

**On the art of audio description –
interview with Naomi Kawase, director of the film *Radiance***

To start with, we would like to thank you for your sensitivity in making this film, which is not only aesthetically beautiful, but also (like your other films) raises very important ethical questions about the place of disabled or chronically ill people in our societies and their place in the art world, and which indeed manages to transmit a tangible feeling of hope about these phenomena.

The role of audio describers in the making of the movie

Radiance is the first movie that puts the spotlight on the very process of making audio description. We would like to ask whether you also consulted audio describers in the process of making *Radiance*; did they influence the film in certain respects? For example, did conversations with them inspire any dialogue or some scenes in the film?

The production of “Radiance” began with my first encounter with an audio descriptor. When I was directing the film “Sweet Bean”, the subject of which was leprosy, Japan was working to promote film accessibility for blind people and hearing impairment, and the government was providing subsidies for such projects. So, we applied for such a subsidy for “Sweet Bean” and we carried out what we call in Japan “barrier-free showings”.

That was when I met an audio descriptor for the first time, and she asked me, “What do you think about having blind people watch the movie ‘Sweet Bean’ through their ears like this?” That was the first time I learned that there was such a profession. To be completely honest, until then, I had never imagined of showing my movie to blind people. This meeting inspired me, and I thought, I want to make a movie about these people, the ones who create audio descriptions.

So, when filming the movie, many lines were created based on information I learned from this audio descriptor. What she emphasized the most was, “Don’t explain too much.” In the movie, Masaya, a character who is losing his sight, says to Misako, “You’re explaining too much,” “We have something called imagination,” and from there, Misako repeatedly struggles to minimize the descriptions as much as possible.

I could really relate to this through my experiences in communication with others, so I was careful to not make it patronizing. I prefer to believe in the viewers, or trust the imagination of the viewers.

Audio description as art

How would you define audio description? Do you think that it is just a “service for the blind”, or it should be considered an art, and if so, why?

I think it should be considered an art. Because there are audio descriptors that explain too much, thinking this is only a service, like, “I should kindly explain more for the people who can’t see.”

However, I think this is not how it should be. Instead, it should be an art form that creates words that evoke visual images in the minds of listeners.

In our paper we interpret audio description as a form of cinematic poetry, building upon a literary ekphrasis trope, evoking—through words—an impression of a visual representation. Do you think that audio description should be considered a new literary-cinematic genre and analysed by film and literary critics?

Considering audio description as a new literary cinematic genre that evokes visual images through words is exciting – it's an idea that excites me very much.

The audio description of *Radiance*

In *Radiance*, the audio description prepared by Misako improves significantly when she manages to meet Mr Kitabayashi, the film's director, who explains his artistic vision to her. Our question is: were you 'Mr Kitabayashi' to your audio describers? Were you available to your audio describers, whether in Japanese or French, for consultation? Did they come to you to discuss their problems, and if so, what were those problems?

Well, there is a movie-within-a-movie in "Radiance". And there's a scene where Misako goes to the studio to meet the director of the movie-within-a-movie, and Misako begins to realize that to express the cinematic visions of this director, just explaining what is happening is not enough.

And whether I was Mr. Kitabayashi, that's a difficult question to answer either yes or no. I am the director of the movie "Radiance", so I guess this character Mr. Kitabayashi is me. We had to create this 'inner' movie before we started shooting "Radiance", and when we did, I directed those scenes. While directing that movie, I was imagining how it would be used in "Radiance", and what difficulties (regarding audio descriptions) would be discussed. I calculated backwards to include all of that in my direction, so it was very complicated.

We watched the movie with French audio description, and we found it very minimalistic, very poetic, and very well done, so there is a parallel between them and your vision. Therefore, what we would like to know is whether you are familiar with the audio descriptions of your movie and whether you are satisfied them.

I didn't watch the movie with the audio descriptions, neither in French nor Japanese, but, of course, I did check it as a written text, as an audio description script.

I'm trying to remind myself now, since it was about eight years ago...it was released in 2017, so productions were in 2016, so it was six, seven years ago. But I remembered that the person in charge of the audio description insisted that I check the descriptions for that movie, and I exchanged many emails with her. She was also the one I had consulted as a supervisor in creating "Radiance", so she was careful not to explain too much – so we were basically on the same page.

Cooperation with blind people

In *Radiance*, the audio description is prepared in cooperation with blind people. Was the audio description for your own film *Radiance* prepared in this way?

The audio description company that I worked with always engages in that [cooperative] process. They have blind people experience the audio descriptions as testers, then they discuss which part was excessive, or where they wanted more explanations, and [their input is then] reflected in the final descriptions.

Is it a common practice in Japan or is this company an exception?

I will check the facts before I give you a definitive answer, but in Japan, I think they always have blind people test the audio descriptions before they're finalized. I'll also check the name of the company.

[*As Naomi Kawase's company KUMIE Inc later shared with us, the group Ms. Kawase worked with was a company called Palabra Inc. The audio descriptor she consulted was Ms. Takako Matsuda]

And this also overlaps with my answer to the previous question: whether I was satisfied when I watched the movie through audio descriptions, but because I am a person with sight, I cannot decide whether the audio descriptions succeed in communicating to the blind audience what I intended in the movie. I need blind people to watch it to find that out.

Masako-san, who plays herself in "Radiance", is really a blind person, and she was crying when she saw the movie. Also, in the last scene, where many people are watching the movie, we had actual blind people watch the movie. And people told me they had cried, and that they had felt like they were inside the movie, as if they existed inside the movie, and this was actually included as a line in the movie. And when they told me that, I thought, yes, this audio description is a success.

Did you engage blind or partially blind actors to play the roles of some of the blind characters in the movie?

I kind of answered that question by talking about Masako-san. She is a really fascinating person. The film also features a white dog who is Masako-san's guide. Masako-san has very keen senses when it comes to expression and art, so much so that when it comes to films, I feel she can understand them more deeply than people who can see them.

"Blindness gain" in art

Two researchers Marion Chottin and Hannah Thompson developed a notion of "blindness gain", arguing that blindness should be not only considered a deficiency, a lack, a process of losing sight, but can be also gain, opening a blind person to new dimensions of experience, enriching their life. Do you think that blindness can indeed be a gain? If so, what gains could it bring in the world of arts, and in particular cinematic arts?

You mentioned the two researchers, Marion and Hannah developing a notion of "blindness gain", I really think what I see in Masako-san is one example of that.

Also, the person I based the character Masaya on was actually a former painter who later lost his sight. He also has acute senses in art, and he mentioned that his keenness underwent further development after he lost his sight. So, I think that, especially regarding the world of movies and art, when you lose something (e.g. sight), you gain something like a gift.

[*As Naomi Kawase's company KUMIE later shared with us, the painter that inspired the character of Mr. Nakamori is Juuji Otani (painter, writer, and weight-lifting athlete)].

Other senses

In your movie, a blind character, Ms. Masako, captures the meaning of the movie in terms relating to touch. She uses tactile terms such as weight or gravity to explain her understanding of the film, saying, for example, *“There is a certain weight, a certain gravity, to this film”*. Therefore, we wanted to ask: do you think that tactile quality should be considered an aesthetic value in visual art, and perhaps be something through which blind people, as experts in experiencing tactile dimension of art, could broaden perception and understanding of art of sighted people?

I think this question is also about Masako-san, and how she uses the words weight and gravity, words relating to the sense of touch. People who can see tend to think of movies as something happening on a two-dimensional flat screen, so they don't really think about the weight, or how it would feel if you touch it, or how it smells. They don't think it's possible to feel those things through movies.

Moreover, Masako-san told me that my films stimulate the sense of smell. I mean, also in my previous film, “Sweet Bean”, as in “Radiance”, there is a scene where the characters are cooking fried noodles, and I think in such a scene people can feel something like the smell of fried noodles cooking in the twilight. This is something that I am aware of and that I try to include in my films. It's not just about blind people. I always try to deliver senses that people presume they cannot experience through movies.

Accessible film making

In the recent years some new artistic paradigms have been born, such as “accessible film making” or “integrated access”, which postulate that audio description should be considered an integrated part of cinematic arts, and that it should be prepared during the production of the film, allowing an audio describer to discuss their work with the director and other members of the crew. What do you think about this idea? Have you considered doing something similar in your movies?

This is connected to what I said earlier. Rather than exclusively focusing on these people, I think that able-bodied people – although I don't really like that term, for people who have sight, hearing, smell, and have no disabilities may have become more insensitive in a certain way. Think of information: compared to thirty years ago, people today have information flowing into their hands every day from all over the world, through their smartphones. I think we are being affected by that, turning into beings who only process that information, forgetting to really feel anything.

Living in a time like this, the experience of watching a movie is, we can put it like this: “watching a single light in the darkness”. So, instead of just having people watch a story formed by that light, I would like to share through movies something that will stimulate people’s sense of smell, touch, and other various senses, maybe even their sixth sense.

When you think about it, the history of movies only goes back about 100 years, and since many years before that, humans have expressed themselves in various styles of art, like music and paintings, hieroglyphics. Maybe I especially feel this because I live in a city that is 1,300 years old, but I sometimes have impression that people living in the ancient ages must have had much keener five, or even six senses. Nowadays, all these things are just being mechanically offered to us, and I feel that we may be adjusting ourselves to the machines more and more. I’m not sure if this answers this question, but this is something I always discuss with my staff when I’m making movies.

Regarding whether we should include audio descriptors from an early stage of production, my ideal is that it should be done that way. It’s a personal opinion.

Learning from blindness

In your movie, there is a subtle interplay between Mr. Nakamori’s camera and your camera filming him and taking his perspective. Is there something that you learned from this experiment? In other words, how much of your experience is put into Nakamori’s and how did the experience of filming blindness “as if” from the inside influence your art?

Now, about what I learned from working with blind people, I think this might not directly answer your question, but it is what I have just described concerning our five senses and even our sixth sense, which we must, as a human race, regain, otherwise we may become altogether incapable of sensing things. And if younger generations begin to limit their own emotional levels, people will lose the ability to imagine how others feel. On the other hand, when people try to communicate with others, they will feel a disconnectedness, like their feelings have been ignored. So, there are many cases where people who lost something struggled to gain something else and ended up receiving a new gift, and we were able to gain this something through our artistic endeavours when we were creating “Radiance”.

Objectivity/subjectivity

The script of *Radiance* showed that you are very aware of one of the main controversies in the theory and practice of audio description, namely the question whether it should be strictly objective and neutral or should allow for some degree of subjectivity and artistic interpretation of the describer. What is your opinion about it?

This is a difficult problem, but it’s something that I really am careful about when I create movies. If it’s all too objective, then it becomes like a news footage - just a presentation of facts. Movies must be well-balanced between objectivity and subjectivity. A movie needs originality, as something unique to me, Naomi Kawase. Cinema always involves a certain extent of subjectivity. Whatever is happening around the world, and happening around me, should be presented as how

I see it through my eyes. Without that factor, it would not matter who creates the movie, it could be even AI (and maybe AIs are better at delivering completely objective information). But in the art of filmmaking, Naomi Kawase's subjective point of view must be taken into account, and this must be the same for many art forms. Similarly, reflecting back to one of the first questions, if we are to define audio description as a form of art, I think there should be a certain extent of subjectivity allowed in creating it. And some day, maybe there could be several audio descriptions for the same movie, and blind people could choose to go to see a movie written by their favourite audio descriptor.