per cent do not use online platforms. Foreign platforms attract less interest, with only 18.9 per cent expressing curiosity. Approximately 37.8 per cent do not watch films on computers, while 29.7 per cent spend 1–2 hours on it daily. A significant 78.4 per cent have experienced films with AD, with 43.2 per cent watching them at least once a year, eliciting positive emotions for 75.7 per cent of the respondents. Furthermore, 73 per cent are content with the pace of AD in already watched films. 56.8 per cent of all the participants value detailed information about characters' body language provided by the AD text for learning and discovery (Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b: 55–56).

## 8. Lithuanian audience needs and experiences: theatre

As far as the theatre AD is concerned, it should be mentioned that this genre is subject to many of the same rules and norms that apply to cinema or other visual products of a dynamic nature. However, there are also some very specific aspects that have been explored in the third part of the questionnaire. In addition, an example of an audio described theatre performance recording included in the survey[20] gave the opportunity for the respondents to express their opinion on the AD of the excerpt.

Among the respondents there were two who do not like and do not watch plays. As many as 73 per cent like watching plays. 40.5 per cent go to the theatre several times a year, 27 per cent very rarely, only every few years, 18.9 per cent go once a year, and 8.1 per cent once a month. There were also some who have never been to the theatre or go several times a month.

The largest share of the audience prefers dramatic plays (37.8 per cent), followed by comedies (16.2 per cent), musical plays (10.8 per cent), and plays dealing with social issues (8.1 per cent). The majority (56.8 per cent) do not watch recordings of performances online. Almost a third said they watch freely available recordings online (29.7 per cent). The rest were not aware of this option or said they pay to watch a recording or live stream of a performance. As many as 62.2 per cent of the respondents have seen performances with AD (live or online), and almost a third (29.7 per cent) have not yet watched theatre with AD and are planning to do so. 8.1 per cent of the participants said they did not know audio described performances exist. When asked about the frequency of watching performances with AD, two trends emerged: 40.5 per cent watch at least once a year, while almost a quarter (24.3 per cent) watch it once every few years. 27 per cent said they had never seen audio described performances before.

In terms of their experience with audio described performances, nearly two-thirds (59.5 per cent) expressed solely positive emotions. About 32.4 per cent mentioned not having had the chance to attend such a performance but expressed a desire to do so. Some participants felt the AD format might be challenging, while others, with residual vision, found issues with premature AD or discrepancies between the video and AD. Regarding the pace of AD, 48.6 per cent were satisfied with it during their past experiences. 32.4 per cent had no opinion due to not having witnessed an AD performance. Approximately 13.5 per cent reported occasional difficulty hearing everything but stated it did not impact their understanding. Several responses expressed confusion due to information overload or stated that sometimes the AD text is not what it should be about.

It turned out that almost half of the respondents (45.9 per cent) would be / are happy to attend in the audio introduction (a pre-show presentation of the actors and scenery), if possible. Only 16.2 per cent of the respondents do not find the audio introduction important, only the performance. When asked about the importance of stage lighting information in AD text, 43.2 per cent of respondents said it is important and should be included. 13.5 per cent felt stage lighting is unimportant and can be excluded from AD.

As mentioned before, this section deals with audience needs and experiences specifically related to theatre AD, that is, those elements that are not covered in cinema AD. For example, a noisy soundtrack is less of an issue for cinema, as it is easily solved by adjusting the soundtracks, as their parameters can be easily changed. Meanwhile, the volume of the music or other sounds in the performance cannot be changed because, in our experience so far, the directors are reluctant to do so. Extremely noisy episodes with intense background music or noises pose challenges in AD. However, 40.5 per cent of respondents believe that even in the presence of loud noise or music, it is necessary to convey crucial stage action information. This indicates that the audience both needs and expects an AD in various situations during a performance.

## 9. The preferred style of Audio Description

The questionnaire proceeded to inquire about which style of AD the viewer prefers: neutral or subjective, detailed or more abstract. Some questions regarding the specific text elements that make one style more effective or engaging than others were included, encouraging respondents to reflect on their personal experiences with different formats of AD.

The survey responses show that it is not always easy for blind viewers to identify characters from the voice alone: while a significant proportion (37.8 per cent) said that they have no difficulty in identifying characters in this way, as many as



43.2 per cent are happy to hear clues to a character's identity in the AD text. 29.7 per cent stated sometimes having difficulties by understanding which character is speaking.

The issue of audio describing body language is highly debated from both scientific and practical perspectives, making the audience's responses particularly valuable: 54.1 per cent said that they like to receive detailed information about characters' body language because in this way they can learn new things. 24.3 per cent most prefer when a character's body language is not described and instead their mental state and emotions are directly named. One admitted that he is annoyed by the descriptions of the body language of the characters, because he does not understand them anyway. Another said that there should be as much talk about body language as is necessary to reveal the plot. Some of the respondents could not answer the question because they had not seen this type of performance or had no opinion.

The naming of colours in the AD text is also often debated. Some partially sighted people said they are happy to get some information about colours (27 per cent). Another 18.9 per cent have residual vision that helps them to see colours, so they do not think it is necessary to mention colours in the text. 16.2 per cent said they have been blind since birth, but colours are important to them and they like it when colours are mentioned in the text. Several other respondents, who have not been able to see since adulthood or have lost their sight recently, confirmed the same. Only one respondent said that he / she has been blind since birth, so colours do not mean anything to him / her, and colour' names are annoying in text. One respondent stated that colours have an archetypal meaning and can therefore be significant in a film or a play. Thus, the results of the survey revealed that blind and partially sighted people are in favour of the mention of colours in the AD text.

After the general questions asking about the preferred AD style, the questionnaire included links to four short extracts of AV products. Here, both about general trends and specifics related to the audio described excerpts of the films and of the performance were asked. The questions about the identification of characters, colours or pace of the AD revealed similar trends as in the previous parts of the survey. However, there were some additional questions, the answers to which are relevant in the context of this article and therefore will be discussed below.

When demonstrating excerpt from selected film[21] and discussing how much AD text should be included and how much of the original film soundtrack should be left uncovered, the audience was sharply divided: 35.1 per cent of respondents would prefer the silent scenes to be audio described as fully as possible, filling all the time when the actors are not speaking. 21.6 per cent opposed this position, arguing that silent scenes should also have silent pauses during which the film's music or other sounds could be heard. 37.8 per cent are in favour of describing silent scenes in as much detail as possible, but not overwhelming important sounds in the original soundtrack.

## 10. The relevance of the sound layer

In addition to the visual layer of a product, the audio layer is of particular importance for AD. Here we should mention both the peculiarities of the original soundtrack (for example, a very noisy film track that interferes with the AD and must be adjusted) and the fact that the original music and background sounds of the film must be largely preserved in order not to lose the character of the product. In addition, some film soundtracks are not monolingual and foreign interludes are not always translated, so the sound layer in the film's soundtrack also poses a challenge. The voice of the narrator, who will voice the AD soundtrack or give live AD in the theatre, also seems to be important.

In AV products, the atmosphere is frequently enhanced through the incorporation of background music. However, it is crucial not to ruin the overall atmosphere with AD. Sometimes these layers intersect, so it was important to find out the needs of the Lithuanian audience in terms of matching the AD text to the music and songs in films and performances. Almost half of the respondents (45.9 per cent) said that only music without lyrics can be covered with AD. Their reasoning was that lyrics are important, and adding an AD track over them could interfere with the audience's ability to hear and understand the lyrics. Just over a quarter (27 per cent) took a similar view, stating that it would be great if as little background music as possible could be covered with AD text. The same proportion of respondents (27 per cent) feel that it is important to get as much information as possible and are therefore in favour of using the musical background to insert AD.

Voice quality is a crucial element of audio content. The audience of blind and partially sighted people had very clear expectations about the voice of the person reading the AD text. The most popular choices in the questionnaire were:

It is important to me that the voice is pleasing to the ear (81.1 per cent).

I only want to hear correct diction and accents (32.4 per cent).

The gender of the reader is not important (29.7 per cent).

The other options given are less frequently selected:

The most important thing is to have as many products with AD as possible and the quality of the voice is not important (18.9 per cent).

The gender of the reader of the AD text should be the same as that of the main character (16.2 per cent).

It does not matter that the diction is poor, and the reading is not properly accented, it does not bother me (10.8 per cent).

In the open-ended answer box, respondents mentioned that they had not seen such performances (one respondent), that the reader should stand out from the other voices in the performance "so that you don't mix it with the troupe of actors". Another respondent modified one of the suggested answers and said that both – the quality of the voice and the maximum number of products with AD – are important.

Another selected and demonstrated excerpt from the film[22] contained multilingual inserts (when Russian and German are spoken). 52.8 per cent of viewers appreciated having a voice reading translations for these parts, as it helped them understand. 33.3 per cent were convinced that they knew Russian well enough not to need a translation, and that the voice-over only interfered. A total of 12 respondents chose this answer option: two of them are in the 31–40 age group, one is in the 41–50 age group, and as many as nine are in the 50+ age group. 5.6 per cent of the respondents stated that they speak German well enough so that translation is not necessary, and that the voice-over interferes. These persons belong to the age group 31–40 years.

## 11. Features of Audio Description for children

The interviewees were also introduced to an excerpt from the children's film[23]. Minors did not take part in the survey, only adult respondents, so responses related to AD products for children should be treated with caution as they are not the responses of children or adolescents. However, some of today's visually impaired people have had disabilities since birth or childhood, so their insights are also valuable. The most significant statement for the largest proportion of respondents (40.5 per cent) was that the pace of reading of AD text should be similar for both children and adults. 32.4 per cent of respondents confirmed that children's film AD can be moderated in the use of more complex words, as this allows them to learn new things. Almost the same number of respondents (29.7 per cent) believed the opposite, that the AD text of children's films should avoid any more complex words or terms. As regards the conveyance of emotions, 29.7 per cent of all respondents believe that short and clear commentaries, no matter how subjective, are more useful for young audiences, so, here again, we could conclude that the audience prefers the direct naming of an emotion to the description of body language. Just over a fifth (21.6 per cent) chose the statement that in children's films the gender of the person reading the AD text is not important. However, 8.1 per cent considered the gender of the narrator reading AD text to be important and tended to agree that the gender of the main character and of the AD voice should be different in children's films, as this makes it easier for children to understand where the characters are speaking and where the AD is.

As already mentioned, the full study covered not only the audience's experiences regarding the accessibility of AV products through AD, but also the attitudes towards the accessibility of the informational, physical, and social environment. The discoveries from the research should give an impetus to the growth of cultural accessibility to the visually impaired community in Lithuania.

## 12. Summary and conclusion

Visually impaired individuals in Lithuania still face challenges when it comes to accessing AV content. Previously, AD in theatre productions was the most developed area until January 2019. Currently, two to three theatre performances with AD are shown annually in Lithuania for the blind and partially sighted. With the airing of the TV series "Laisvės kaina. Disidentai" [The Price of Freedom. Dissidents] on the national broadcaster LRT in January 2019, the number of TV programs with AD has surpassed audio described theatre performances. The LRT is improving accessibility by broadcasting cinema productions with AD. They currently broadcast around 25 hours of blind-friendly content per year, which includes full-length films or TV series episodes on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. However, achieving a certain amount of legally defined AV output with AD is not enough to maximise audience satisfaction. It is necessary to ensure that the adaptation meets the audience's expectations, and this requires an understanding of audience needs.

The research, conducted in Lithuania in 2021–2022 by implementing the project "KlaRega" (the full title "Kultūrinė įtrauktis: audiovizualinių produktų pritaikomumo klausos ir regos neįgaliesiems tyrimas" [Inclusive culture: the study on accessibility of audiovisual products for the visually and hearing impaired]), revealed that there is a lack of suitable AV productions with AD, especially for children, and that the number of audio described AV material from foreign producers is also extremely limited. Foreign films were for a long time not audio described in Lithuania due to restrictions on editing foreign films and the short validity period of licenses obtained for foreign films. This made it economically unviable as the audio described movie cannot be viewed once the license expires. Therefore, only classic Lithuanian films or films by contemporary Lithuanian directors received AD for visually impaired viewers on our national television, which was almost the only provider of AD service for several years. Now is the situation changing, because of private VOD platforms and film festivals, they became main agents ensuring that foreign films reach Lithuania's blind and partially sighted.

Two respondents expressed a clear belief that high-quality ADs, characterised by being fast, accurate, and not too loud, are not only beneficial for visually impaired individuals but also do not disturb those without visual impairments. Conversely, slow-paced descriptions were regarded as frustrating, even for the main target audience. It is gratifying that audiences are satisfied with the current quality of the products already adapted.

The interviewees reaffirmed their statements that AD is most essential during silent scenes with minimal or no dialogue. In other cases, the progression of the film or performance can be mainly understood through the characters' speech or sounds. For 35.1 per cent of the respondents it is important that silent scenes are audio described in as much detail as possible, filling all the time before the actors speak. One participant has stated that explanations of actions obvious from the main soundtrack, such as the sound of a squeaky door closing, can be annoying for the visually impaired audience and has recommended to utilise the available time for naming the action or the characters' emotion rather than explaining the source of the sound.

Feedback from discussions on film excerpts revealed that Lithuanian visually impaired audience appreciates detailed descriptions of characters, their body language, movements, and visual details of shown object such as colours and fabric patterns. The respondents mostly prefer subjective naming of characters' emotions in audio described content. They also favour information that reveals the identities of the characters. Attention should be paid to the complexity and expressiveness of the language used in the AD texts. This is particularly important in AV products audio described for children.

When theatre content is complex, viewers prepare by seeking primary sources, like the original book or drama script, to aid comprehension. Context is crucial, and audiences appreciate audio introductions before the performance. During the



show, visually impaired viewers desire ongoing AD of stage lighting, the mention of character names, and crucial actions, even in the presence of loud noises or music.

The quality of the AD voice is important to the audience: pleasant timbre, clear diction, and proper accentuation matter, unlike gender of the AD voice. Some respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the sound quality of some previously watched products, stating that the AD voice was sometimes unclear (described as “muffled”). The comfortable AD pace is also crucial, allowing the audience to comprehend the spoken text. According to the audience, in certain cases, the AD may partially cover the musical background, if deemed necessary. Audio subtitling for the multilingual fragments were found useful to clarify AV content.

These useful opinions and insights will enable AD practitioners to better tailor AV productions to the visually impaired community in Lithuania.

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## Filmography

*Gustavo nuotykių* [The Adventures of Gustav] Full-Length Children's Film (Directed by Vaidas Lekavičius and Augustinas Gričius). Excerpt with AD. URL: <https://youtu.be/hxePeRQGj28> (accessed 5 September 2024).

*Kai apkabinsiu tave* [Back to Your Arms] Full-Length Film Directed by Kristijonas Vildžiūnas. Excerpt with AD. URL: <https://youtu.be/8jtAl8tZYeM> (accessed 5 September 2024)

*Laisvės kaina. Disidentai* [The Price of Freedom. Dissidents]. TV Series Directed by Alvydas Šlepikas (Episode 7). Excerpt with AD. URL: [https://youtu.be/w7FM\\_hEjJYA](https://youtu.be/w7FM_hEjJYA) (accessed 5 September 2024)

*Mūsų klasė* [Our Class] Theatre Play Directed by Oskaras Koršunovas. Excerpt with AD. URL: <https://youtu.be/xZeCAhVgoys> (accessed 5 September 2024).

## Notes

[1] The full research also covering the needs and experience of the deaf and hard of hearing in Lithuania is described in detail in a scientific study (Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b).

[2] For a long time, there was no official term for the phenomenon of AD in Lithuania, so different authors used several synonymous terms, and there was a certain confusion in the terminology of this field (see Niedzviegienė 2023: 4). The Lithuanian term “garsinis vaizdavimas” was approved by the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language [Valstybinė lietuvių kalbos komisija] in April 2014 (Koverienė and Satkauskaitė 2014: 28).

[3] URL: [https://audiodescriptionau.com.au/?page\\_id=465#1920](https://audiodescriptionau.com.au/?page_id=465#1920) (accessed 8 September 2024).

[4] Information about AD on the website of the Estonian Blind Union. URL: <https://pimedateliit.ee/kirjeldustolge/> (accessed 7 September 2024).

[5] “The first audio description of a film for people with visual disabilities was created in Latvia” (20 October 2022). URL: <https://baltics.news/2022/10/20/the-first-audio-description-of-a-film-for-people-with-visual-disabilities-was-created-in-latvia/> and <https://rb.gy/fvxdc> (both accessed 5 September 2024).

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[7] Lietuvos nacionalinis dramos teatras [Lithuanian National Drama Theatre]

[8] Lietuvos rusų dramos teatras [Russian Drama Theatre of Lithuania]

[9] Nacionalinis Kauno dramos teatras [National Kaunas Drama Theatre]

[10] Panevėžio Juozo Miltinio dramos teatras [Panevėžys Juozas Miltinis Drama Theatre]

[11] Klaipėdos dramos teatras [Klaipėda Drama Theatre]

[12] Valstybinis šiaulių dramos teatras [Šiauliai State Drama Theatre]

[13] The table is prepared by the author of this article based on the personal knowledge and on the annual activity reports’ data of the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired. URL: <https://lass.lt/ataskaitos-dokumentai/> (accessed 23 August 2024).

[14] Reports, representing the results gathered from questionnaires related to two full-length films with Lithuanian AD. URL: [https://www.labiblioteka.lt/data/public/uploads/2018/11/filmas\\_gv.pdf](https://www.labiblioteka.lt/data/public/uploads/2018/11/filmas_gv.pdf) and [https://www.labiblioteka.lt/data/public/uploads/2018/11/filmas\\_ataskaita\\_galutine.pdf](https://www.labiblioteka.lt/data/public/uploads/2018/11/filmas_ataskaita_galutine.pdf) (both accessed 10 September 2024).

[15] Final report, representing all the findings of the research carried out by the program “Kurk Lietuvai”. URL: <https://data.kurk.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2018-09-05-Galutinis-modelio-aprasas-su-priedais.pdf> (accessed 7 September 2024).

[16] The questionnaire “Audiovizualinių kūrinių prieinamumas neregiam ir silpnaregiams Lietuvoje” [Accessibility of Audiovisual Works for the Blind and Partially Sighted in Lithuania] is now closed as the deadline for completing it has passed. URL to the copy of the questionnaire: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeCJWZZEN6laaiscVsSbGS7QdyPvQsaCKAgqBcWTE8SjsR\\_8A/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeCJWZZEN6laaiscVsSbGS7QdyPvQsaCKAgqBcWTE8SjsR_8A/viewform) (accessed 7 September 2024).

[17] Neregijų ir silpnaregių klubas [The Blind and Partially Sighted Club]. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/397246637052132> (accessed 3 September 2024). This club has around a thousand members.

[18] As of January 2020, the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired had 5672 members, constituting around 0.20 per cent of the population. However, these figures may not precisely reflect the size of the blind and visually impaired community in Lithuania. The data might be influenced by potential inaccuracies in medical diagnoses and the inclusion of individuals without visual impairments, such as relatives or assistants, in the Union’s membership.

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[20] Excerpt from the theatre play “Mūsų klasė” [Our Class] (directed by Oskaras Koršunovas). URL: <https://youtu.be/xZeCAhVgoys> (accessed 5 September 2024).

[21] Excerpt from the TV series “Laisvės kaina. Disidentai” [The Price of Freedom. Dissidents] (directed by Alvydas Šlepikas) (Episode 7). URL: [https://youtu.be/w7FM\\_hEjJYA](https://youtu.be/w7FM_hEjJYA) (accessed 5 September 2024).

[22] Excerpt from the film “Kai apkabinsiu tave” [Back to Your Arms] (directed by Kristijonas Vildžiūnas). URL: <https://youtu.be/8jtAl8tZYeM> (accessed 5 September 2024).

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