

Now You're Talking!

Early Audio Description, Film *Spectatorship*, and Histories of Access in Early American Cinema

“Wait a minute, wait a minute – you ain’t heard nothin’ yet!”
- Al Jolson, *The Jazz Singer* (1927)

Let us open this paper with a brief exercise.¹ Trying your best not to read the title, and avoiding looking at the screen altogether, play [this clip](#) in another window until about the forty-five second mark. **Do not watch the clip – only let yourself hear it.** Listen closely to the audio. What sounds do you hear? What do you think is going on in this clip? Most importantly, what information do you seem to be able to access from this purely sonic register, and which information is placed beyond your audible grasp? Once you have reached the specified time, return to the clip and pause it. Play it again from the beginning, and this time allow yourself to watch it as well as listen to it. What do you see? What diegetic sources did the sounds you heard correspond to? How accurate were your guesses as to the clip’s content? Finally, what was the effect of being denied the information available only on this clip’s visual register?

The clip selected for this particular exercise comes from the climactic scene of the 1967 film *Wait Until Dark*. The film tells the story of Susy Hendrix, a blind woman who has mistakenly come into possession of a doll stuffed with heroin, and becomes the target of a crime ring who badly want it back. Starring Audrey Hepburn (a sighted actress) as the blind Hendrix, *Wait Until Dark* is notable not only for its participation of a long tradition of using able-bodied actors to play disabled characters, but also for being a film that – despite its deployment of blindness as a dramatic element – is highly dependent on the visual. What does it mean, that a film so contingent on the presence of a physical disability is also largely inaccessible to those who might actually possess that disability? As it currently stands, there are no copies of *Wait Until Dark* available for purchase or streaming that have been audio described for the visually impaired. In other words, even in 2020 – more than fifty years after the film was first released – *Wait Until Dark* remains largely inaccessible to the very people whose disability it exploits for entertainment value.

¹ Credit for this exercise belongs to Joel Snyder of the Audio Description Project, who uses it to begin his Audio Description training workshops

When it comes to discussions of film and disability, attention is most often directed towards questions of representation. Indeed, numerous books and articles have taken it upon themselves to “examine the ways that the mainstream movie industry has depicted the physically disabled experience” and the social implications of these depictions.² This is important work, its urgency underscored by the very real consequences that attend representational politics. At the same time, however, it is necessary to explore questions not only of what is *on* the screen, but also of who is able – even allowed – to access those images, and how they are (or are not!) able to do so. In many ways, these questions are closely aligned: the question of how disabled people are portrayed in cinema and the degree to which disabled people are able to access cinematic products can be answered by the simple fact that cinema (like many places and kinds of meaning-making in the United States) is not a site to which disabled people have been allowed full access.

As the visibility of disability justice initiatives has grown – due in large part to the efforts of Disability Justice activists of the late twentieth century and beyond – so have initiatives, both individual and institutional, to make society accessible for all. That popular media is a key site for this intervention should come as no surprise. If film is, as Robert Sklar has noted, one of “the most popular and influential [forms] of culture in the United States,” the stuff that dreams are made of, it makes little sense that some Americans are not allowed to fully participate in or engage with it.³ Disability, writes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune” but rather “a culturally fabricated narrative of the body... [that] produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies.” Disability is an insidious and “pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variation.”⁴ One of the ways in which disability is “produced” by culture, then, is in the construction of social spaces and structures that – whether consciously or not – have the effect of excluding certain bodies and therefore marking them as deviant. Taken on these terms, accessibility is not

² Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation*, ix.

³ Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 3.

⁴ Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” 17.

simply an issue of inclusion, but a litmus test for understanding which kinds of bodies matter enough to take into consideration.

In the arena of film and television, one of the primary ways of ensuring accessibility for vision-impaired people lies in the practice of “Audio Description” (AD). Audio Description, according to the American Council of the Blind’s aptly-named Audio Description Project, “is a narration service... that attempts to describe what the sighted person takes for granted” in media like film, television, and theater. It relates “those images that a person who is blind or visually impaired formerly could only experience through the whispered asides from a sighted companion.”⁵ For those unfamiliar with audio description, a short example may be found [here](#). An audio commentary that “guides the listener through the presentation with concise, objective descriptions of new scenes, settings, costumes, body language, and ‘sight gags,’” AD – especially in the case of prerecorded audiovisual media like films and video presentations – must frequently be “slipped in between portions of dialogue or songs,” supplementing the existing audio track with information available only on its visual register.⁶ In this capacity, AD is generally understood as an additive technology of access, one aimed at amending existing discrepancies that characterize questions of media, representation, and legibility.

Most histories of AD – at least those available on blindness advocacy websites like the Audio Description Project – locate its inception in the latter half of the twentieth century. Audio Description Solutions begins its timeline in 1974, with Gregory Frazier’s Master’s thesis on possible concepts for “television for the blind.”⁷ Joel Snyder’s book, *The Visual Made Verbal*, posits a slightly earlier date of origin in the 1960s, noting that Chester Avery, a “blind theatre-lover” and member of the Department of Education, theorized “a formal process that could convey the visual images of theater performances to people who are blind or have low vision.”⁸ As the ADP website observes, however, “credit for the

⁵ “All About Audio Description,” Audio Description Project

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “A Brief History of Audio Description in the U.S.,” Audio Description Solutions

⁸ Snyder, “Audio Description: A Brief History,” 15.

invention of ‘audio description’” as we currently understand it “generally goes to the late Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl,” who in 1990 – the same year that saw the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – would receive an Emmy for her work on AD.⁹ In 2009, the American Council of the Blind would launch its Audio Description Project “to offer training, establish standards, encourage growth, disseminate information, and encourage studies of audio description.”¹⁰ In 2015, the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, signed in 2010 by President Barack Obama, was finally implemented.

As of 2018, movie theaters are required “to provide closed movie captioning and audio description at a movie patron’s seat whenever showing a digital movie produced, distributed, or otherwise made available with these features.”¹¹ Streaming platforms – including *Amazon Prime*, *Disney+*, *Hulu*, *Netflix*, and even *PornHub* – also offer patrons options for both closed-captioning and AD.¹² That being said, even newly “accessible” movie theaters are required only to abide by the mandatory minimum of AD devices, which is “less than 1 per screen.”¹³ Likewise, even streaming platforms that make AD available to consumers tend to do so for only a portion of their lineup. This is part of the issue with positioning accessibility as an accommodation, incorporating it retrospectively rather than from the outset. As disability scholar Jay Dolmage has written,

“Accommodation is thought of as something that always needs to be created, something that has a cost. This underlines the inherent inaccessibility of nearly all of society: seemingly, nothing is ever designed to be accessible in the first place. Accessibility itself is an exnomination, a negative or inverse term, existentially second to inaccessibility. Accessibility is existentially second in a way that demands a body that cannot access. Nothing is inaccessible until the first body can’t access it, demands access to it, or is recognized as not having access.”¹⁴

⁹ “History of Audio Description,” The Audio Description Project

¹⁰ “A Brief History of Audio Description in the U.S.,” Audio Description Solutions

¹¹ “Audio Description in Movie Theaters,” The Audio Description Project

¹² Incidentally, Disney+ received the ADP’s 2020 award for Achievement in Audio Description – Media, “specifically for having 300 titles audio described on day [one] of the new service and expanding rapidly from there.” All Disney+ originals – including *The Mandalorian* – as well as acquired properties like the older *Star Wars* films are available with AD.

¹³ “Audio Description in Movie Theaters,” The Audio Description Project

¹⁴ Dolmage, “Steep Steps,” 53.

When we figure accessibility as an accommodation, then, we continue to posit disabled bodies as negligible; as afterthoughts that can be made subsidiary to concerns of cost and convenience. Viewed in this unflattering light, cinema as a whole can be viewed as collusive in the production and perpetuation of disabled bodies and stigma.

In taking disability into account, we can puncture the long-standing idealization of film as a universalizing “visual language” credited with “overcoming divisions of nationality, culture, and class.”¹⁵

The notion of American cinema as emphasizing and, in certain ways, creating human difference is a familiar concept within film historiography. Miriam Hansen, in her seminal *Babel & Babylon*, notes the ways in which the move toward ‘classical,’ narrative forms of cinema and their attendant modes of exhibition not only “imposed a middle-class standard of spectatorship” upon early film audiences but also “contributed to the cultural homogenization of a mass audience.”¹⁶ Jacqueline Stewart likewise highlights the phenomenon whereby “the centralization and celebration of whiteness that characterize film on screen were reinforced by the spatial arrangement of theaters, which” – in their segregatory practices that often confined Black patrons to balcony seating – “deliberately kept Black audiences out of sight (and beyond the broader sensory perception) of whites.”¹⁷ Both scholars thus explore the ways in which existing social differences and inequalities were in fact reproduced in and by the supposedly democratic medium of American film. This paper seeks to highlight an additional mode of social difference generated through film spectatorship: that of disability. With the development of American cinema, I argue, came the implicit standardization not only of film form, but also of the audience that this form invited. The film spectator was assumed - and constructed - to be able-bodied. I hypothesize that contemporary questions of accessibility, particularly in terms of “supplemental” technologies of access like captioning and modern AD, are not inherent to cinema, but are needs imposed by the medium’s development along implicitly able-bodied norms and terms.

¹⁵ Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 77.

¹⁶ Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 95.

¹⁷ Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 108-109.

Despite this, however, it is essential to understand that even when denied full access and participation to public spaces and the forms of culture therein, disabled people have always created room for themselves within those spaces. I say this not to downplay the very real physical, social, and institutional barriers that disabled people have had to contend with throughout history, but to highlight the ways in which, despite those barriers, disabled people have also possessed and exerted agency in opposition to them. My goal here is to problematize a history of cinema that actively seeks to exclude, or assumes the absence of, disabled people – particularly vision-impaired people – in its narrative. In fact, disabled people have always been a part of cinema, and their presence can be felt not only on the screen and behind the screen, but before it as well. I also hope to broaden existing histories of audio description that tend to fall in with this “narrative of absence” – in fact, I argue, forms of AD have been incorporated into spectator practices since at least the silent era of cinema. In this paper, I will be looking at newspaper accounts of what I consider to be early forms of Audio Description, tracing its presence from the silent era through the advent of sound cinema and beyond, thereby “excavating” the participation of blind audiences in the practice of cinema-going prior to established timelines.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that this history is an incomplete one. We can never know the full degree or extent to which vision-impaired people – particularly those independent from institutions – engaged in the cinematic culture of the early twentieth century. How many attended and enjoyed the vaudeville shows that incorporated some of the earliest examples of the motion picture? How many might have attended silent cinema shows with their sighted friends and family members, enjoying the aspects of the performance – such as musical accompaniment – that they had access to? How many might have lost their sight later in life, after having long been an avid fan of the motion picture? Indeed, even such instances as I explore here (mainly isolated, institutionally-specific occurrences involving the congregation of a largely blind audience) cannot and have not been recovered in full: a major gap in my research is the fact that I am looking solely at reports of these events in popular newspapers aimed at general audiences. There is little doubt that periodicals specific to vision-impaired

and other disabled readers – such as the *Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind* – contain a larger and more diverse array of reports on early AD practices.¹⁸

Despite this, I believe that this is a history well worth documenting, one whose very incompleteness signals both the ephemerality of spectator practices and the systemic erasure that disabled bodies and lives contend with on a daily basis. If this work is an incomplete one, then it is because there is so much more that needs to be done.

Part I: Audio Description Before Sound Cinema

“To the deaf,” wrote the *Boston Globe* in 1930, “life is a silent movie. To the blind, it is a radio performance.”¹⁹ Folded into this metaphor, of course, is a set of generalizations aimed not only at types of disability, but at forms of popular media as well. Of particular significance is the way in which this statement positions its subjects as oppositional to one another. This analogy aligns the form of disability with its supposed media counterpart by gesturing towards a common – though here unspecified – “sense” that is assumed to define the experience of both. By this logic, deafness and silent movies are united by their reliance on the visual; blindness and radio are likewise united by their tendency toward the audible. Taken on these terms, radio and deafness are totally incompatible with one another; silent cinema, likewise, is wholly inaccessible to the blind and otherwise visually-impaired. It is the latter assumption that this section takes issue with.

The idea of silent cinema being totally inaccessible to blind audiences is something of a recurring theme in both past and present literature on the subject. This seems to stem not simply from typical erasure of disabled bodies, but also from broader assumptions about the form and content of silent cinema. Quite often, the transition from silent to sound cinema is conceptualized as a process by which

¹⁸ The *Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind* is, unfortunately, not currently widely accessible – the only archive I have been able to find for this publication exists at Harvard’s Beinecke Library. Additionally, these periodicals were printed in Braille and New York Type (another system of tactile writing used by the vision-impaired), and thus can only fully be appreciated by scholars fluent in these writing systems.

¹⁹ Walter Trumbull, “Voices Tell Ages to Those Who Cannot See,” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), May 18, 1930.

“The primarily visual was supplanted by the primarily verbal.”²⁰ This, of course, is not quite true – and the term “silent cinema” is in fact a misnomer. As James Lastra has observed, this notion “that the silent cinema was never silent has become one of the great revisionist clichés of film studies.”²¹ A number of scholars have noted the numerous ways in which so-called “silent cinema” deployed sound as both a narrative and commercial technique: “sound’s most important early role,” for example, “was as a means of attracting attention to the nickelodeon itself,” and in the nascent days of the medium “primarily served the function of hailing potential patrons.”²² Lastra’s work on sound histories and technologies highlights numerous forms that the audible could take within and alongside the cinematic medium. Some examples include the “illustrated song” and the slide lecture, both of which constituted forms of cinema wherein “*images... accompany sound, not vice-versa,*” displaying a “functional subservience of image to sound” that belies notions of silent cinema as predominantly visual in nature.²³ This alternate configuration of silent cinema (however subsidiary in nature) should be taken not as an indication of the medium’s accessibility, but rather as a reminder that monolithic histories of silent film are neither scholastically productive nor wholly accurate. It serves also as a reminder that, at least in these small ways, cinema has never been fully beyond the grasp of the blind and visually-impaired.

This would prove to be the case even as the medium matured, though in some respects the range of audible points of entry would begin to contract. “Although film producers had been generally successful in consolidating their control over the product,” writes Lastra, “sound accompaniment, more and more a part of standard exhibitions after 1907, remained an arena wherein individual exhibitors could alter the public’s relation to the film.”²⁴ The practice of “funning” a motion picture, for example, was apparently common enough to merit its own term, not to mention the disapprobation of those who sought the medium’s standardization. “Funning” referred to accompaniment practices that “satirized scenes or

²⁰ Eyman, *The Speed of Sound*, 20.

²¹ Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, 98.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, 101.

²⁴ Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, 104.

entire films through musical puns, commenting on the picture through the title, lyrics, or melody of the accompanying music.”²⁵ At theaters in cities with large Black communities, this technique could take on additional political and cultural dimensions, “from sound effects jokes to race-specific ‘commentary’” by the jazz bands that frequently provided these theaters’ sound effects.²⁶ As a mode of address, this practice had the effect of highlighting “the musician’s cleverness” and the perspicacity of his audience, often “to the detriment of the film, whose uniformly coherent address was hopelessly fractured.”²⁷ Though still dependent on the presence of the visual – “funning,” after all, can only make sense in tandem with an optic referent – this particular form of musical accompaniment constituted a way in which sound played with, subverted, and even undermined the conventional narrative practices of the cinema. As such, it can be seen as yet another space wherein the acoustic register could be deployed in the service not of the film itself, but of its audience. It also suggests ways in which individual exhibitors (or the sound technicians of various stripes that they employed) could create levels of meaning independently of – though closely related to – the initial cinematic product.

Finally, as Miriam Hansen and Jacqueline Stewart have argued, the “silence” of silent cinema was frequently broken by “modes of spectatorial behavior which deviated from middle-class” – and typically white – “standards of reception – a more participatory, sound-intensive form of response, an active sociability, a connection with the other viewers.”²⁸ Audience engagement, albeit to varying degrees and in highly-specific contexts, could at times be courted by these modes of exhibition, rather than discouraged by the more passive, silence-demanding practices associated with the middle class. Stewart, drawing upon a literary as well as historical analysis, advocates for the possibility of spectatorship practices that involved Black audiences’ literal and ideological responses to the racial hegemonies that structured both theater spaces and film narratives. Thus did practices of “talking back” to and, in effect,

²⁵ Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, 112.

²⁶ Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, 114.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 95.

taking back cinema offer alternative ways of imagining, accompanying, and amending practices that both on and off the screen failed to take certain bodies into account.

These practices are mentioned not to position early cinema as a particularly accessible public space, but to highlight the ways in which cinematic audiences and exhibitors created space for themselves and their interests using acoustic practices. To augment the words of Miriam Hansen, “early cinema was no less patriarchal,” racist, or ableist “than its classical successor.... But [it] still lacked the formal strategies to predetermine reception in the classical sense.”²⁹ It is in this tradition, I argue, that the cinematic mode of AD – at least in the United States – can be said to participate, constituting a way by which excluded populations intervene in spectatorial practices and refashion them to suit their own needs and demands. Aligning AD and other technologies utilized by disabled communities with those of other subaltern groups – such as lower-class audiences and spectators belonging to racialized minorities – is also of a piece with the ways in which activists have positioned disability as an ideal site for coalition-building. It is, after all, one of the few oppressed groups that one is not simply – or not only – born into, but can also “enter” into at any point in their lives. Just as “disability is produced, sometimes most powerfully, by our uses of space” and narrative, so too are race, class, and other categories of identity.³⁰ Understood along these terms, Al Jolson’s famous first spoken words in 1927’s *The Jazz Singer* – “Wait a minute, wait a minute – you ain’t heard nothing yet!” – are incorrect: cinema audiences, both then and in earlier decades, had, in fact, heard quite a lot.

1915 – The Battle Cry of Peace (1915) screened at Boston’s Majestic Theater

The first explicit use of Audio Description in American cinema that I have been able to locate is a 1915 screening of the silent war picture *The Battle Cry of Peace* at Boston’s Majestic Theater. The newspaper article describing the event, published in the *Boston Daily Globe* with no mentioned author, is entitled: “Blind Persons ‘See’ a ‘Movie’ Spectacle.” The quotation marks around the word “See,” which

²⁹ Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 38.

³⁰ Dolmage, “Steep Steps,” 43-44.

denotes the word's ironic deployment and highlights the disabled status of the audience, was not a new phenomenon in reports of audio description. Though this is the earliest reference to AD's use in film located in this project, there are numerous newspaper accounts – many of earlier date – that use the same grammatical strategy to describe the practice's use in the theatre. The able-bodied presumption (and naturalization) fixed within this rhetorical othering is further underscored by the article's first subheading, which reads “‘The Battle Cry of Peace Pleases Unfortunates.’” The use of the term ‘unfortunates’ here constitutes the first – and most visible – moment of ableism in these accounts, categorizing disabled lives and bodies as something to be pitied even as it goes on to describe what seems to be a pleasurable and tentatively inclusive experience. Indeed, the article makes an effort to highlight the audience's enjoyment of the performance. The report opens with the claim that “No audience who has seen ‘The Battle Cry of Peace... enjoyed the photo spectacle more than the audience of yesterday afternoon, although nearly half the persons present could not see a single scene flashed on the screen.” This emphasis on the audience's apparently unusual enjoyment of the film is also a rhetorical configuration borrowed from theatrical uses of AD. The emphasis placed on the ironic nature of the spectator's enjoyment of the film serves, once again, to highlight their disability and separate them from “normal,” able-bodied audiences.

Directed by Wilfrid North and J. Stuart Blackton, the film was released two years prior to the United States' entry into the First World War, and was widely regarded as interventionist propaganda. The screening itself seems to have shared its subject's ideological purpose, hosted by Massachusetts governor David I. Walsh, who reportedly used the occasion to “endorse ‘military preparedness’” at the end of the first act.³¹ Significantly, selections from Walsh's speech take up at least fifty percent of the body of the piece, quoting him at great length, and the second of the article's two subheadings informs the audience that “Gov Walsh Indorses National Preparedness in Speech.” Thus does this event – and the article reporting on it – move towards a familiar tactic of invoking disability and disabled audiences as a political gesture in the service of the able-bodied. Whether Governor Walsh desired a captive audience for

³¹ “Blind Persons ‘See’ A ‘Movie’ Spectacle,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Dec. 4, 1915

his speech, or whether he simply used the unusual screening as a means of generating publicity for his political views, his effort to address a vision-impaired audience suggests an attempt to position himself as at the very least sympathetic to the disabled. In any event, the particular choice of this film – a war drama that seems to mobilize dystopian elements to underscore its advocacy of American military power – is notable at the very least for urging its audience to enter a war whose aftermath would bring about a new awareness of the disabled, particularly the disabled soldier.

The actual form that Audio Description takes on in this event is slightly unclear: the audience, wrote the reporter “enjoyed the spectacle of armies and war through a lecture describing the scenes by Geoffrey O. Whalen, who offered his services as an interpreter.” Whether the “lecture” in question was synchronized with the film itself goes unstated, but seems likely given the lack of spoken dialogue that required audio-described theatre performances to insert spoken-word summaries at the beginning of each act. The article’s lack of specificity leaves its formal possibilities open, however: perhaps the lecture came at the beginning or end of the film, or was even interjected sporadically at moments throughout the film. Also notable is the article’s mention that “all [members of the audience] had received raised letter invitations printed at the Perkins Institute” as well as raised-letter “‘point system’ programs which could be read with the finger tips.” First, this linkage to the Perkins Institute – a school for the blind that still exists today – is key, explaining not only part of the background of this event (such as how the audience was convened in the first place) but also some of the accessibility measures put in place here. The presence of raised-letter programs, for example – a common component of earlier AD theatre performance – not only gestures to an existing tradition of efforts to make public entertainment accessible, but also highlights the work of one of the organizations key in bringing about such events. It is probably due to the Perkins Institute’s involvement in this event, for example, that multiple modes of accessibility are deployed within it. That the audience members received raised-letter invitations as well as programs also speaks to a degree of consideration in the framing of this event: though obviously framed by the writer as an act of charity, the blind and vision-impaired spectators are allotted, at least by theatre management and the Perkins Institute, the status and dignity of guests. Issued to this audience in a

format that quite literally speaks to them on their own terms, the invitations highlight the multidimensionality – the need for multiple points entry and multiple forms of legibility – required of true accessibility. As the earliest account of AD in cinema located in this project, then, this article contains the best and worst of the disabled experience. It highlights the significant efforts of early disability rights advocates to create sites of access within seemingly inaccessible spaces and media, and also betrays (at least on the part of the reporter) familiar patterns of ableist condescension and pity.

1924 – The Lighthouse by the Sea (1924) screened at New York’s Piccadilly Theatre

The second-earliest instance of cinematic AD encountered in this project was a screening of the silent adventure film *The Lighthouse by the Sea* (1924) for “More than one thousand blind persons and their friends.”³² This screening took place in December of 1924 at New York’s Piccadilly Theatre on Broadway, built only a few months earlier and later rechristened the Warner Theatre. The event was reported on by *The New York Times*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, and *The L.A. Times* (which reprinted the short blurb published in the Atlanta paper) and, in the case of the latter two papers, reiterated the 1915 reporting’s titular emphasis on the term “See”: “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Movie Show,” ran the headline in *The Atlanta Constitution*, while the *L.A. Times* proclaimed “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ New Type of Picture Play.” Once again, this rhetorical move works to underscore what is taken to be the irony of the situation – and, though the very content of this article offers evidence to the contrary, its titles seem to reify the supposedly antithetical relationship of (silent) cinema and the blind spectator.

A different approach to AD seems to have been taken in the facilitation of this screening than in that of the earlier film. “The sightless persons were able to enjoy the pictorial effort by having it explained to them,” wrote the *New York Times*, “while the organist added to the effect, taking advantage of pauses in the talk and increasing the volume of music, but during most of the screening keeping the music soft

³² “1,000 Blind Enjoy A Film,” *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1924

and low.” No mention is made of any printed material, departing from its predecessor in this capacity, but a synoptic commentary does seem, once again, to have been present. *The Atlanta Constitution* article describes the commentary as “the reading of an atmospheric narrative,” and notes that this “enabled the audience to conceive the story as it was unreeled on screen.”³³ Indeed, *The New York Times* notes that the description often found itself “sticking with one scene even when the production showed the flash of another.” This seems to indicate an audio descriptive narration spanning the length of the picture, one that can more concretely be said to align with contemporary versions of AD. Of particular interest is the usage of music in the performance, something that both articles take note of. Describing the deliberation of the organist in his careful control of the musical accompaniment, this article highlights ties between this early instance of audio description and aspects of other auditory practices found within silent film spectatorship.

The Lighthouse by the Sea (1924) was a vehicle for canine hero Rin-Tin-Tin, apparently the seventh film featuring “the police dog star” released. Notable in this particular choice of film was its inclusion of a sightless character, a blind lighthouse-keeper menaced by criminals and presumably rescued by Rin-Tin-Tin. Whether the audience approved of or objected to the portrayal of a blind person in the film is unclear; all articles make sure to emphasize the positive character of their response to the experience. *The New York Times* writes of how the audience “declared that they enjoyed the story perhaps more than those who could see the picture. Several... said that their vivid imaginations brought a mental picture to them, which in certain cases might be far more wonderful than the actual scenes.”³⁴ Dwelling upon this audience reaction at far greater length than did the account of the 1915 film, this article is the first to include the testimony (albeit only partial) of the blind members of the audience themselves. Of great significance here is the fact that this testimony seems to push back preemptively at the possibility of any able-bodied chauvinism: in declaring that their joy may in fact be greater than that of a sighted

³³ “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Movie Show,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 27, 1924

³⁴ *Ibid.*

spectator, the blind audience members refuse to privilege able-bodiedness and its attendant modes of perception above their own.

We also learn, finally, that this audience was “gathered together through Walter G. Holmes of the *Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind*,” a fact that – as with the mention of the Perkins Institute in the earlier account – highlights the reality that this event was made possible by disabled people and the institutions and advocates that worked with them. The *Matilda Ziegler Magazine*, as previously mentioned, was a periodical aimed at blind and vision-impaired people. Its use of a tactile writing system – Braille and New York Point – signaled its prioritization of disabled readers, and its mention in this article (and in relation to this specific incident) opens up the possibility of other, similar instances of early cinematic AD being documented within its pulpy annals. This magazine is often mentioned in conjunction with some of the era’s theatrical instances of AD performance, and one cannot help but wonder the histories that it might reveal.

The Lighthouse by the Sea, appearing as it does later in the sound era than *The Battle Cry of Peace*, constitutes another example of the fact that AD technologies – and the blind cinemagoers that utilized them – were present even in the silent era of American cinema. While these accounts do highlight the ways in which films of this era could be deeply inaccessible to blind and vision-impaired audiences, they also suggest the ways in which this need not have been the case and in certain, isolated instances, was not. Thus do these accounts give the lie to the fiction of accessibility as accommodation: accessibility has, in fact, always been possible – society has simply failed to incorporate it into its structures. Rather than see inclusivity as something broadly necessary, then, it has been figured as a kind of periodic indulgence – a “special” event rather than part of the social framework. Though this admission sounds in many ways despairing, it should also signal the ways in which we could have done better – and thus, *can* and *must* do better moving forward.

Part II: Audio Description and Sound Cinema

“Talking pictures have won for the screen a legion of new fans – the blind,” *The Washington Post* proclaimed in 1929. “Fifty thousand sightless people throughout the United States hail the invention as the greatest invention for their entertainment since the innovation of the Braille system of reading and radio.”³⁵ This refrain is a familiar one, reiterating the notion that cinema’s visual register inherently constituted a site inaccessible to the blind and vision-impaired. It cannot be denied that the institution of sound cinema, in its merging of the visual and auditory registers, made film newly accessible to blind patrons in a significant and far-reaching way. Now (or, at least, eventually) integral to the filmic narrative, sound could no longer be conceptualized – even broadly – as an entirely negligible component of the cinematic apparatus. This did not mean that sound was totally absent from silent film; indeed, it constituted, as we have discussed, a major aspect of the spectatorial experience. Yet with the move towards a systematized mode of “sound cinema,” sound became part of the product as well as its exhibition: a point of acoustic entry that did not have to be produced by the spectators themselves.

This is not to say, of course, that sound cinema signaled a broad new era of cinema accessibility. Indeed, the widely-publicized protests of deaf people to this shift in the medium highlighted a new way in which the transition created additional forms of inaccessibility. “Deaf Clubs in Plea for Silent Film,” ran the title of one 1929 article, which called “attention to the fact that the patronage of millions of deafened people will be lost by the displacement of the silent picture... one of the greatest sources of pleasure to the deaf.”³⁶ What was interesting was the fact that these objections, though rarely emphasized by the presumably able-bodied people reporting on these “protests,” frequently called not for the abolition of talking cinema, but for the “use of captions sufficient to enable the deaf to follow the story.”³⁷ This dimension of deaf people’s critique was frequently obscured by the broader focus on their supposed outrage. It may also (at least in terms of its questionable accessibility) have been muted by a somewhat condescending attention to blind viewers’ appreciation of the cinema’s new dimensions. The

³⁵ “The Talkie Brings Solace to Those Bereft of Sight,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 1929.

³⁶ “Deaf Clubs in Plea for Silent Film,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr 2, 1929.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

aforementioned *Washington Post* article offers an extended account of one blind man's experience of the new medium in predictably rose-tinted prose:

“When the last strains of the picture's theme song died away with the fade-out, Houk turned to his friends, who awaited his verdict. Tears streamed down his cheek, but there was the surge of joy in his voice as he said: ‘You have almost given me my sight!’”³⁸

Complicating this statement, however, was the fact that even this newly-audible access was only partial. Betraying the incompleteness of Houk's access to the narrative is the admission that “in scenes where the sounds will not tip off the action, a whisper from a companion, which can be so low that the rest of the audience will not be aware of it, will make intelligible the action to the blind person.”³⁹ At no point is the necessity of this ‘extra’ measure questioned. Indeed, the assurance here that such “whispers” will not inconvenience cinema's sighted patrons speaks to the degree to which access was figured largely as something both individualized and possibly inconvenient, especially where it was not incidental to the formal elements accepted by the able-bodied masses.

Indeed, the very fact that AD would need to be utilized at all after sound synchronization was established speaks volumes (pun not intended) to the limitations of talking cinema's supposed superior auditory “accessibility.” Between 1928 and 1953, more than a dozen newspaper accounts of Audio Described film screenings appeared in major periodicals. Beginning with a screening of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), AD technology merged with the burgeoning sound cinema to create new kinds of spaces for blind and vision-impaired patrons. As was the case with their silent-era counterparts, these instances were largely “special,” isolated incidents, but they nevertheless gestured to the continuing efforts of disabled people and organizations to access mainstays of popular culture and society, and further outline the continuing lack of comprehensive accessibility measures within public space. In reviewing these accounts, three major lines of inquiry tend to surface. First, what kinds of AD were utilized during these events? Second, what were the sizes of these audiences, and what did these forms of spectatorship suggest

³⁸ “The Talkie Brings Solace to Those Bereft of Sight,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 1929.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

about AD more broadly? And third, what kinds of language were used in these articles to characterize disabled people and disability more generally - and in what way? In synthesizing these reports along these thematic lines, one is able to review the broader contours of post-Silent Era AD and locate specific trends within these categories.

Of perhaps greatest interest to the scholar of audio description is the way in which AD technology was deployed across these events: what forms and features did it tend towards, and in what ways did it depart from both earlier forms of AD and those to come later in the century? As was the case with Silent Era AD, the descriptive technologies of the transitional and sound eras tended to rely on the descriptive lecture or commentary, typically delivered live by a sighted person on-site. The news report on the 1928 screening of *The Jazz Singer*, for example, notes that the theater manager “explained the silent parts of the moving picture to the blind audience thoroughly as the drama unfolded” – apparently so effectively that by the time Jolson had warbled his blackfaced way through “Mammy” and “Mother o’ Mine,” the blind cinemagoers “had tears in their eyes like others in the theater.”⁴⁰ Though the lengthy silent sequences of *The Jazz Singer* likely offered up ideal spaces for audio descriptors to insert commentary, one wonders whether it became more difficult as the medium became more uniformly sound-inclusive. Kate Ellis cites a 1929 screening of *Bulldog Drummond* wherein “an interlocutor explained the visual sequences for the blind when the dialogue was momentarily halted.”⁴¹ A 1943 screening of the film *Mission to Moscow* (1942) – which would, incidentally, later become a target of anticommunist wrath – likewise notes that the describer, a radio commentator named H.R. Gross, “described the visual portions of the picture while the blind student heard the dialogue.”⁴² Some of these early accounts also highlight the conjunction of narration and sound technology, as is the case in the screening of a short study of Gov. Al Smith earlier that year, with Glen Allvine of Fox Films acting “as an interpreter” in conjunction with new MovieTone

⁴⁰ “Blind Attend Movie and Weep for ‘Jazz Singer,’” *Times-Picayune*, Sept. 14, 1928

⁴¹ Ellis, *Disability and Digital Television Cultures*

⁴² “Blind ‘See’ Film,” *Washington Post*, Jul 19, 1943

technology to help the audience “reconstruct the drama... in their imagination.”⁴³ This attention to the narrative dislocation between the diegesis and the audio describer seems to suggest a heightened awareness not only of film form, but also of the ways in which blind spectators drew from various sources of information in order to generate an understanding of the film.

Other accounts offer alternative approaches to audio description, such as one 1929 screening of *The Broadway Melody* (1929) which reported that “Before the show, the story of the play was read to the audience.”⁴⁴ Perhaps a method employed to avoid having to fit its commentary into the film’s auditory pauses, this method is notable in that it derives from earlier methods of AD used in theatre – and therefore signals a degree of continuity between AD’s usage in different forms of media. It may also suggest the ways in which AD of the Sound Era had to adapt its methods to suit a mode of filmmaking that could not be talked over or frequently interrupted. Also borrowed from extant AD theatre practices was the inclusion of Braille programs, as occurred in a 1944 screening of the film *The Desert Song* (1943) at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. This is the only instance, apart from the 1924 screening of *The Lighthouse by the Sea* mentioned in the previous section, of this particular supplemental method in use, and its presence signals an effort to create multiple avenues of approach to the cinema text.

Interestingly enough, not all “special screenings” for blind patrons incorporated AD into their programming. In one case, that of a 1947 screening of a two-reel film based on blind recreation called *Playing By Ear*, this was because the film itself was evidently constructed “in such a way that blind members of the audience are able to follow it easily.”⁴⁵ Other instances of this, however – as in the case of a 1929 screening of an unspecified “crook” picture – seem content to assume that the presence of sound constitutes sufficient access, even making a point to comment on the auditory proficiency of the blind audience. “With ears trained to an acute sense of hearing,” reads the article, “the blind group was able to follow the action almost as well as others in the audience. In fact, the blind spectators seemed to

⁴³ “Blind ‘See’ Movies of Governor Smith,” *New York Times*, Jul. 15, 1928.

⁴⁴ “Talkie Performance for Blind Persons,” *The Billboard*, Jul. 20, 1929

⁴⁵ Murphy, Bob. “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Sports Film Short.” *Minneapolis Star*, Feb. 20, 1947

catch the sound effects better.”⁴⁶ Similarly, two mid-1930s accounts from British newspapers report instances of all-blind-audience screenings but make no mention of any kind of AD – though readers are assured that the audience was at least “provided with tea.”⁴⁷ Though this line of inquiry diverges from a specific focus on AD, it echoes many of the rhetorical moves used to justify incomplete accessibility even when AD was present. Such was the case with one 1930 screening of *Atlantic*, documented by British periodical *The Film Weekly*. Though “occasionally, an ‘explainer’ seated among them interjected a comment that a scene had changed... explanations were hardly necessary. The action was already pictured in their imagination.”⁴⁸ Thus is AD, even when present, conceptualized as a negligible – even unnecessary – aspect of spectatorship for blind and vision-impaired patrons. The technology’s tentative bid at accessibility is downplayed in the interest of highlighting the significance of the industry’s newest (and more profitable) mode of sound technology.

Also useful in contextualizing AD technologies in early sound cinema is an understanding of the audiences that utilized them. For the most part, accounts of early AD involved relatively large audiences. This seems to have been true even during the silent era, as the screening of *The Lighthouse by the Sea* (1924) mentions an audience of “Twelve hundred blind men, women, and children” in attendance,⁴⁹ while another account of this event puts the total at a more conservative “over 300.”⁵⁰ Large audiences continue to characterize the AD performances well into the sound era, however: the 1928 screening of the Gov. Al Smith MovieTone amassed an audience of around five hundred, while a 1944 screening of *The Desert Song* (1943) reported four hundred people in attendance. Even in smaller-scale events, audience numbers rarely dip below 65, which – with the 1929 screening of *The Broadway Melody* (1929) – was the smallest reported audience located in these accounts. *Bulldog Drummond* (1929) recorded an audience of one hundred; and even the screening of *Mission to Moscow* (1943), which took place at the Indiana State

⁴⁶ “Blind Hear Movies,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jul 21, 1929.

⁴⁷ “Film Performance for the Blind,” *Manchester Guardian*, Oct. 31, 1935

⁴⁸ “Blind Filmgoers: Sightless Audience Enjoys ‘Atlantic,’” *Film Weekly*, Nov. 22, 1930

⁴⁹ “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Movie Show,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 27, 1924

⁵⁰ “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Canine Drama,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 18, 1925

School for the Blind, boasted one hundred and twenty-five attendees. The size of these audiences highlights a number of factors at play in many of these events, chief of which is the fact that where institutionally-sanctioned AD did exist, it did so only in individualized cases marked by the presence of a massive audience. In other words, the presence of AD was something to be justified by the very infrequency of its use. A one-time event could be indulged, even used for publicity. It also folded any question of regularity or generalized availability neatly into a more profitable narrative of the “special” event - something to be noted but not necessarily repeated.

The size of these early audiences also functions to highlight what is *not* there - namely, any occasions of blind spectatorship that might have occurred at smaller, less visible levels. For example, it is significant, given the numerous ableist assumptions that framed access to cinema, that blind Americans were familiar enough with mainstream cinema to have favorite actors. One 1933 article cites Lionel Barrymore, Marie Dressler, and Helen Hayes as the favorites of blind cinema fans. Below these, “George Arliss, Wallace Beery, Will Rogers, Walter Huston, and Warner Baxter” lead the category for favorite actors (though we are told that “among the younger men... Robert Montgomery and Clark Gable lead”). Janet Gaynor leads the category for actresses, “followed by Norma Shearer, Greta Garbo, Mae West, Kay Francis, Claudette Colbert, and Joan Crawford.”⁵¹ It follows, then - for all these articles’ posturing about the singularity of blind spectatorship - that blind and vision-impaired people were quite prolific patrons of the cinema. These individual histories of blind moviegoing seem in many ways to be irrecoverable, yet - as this article demonstrates - they did exist, without the aid or permission of institutional support. One can only speculate as to the instances of homespun AD that may have taken place: summaries whispered by sighted companions, inexpertly or with great finesse, overlapping with dialogue or drowned out by swelling scores, and perhaps greeted with the irritation of other spectators insistent on total silence. What histories are missing from the archives? How might we recover them, or at least attempt to speculate upon

⁵¹ “Blind ‘Fans’ Tell Picture Favorites,” *Hollywood Reporter*, Dec. 20, 1933

them? It is useful, if distasteful, to mention the condescension that even this article displayed toward its own blind subjects: “Of course all they get is the voices of the talkies and a ‘feeling.’”⁵²

This condescension, of course, was nothing new; ableism was pervasive then as it is now, and its presence frequently characterized accounts of early AD. Beginning, as has been mentioned, with the use of the term “Unfortunates” in the AD screening of *The Battle Cry of Peace* (1915), rhetorical ableism was unfortunately a recurrent theme in these reports. A sighted spectator is quoted at length in an article on the 1915 film:

“I never saw a more pathetic sight in my life. These poor people felt their way down the aisles and were shown to their seats, settling themselves and turning their sightless eyes toward the screen they would never see. If their eyes were useless, all their other senses were on the alert.”⁵³

By transforming the blind cinemagoers from spectators into the spectacle itself, this rhetorical move naturalized not only the able-bodied perspective put forth by news narratives, but also obscured any subversiveness that AD may have brought to the situation. What initially might have been configured as the generation of a viable, albeit limited space for disabled participation, was turned on its head, transfiguring the blind and vision-impaired from the subject of the gaze to the object of its scrutiny, restoring the hegemony embedded in the deployment of the cinematic/spectatorial gaze. This is further underscored by the incessant emphasis (which can be observed in the footnotes of this paper) on the word “See” in the title of many of these articles: “Blind ‘See’ Battle Cry,” “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Movie Show,” “Blind ‘See’ Movies of Governor Smith,” “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Canine Drama,” “Blind ‘See’ Movies” - at every turn, the possession of the gaze (and whatever power or agency that may attend it) is treated with skepticism and irony, effectively re-appropriated for the use of the able-bodied readers and reporters.

Other moves are more subtle. A frequent claim that these articles make is that they represent the first instance of Audio Description to have ever occurred. “For the first time,” wrote the *New York Times*

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “Blind ‘See’ Battle Cry,” *Oregonian*, Dec. 28, 1915

in 1928, “blind persons of New York ‘saw’ a complete motion picture program.”⁵⁴ Four years earlier, it had reported on the 1924 AD screening of the Rin-Tin-Tin vehicle, *The Lighthouse by the Sea*. As late as 1943, the *Washington Post* was making the same claim: “First showing of a motion picture to an audience of blind persons, through the medium of a ‘human seeing eye,’ was held in Indianapolis recently.”⁵⁵ Slightly differently (if no less egregiously), the *Seattle Daily Times* made the discovery that “Blind persons can enjoy movies, it was proved recently when a sightless audience of 400 listened to the soundtrack of ‘The Desert Song’ and heard a seeing-eye commentator describe the action taking place on the screen.”⁵⁶ What these statements demonstrate - apart from able-bodied superciliousness - is a general lack of awareness of AD even in its largest and most publicized forms. The cinemagoing of blind people was apparently sensational enough to produce a headline - or at least a human-interest column - but not enough to generate either awareness of its history or a social push to broaden its scope. Then, as it in many ways continues to be now, AD was understood as something interesting but ultimately inconsequential to broader patterns within cinema and spectatorship.

Yet these events happened. They were thought up, proposed, planned, implemented, and attended, by hundreds if not thousands of blind and vision-impaired people and their allies. They are imperfect, even inadequate - and yet they demonstrate a history of agency and resistance that is absolutely integral to understanding the nature not simply of cinema, but of American culture more broadly. They are a testament to the fact that AD and the people who create and use it have always been a part of these histories and these conversations - it has simply been a matter of whether we, as a culture, have been willing to listen to them. Audio Description’s history is a long one; it does not begin with cinema and will not end there. Yet its presence within cinema is important to acknowledge, as is the fact that it continues to be a field laden with tremendous possibilities. Having looked at its history, it is now necessary to look

⁵⁴ “Blind ‘See’ Movies of Governor Smith,” *New York Times*, Jul. 15, 1928

⁵⁵ “Blind ‘See’ Film,” *Washington Post*, Jul. 19, 1943

⁵⁶ “Blind Audience ‘Sees’ Movie,” *Seattle Daily Times*, Jan. 16, 1944

to its future - to consider the questions of agency, embodiment, and equality that it raises and to *do better* in the years to come.

AD in Early Cinema Timeline

[Black Text = American Event]

[Blue Text = British Event]

[Red Text = A/D Adjacent Event of Note]

1915

- Screening of *The Battle Cry of Peace* (1915) at Boston's Majestic Theatre
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive lecture, supplemented by [New York] Point System programs

1924

- Screening of *The Lighthouse by the Sea* (1924) at New York's Piccadilly Theater
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive lecture/commentary, supplemented by musical effects

1928

- Screening of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) at Saenger Theater in New Orleans
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive commentary
- Screening of MovieTone of New York Governor Al Smith at New York's Globe Theater
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive lecture, supplemented by MovieTone (talking picture) technology

1929

- Screening of *Bulldog Drummond* (1929)*
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive Lecture delivered during pauses in the dialogue
- Screening of unspecified "crook picture" – NO AD USED
- Screening of *The Man I Love* (1929) for Earl Houk – NO AD USED
- Screening of *The Broadway Melody* (1929) at the Park Theatre (Williamsport, PA)
 - **Form of AD:** Summary of show read to the audience before the show

1930

- Screening of *Atlantic* (1929) at the Royal School for the Blind at Leatherhead
 - Mention of previous screening of *The King of Jazz* (1930)
 - **Form of AD:** Occasional interjection by sighted "explainer" seated with audience

1933

- Screening of *I Was A Spy* (1933) at the Majestic Cinema in Leeds
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive "running commentary"

1935

- Screening of film *On Wings of Song* – probably *One Night of Love* (1934) – at Gaumont Cinema in Manchester
 - **Form of AD:** Unspecified
- Screening of *One Night of Love* (1934) at the New Palace theatre in Bristol

1938

- Talking Book translation of Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) using dialogue and soundtrack of film
 - First motion picture to be adapted into talking book form

1943

- Screening of *Mission to Moscow* (1943) at the Indiana State School for the Blind
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive Lecture/Commentary

1944

- Screening of *The Desert Song* (1943) at the Brooklyn Academy of Music
 - **Form of AD:** Descriptive Lecture/Commentary, supplemented by Braille program

1947

- Screening of two-reel film *Playing By Ear* (1947)
 - Film “done in such a way that blind members of the audience are able to follow it easily”

1952

- Screening of *The Great Caruso* (1951) at Riddrie's Rex Cinema
 - **Form of AD:** Live microphone commentary

1953

- Concept of “Sightless Cinema” reported to be under way by the Braille Institute of America, Inc.

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