

# Audio description, subjectivity and film experience

**FLORIANE BARDINI**

Associate professor

Universitat de Vic - Universitat Central de Catalunya

[floriane.bardini@uvic.cat](mailto:floriane.bardini@uvic.cat)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5116-6631>

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## Abstract

*This article examines the audio description (AD) of films in Catalonia. After reviewing the regulatory framework governing this practice, it highlights the contradiction between its demand for objectivity and the highly connotative nature of the film language. Then presents the results of a reception study which tests three AD styles with individuals with visual impairment: a conventional style and two interpretative styles, namely narrative AD and cinematographic AD. The findings show that the interpretative AD styles are a valid alternative which could help to improve the film experience of individuals with visual impairment.*

## Keywords

*Audio description, Audiovisual Accessibility, Visual Impairment, Blindness, Film Language.*

## Resum

*Aquest article tracta de l'audiodescripció (AD) de pel·lícules a Catalunya. Després d'un repàs del marc normatiu que regeix aquesta pràctica, es posa en relleu la contradicció entre l'exigència d'objectivitat de la norma vigent i el caràcter altament connotatiu del llenguatge cinematogràfic. Seguidament, es presenten els resultats d'un estudi de recepció que posa a prova tres estils d'AD amb persones amb discapacitat visual: un estil convencional i dos estils interpretatius, l'AD narrativa i l'AD cinematogràfica. Els resultats mostren que els estils d'AD interpretatius són una alternativa vàlida, que podria ajudar a millorar l'experiència fílmica de les persones amb discapacitat visual.*

## Paraules clau

*Audiodescripció, accessibilitat audiovisual, discapacitat visual, ceguesa, llenguatge cinematogràfic.*

*"A spectator does not find herself 'receiving' a film: she finds herself 'living' it."<sup>1</sup>*

Francesco Casetti

## 1. Introduction

Audio description (AD) consists in the verbal and auditory description of visual or audiovisual content. It appeared in the 1940s and 1950s with the weekly description of a film on Spanish radio, but did not start to gain ground as an audiovisual accessibility service for persons who are blind or visually impaired until the late 1980s (Orero, 2007: 112-114). In the early twenty-first century, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, dated 13 December 2006, recognises the importance of accessibility as a means of guaranteeing that persons with disabilities can fully enjoy their rights. This ushered in a new stage in which the range of audiovisual accessibility expanded, as did research and training in this field, mostly in translation faculties. The study presented in this article focuses on the audio description of films and audiovisual fictions. First,

we shall examine the regulatory framework governing these products and the creation of this type of audio description in Catalonia. We shall then explain the connotative function of film language and its implications on creating audio descriptions. Finally, we shall present a perception study conducted with persons with visual impairment to test alternative audio description styles which offer more interpretation of the film language than conventional audio description.

## 2. The audio description of films in Catalonia

Spain's General Audiovisual Communication Law 7/2010, dated 31 March 2010, is in force regarding audiovisual accessibility matters in Catalonia; it stipulates that 'persons with visual impairment have the right for televised audiovisual communication, both free-to-air and state or regional coverage, to have at least two audio-described hours per week' (BOE, 2010: 14) and it calls for a gradual increase in these numbers up to 10 hours per week on public television stations after 2013

(*Ibid.*, p. 43). Likewise, the Catalan Law on Accessibility 3/2014, dated 30 October 2014, stipulates that 'the audiovisual media' and 'companies distributing cinematographic and audiovisual works' are responsible for 'gradually incorporating subtitling and audio description systems' (DOGC, 2014: 15).

According to the study by Rovira-Esteva and Tor-Carroggio (2018), in 2017 the presence of audio descriptions in Catalan was still quite limited. There was no audio-described content in Catalan on the private TV stations, and on the public stations, only the CCMA's TV3 and Super3/33 offered audio descriptions. However, it was under the 10 hours stipulated by the state law, with 8.9 and 8.3 hours offered, respectively, that is, a total of 801 audio-described hours on the CCMA's channels that year (Matamala, 2019). In 2018, in order to adapt the accessibility service for persons with visual impairment to the new forms of content consumption, the audio-described version was introduced to the programmes on demand, and almost 900 hours were audio-described (Matamala, 2019). In 2021, the figure went back to 807 hours (CCMA, 2021).

The 20 May 2021 version of the draft decree approving the Accessibility Code of Catalonia,<sup>2</sup> which is still being processed, stipulates that public TV stations must offer 15 hours per week of audio description and private ones 10 hours, thus exceeding the minimums stipulated in the Spanish law. The Code also seeks to regulate the range of audio description available in cinemas which hold more than 500 people as a whole and/or which have specific rooms that hold more than 250 people, but it ignores streaming platforms, even though they have become a prime actor within the current audiovisual consumption scene.

Therefore, we see that the current laws in no way guarantee universal accessibility for persons with visual impairment, but they are working towards more audiovisual accessibility and a larger supply of audio-described contents. Regarding the way these contents are created, in Catalonia we have no guide of our own on good practices, and the creation of audio descriptions is regulated by UNE standard 153020 (AENOR, 2005).

This standard (AENOR, 2005: 4) defines audio description as:

*'a communication support service that consists in a set of techniques and skills applied in order to compensate the lack of visual information contained in any type of message. It provides accurate sound information that translates or explains so the receiver with visual impairment perceives the message as a harmonious whole and as similarly as possible to the way a person who sees perceives it.'*

In this definition, we see how the stress is on both understanding the information, guaranteed by 'sound information that translates or explains', and the experience of the person with visual impairment, who has to 'perceive the message [...] as similarly as possible to the way a person who sees perceives it'. Despite the initial intention of the definition of the service, the regulation itself primarily focuses on what information must be conveyed more than on how it should be conveyed, so it ignores part of the experience of the persons using the service.

The main recommendations issued by the UNE 153020 standard for preparing an audio description script are the following (AENOR, 2005: 7-8):

- The audio description should be offered in the same language as the production (except in the case of audio-subtitles; see Matamala, 2019: 231-232).
- A prior analysis of the work must be conducted to see whether it is suitable for being audio-described, that is, whether there is enough space to include 'information bites' in the soundtrack, as well as to analyse the type of work, the topic and the audience to which it is targeted.
- Care must be taken to offer the right amount of information: too much may saturate and too little may cause anxiety.
- It advises prioritising the information needed to understand the topic over aesthetic information and providing information following the spatial-temporal rule, that is, offering information on the *when*, *where*, *who*, *what* and *how* of each situation.
- The script should be written in the third person using words whose meaning is precise and with a fluid, direct style. It bans using words like 'we see...', which distance the users from the film and futilely reminds them that they cannot see it.
- It asks for objective descriptions that do not express any subjective viewpoint or add or cut information.
- The standard does not mention the film language or how it should be described.

Just like other advice, the demand for objectivity is also common in other recognised or official European guides. For example, the French *Charte de l'audiodescription* states that 'the audio-describer should not interpret the images but describe them' (Morisset & Gonant, 2008: 2, translated by author), and the British style guide (Ofcom, 2021) advises producing descriptions that only provide information on what can be seen onscreen (Ofcom, 2021: 7). Nonetheless, we can see that the issue of objectivity is thorny: the *Charte* is as unequivocal as the Spanish regulation, but despite this resolutely objective approach, it says that 'describing a work means [...] conveying its message so the verbalisation sparks emotion' (p. 2), which is a surprising paradox when the objective is quite clear but the means allowed to reach it are limited. Regarding the British style guide, it outlines its requirement of limiting audio descriptions to the information on the screen, appealing to the judgement of the audio-describer: it cites the example of a weighbridge with the two towers (p. 7), which we could call '*Tower Bridge*' if the iconic bridge in London actually appears onscreen, even though no signs or subtitles tell the seeing audience this. The example is not about the interpretation of a complex meaning of the image but instead shows us that in a decision taken on how to describe, it is inevitable that the audio-describer's subjectivity will come into play.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, the excessive requirement of objectivity in audio descriptions has been questioned in numerous studies,

while the stress has shifted to the need to audio-describe the film language. Here we could cite the studies by Kruger (2010) on audio narration, Fryer and Freeman (2013) on cinematographic audio description, Orero (2012) on the importance of film analysis for audio description, the description of auteur cinema by Szarkowska (2013) and the audio description of framing by Wilken and Kruger (2016). This trend towards criticising the requirement of objectivity, as well as the opening of a new and more functional approach to decision-making in audio description, stressing the importance of film analysis, is reflected in the guidelines developed more recently, which are not official but are presented as valuable tools in the training of audio-describers (Remael et al., 2014; Fryer, 2016; Valero Gisbert, 2021).

In this article, we shall also present audio description proposals that are alternatives to the conventional ones and interpret the film language. However, before delving into the details of these modalities, we shall examine how the film language works and why it is essential to interpret it in order to convey its meaning in the audio description script.

### 3. The connotative value of the film language and its implications for audio description

One way of analysing films is by considering them texts: they are audiovisual texts composed of information conveyed via two modes, verbal and non-verbal, and two channels, auditory and visual. Films spring from the intentional and complementary use of these modes and channels to convey information (Zabalbeascoa, 2008: 24). When part of the information is missing because the viewers do not have access to one of the channels, it has to be provided with alternative information via the channel available. As discussed above, in the case of visual impairment, relevant information has to be provided via the auditory channel.

In turn, according to Wollen (2013: 102), information can have different values: iconic, indexical or symbolic. An icon represents itself, in the way that the image of an apple can represent an apple. An index indicates how, for example, the image of a column of smoke conveys the existence of a fire. Finally, a symbol represents a thing through convention, the way a cross represents Catholicism. According to Monaco (2000: 166) metaphorical symbolic equivalents are widely present onscreen and cannot work as they do in literature. In contrast, indexes are a valid alternative for cinema, as they can be expressed in different ways. He cites the example of heat, which can be represented by a thermometer, a droplet of sweat or a mirage, as well as by warm colours. Films work very well in the indexical sphere, as they generate valid connotations within the context of each film. This idea that each film reflects its own conventions is recurring in different film scholars, such as Monaco, as well as Metz (1964: 59): 'we do not understand a film because we understand its syntax; we understand the

syntax of a film because we understand the film'; and more recently, Carroll (2008: 118): 'there is no film vocabulary; no set dictionary of moving images. There are as many films as things, and likewise as many possible combinations for photographing from an infinitely large number of camera positions.' On the other hand, according to Monaco (p. 167), some connotations are so recurring that they become conventions. We could cite the example of complementary two-shots, a film technique that consists in alternating close-ups of two characters looking at the camera to express the idea that they are looking at each other. This type of convention is interpreted unconsciously and immediately when watching a film—and when listening to an audio description.

Unlike icons, which represent themselves, and symbols, whose meaning we know or recognise via a convention, understanding the meaning of an index requires interpretation. If we revisit the example of heat, a droplet of sweat running down the character's cheek could mean that it's hot, but also that she is nervous or has just made a physical exertion. But when we watch a film, our eyes capture more information, and the heatwaves in the air and warm tones of the photography join the droplet of sweat to convey the idea of heat. In the words of Schmid (2014: 22), viewers interpret films 'by combining the verbal, visual and musical signals to shape a semantic, sensual and emotional impression which captures the maximum symbols, icons and indexes from the multimedia cinematographic "text"'. According to Plantinga (2010: 94), all of these elements can be conveyed by all the components of the film language, the composition of the moving image of the camera, including editing, colour and music.

This small overview of how the film language work clearly reveals the complexity of an activity that may seem as simple as watching a film. This complexity has implications for making good audio descriptions beyond the denotative sphere and the basic elements of the story: beyond the *when*, *where*, *who* and *what*, as we also describe the *how*.

To exemplify this, below we present three audio descriptions of the same clip from the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), drawn from a broader descriptive study which compares the British, German and Spanish audio description of this film, which take three different approaches to describing it (Bardini 2020a). *Slumdog Millionaire* occurs in three time frames, which converge in the denouement. Before reaching this point in the film, the present is set in a police station, where the main character, a young Muslim Indian man from a lower caste named Jamal, is watching the recording of the TV game 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire', in which he was participating until he was arrested for presumably having cheated. The recent past is a TV game where we see Jamal answering all the questions correctly thanks to the distant past: experiences from his life which appear as flashbacks between the questions. In the clip we are focusing on now, Jamal is at the police station, even though the film does not remind us of this at the time: what we see is a transition between a flashback and the return to

the reality of the moment, to the TV set. In the foreground and behind Jamal's half-head in the background, we see an oblique, blurry image of the audience and the host. This is a subjective shot which seeks to convey the sense that we are looking through Jamal's eyes and have us feel what he is feeling: a great deal of difficulty returning to reality after recalling a very harsh memory. This shot is a transition between memory and reality, a logical connector in the film discourse which only lasts a few seconds. This is a prime example of the indexical function of the film language, and we can see the difficulty this poses if we want to offer an objective audio description. First, offering all the information described above so that individuals with visual impairment can make their own interpretation of it could mean breaking the suspension of belief. Secondly, the free space available for the information bite of the audio description is brief and prevents all the information from being shared. This situation has been resolved in different ways in different audio descriptions, as we shall explain below, and as reproduced in Table 1.

The British AD provides an iconic description of this clip, that is, a description of what can be seen, while failing to mention either the film techniques or how to interpret them, as the majority of audio description style guides recommend. The essential information on time and place is provided, but the emotional part of the message is lost. In contrast, the German AD chooses a cognitive (or indexical) description; that is, it interprets the film language in order to extract its meaning and capture it in words so that the audio description users have access to it. In this case, the emotional dimension of the subjective shot is conveyed in the audio description, and this is possible thanks to the interpretation. Finally, the Spanish AD provides a creative description, an interpretation that goes beyond the information offered by this clip in order to instead provide a narration that conveys both the narrative and the emotional elements of this brief scene.

In the descriptive study of the AD of the film language in these three audio descriptions, we were able to see how the more interpretative AD techniques (the cognitive and the creative descriptions) were largely the most appropriate ones for conveying both the meaning and the emotions and sensations associated with the film language in the audio-described version

of each clip studied.<sup>4</sup> These techniques only affect the clip we are examining, but their repeated, intentional use also affects the general style of each audio description. Based on these observations, we sought to define alternative AD styles to test them with persons with visual impairment and check whether including more interpretation of the film language, counter to the rules currently in place in Catalonia, made it possible to offer them a better film experience. In the next section we shall present these styles and our experimental design, before going on to the results of the study and the conclusions of the article.

#### 4. Interpretation of the film language in audio description: users' opinions

##### 4.1 Conventional and interpretative audio description styles

In order to conduct our study on the reception of audio descriptions of the film language and the film experience with persons with visual impairment (Bardini 2020b), we wanted to define three AD styles: a conventional one, which corresponds to the current audio description practice in Catalonia, and two alternative, interpretative styles. All three are defined in Table 2.

In order to apply these styles to a real case and test them with persons with visual impairment, we choose the short film *Nuit Blanche* (2010) by the Canadian filmmaker Arev Manoukian, a film with no dialogue that makes extensive use of the film language to convey its message.<sup>5</sup> *Nuit Blanche* explores a moment of attraction between a woman and a man when their eyes meet, each on the other side of a street, in a black-and-white aesthetic reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood films. Part of the film occurs outside reality: from the time they make eye contact, the image turns to slow motion as the man and woman walk toward each other. The woman, who was seated in a restaurant, comes out through the window, which shatters into thousands of shards which surround her like a halo. The man crosses the street and a car hits him—but the car suffers more, as the man just leans to one side and then returns upright and keeps walking towards the woman. They meet in the middle of the street, enveloped in bits of glass that float and glimmer, and just before the denouement, they are about to embrace and kiss

**Table 1. *Slumdog Millionaire*: clip in three ADs [TCR 00:21:50]**

British AD	<i>Present day. Jamal sits on the studio stage opposite the host.</i>
German AD	<i>Im Studio. Abwesend betrachtet Jamal die applaudierenden Zuschauer. Er löst sich aus seinen Gedanken.</i> [In the studio. Jamal absently looks at the spectators clapping. He is coming back from being lost in thought.]
Spanish AD	<i>En el presente, en comisaría. Siguen viendo el vídeo del concurso. Jamal parece olvidar sus recuerdos y volver a la realidad.</i> [In the present, in the police station. He is still watching the video of the game show. Jamal seems to forget his memories and come back to reality.]

Source: Author.

**Table 2. Audio description styles**

<b>Conventional audio description</b> Denotative AD, which describes what is seen onscreen in the iconic sphere, thus avoiding any mention or interpretation of the film techniques used. The main goal of this AD style is to provide an objective description of what is seen so that persons with visual impairment can reconstruct the meaning of the images themselves.
<b>Cinematographic audio description:</b> Interpretative AD, which strikes a balance between iconic description, the use of film terminology and interpretation of the film language. The use of technical terms primarily comes into play to describe specific cinematic elements, such as camera movements and editing techniques. Furthermore, when the describer deems it relevant, it also provides an interpretation of the meaning of the film techniques used.
<b>Narrative audio description:</b> Interpretative AD, which concentrates on interpreting the film language and integrating the visual information in a fluid, coherent narration. This AD style does not always describe everything seen (or not at the exact time when it is seen) but instead seeks to verbally recreate everything that the film language enables viewers to feel and understand.

Source: Author.

each other. At this moment, the music stops and we hear the noise of the street; the camera goes back to normal speed and the image of the two faces about to touch fades to show the woman smiling as she is seated in the restaurant. In the next and final shot, the man, who is standing on the other pavement, is looking at the woman. Below, Table 3 shows the three audio descriptions of the denouement of this short film, which are highly representative of each style.

In order to create the three audio descriptions of *Nuit Blanche*, which are not entirely different because multiple factors influence the users' preferences, we started with one common version written by the audio-describer Carme Guillamon as part of our project, and then made specific changes to it according to each style's approach. We should note that our study focuses on the AD script, and special attention was paid to offering a similar vocal experience in all three versions so that this aspect did not interfere with the participants' experience with the different versions.

As shown by the different elements highlighted in Table 3, the three audio descriptions took different strategies to describe the denouement of *Nuit Blanche*. The conventional AD, which is essentially denotative, tells that the image goes back to normal speed, as well as the location of the main characters. This information, along with the film's change in soundtrack, are sufficient for the persons with visual impairment to deduce that the situation in the film is returning to reality. Nonetheless, the cinematographic and narrative audio descriptions verbalise the 'return to reality' because they believe that this interpretation will facilitate the experience of persons with visual impairment, who may focus their cognitive capacities on other issues that emerge about the characters in the denouement, what happened or what will happen next. The responses to these questions are more subjective interpretations and depend on each person's personality and experience, while the interpretation of the return to reality is an exercise in film reading. This situation also occurs just before that, when the conventional version limits itself to saying that the main characters 'close their eyes and their lips draw closer', but the interpretative versions say that

they are 'about to kiss'. On the other hand, with the goal of always getting the audience to grasp how the film feels so they can experience it more intensely, the cinematographic audio description adds information on the cinematographic shots and the movements of the framing, while the narrative description highlights certain aspects that are secondary to the story but contribute to the film's atmosphere, such as the wind blowing. Next we shall see how the persons participating in the study received these three versions.

#### 4.2 Experimental design of the reception study

Forty-five persons with visual impairment affiliated with ONCE (Spanish National Organisation of the Blind) and/or members of the ACIC (Catalan Association for the Integration of Blind Persons) participated in the study. The ONCE offices in Girona, Lleida, Vic, Manresa and Reus participated. The interviews were held in groups of two to five people and sought a variety of objectives. First, the idea was to offer the participants the possibility to enjoy a film for a while and to discuss it together; thus, it was designed as an enriching cultural activity, as in many cases they had to travel to the office solely for that reason. Despite the researcher's presence and the fact that the interview was semi-guided, this relaxed atmosphere encouraged conversation among the participants and allowed more information to emerge as the discussion unfolded. Nonetheless, in order to avoid any contamination between the different participants' responses when collecting responses on the questionnaire, abacuses were designed that could be used for all the binary and scaled questions. In order to analyse the data collected, we adopted a quasi-experimental model of comparison between non-equivalent groups (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006: 216) because of its suitability for studying natural groups, given that the groups and the dates of the activity were chosen according to the participants' availability, and each group was assigned one AD version in such a way that the total number of people who had listened to each version was balanced at the end of the study.

**Table 3. AD of the denouement of *Nuit Blanche* in three styles**

AD1: Conventional audio description	++00045901+00051303 [...] As they are nearing each other, they close their eyes and their lips draw closer. ++00053001+00054120 <b>At normal speed.</b> The woman is sitting at the Café de Flore and is smiling at the man looking at her, who is wearing a hat and carrying a briefcase.
AD2: Cinematographic audio description	++00045901+00051303 [...] As they are nearing each other, they look at each others' lips and close their eyes, <span style="border: 1px solid black;">about to kiss.</span> ++00053001+00054120 The <u>framing</u> focuses in on their lips, which are about to touch. <u>They then vanish</u> , and <span style="border: 1px solid black;">we are back in</span> <b>reality at a normal speed:</b> the woman is sitting in the Café de Flore smiling at the man, who remains standing on the pavement. <span style="border: 1px solid black;">They look into each others' eyes.</span>
AD3: Narrative audio description	++00045901+00051303 [...] Facing each other, they look at each others' lips and close their eyes, <span style="border: 1px solid black;">about to kiss.</span> ++00053001+00054120 <b><u>Suddenly, everything goes back to reality;</u></b> <span style="border: 1px dotted black;">the wind is blowing;</span> and the woman is seated at the Café de Flore, smiling. The man, wearing a hat and carrying a briefcase, is still standing on the pavement. <span style="border: 1px solid black;">They look into each others' eyes.</span>
<p><i>Legend:</i>  <span style="border: 1px solid black;">Bold:</span> signs of the return to reality.  Square box: interpretative elements.  <u>Underline:</u> cinematographic elements.  <span style="border: 1px dotted black;">Dotted underline:</span> narrative elements.</p>	

Source: Author.

Additionally, 100 seeing persons participated in the study. They saw the short film without any audio description and responded to the survey online. Despite the different protocols, several identical questions enabled us to compare the experience of the persons with visual impairment who saw an audio-described version of *Nuit Blanche* with that of seeing persons who saw the film without an AD.

The questionnaires were designed to evaluate different aspects of the participants' film experience and included comprehension questions on narrative elements; questions on the interpretation of the film language; and questions on the emotional reception, film experience and rating of the audio description. The questions on the narrative elements and film language had a multiple-choice format with a fill-in option; the questions on emotional reception had a multiple-choice format with scales, as well as a fill-in option; and the film experience and audio description were rated via four items on a six-point Likert scale. The six-point scale forced the respondents to lean more towards yes or no, so they could not remain neutral. On the other hand, the four items provided a more reliable vision of the rating, including different aspects: in our case, interest and comprehension, enjoyment, emotion and aesthetics.

The objective of the reception study was to verify the following hypotheses:

- To check whether the interpretative ADs fulfilled the purpose of being an audiovisual accessibility service, as well as their acceptance by users.

- To investigate whether the interpretative ADs allowed the film language to be better transposed into audio descriptions than conventional ADs.
- To investigate whether the interpretative ADs could offer users a better film experience than the conventional ones and to compare this experience with that of seeing persons who saw the film without an AD.

Below we present the most salient results.

### 4.3 Results of the reception study

The results of the study were analysed using qualitative methods (tagging and analysis of emergent themes) and descriptive statistical techniques, such as analysis of variance (ANOVA). This statistical method enables the comparison of means of independent samples to determine whether the effect of one variable is statistically significant. If the 'p' value obtained is lower than 0.05, this means that the null hypothesis can be rejected; that is, it establishes statistical significance of the variable's effect on the sample (in our case: audio description style). This method is appropriate for statistical analyses of small groups, and its use in analysing the results of audio description reception has become common practice (as in Fryer & Freeman 2013; Fidyka *et al.* 2021).

#### 4.3.1 Comprehension of the short film

Comprehension of the short film was essentially evaluated

through two questions:

- 'Did you notice that the action in the short film departed from reality?', and
- 'Did you feel the attraction between the characters?'

A large number of positive responses were given, as shown in Table 4. In both cases, an analysis of variance between the three groups of persons with visual impairment revealed no statistically significant effect of the audio description style on the response to the question.

These results show that all three audio description versions, both the conventional one and the interpretative ones, are capable of conveying the essential elements so that persons with visual impairment can understand the film, with similar results to those of seeing persons. Even though this result is not statistically significant, we should highlight that there was a higher percentage of persons with version AD2 who did not notice the departure from reality, and we believe it might be interesting to research the reasons for this. It is a denser style because it adds cinematographic information, like 'the framing focuses in on their lips', and we cannot discard the possibility that while this information may help some people, it may confuse others. Having said this, the British study by Fryer and Freeman (2013) on a cinematographic audio description made more extensive use of film terminology in the description; in this case, the participants' reception was good and their comprehension was not affected.

### 4.3.2 Emotional impact

One important way to determine the emotional effect caused by the different versions of the AD was to ascertain the participants' mood after seeing the film. We mentioned subjectivity above, and it is clear that when talking about emotional reception there are as many nuances as there are people. This is why our goal when analysing the responses to this question was to ascertain not so much what they felt but whether they felt anything. The results are shown in Table 5.

The results show that 36.4% of the participants with AD1 did not notice any special mood after the film. In contrast, 100% of the people with AD2 and AD3 and 85% of the seeing people

**Table 4. Comprehension questions**

Did you feel the attraction between the characters?			
	Yes	No	ANOVA
AD1	81.80%	18.20%	F(2;28)=0.77; p=0.474 (p<0.05)
AD2	83.30%	16.70%	
AD3	100%	0%	
Seeing people	90%	10%	
Did you notice that the action in the short film departed from reality?			
	Yes	No	ANOVA
AD1	86.70%	13.30%	F(2;41)=1.47; p=0.242 (p<0.05)
AD2	64.30%	35.70%	
AD3	86.70%	13.30%	
Seeing people	79.20%	20.80%	

Source: Author.

were emotionally affected by the film. An analysis of variance with the three groups of participants with visual impairment shows that there is a statistically significant effect for the AD version in this aspect (F(2;36)=7.38; p=0.002; p<0.05). A Tukey *post hoc* test shows that there is no difference between AD2 and AD3, but there is between AD1 and AD2 and between AD1 and AD3. This means that both AD2 and AD3, the two more interpretative versions, allow for a more intense visual experience than AD1, the conventional AD.

### 4.3.3 Rating of the audio description

The aforementioned aspects are also reflected in the rating of the audio description. The participants had to rate the audio description with four items on a six-point Likert scale. They were asked to rate the access that the audio description provided to four aspects: comprehension of the film, an enjoyable experience, an aesthetic experience and an emotional experience. The first two aspects can be considered general

**Table 5. Emotional impact of the film**

What was your mood after the end of the film?									
Group	Cheerful	Happy	Sentimental	Admiring	Sad	Disappointed	Pensive	Nostalgic or melancholy	None
AD1	18.2%	9.1%	45.5%	36.4%	18.2%	18.2%	36.4%	9.1%	<b>36.4%</b>
AD2	46.2%	38.5%	53.8%	46.2%	22.2%	11.1%	100.0%	44.4%	<b>0.0%</b>
AD3	86.7%	86.7%	60.0%	46.7%	40.0%	26.7%	20.0%	33.3%	<b>0.0%</b>
Seeing people	10.0%	11.0%	36.0%	13.0%	5.0%	6.0%	31.0%	34.0%	<b>15.0%</b>

Source: Author.

**Table 6. Rating of the audio description [M (SD)]**

Group	Access to comprehension	Access to an enjoyable experience	Access to aesthetic and stylistic aspects	Access to emotional aspects
AD1	4.3 (1.0)	4.9 (0.8)	3.4 (0.9)	3.4 (1.3)
AD2	4.9 (1.4)	4.8 (1.9)	4.8 (1.2)	4.8 (1.5)
AD3	5.3 (0.8)	5.0 (1.1)	4.3 (1.1)	4.7 (1.1)

Source: Author.

elements that should be provided in all films, while aesthetics and emotion are two aspects characteristic of the film *Nuit Blanche*. The results are shown in Table 6.

These results provide us with relevant information. First, the similar ratings of all three styles in the first two aspects show that both the conventional and alternative interpretative ADs guarantee satisfactory access to the film by offering the keys to understanding it and enjoying the experience. In contrast, regarding the aesthetic, stylistic and emotional aspects, which are primarily conveyed by the film language, we can see that the interpretative audio descriptions are rated more highly than the conventional one. Regarding the aesthetic and stylistic aspects, the ANOVA method did not show a significant effect at the level of  $p < 0.5$ , but it did in the emotional aspects ( $F(2;34)=3.57$ ;  $p=0.039$ ). In this case, a Tukey *post hoc* test shows a difference between AD1 and AD2 and between AD1 and AD3, which confirms that the interpretative audio descriptions better convey the emotional aspects of the film.

Apart from the information collected in the responses to the questionnaires, the qualitative analysis of the content of the group interviews provided additional information of interest. One of the topics emerging from this analysis was the immersiveness of the experience.

#### 4.3.4 Immersion in the audiovisual fiction

Robrecht Vanderbeeken (2010) defines immersion as:

*'[...] a psychological phenomenon, specifically an imaginative experience, initiated and controlled through our senses. The spectator, the listener, or the reader (in one word: the immersant), should not merely succeed in holding on his or her attention to a work. (S)he should also be able to live the fictitious aspect of the work.'*

**Table 7. Immersion in the film**

Group	Immersion	No immersion	No information available
AD1	5	5	5
AD2	7	1	7
AD3	8	0	7

Source: Author.

On the questionnaire, we did not directly ask about this aspect because we believe that it in itself could be the subject of study using psychological tools, among others. Nonetheless, immersion became an emerging topic because numerous people provided information on how they felt or did not feel immersed in the film, and we were able to observe different responses according to the AD version heard. For example, below are the comments of two participants:

- Participant 13, woman, AD3: 'It was very emotional, very. It reminds me of a book whose story carries you away; it's not a cold description.'
- Participant 38, man, AD1: '*The characters cannot convey emotions because they are a set of stills being narrated. It's the same as a book because there is a lack of interaction.*' [Original in Spanish].

These two people are comparing the AD with a book, but they had to contrasting experiences: the first one felt transported into the film, while the second one clearly did not. By analysing and tagging the comments along these lines, we have reached the results found in Table 7.

According to our analysis, approximately half the participants with an interpretative version of the AD (AD2 and AD3) and one-third with the conventional AD (AD1) indicated that they felt immersed in the film. In contrast, no one with the narrative AD (AD3), just one person with the cinematographic AD (AD2) and one-third of the group with the conventional AD (AD1) stated that they did not feel immersed in the film. This result, which should be further explored with additional studies, points to better immersion with interpretative audio descriptions.



## 5. Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how the requirement of objectivity in the UNE 153020 audio description standard (AENOR, 2005), which is currently in force in Catalonia, contradicts the connotative nature of films and the interpretative nature of film viewership. In order to work towards a solution to this contradiction, we have proposed two interpretative AD styles, which we have then tested with persons with visual impairment along with a conventional AD. Our results show that the two audio description styles that offer an interpretation of the film language, the cinematographic AD and the narrative AD, provide access that is as satisfactory as the conventional audio description in key aspects of the film experience such as comprehension of the film and an enjoyable experience. Furthermore, in our study, these interpretative audio descriptions also enabled the participants to enjoy better access to the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of the film and to a more immersive and emotionally more intense experience. Given these results, we believe that narrative and cinematographic ADs are worth exploring in order to improve the experience of users of film audio descriptions. The only caveat in the case of the cinematographic AD is the need for an additional study to assess possible comprehension difficulties with this style, which is less dense and includes film terminology. As we await this study, we recommend creating cinematographic audio descriptions for films targeted more at cinephiles than at audiences at large.

Our research has focused on a film model with a prominent use of film language. However, similar to the reflection on creative audiovisual accessibility by Romero-Fresco and Chaume (2022), we believe that the approach we are proposing may be used in different types of films, and that the need may arise to define new audio description styles that meet the demands of the film style or the type of audio description to be offered. To reinforce the benefits of the interpretation and creativity of the audio description, it would be optimal to include the AD in the creative process from the very first conception of a film or any other audiovisual fiction, as Romero-Fresco (2012) advocates in his proposal to create accessible filmmaking.

In consequence, even though we understand that the requirement for objectivity in the UNE 153020 standard (AENOR 2005) seeks to protect persons with visual impairment from excessive interpretations, paternalistic descriptions or exposure to the audio-describers' personal opinions, we believe that in practice, this requirement has become overly limiting and does not provide persons with visual impairment with the best film experience possible. In short, we have to trust the ethical criteria of audio-describers and their ability to offer an informed interpretation based on their film and storytelling knowledge in order to optimally convey the narrative, emotional and aesthetic charge of the film in the audio description text.

## Note

This research was granted the first prize in the XXXIII CAC awards for research on audiovisual communication.

## Notes

1. Casetti, 2011: 53.
2. The documents on the approval process of this decree are available on the Open Government website [https://governobert.gencat.cat/ca/transparencia/Organitzacio-i-normativa/normativa/normativa-en-tramit/dso/en-tramit/codi\\_accessibilitat](https://governobert.gencat.cat/ca/transparencia/Organitzacio-i-normativa/normativa/normativa-en-tramit/dso/en-tramit/codi_accessibilitat). The document consulted (the most recent as this article was being written) is available at this address <https://bit.ly/3DjBp1M> (Consulted: June 21, 2022).
3. For a more comprehensive list of the most important audio description rules and guides published in different European countries, see Perego (2020).
4. In Bardini (2020a), we defined 14 audio description techniques, including iconic, cognitive and creative descriptions. Although we shall not delve into the details of this classification here, we do want to recall that an audio description technique is a way of conveying the message of a clip from an audiovisual text to the verbal language.
5. The production company Stellar Scene has made the short film available at this link: <https://bit.ly/3Ng4L5R>.

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