

## **Audio Description for Cinema and TV Production in Lithuania**

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Recently, there has been an increase in the engagement of initiatives and projects pertaining to individuals with disabilities in Lithuania. Local and foreign cultural, educational, or other institutions are often interested in partnerships on such topics. However, a prevailing challenge lies in locating individuals in Lithuania who possess prior experience in the realm of accessibility. Insufficient dissemination of information regarding such activities contributes to this difficulty. Lithuanian practice shows that local or foreign institutions wishing to establish partnerships in the field of accessibility (or specifically in the field of audio description) find the right people only after a long search. This article acquaints the reader with the concept of audio description and explores the Lithuanian terminology associated with this phenomenon in detail. The paper provides a clear and concise outline of information on the visually impaired population and on the increasing popularity of accessible film and television production in our country. Hopefully, this article will improve the dissemination of information about audio description services in Lithuania, enabling researchers and practitioners to identify institutions and individuals involved in the field of audio description in our country, as well as understand the legal framework governing audio description services.

Keywords: accessibility; audio description; cinema; television; vision loss

### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this article is to delineate the tendencies of audio description (hereinafter AD) in Lithuania in terms of scientific and practical contexts. The author wants to discuss the development and prevalence of AD with special attention to the AD of cinema and TV production in Lithuania, since those areas of AD are most developed in our country in comparison to other types of AD.

To achieve the aim of this article, the following objectives have been set: (i) to present the phenomenon of AD as one of the audiovisual (AV) translation modes; (ii) to discuss terminological issues and scientific insights in the field of AD presented by Lithuanian scholars; (iii) to disclose practical applications of AD concerning Lithuanian cinema and TV production; and (iv) to name the scope defined by law.

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Such a comprehensive article, which covers as many aspects of cinema and TV production AD in Lithuania as possible, has not yet been published. Much of the information presented in this article has been collected, systemized, and archived by the author of this article during her nine years of work in the field of AD in Lithuania. Some of the data (facts, figures, or names) contained in this paper can be found in various sources on the Internet. However, it is unfeasible to find all information within a singular location. Furthermore, this article offers valuable empirical observations concerning the workflow of AD in the Lithuanian film industry, an area that has received limited attention so far.

The research methodology employed in this study encompasses analytical, comparative, and descriptive approaches. It was necessary to partially consider the AD situation in neighbouring countries and make comparisons with the state of AD in Lithuania. The relevant data pertaining to AD in the film industry of Lithuania was presented from a diachronic perspective and organized thematically, covering topics such as the origins of AD in Lithuania and the historical development of cinema AD (including information on audio-described films screened at film festivals, private AD initiatives by filmmakers and institutions representing the blind, as well as the contribution of the Lithuanian Film Centre and Lithuanian National Radio and Television [Lietuvos nacionalinis radijas ir televizija; LRT] to the field of AD). Furthermore, the article provides insights into the legislation related to the accessibility of AV content in Lithuania. A subsection is also devoted to discussing scientific research pertaining to film and theatre AD in Lithuania. The conclusions of the study summarize the ideas presented in the paper.

## **2. The Origins and Development of Audio Description**

AD has been known as a format for the oral transmission of visual information since the beginning of time mankind had a need to provide such information to each other. On the other hand, AD as a formal service has been known for less than one hundred years (since the official film AD on Spanish radio in the late 1940s [Arma 2011, 41]). The history of AD in the USA, Spain, or Great Britain, both in practical activities and in AD research, is counting some decades, while AD came to the former Soviet bloc countries later: To those countries, AD as a method and service came much later due to the extreme marginalization of people with disabilities and the lack of experience (foreign links were very limited, and there were no

opportunities to travel to and learn from countries with experience in AD). The very limited economic opportunities can also be considered as one of the reasons for the delay in the uptake of AD in our country. In other Baltic states (i.e., in Estonia), AD<sup>1</sup> services for films started in 2009,<sup>2</sup> while in Latvia<sup>3</sup> the start of the film AD<sup>4</sup> services is dated to 2022.<sup>5</sup> It is also worth mentioning that in our southern neighbouring country Poland (Białystok), the first locally produced film for the blind, *Statyści* (Extras), by Polish director Michał Kwieciński with live commentary was screened in 2006 (Jankowska and Walczak 2019, 237).

AD is considered to be a form of audiovisual translation (AVT) (Gambier 2004) and is treated as an intersemiotic translation, as it uses this technique to convey the information encoded in the images (visual code) through spoken text (verbal code). AD is applied to both dynamic and static visual and AV productions: films, theatre plays, sporting or cultural events, gallery and museum content, etc. Comments describing the specifics of the image and action are inserted in the silent pauses of the original soundtrack when monologues, dialogues, and polylogues or important background sounds are not played. Commentaries shall be in figurative language, objective, and synchronous with the images they describe. The main target group of such a service is the blind and visually impaired, but AD can also be used for those who are learning new subjects, experience learning difficulties, or have cognitive challenges. In all these cases, AD helps to fill gaps in knowledge or perception.

### **3. Facts and Terms: Lithuania as a Newcomer to Audio Description**

As the term ‘audio description’ is not well known to the general Lithuanian public, previous Lithuanian articles on the topic of AD have been written not only to increase the volume of AD research but also to introduce the AD methodology to a wider audience. Although the dissemination of scientific sources and results of scientific research in public discourse is not wide, it is still easier for Lithuanian stakeholders to find people related to this

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<sup>1</sup> The official Estonian term for AD is *Kirjeldustõlge*.

<sup>2</sup> Information about AD on the website of the Estonian Blind Union is available at <https://pimedateliit.ee/kirjeldustolge/>.

<sup>3</sup> The Latvian Society of the Blind has about 3,000 members. (See “Opportunities to Spend Free Time,” *Latvijas Neradzīgo Biedrība*, accessed June 7, 2023, <https://www.lnbiedriba.lv/en/support/donation-support/opportunities-to-spend-free-time/>.)

<sup>4</sup> The official Latvian term for AD is *Audioapraksts*.

<sup>5</sup> “The first audio description of a film for people with visual disabilities was created in Latvia” (*Baltics News*, accessed June 3, 2023, <https://baltics.news/2022/10/20/the-first-audio-description-of-a-film-for-people-with-visual-disabilities-was-created-in-latvia/>); “Pirmā latviešu filma ar audio aprakstu” (The first Latvian film with audio description), *YouTube*, accessed June 3, 2023, <https://rb.gy/fvxdc>.

area of AVT (involved in AD practice or research) because we are united by the same language. The biggest problem is for foreign institutions or individuals living abroad who do not speak Lithuanian, because searching by the term ‘audio description’ is not easy: the Lithuanian-speaking audience has a special term for AD—*garsinis vaizdavimas*—which in Lithuania is known only to persons closely related to this field and in foreign countries is hardly known to anyone. It is not present in dictionaries or popular machine translators. Thus, the search for information about AD in Lithuania becomes quite complicated.

The main term *garsinis vaizdavimas*<sup>6</sup> (AD as a process) and the closely related term *garsinis vaizdo apibūdinimas* (AD as a final product: AD text / live AD performance / AD soundtrack) and its alternative Lithuanian terms used by other authors were already analysed and described by Laura Niedzviegienė and Ana Kirejeva in the article “Audiovizualinės produkcijos pritaikymas žmonėms su regėjimo negalia” (Adaptation of audiovisual products for people with visual disabilities) (2014, 155). Some alternative terms to the main term *garsinis vaizdavimas* (audio description) that have previously been considered synonymous include: *garsinis vaizdo apibūdinimas* (audible description of visuals) (Niedzviegienė and Kirejeva 2014, 155), *audiodeskripcija* (audio description) (used as an international term) (Mykolaitytė 2000), *garsinis aprašymas* (audio description) (Lithuanian verb *aprašyti* means ‘to describe’) / *garsinis komentavimas* or *garsinis komentaras* (audiocommentary) (Rotundas 2004), *garsinis aprašas* / *garsinis aprašymas* (audio description) (Vilčinskas 2008, 21), *audiopasakojimas* (audio narration) (Vainoras 2012). It is obvious that for a long time there was no clear and unambiguous term for AD in Lithuanian. During the subcommittee meeting on April 2, 2014, the Terminology Subcommittee of the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language recommended the following: the terms *garsinis vaizdo apibūdinimas* and *garsinis vaizdavimas* can be used synonymously, with the preference of *garsinis vaizdavimas* as the shorter and therefore more convenient to use term (Koverienė and Satkauskaitė 2014, 28). However, the most used terms today are *garsinis vaizdavimas* (audio description) (naming AD as a process) and *garsinio vaizdavimo aprašas* (audio description) (naming AD as a physical product: created text, written script, etc.).

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<sup>6</sup> The Lithuanian noun *vaizdavimas* means ‘depiction,’ ‘representation,’ and the official two-word term for AD *garsinis vaizdavimas* literally means ‘audible depiction,’ ‘audible portrayal,’ ‘audible representation.’

Another important reason why the amount of information about the visual or AV products adapted for the blind and visually impaired is scarce and the dissemination of the information is also rather narrow is the fact that the blind community is officially small in Lithuania. According to the Statistics Lithuania, there were about 15,000 people with visual disabilities in 2015 in our country, and as reported by the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired, the union listed 5,672 official members as of January 1, 2020<sup>7</sup> (approximately 0.20 percent of the citizens),<sup>8</sup> 5,568 official members at the end of 2020, and 5,425 one year later (at the end of 2021). The newest statistics are not yet provided on the web page of the union. Only 0.20 percent of people identify themselves as part of the blind and visually impaired community, and this probably explains the lack of demand for AD activities in Lithuania.

It can be assumed that members of the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired are better informed about accessible products than non-members with visual impairments. The union disseminates this information through its website, social networks, and in-person announcements at events.

## **4. History of Cinema Audio Description in Lithuania**

### 4.1 The Beginnings

Although the practice of AD has existed in the world for several decades, Lithuania is still learning and just gaining momentum. The number of products with AD in our country has been growing rapidly only in the past 5 years. Thus, it can be said that in Lithuania, AD is a fairly new phenomenon, as it has been in use only since 2012, although two initial attempts at movie AD took place in Vilnius in 2000 and 2006.

No AD events were documented until 2000, although there were technical possibilities for applying live commentary in theatres using equipment for simultaneous interpretation. At that time, the Lithuanian blind and partially sighted audience dreamed of seeing an adapted

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<sup>7</sup> The membership statistics are provided in the annual reports of LASS (Lietuvos aklujų ir silpnaregių sąjunga) (The Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired). The reports are accessible via <https://lass.lt/ataskaitos-dokumentai/>.

<sup>8</sup> In total, there were 2,794,090 citizens in Lithuania in 2020 (See Official Statistics Portal: [https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=5b7fa09d-7ace-4909-89d9-b8a8897da5ba#](https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=5b7fa09d-7ace-4909-89d9-b8a8897da5ba#/)/ [Accessed March 18, 2023]).

theatre performance at least once a year. The adaptation of such performances seemed simpler at the time, requiring fewer technical resources and more human potential. Knowing about the situation and progress of foreign countries, Lithuania aspired to adapt television, but the television board's initiative alone was not sufficient. Improved home equipment, such as TVs with stereo sound, was necessary for viewers (Mykolaitytė 2000).

Already at that time, there were ongoing discussions about technical possibilities for commenting on films in radio-controlled halls, on the same principle as in a theatre. In the same year, 2000, the community of blind and partially sighted people welcomed the first attempt to comment on films (live) and dreamed of a wider and more active adaptation of the theatre, cinema, or TV production in the future in Lithuania. The first documented attempt at live AD dates back exactly to the year 2000. It was the case of the film *Tylos ir tamsos šalis* (Land of silence and darkness; 1971, film by German filmmaker Werner Herzog), commented live by the Lithuanian film director Audrius Stonys on April 3, 2000 in the full Hall 88 of the Cinema Lietuva in Vilnius (Mykolaitytė 2000). As the hall was not adapted for commenting by voice, the commentator had to talk not from a radio booth but standing at the screen. A lot of feedback was expressed after the show: some viewers wanted a more detailed narrative, while others expressed interest in watching not a scientific documentary but an art film. A third group lamented that it was hard to hear. Despite any shortcomings, the attempt was generally well received. However, it appears to have been a one-time event, followed by years of silence, according to available sources.

The second public attempt to audio describe a film for the blind occurred on March 27, 2006, during the Vilnius international film festival *Kino pavasaris*. It was the documentary *Juoda saulė* (Black sun) by British filmmaker and composer Gary Tarn.<sup>9</sup> Alvydas Valenta, a blind Lithuanian journalist and poet, reviewed this special film session. He mentioned that the film, which is based on the monologue of the main character, may not have needed AD as the audience could rely on the original soundtrack. Valenta emphasized that the AD voice actor's main role was to read the Lithuanian subtitles since the film was in English. He also expressed regret over the low interest and limited participation of the blind community (Valenta 2006).

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<sup>9</sup> “‘Kino pavasaris’ surengė išskirtinį seansą akliesiems” (Vilnius international film festival ‘Kino pavasaris’ held an exclusive screening for the blind), *Delfi*, March 28, 2006, accessed March 4, 2023, <https://www.delfi.lt/veidai/kinas/kino-pavasaris-surenge-isskirtini-seansa-akliesiems.d?id=9156408>.

The Internet has limited media coverage of this event, with only two public sources mentioning it.

In 2012, a significant milestone occurred in Lithuanian AD. The feature film *Anarchija Žirmūnuose* (Anarchy in Žirmūnai) directed by Saulius Drunga was presented to blind and visually impaired audiences. It was the first Lithuanian film with pre-recorded AD, originally released in 2010 (the AD version in 2012). The AD text was prepared with the artistic director's involvement.<sup>10</sup> The female AD voice actor's identity remains unknown. Screenings of the film took place in Vilnius, Klaipėda, and Panevėžys in January 2012.<sup>11</sup> To date, this film remains the only audio-described full-length film in DVD format in Lithuania.

#### 4.2 Audio-Described Content in Lithuanian Film Festivals

At present, film festivals organized in Lithuania are gradually contributing to the distribution of films with AD. On October 5, 2018, during the Lithuanian international film festival *Nepatogus kinas* (Inconvenient films), the film *Sengirė* (The ancient woods) by director Mindaugas Survila with AD was shown. The AD text was created by the film director himself together with his team, and the AD voice actor was Lithuanian actress Jūratė Vilūnaitė. The film screening was attended by both visually impaired and sighted people. Since the film is highly visual and based on nature imagery, the AD commentaries were particularly useful for the sighted audience as well. This is evident from the audience's verbal feedback.

In the autumn of 2019, during the same film festival, it was planned to show the film *Labas, robote* (original title: *Hi, AI*) with AD. The author of this article prepared the AD text for this film together with AVT student Urtė Aganauskaitė. The AD soundtrack was recorded, and it was planned to screen the film in several smaller Lithuanian towns, but the regional cinemas did not have the necessary technical equipment, so the screening of the film was postponed and took place only in autumn 2021.

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<sup>10</sup> "Filmas 'Anarchija Žirmūnuose' pasieks ir regėjimo negalią turinčius žmones" (The film 'Anarchy in Žirmūnai' will also reach the people with visual impairments), *bernardinai.lt*, January 16, 2012, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2012-01-16-filmas-anarchija-zirmunuose-pasieks-ir-regejimo-negalia-turincius-zmones/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Lietuvos aklųjų ir silpnaregių sąjungos centro tarybos 2012 m. veiklos ataskaita LASS XXIV suvažiavimui" (2012 activities report by the Centre council of the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired dedicated to the XXIV LASS congress), accessed March 5, 2023, <https://lass.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2012-m-LASS-veiklos-ataskaita-MS-Word.doc>. (See page 11.)

In autumn 2022, the film *Geras gyvenimas* (Good life) was shown during the festival *Nepatogus kinas*. Subsequently, the producers of the film decided to adapt the film for the audience of the blind and partially sighted. The AD text for the film was prepared at the end of 2022 by L. Niedzviegienė, and it is planned to publish the version with AD in 2023.

During the other film festival—*Kino pavasaris*—on March 28, 2019, the film *Išgyventi vasarą* (Summer survivors) by film director Maria Kavtaradze was screened with AD: There were two screenings with AD, and the halls were almost full on both occasions. In October 2020, the filmmakers agreed to donate a recording of the film with AD to the former Lithuanian Library for the Blind (since January 1, 2023, Lithuanian Audiosensory Library) (hereinafter LAB). Hence, the film is now available to library customers indefinitely. It is important to mention that in September 2019, the library introduced a new service: a film library (officially called *LAB filmoteka*). At the time of its opening, it was possible to find only 10 films with AD, but the film library is gradually filling up.

In the spring of 2020, at *Kino pavasaris*, it was planned to screen the film *Nova Lituania*, directed by Karolis Kaupinis. The author of this article prepared the AD text, but the soundtrack recording and the screening of the film with AD in cinema had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The screening of the film with AD in the three largest Lithuanian cities / towns (Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda) took place on September 30, 2020, organized primarily for the blind and visually impaired audience (with open AD).<sup>12</sup> The interest of the target audience was high—the halls were fully filled. In October 2020, the filmmakers agreed to donate the film recording with AD to the LAB.

In the spring of 2022, the festival *Kino pavasaris* screened another audio-described film, *Piligrimai* (Pilgrims), directed by Laurynas Bareiša in 2021. The screening was with open AD; some sighted people also participated in the event, and their verbal feedback suggests that the AD commentary of the film was interesting and useful not only for the blind but also for the sighted.

#### 4.3 Private Initiatives by Filmmakers and Institutions Representing the Blind

In October and November 2018, the audio-described film *Šuns tikslas* (A dog's purpose), directed by Lasse Hallström, was shown widely in Lithuanian cinemas for the first

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<sup>12</sup> There is no possibility to turn off the AD soundtrack; it is heard by all viewers at the hall.



time. The AD text of the film was created by L. Niedzviegienė and her student Kristina Meilūnaitė, and the voice of AD was Lithuanian voice-over artist Audrius Čaikauskas. The initiative came from the Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired and from the LAB. Special screenings of this film took place at the cinema Forum Cinemas in the major Lithuanian towns of Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Panevėžys, and Šiauliai. The screenings of the film were primarily intended for visually impaired people, so the AD comments were openly broadcast.

In the autumn of 2019, the premiere of director Akvilė Gelažiūtė's full-length documentary *Neregėta Europa* (Unseen Europe) took place at the European Film Forum Scanorama. The film depicts a honeymoon trip to Europe, on which the newlyweds take some of their relatives and close friends, some of whom are blind and partially sighted. The process of AD on this film began in the spring of 2019. The film with AD was presented to the community of the blind and visually impaired by the director Akvilė Gelažiūtė during a closed screening. The AD text was prepared by L. Niedzviegienė and read by actress Aldona Vilutytė.

On September 20–26, 2019, the film *Nematoma* (Invisible) by Ignas Jonynas and Kristupas Sabolius with AD was shown at the Forum Cinemas in Kaunas. The adaptation of the film was initiated by the team of the project “Kaunas – European Capital of Culture 2022.” The AD text was also prepared by the author of this article and voiced by voice actor Viktoras Linartas.

In the chronological sequence of events, it is also important to mention the contribution of the cinema centre *Skalvija* to the field of AD. This institution has taken the initiative to adapt some products for the audience of blind and partially sighted children. On behalf of the centre, in 2022, AD texts for two full-length children's films were developed by the author of this article. Adapted were the films *Bintė* (Binti) and *Jokūbas, Mimi ir kalbantys šunys* (Jacob, Mimmi and the talking dogs). At this point it must be admitted that Lithuanian audience of the blind and visually impaired has had poor access to audio-described AV products for children so far.

At the end of the same year, the AD text was also prepared for the film *Tvano nebus* (The flood won't come), directed by Marat Sargsyan (created in 2020 by film company Tremora). The audio-described version of this work should be released in 2023. Such private initiatives are crucial in accelerating the development of cinema AD in our country.

#### 4.4 The Role of the Lithuanian Film Centre in the Field of Cinema Audio Description

In the autumn of 2020 and in the spring of 2021, by the order of the Lithuanian Film Centre (*Lietuvos kino centras*; LKC), were prepared AD texts for Lithuanian film classics: *Žydrasis horizontas* (Blue horizon [1957]), *Maža išpažintis* (The small confession [1971]), *Skrydis per Atlantą* (Flight over the Atlantic [1983]), *Moteris ir keturi jos vyrai* (A woman and her four men [1983]), and *Vaikai iš „Amerikos“ viešbučio* (Children from the Hotel “America” [1990]).<sup>13</sup> In 2022, five more classic Lithuanian films were adapted on behalf of the centre: *Paskutinė atostogų diena* (The girl and the echo [1964]), *Jausmai* (Feelings [1968]), *Herkus Mantas* (Northern crusades [1972]), *Riešutų duona* (Walnut bread [1978]), and *Mano mažytė žmona* (My little wife [1984]). The centre has restored and digitized the original prints of the films. The films were then audio described by the author of this article in cooperation with some AVT students of Vilnius University Kaunas Faculty. Because of some foreign language inserts, which were translated in the form of subtitles, some of the films were supplemented with audio subtitles (in the form of voice-over). The recordings with AD are stored in the Lithuanian Film Centre archive. They are accessible for visually impaired people through the archives of the LAB. Some of them are also freely accessible to the public through the LRT media library (*LRT mediateka*).<sup>14</sup> It is particularly encouraging that this work has continuity—there are already scheduled plans to add AD soundtracks to three other films within the year 2023.

Lithuanian filmmakers and film distributors are increasingly interested in and concerned about the accessibility of their productions to people of different physical abilities, and AD services are receiving growing interest.

### 5. Audio Description on Lithuanian Television

The implementation of AD for TV products through a third audio channel originated in 1990 with the introduction of Descriptive Video Services by the Boston public broadcaster WGBH (Cronin and King 1990). However, in Lithuania, this way of adapting TV content was introduced considerably later. Until 2012, Lithuanian television was analogue. It was the main obstacle preventing television broadcasts with AD. However, even with the introduction of

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<sup>13</sup> “Restauruoti filmai” (Restored films), *Lietuvos kino centras* (LKC), accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.lkc.lt/kino-paveldas/restauruoti-filmai>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka>.

digital television, nothing changed for another five years: there were no broadcasts with AD on Lithuanian TV, while in some foreign countries this service had been provided for more than a decade. Until the beginning of 2018, theatre AD was the most developed AD area in Lithuania, as over 10 performances had already been adapted. Thus, theatre AD services had developed the fastest by 2018. There were no TV broadcasts with AD in Lithuania until 2018. The first audio-described TV product in Lithuania, the Lithuanian classical film *Gražuolė* (The beautiful girl) directed by Arūnas Žebriūnas in 1969, was released in January 2018 without live broadcast because of a lack of experience on how to do it on TV (more details in table 1). The release of this film with AD generated optimism for the dissemination of AV production with AD, potentially accelerating its prevalence in our country. As expected, a few months later, our national broadcaster sought consultations from AVT specialists at Vilnius University Kaunas Faculty regarding the accessibility of AV production. Starting in autumn 2018, television representatives asked the author of this paper to prepare AD texts for certain AV products. In this way, the continuous preparation of AD texts began. The systemized information about the very first<sup>15</sup> Lithuanian TV products with AD can be found in table 1.

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<sup>15</sup> In the summer of 2018, one private Lithuanian television broadcaster, LNK, also adapted some content for the audience of the blind and partially sighted: their reality show-experiment “Tamsoje” (In the dark) was broadcast with AD (AD text author unknown). Participants of the reality show were sighted and visually impaired people who had to live together in complete darkness for 8 weeks (“Jurgis Didžiulis apie projektą ‘Tamsoje’: abejojantys, ar reikalingas toks televizijos eksperimentas, patys turi negalia” [Jurgis Didžiulis on the project ‘In the dark’: those who doubt the need for such a TV experiment have disabilities themselves], *Delfi*, May 23, 2018, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.delfi.lt/veidai/eteris/jurgis-didziulis-apie-projekta-tamsoje-abejojantys-ar-reikalingas-toks-televizijos-eksperimentas-patys-turi-negalia.d?id=78085411>.)

Table 1. First attempts at AD on Lithuanian television

Genre / Type	Original title	Title in English	Director(s)	Release of version with AD	Authors of AD text	AD voice <sup>16</sup>	Duration	AD type	Appeared on
Full-length film	<i>Gražuolė</i>	The beautiful girl	A. Žebriūnas	January 2018	L. Niedzviegienė, AVT BA and MA students (Vilnius University Kaunas Faculty)	A. Bungaitė (AVT BA student)	64 minutes	Open AD	LRT media library <sup>17</sup>
TV series <i>Laisvės kaina</i> (The price of freedom) (4 seasons)	<i>Savanoriai</i>	War volunteers	A. Šlepikas	March 2022	L. Niedzviegienė A. Armonaitė, I. Hug, L. Kavaliauskas, U. Pužaitė, T. Tamkevičius E. Adomavičiūtė, K. Meilūnaitė K. Meilūnaitė E. Adomavičiūtė, V. Davydovaitė	Actor G. Arbačiauskas and some other voices for audio subtitles	Each season 12 episodes (1 hour duration each)	Closed AD <sup>18</sup> (first attempt on Lithuanian TV)	LRT and LRT media library
	<i>Partizanai</i>	Partisans		July 2022					
	<i>Disidentai</i>	Dissidents		January 2019					
	<i>Sąjūdis</i>	The <i>Sąjūdis</i>		November 2022					
Teenager series	<i>Bloga mergaitė</i>	Bad girl	M. Vildžiūnas, P. Laurinkus	Starting August 2019 (AD preparing from June 2019 to June 2020)	L. Niedzviegienė, AVT students	Female actor J. Čižauskaitė	3 seasons adapted: 85 episodes total, each lasting about 25 minutes	Closed AD	LRT
								Open AD	LRT media library <sup>19</sup>
Animated film	<i>Gustavo nuotykių</i>	Adventures of Gustav	A. Gričius, V. Lekavičius	April 2020	K. Meilūnaitė, L. Niedzviegienė	G. Arbačiauskas	97 minutes	Closed AD	LRT and LRT media library <sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> LRT is the main provider of AD voicing / recording services in Lithuania.

<sup>17</sup> See “Gražuolė (žmonėms su regos negalia)” (The beautiful girl [for people with visual impairment]), *LRT*, January 2, 2018, accessed April 2, 2023. <https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/1013682190/grazuole-zmonems-su-regos-negalia>. (With open AD.)

<sup>18</sup> The series was broadcast in real time with closed AD, meaning that it was possible to synchronously switch on / off the audio track of AD comments.

<sup>19</sup> See “Bloga mergaitė” (Bad girl), *LRT*, 2020, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/video/bloga-mergaite>. (With open AD; episodes with AD are marked with the textnote ‘su garsiniu vaizdavimu’ [With audio description].)

<sup>20</sup> See “Gustavo nuotykių” (Adventures of Gustav), *LRT*, April 12, 2020, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000100842/filmas-gustavo-nuotykiu-su-garsiniu-vaizdavimu>. (With closed AD).

As can be seen in table 1, all the mentioned AV products with AD can be found on the LRT media library, which allows filtering the content according to the product accessibility parameter, meaning that it is possible to filter out AV products with and without AD or other accessible formats (e.g., subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing [SDH] or sign language). All films newly adapted for the blind by LRT are also hosted on this platform.

At the beginning of 2021, the LRT commissioned AD texts for eleven full-length films created by contemporary Lithuanian film directors or producers: *Aš esi tu* (You am I [2006]), *Kai apkabinsiu tave* (Back to your arms [2010]), *Emilija iš Laisvės alėjos* (Emilia. Breaking free [2017]), *Gimtinė* (Motherland [2019]), etc., as well as for short children's films *Pieno baras* (Milkshake bar [2020]) and *Šokliukė ir Kalėdų eglutė* (Hopscotch and the Christmas tree [2018]). Some of the products contain several inserts in foreign languages (English, Russian, or German), all of which were subtitled in Lithuanian and made fully accessible through audio subtitling. Several documentaries by Lithuanian authors are currently being adapted. As is well known, the documentary genre does not always lend itself easily to adaptation, as there are often not the pauses necessary to insert AD commentaries. Lithuanian productions are no exception, so the films had to be carefully selected.

While the number of products with Lithuanian AD is increasing, visually impaired people still have very limited access to such content. The visually impaired community and their organizations have high expectations for amendments to article 5 of the law of the Lithuanian public broadcaster LRT.<sup>21</sup> The amendments came into force on January 1, 2020. The law states that the duration of television broadcasts adapted for visually impaired audiences shall be at least 10% of the total monthly broadcast time on our national television. Repetitions will not be included in the calculation of the minimum hours for the broadcast time. Thus, programs adapted for the blind and partially sighted will initially be broadcast for at least 1% of the total broadcast time. The time will be extended by at least 1% of 2019's total monthly broadcast time for audio-described content each year until the minimum broadcast volume proposed by the law (i.e., at least 10%) is reached.

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<sup>21</sup> "Lietuvos Respublikos Lietuvos nacionalinio radijo ir televizijos įstatymo NR. I-1571 5 straipsnio pakeitimo įstatymas" (Republic of Lithuania law on the Lithuanian National Radio and Television law No. I-1571, amending Article 5) (March 21, 2019), *Teisės aktų registras* (Register of legal acts), accessed March 7, 2023, <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/654b2710554111e9975f9c35aedfe438>.

Thus, there are already some changes in the legal framework in this area and a strong interest in AD services from cultural institutions as well as from the visually impaired community, which is expected to lead to the development of even more content accessible for audiences with different visual abilities.

## **6. Scientific Research in the Field of Cinema Audio Description in Lithuania**

The volume of practical AD work and the depth and size of academic AD research greatly vary in different countries. Until now, Lithuanian scientists have published only a few extensive scientific papers on the topic of AD. In fact, there are only two Lithuanian scientific articles discussing the AD methodology of cinema products, both written by the author of this article with coauthors.

The first Lithuanian scientific article about AD was published by Dr. Laura Niedzviegienė and former English Linguistics master's student Ana Kirejeva in 2014. This first scientific article of the kind in Lithuania was entitled “Audiovizualinės produkcijos pritaikymas žmonėms su regėjimo negalia” (Adaptation of audiovisual products for people with visual disabilities). The aim of this article was to reveal the specifics of the adaptation of television, cinema, and theatre as AV products for people with visual impairments. The article discussed the AD methodology's theoretical and practical background in different countries including Lithuania and introduced technologies used to deliver accessible television, cinema, and theatre content to the blind and partially sighted audience. To reveal the main problems and guidelines of AD preparation, one small-scale AV product, a movie trailer, was selected and analyzed.

The second Lithuanian scientific article in the field of AD was published in 2017 under the title “Garsinio vaizdavimo raida Lietuvoje ir vokiškai kalbančiuose kraštuose” (Development of audio description in Lithuania and German-speaking countries). This topic was taken into consideration in the spring of 2016, when both authors—Dr. Laura Niedzviegienė and her colleague Dr. Eglė Aloševičienė—went on an ERASMUS+ non-academic visit to the Austrian AD company AUDIO2, where they had an opportunity to gain more theoretical knowledge and participate in the AD processes of different kinds of AV products: sports, theatre, and cinema. This publication reflects the training experience, history, and former situation in the field of AD in Lithuania and in the German-speaking countries (Aloševičienė and Niedzviegienė 2016).

Throughout the implementation of the AVT BA and MA programs at our faculty, students have prepared and defended many final theses. It is necessary to mention the research carried out by master's students in Lithuania: there are only two MA theses covering the field of AD and no PhD theses so far. Both works were supervised by the scientific advisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Laura Niedzviegienė. The first MA thesis, "Audio Description of Colours in Contemporary Narrative Based Music Videos: Reception Approach," was prepared by Karolina Jenciūtė in 2020. The aim of this thesis was to investigate how AD added to a contemporary narrative-based music video impacts the reception of color semantics that correlates with the overall song meaning for blind and visually impaired audiences (Jenciūtė 2020). The second MA thesis, discussing the rendition of fantastic elements in Lithuanian AD and analyzing the case of the film *Gustavo nuotykių* (Adventures of Gustav) (2014) by Vaidas Lekavičius and Augustinas Gričius, was successfully defended by Urtė Pužaitė in 2023. These academic works undoubtedly make an important contribution to the scientific development of the AD field in our country.

As we can see, the amount of comprehensive scientific research on the topic of the AD of cinema products in Lithuania is low. However, the results of scientific research are successfully shared in other ways. Since 2014, a few important aspects from the field of AD have been analyzed and presented at scientific conferences and in public lectures, in Lithuania and abroad, individually and with coauthors. Since 2012, the following features have been discussed: natural interfaces in computer and human communication (2014), AD as a study subject and as a tool for the study content accessibility (2014), application of AD in the development of (non)verbal communication skills in autistic children (2015), AD as a tool for media and culture accessibility in German-speaking countries (2016; 2016), concept and peculiarities of AD (2016; 2017; 2018), target groups and need of AD (2016), AD in visual (2019) and AV art (2016; 2017; 2018; 2019), AD in Lithuania (2017; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2021; 2022) (including the research on strategies for AD of food related images or of culture-specific items in selected Lithuanian series, AD of multilingual films in Lithuania), impact of genre on the AD of an (audio)visual product (2019), etc.

A significant scientific and practical breakthrough was the scientific 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), implemented by Assoc. Prof. Dr. L. Niedzviegienė and Assoc. Prof.

Dr. Jurgita Kerevičienė in 2021–2022 in Lithuania. This project has received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania and was carried out within the framework of the competitive priority research program “Welfare Society.” Several public (inter)national seminars and scientific presentations related to the content of the project were organized. It also produced a scientific study summarizing the results of the research carried out and detailed AD guidelines for film and theatre products, which are increasingly in demand by theatre makers, performers, filmmakers, and distributors. Both publications are freely available in digital format. The guidelines for the adaptation of AV material cover the basic principles of subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing and the main aspects of AD for the blind and visually impaired (Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022a). This publication will help Lithuanian AV producers and distributors to adapt cinema and theatre productions to the sensory characteristics of the audience. The second major product of this project—the research study—highlights the quantitative and qualitative research carried out during the project on audiences and AV materials already adapted for the blind and deaf and gives insight not only on adaptation of cultural content but also on social and physical accessibility as well as on the accessibility of information about cinema, theatre, and TV products adapted for the deaf and blind audience in Lithuania (Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b).

## **7. Conclusions**

Lithuanian organizations uniting visually impaired people, AD practitioners, and researchers in the field of AVT all make efforts to educate the public as much as possible about the accessibility of culture by organizing public lectures, seminars, and trainings. In addition, efforts are being made to look at this area from a scientific perspective. Two Lithuanian scientific articles and two master’s theses discussing AD methodology for adaptation of cinema have been published in Lithuania so far.

The long-standing terminological confusion prevailing in Lithuania is gradually diminishing, and the main AD-related terms enacted by the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language are stabilizing in our discourse. Nevertheless, a significant segment of Lithuanian society continues to conflate the terms ‘audio description’ and ‘audiovisual translation,’ often regarding them as interchangeable.



In Lithuania, visually impaired individuals face limited access to AV content. Currently, there is only one audio-described film available on DVD. Theatre AD used to be the most developed area of AD until January 2019. However, with the TV series *Laisvės kaina. Disidentai* (The price of freedom. Dissidents) airing on the national broadcaster LRT, the number of TV products with AD surpassed audio-described theatre performances. It must be emphasized that LRT is now making films more accessible by broadcasting cinema productions with AD. These AD versions are prepared either by the television itself, in collaboration with freelancers, or by freelancers working with the Lithuanian Film Centre or certain film directors who support the screening of their films with AD on television.

The number of Lithuanian and foreign films with AD differs significantly: most publicly known and freely accessible films with AD in Lithuania are Lithuanian films, except for *Šuns tikslas* (A dog's purpose), which was shown in public cinemas. The Lithuanian Audiosensory Library (former Lithuanian Library for the Blind) has several foreign language films with AD, but they are exclusively accessible for blind and visually impaired clients through library funds (in accordance with the Marrakesh Treaty). The AD of foreign films is not performed because television usually has very limited rights to transform foreign works, and licenses are valid for a correspondingly short period (1–2 years), which makes the service of AD not cost-effective. All other film productions with AD are classics of Lithuanian cinema or films created by Lithuanian contemporary directors. Of all the films adapted and publicly available so far, there are only a few audio-described products for children.

Lithuania has made great progress in AD in the past two decades, particularly in recent years. Now, most cinema screenings have special showings for the target audience since films still often have an open AD track audible to all cinema visitors. TV movies on national television have a closed AD track that allows both—sighted and visually impaired—audiences to choose the preferred version of the AV product. Additionally, the LRT media library also offers access to both versions (the original and the audio-described film).

AD methodology varies based on linguistic and cultural peculiarities and target audience needs in each country. National AD guidelines are therefore crucial. During the implementation of the project 'Inclusive culture: The study on accessibility of audiovisual products for the visually and hearing impaired,' extensive guidelines were developed, which include AD recommendations for films and theatre performances and are publicly available to all interested parties (see Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022a). The guidelines are based on

international practice and on the needs and experiences of the Lithuanian blind and partially sighted audience, which were researched through questionnaires and interviews. A comprehensive scientific study discussing the experiences and needs of the deaf and blind audiences in Lithuania has also recently been published (see Kerevičienė and Niedzviegienė 2022b).

Currently, Lithuania lacks institutions employing AD specialists on long-term contracts, with most working on a freelance basis. There is no community or regulation for audio describers in the country. Funding for AD activities, aside from national television services, lacks a clear mechanism and primarily relies on project funds.

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