

Diversity in museums: The inclusive value of museum audio description

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Abstract This contribution seeks to explore the potential of museum audio description (AD) – a sub-genre of general screen AD – as an instance of intersemiotic translation for non-sighted and sighted alike by drawing on a systematic review of museum AD guidelines and on extensive bibliography from Museum Studies (MS), Translation Studies (TS) and, within the latter, Audiovisual Translation (AVT) and Media Accessibility (MA). The paper will first discuss the social mission of museums and the intrinsic diversity characterising their communication and translation practices, with a special focus on museum AD. It will then move on to the wider value of screen AD; although the latter is primarily intended as an access tool to help blind and visually impaired individuals construct a mental image of what they cannot partially or totally see, its recognised benefits for other groups (Perego 2017) will be addressed. Similarly, the paper will discuss the potential of museum AD for a wider audience by presenting insights from museum-specific AD guidelines. Museum AD may arguably be revisited as a form of museum translation for everybody, which could truly foster social inclusion.

Keywords museum communication; museum translation; museum audio description; museum audio description guidelines; social inclusion.

1. Introduction

Contemporary museums are places devoted to diversity and inclusion par excellence, as they have progressively recognised and taken up their social responsibility to ensure equal access and support a democratic society. This responsibility also translates into a “response-ability”, i.e., the ability to respond

to current issues, by addressing inequalities through social agency and acting as open platforms for an inclusive, empathetic dialogue.

Communication plays a crucial role in this regard, by addressing the inherent diversity of the ‘museum audience’ through equally diverse communicative forms. Museums are also imbued with translation practices of different types – which serve accessibility and inclusion among other purposes – thus further enriching the museum’s communicative scenario and making it even more complex and layered.

Drawing on an extensive bibliography from Museum Studies (MS), Translation Studies (TS) and, within the latter, Audiovisual Translation (AVT) and Media Accessibility (MA), this paper aims to reflect on a specific form of museum translation, i.e. museum audio description (AD), a sub-genre of general AD primarily intended as an access tool for blind and partially sighted individuals but here further explored as a powerful interpretative aid for all and a catalyst for social inclusion.

Although museums still tend to be framed within an ocularcentric model, based on the idea that cultural heritage (in its diversified forms) should be mainly accessed by visual perception, the paper seeks to challenge the assumption that sighted people do not need further visual guidance for decoding and appreciating cultural heritage. Given the current predominance of (and reliance on) vision over the other senses in museums (Hayhoe 2017), the passive act of ‘seeing’ needs to be distinguished from the active one of ‘looking’. Museum AD is here proposed as an enriching opportunity for “guided looking” (Eardley et al. 2017: 203) that can encourage individuals to linger on an artwork or a cultural artefact and thus establish a deeper, long-lasting connection with it.

It is here argued that the conception of museum AD should evolve from an access tool to a gateway for social inclusion, in line with previous research (Szarkowska et al. 2016; Eardley et al. 2017). By extending its scope and beneficiaries, non-sighted and sighted individuals may share a common museum experience, which can contribute to inclusion – rather than integration by way of compensating for sensorial impairments. As an alternative to an ‘exclusive’ tool meant for a ‘special’ audience conflating with access provision, museum AD can become part of the museum’s general interpretation for all its communities, with a potentially revolutionary impact on the museum experience and our understanding of diversity.

After an introduction to the social mission of museums (Section 2), this contribution discusses the intrinsic diversity characterising communication and

translation practices in heritage contexts (Section 3), and the role of museum AD as a tool to ensure cultural access (Section 4). Having laid the foundations for the benefits of screen AD for diverse groups of people (Section 5), the paper moves on to review the theoretical reflections already available on the potential of museum AD for a wider audience (Section 6.1) and presents a relevant selection of insights from an analysis of museum-specific AD guidelines (Section 6.2). By way of conclusion, the paper calls for a reconceptualization of museum AD, setting the scene for further research into the inclusive power of museum translation.

2. Diversity and inclusion in museums

In trying to come to grips with the evolving, multifaceted concept of ‘museum’, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has been seeking to agree on a new shared definition for years through an open process of consultation involving all ICOM members. Not only is this revealing about the complexity of such a definition but is also suggestive of the inherent diversity characterising museums as cultural institutions. By relying on the recently approved new definition, a museum can be considered as

a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (ICOM 2022)

This definition, which only incidentally mentions communication among many different types of activities, already hints at the public and social function of museums, which has increasingly been in the spotlight and is now commonly accepted. What is more, it includes the words ‘accessible’, ‘inclusive’, ‘diversity’, ‘society’ and ‘communities’, which seem to underpin widely shared objectives of social responsibility to be gradually translated into future practices.

This perspective, of course, is the product of a long, evolving process of changes (pioneered by the Anglo-Saxon academic and cultural context) regarding concepts such as cultural access and participation, audience engagement and ultimately, the relationship between museums and their

public. In the last few decades, academic research in Museum Studies has advocated a new approach, in line with post-modern constructivist theories (G. Hein 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 2000) and the emerging field of Visitor Studies, at the heart of which lies the museum audience – intended as the wide variety of target groups with which museums wish to engage. For long regarded as sacred repositories of culture, museums have finally been revisited and defined as institutions that serve the public (Hudson 1998), whose expectations need to be recognised and addressed. Research and (more gradually) professional practices have hence experienced a paradigmatic shift in the focus of attention – from an object-centred museum, mostly concerned with issues related to collecting and conservation, to a people-centred museum (H. Hein 2000), in which visitors (and even more so non-visitors, i.e., people who do not regularly visit museums) are at the top of the agenda.

This move has also been embraced and driven by international organisations, remarking the indisputable importance of public policies to guarantee cultural access. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) proclaimed by the United Nations (UN) was certainly a turning point in the history of human rights, paving the way for subsequent progress. Article 27 acknowledged that “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” Only a few years later, this was reiterated by the UN *International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966), stressing – once more – everyone’s right “to take part in cultural life”. However, a particularly significant date was 2005, when two important international conventions were adopted: the *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (commonly known as the Faro Convention) and the UNESCO *Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*. The former set out human rights and democracy as fundamental aspects of cultural heritage, whose importance is defined in relation to the meanings and uses that communities and society at large attach to it, while the latter recognised the “principle of equal dignity of and respect for all cultures”, including minorities, which underpins the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.

The international debate about cultural access and diversity also encouraged and accompanied efforts to change attitudes to disabilities, which resulted in the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006). By shifting from an approach based on charity, medical treatment and social protection toward one considering persons with disabilities as active members

of society, it enshrines their right “to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life”, including “enjoy[ing] access to places for cultural performances and services, such as ... museums”, which implies the development of appropriate accessibility measures that may cater for their needs. Unfortunately, there is still a gap between international and national legislation, as well as between policies and actual practices, so the situation is not all roses in terms of the inclusion of people with disabilities in museums. Nonetheless, general awareness of and sensitivity towards Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) seem to have increased in the last few years, also influencing international museum rhetoric, policy and practice.

In his seminal discussion about museums as “agents of social inclusion”, Sandell (1998) explored different ways in which individuals may be fully or partially excluded from cultural systems: representation (i.e. the degree and the way in which an individual’s own cultural heritage is represented in museums and other cultural venues), access (i.e. the opportunities to benefit from and appreciate cultural services) and participation (i.e. the opportunities afforded to participate actively in cultural production). Therefore, museums are increasingly expected to fulfil their social mission and be relevant to and representative of different communities by promoting an inclusive representation of the displays through polyvocal narratives, ensuring diversified and inclusive access, and consequently fostering the participation of a diverse audience.

Dodd et al. (1998) identified different types of barriers in museums, i.e. obstacles encountered by people that may affect, reduce or jeopardise their access, thus deterring them from visiting. These barriers – and the ways in which they can be removed or reduced – go beyond the physical access (e.g. ramps, handrails, lifts, etc.) to include also other forms of access: access to information (by reaching out to the public, advertising exhibitions and activities and providing a variety of sources and formats of information before, during and after the visit), cultural access (e.g. by reflecting the local communities’ stories and traditions in the exhibitions), emotional/attitudinal access (by making people feel welcomed and respected), financial access (depending e.g. on the costs for getting to the museum, visiting the exhibitions and eating or purchasing goods there or in nearby venues), access to the decision-making process (by collecting feedback from visitors and communities), intellectual access (by supporting people with little experience in visiting cultural venues and people with special cognitive needs) and sensory access (by assisting people with visual and hearing impairments). The variety of existing barriers and

necessary access tools or services suggests the wide spectrum of figures required to deal with museum accessibility.

Nowadays, although some museums still tend to be resistant to change, many seem to have accepted, alongside their educational value, their social responsibility and the need to prove an outcome to and empower their communities (Watson 2007). Researchers have called for a recognition of the integral power of museums as “agents of civic reform” (Witcomb 2003) and “activists in civil society” (Janes & Sandell 2019), affirming their ability and willingness to promote equality, diversity and social inclusion, and ultimately to support a participatory democratic society.

Although this does not intend to be an exhaustive review of the state of the art in cultural accessibility and inclusion, it seems to be clear that museums aim to be “safe spaces” (Gurian 1995) for all. Now that museums are “increasingly taking up human rights as an interpretive frame” (Sandell 2012: 195), it remains to be seen what role is played by communication and translation in this scenario.

3. Diversity in museum communication

The concept of diversity in museum communication may encompass multiple dimensions, including a range of audiences, modes of communication, and types of translation. Museum professionals and academics have now fully understood that visitors are extremely diverse. As reported by the call to the Fifteenth International Conference on *The Inclusive Museum* (Philadelphia, 22-24 April 2022)¹, the facets of such diversity are material (e.g., class and family circumstances), corporeal (e.g., age, ethnicity, as well as physical and mental characteristics and abilities) and symbolic (e.g., origin, linguistic and cultural background, gender, interests, and affinities). ‘New’ or more ‘challenging’ target groups for museums include children and youth, older people, migrants and refugees, sociocultural and linguistic minorities, socially vulnerable groups, people with low(er) literacy or little experience in cultural venues and people with disabilities. The latter group is already diverse per se, comprising (different degrees of) visual impairment, hearing impairment, cognitive impairment, intellectual impairment and multidisability. However, if we consider the infinite intersections among these dimensions, we can easily imagine all the complex layers of identity characterising such an abstract concept as the ‘museum

¹ See the conference website: <https://onmuseums.com/2022-conference>.

audience'. Recognising visitor diversity and moving towards inclusion means recognising particularity, without dividing people into separate ad hoc categories and isolated groups distinguished by the generic labels of 'different' or 'other'.

In order to cater for such a diverse audience, museums employ a plethora of communicative tools and modes. In their *Key Concepts of Museology*, Desvallées and Mairesse (2010) defined museum communication as characterised by two aspects: on the one hand, the presentation of the results of research carried out on the collections (e.g., catalogues, articles, conferences, and exhibitions) and on the other hand, the provision of information about the objects belonging to such collections (e.g., the permanent exhibition). The ICOM Code of Ethics (2017: 18) clearly states that "museums have particular responsibilities to all for the care, accessibility and interpretation of primary evidence collected and held in their collections." While we have already argued for the museums' commitment to accessibility, 'interpretation' refers to the concern to provide accurate information about the displays and exhibitions and convey their significance. Since "a museum is not just a preserver of precious relics but an information link with these objects and the world" (Coxall 1991: 93), museums are expected to facilitate cultural mediation with their visitors by adding "layers of meaning" (Maroević 1998: 23). These may be offered in a variety of formats, including (but not limited to) labels, panels, catalogues, guided tours, audio guides, video guides, virtual tours, augmented reality experiences and customised apps.

Interpretation as an academic field and a recognised professional practice was born in the US (Tilden 1957) and has later been 'imported' into the European cultural context. The heritage 'interpreter' – a term that should not be confused with the commonly held notion in TS – generally corresponds to curators, guides, front-of-house staff or anybody responsible for facilitating the visitor's learning experience. In the last few decades, heritage interpretation has moved from a model based on presentation and display to one mainly centred on communication (Ham 2013 [1992]; Veverka 2013 [1994]) and social interaction (Cunningham 2004) as fundamental components of the museum experience, whereby museum staff, cultural heritage and visitors are co-participants in the construction of meanings. Therefore, "interpretation materializes in interpersonal human actions and in aids which enhance the straightforward display of exhibited objects" (Desvallées & Mairesse 2010: 48) and facilitates the co-construction of meanings with the visitors. If we understand museum interpretation as indispensable to create a context and

provide the objects with a voice to tell a story about them (Coxall 1991), then such interpretation also needs to account for different voices and stories (including those of the public) that can mediate meanings for – and with – different communities.

This inevitably brief introduction to museum interpretation only minimally offers a glimpse of the crucial role played by language and texts (verbal and non-verbal) – considering both “texts in museums” and “museums as texts” (Ravelli 2006: 1), which correspond respectively to “the language produced by the institution, in written and spoken form, for the consumption of visitors, which contributes to interpretative practices within the institution” and “the way a whole institution, or an exhibition within it, makes meaning, communicating to and with its public”. The importance of language and communication is also attested by the attention dedicated to these issues in the MS literature (Coxall 1991, 1994; Ferguson et al. 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 1991; McManus 1989, 1991; Whitehead 2011).

Nonetheless, translation does not seem to be a central concern in MS and is not envisaged in ICOM documents – yet museums are imbued with translations. Most notably, the concept of ‘translation’ was taken up by Sturge (2007) as a metaphor for the processes of interpretation and cross-cultural comparison in ethnographic museums. Furthermore, she argued that there has been remarkably little interdisciplinary exchange between anthropology and MS on the one hand and TS and linguistics on the other hand. As already noted by Manfredi (2021b), TS has only devoted scant attention to translation practices in museums, and museum translation still seems to be a relatively newly emerged area of study, at the crossroads of TS and MS. Of course, museum translation does exist as a practice, but apparently in a “parallel world” that is still mostly uninfluenced by TS (Krein-Kühle 2021). Although, as Guillot rightly points out, “there is as yet no overview of translation practices across the many different possible sites of representation that museums are, fundamentally and both intralingually and interlingually” (2014: 92), studies have been conducted about different types of translation (considered both as product and process) in museums.

We will here adopt Jakobson’s (2012 [1959]: 127) tripartite distinction between interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic translation – the former referring to “translation proper” between two different languages, the second being “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language” and the latter representing “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems.” Research on museum translation

has mainly investigated interlingual translation practices (Neather 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Jiang 2010; Deane-Cox 2014, 2017; Guillot 2014; Garibay & Yalowitz 2015; Chen & Liao 2017; Liao 2018; Turnbull 2018; Bartolini & Nauert 2020; Côme 2020a, 2020b; Kim 2020; Ahrens et al. 2021; Manfredi 2021a, 2021b; Nauert 2021). As a matter of fact, translation in museums has been mostly conceived as “the study of interlingual transmission of texts in museum exhibitions” (Liao 2018: 47). The fact that museum interlingual translation has received increasing attention and is becoming a newly developing field in TS is also proved by the emerging (though still sporadic and generally small) conferences and events organised in recent years (e.g. the *Inclusiveness in and through Museum Discourse* Conference² in Turin in 2020 and the *Museums as Spaces of Cultural Translation and Transfer* Conference³ in Tartu in 2022) and by the panels addressed to it in international congresses, such as at the IATIS 6th (2018)⁴ and 7th (2021)⁵ conferences.

Less consideration, nonetheless, has been given to museum intralingual translation, although some studies have hinted at the need for considering such practices as an additional step to produce a communicatively functional (interlingual) translation in the target language, as well as to improve the linguistic and intellectual accessibility of the museum’s source texts (Manfredi 2021b; Bartolini, *forthcoming*).

Finally, intersemiotic translation has also been explored in museum contexts (Neves 2018), involving different practices dealing with the translation of cultural heritage between different semiotic systems. Research on intersemiotic translation in museums often goes hand in hand with concerns regarding accessibility. While MS has examined accessibility from a variety of perspectives, considering its practical, physical, intellectual and cultural dimensions (Kjeldsen & Jensen 2015: 92), TS has mainly investigated accessibility in relation to specific modalities devised to cater for visitors with visual or hearing disabilities (Jiménez Hurtado et al. 2012), including AD (e.g. Jiménez Hurtado & Soler Gallego 2015; Neves 2018) and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (e.g. Arrufat Pérez de Zafra 2019; Seibel et al. 2020), sign

² See the conference website: <https://en.unito.it/events/international-conference-inclusiveness-and-through-museum-discourse>.

³ See the conference website: <https://museumtranslation.ut.ee/main>.

⁴ See the conference website: <https://www.iatis.org/index.php/6th-conference-hong-kong-2018/itemlist/tag/6th%20IATIS%20Conference>.

⁵ See the conference website: <https://www.iatis.org/index.php/itemlist/category/231-7th-conference-barcelona-2021>.

language interpreting (Arrufat Pérez de Zafra et al. 2021) and easy language (Jiménez Hurtado & Seibel, *forthcoming*).

4. Museum AD: museum translation for accessibility

Against this backdrop, this paper will now more closely focus on museum AD as one of many interpretative aids within the wider communicative framework and “cultural map” (Whitehead 2011) in museums. As a sub-genre of general AD (which has been traditionally created for screen products and theatre performances), museum AD, also known as descriptive guide, offers a verbal description of an artwork or artefact “that seeks to make the visual elements of the diverse contents of museums and galleries accessible to blind and partially sighted people” (Hutchinson & Eardley 2019: 42). What makes it different from general audio guides for the visit (Soler Gallego 2014; Fina 2018) is its function and main target audience, as museum AD is primarily conceived to assist blind and partially sighted individuals to construct a mental image of what they cannot partially or totally see. As a verbal reproduction of visual input, it represents a form of intersemiotic and intermodal translation – in this case, a translation from the visual to the oral code – but it has also been referred to as “intersensorial translation” (De Coster & Mühleis 2007: 189). Snyder (2008: 192), an internationally acclaimed AD researcher and professional describer, defined museum AD as a “literary art form in itself, a type of poetry ... whereby the visual is made verbal, aural, and oral” through the use of a straightforward, vivid and evocative language in order to convey a visual image through words. This type of description, and the mental image it is supposed to create, may be associated with the concept of “ekphrasis”, based on “a highly vivid description that allows the reader or listener to see the represented object with his/her internal eye” (Soler Gallego 2014: 680), although the communicative setting, the intended receiver’s profile and the specific communicative intention differ between AD and ekphrasis.

While research on museum AD is highly interdisciplinary, it mainly lies at the intersection of two fields within TS: on the one hand, AVT, as an area pertaining to TS that has crossed the cinema borders to encompass performing arts events and other cultural and leisure venues; on the other hand, MA, initially regarded as a sub-area within AVT focusing on practices making cultural venues accessible to people with sensory impairments, and now coming forward as “a driving force for social change” (Romero-Fresco 2018: 189). MA is paying increasing attention towards the involvement of users as bearers of

valuable knowledge for the investigation and design of accessibility processes and phenomena (Greco & Jankowska 2020): this implies a more user-centred perspective for accomplishing human rights, in light of the principle “nothing about us without us” (Charlton 2000).

Research has addressed museum AD both as a product and a process: in the former case, studies have focused on a descriptive (Soler Gallego & Jiménez Hurtado 2013; Soler Gallego 2018) and multimodal analysis (Taylor 2019) of existing ADs, while in the latter, both production (De Coster & Mühleis 2007) and reception (Jiménez Hurtado & Martínez Martínez 2018; Di Giovanni 2020; Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego 2021) have started to be investigated.

As a practice, museum AD may be provided either live, during a guided tour to the museum or an exhibition, or pre-recorded and embedded into a specific device or a mobile app to be used on-site or online, on the museum website. It is an increasingly common practice in museums in the UK and US, and is more slowly gaining momentum in other countries in Europe, also as a result of national and international regulations and plans to ensure equal access to culture (e.g., the AENOR 2005 in Spain and the European Audiovisual Media Services Directive 2010). In contrast with screen AD, museum AD translates a source text which is (generally) only visual and produces a target text that replaces the source text (Soler Gallego 2014). It is worth mentioning that AD provision may complement or be complemented by a range of tools devised by museums to improve access: other tools include wall information, books or leaflets in large print and Braille, materials that can be touched (e.g., raised images, replicas and tactile reproductions) during hands-on sessions and touch tours, as well as multisensory visits, combining, e.g., acoustic and olfactory elements (Martins 2020).

Of course, translating the visual nature of an artwork or an artefact into a verbal narrative is a complex and challenging task, which may follow ad hoc strategies, although few museum-specific AD guidelines exist. The result of this process may reflect an objective approach, related to the status of the AD as a translated text that is required to ‘adhere’ to its ‘ST’ as much as possible, or a more subjective approach. A lively debate has unfolded, and is still ongoing, over the issues of interpretation, subjectivity and ambiguity in museum AD (e.g., Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego 2019; Soler Gallego 2019; Randaccio 2020).

5. AD: including without excluding

The concept of ‘AD for all’ is not new in AVT. In his introduction to a special issue on screen translation, Gambier (2003: 178) claimed that the various modalities of AVT (among them, AD) also serve new audiences “with different socio-cultural and socio-linguistic backgrounds and expectations (children, elderly people, various sub-groups of the deaf and hard of hearing, and the blind and visually impaired).”

As a matter of fact, early research on screen AD has hinted at the potential of such practice for other sectors of the population, including sighted individuals, who may be “the largest audience to benefit from audio description” (ITC 2000: 7). The AUDETEL project (1991-1992), for instance, tested AD with a group of elderly and concluded that it “did not detract from the enjoyment or interfere with the comprehension of the program by elderly viewers with normal vision” (Peli et al. 1996: 378-9). In their comparative analysis of AD guidelines from different countries (i.e. France, Germany, Greece, Spain, the UK and the US), Rai et al. (2010) mentioned other groups envisaged by the French Audio Description Charter (Morisset & Gonant 2008: 1): these include “elderly people whose cognitive capacities are diminishing”, “sick people who are sometimes bothered by the rapidity of the moving image”, “foreigners who are learning the language”, and ultimately “anyone who can see but who wants to listen to a film without looking at it (while driving, for example)”.

Given the benefits offered by AD to the visually impaired, Perego (2016) explored the effect of AD on sighted viewers and found out that watching AD films “does not seem to interfere much with viewers’ comprehension, memory and appreciation of the film” (Perego 2016: 437), but these seem to be challenged when sighted people are asked to listen to AD without the visuals. The ADLAB PRO project (2016-2019) also set out to increase “the access to information for those who are still experiencing barriers to their social inclusion”, opening up to other groups alongside visually impaired people, defined as “vulnerable audiences (elderly, physically/mentally challenged groups, people with special needs and learning disabilities including those diagnosed with autism)”, as well as migrants (Perego 2017: 133).

As already discussed, AD is a powerful instrument to ensure human rights, benefitting not only persons with disabilities but also other groups, such as “the elderly, migrants and language minorities” (Greco 2016: 12). Nonetheless, extending the use of AD to new categories of users brings advantages that go

beyond the social sphere. In their introduction to the volume “Innovation in Audio Description Research”, Braun and Kim Starr (2020: 4) advocate for “applications of AD which engage new audiences (e.g. language learners, individuals with additional cognitive needs, multi-taskers, educators)” in order to “increase exploitation” of AD material for commercial reasons.

Among the possible secondary audiences for AD, multi-taskers reflect the idea that AD can be used as a sort of ‘audio book’ while carrying out other activities (ITC 2000: 7). In her introductory manual on AD, Fryer, a renowned UK professional describer and academic scholar, proposed a new definition of (screen) AD, which consists in “using speech to make AV material accessible to *people who might not perceive the visual element themselves*” (Fryer 2016: 9, emphasis added). She commented that most AD users are of course people with a visual impairment but argued that this definition also covers sighted people who want to ‘watch’ TV while completing other tasks.

Studies have also concentrated on individuals with a variety of learning disabilities or intellectual impairments (Jankowska 2020), including people diagnosed on the autism spectrum. For instance, Kim Starr (2017) adopted a functionalist approach to examine the usefulness of AD for individuals with learning or cognitive difficulties or children on the autism spectrum, arguing that AD may help them decipher facial expressions and emotions, and thus provide information necessary to understand and follow the plot.

Another group of secondary AD users are foreign-language learners and educators: in fact, AD has more recently started to be investigated as a new didactic tool to improve language skills (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen 2013; Walczak 2016; Talaván & Lertola 2016; Navarrete 2018; Talaván, Lertola & Ibáñez Moreno 2022). Not only does AD offer an additional linguistic input to the dialogues of an audiovisual product, but it also provides students with the opportunity of creating their own AD scripts and in some cases also revoicing the audiovisual product, thus developing integrated language skills and becoming aware of media accessibility issues.

Finally, children have been another focus of attention in AD research. For instance, Snyder (2008: 197) described experiments in developing “more descriptive language to use when working with young children and picture books” with the aim of developing “more sophisticated language skills.” In their eye-tracking study on the viability of AD as an educational tool for sighted children (age 8-9), Krejtz et al. (2012: 99) showed that watching described educational films facilitates knowledge and vocabulary acquisition by effectively “guiding children’s attention” to the most relevant elements

displayed on the screen. They also highlighted the practical implications of introducing AD in schools where both sighted and visually impaired children are integrated, discussing its potential for children with attention deficits.

These studies contribute to laying a theoretical and applied foundation for the assumed beneficial effect of AD on sighted individuals and for the diversity of the AD audience. Acknowledging that AD is not an exclusive tool used by a minority group also reminds us that part of the AD audience (both primary and secondary) “can see, have some residual vision in the case of partially sighted persons, or have visual memory in the case they lost sight later in life” (Mazur 2020: 228).

6. Museum AD: revisiting the issue of diversity for promoting social inclusion

The question as to whether museum AD, as a sub-genre of general AD, can also be used successfully by sighted people will be discussed in the following sections, in light of a review of reflections on the potential of museum AD for diverse groups, as well as by drawing on an analysis undertaken on museum-specific AD guidelines.

6.1 Theoretical reflections on museum AD for all

Research has already partially highlighted the “much broader potential scope and benefit” (Eardley et al. 2017: 195) that museum AD may have beyond its application as an access tool. Although museum AD “is still seen largely as a form of audiovisual translation which is uniquely beneficial to visually impaired audiences” (Eardley et al. 2017: 197), scholars have started to explore it within a Universal Design provision that may enhance the museum experience of both visually impaired and sighted visitors. Universal Design (UD), also known as, ‘inclusive design’, ‘accessible design’ or ‘design for all’, is founded on seven principles (Connell et al. 1997): equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort and size and space for approach and use. Although a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution may not exist, the objective of UD is to accommodate the needs of as many potential users as possible right from the design stage, rather than as an afterthought. As observed by Neves, “no solution is adequate to all, but ... by

providing for those at the farthest ends and those considered (mainstream) centre, a greater number of individuals will be catered for” (2018: 416).

Studies have shown that a UD ethos applied to various types of ADs may provide an enriching opportunity for all, bringing cognitive, aesthetic, social and linguistic benefits (Mazur 2019). Eardley et al. (2016: 283) presented the case of two Portuguese museums implementing a UD approach for the display of their permanent collections, based on “a vision of access as a shared, common museum experience.” Their study indicated that such an approach has the power to “enhance learning, long-term memorability and the ‘cultural value’ of a museum experience for all visitors” (Eardley et al. 2016: 263). Long-term memory, in particular, is a considerable cognitive benefit, as indicated by the literature on the “museum experience” (Falk & Dierking 1992).

According to the standard visuocentric perspective on art, one could argue that a sighted individual would never feel the need for AD, thus assuming that people who can ‘see’ already know how to ‘look’ at an artwork or a cultural artefact. Nonetheless, Snyder interestingly remarked that an image may need to be made accessible not only to people with visual impairments but also to those among us “who can see but may not observe” (Snyder 2008: 192) or who may want more guidance in their visual experience, as an aid to ‘observing’ or ‘reading’ images. By directing visual attention toward salient elements and highlighting details that may otherwise escape one’s attention, museum AD can arguably improve “the ‘seeing’ ability of all people” (Eardley et al. 2017: 195). In fact, all visitors can better appreciate the visual and aesthetic dimension of the museum visit through this “guided looking” (Eardley et al. 2017: 203). Along the same lines, Szarkowska et al. (2013) suggested that the AD of works of art helped teenagers (age 15-17) focus on the described elements and thus develop their visual literacy.

Szarkowska et al. (2016) proposed a multimedia museum app guide designed following a UD approach. Although they recognised that it may be challenging to find the right balance (i.e., providing adequate information for the non-sighted without overwhelming sighted people), they developed a set of guidelines for an optimal description of an artwork in order “to eliminate barriers to integration, enhance user autonomy and diminish the need for special services and segregation in museums and art galleries” (Szarkowska et al. 2016: 319). Hence, museum AD allows families, friends and carers to share a common experience; by gathering sighted and non-sighted individuals, it feeds into the social dimension of the museum visit (Falk & Dierking 1992).

To the best of the author's knowledge, the linguistic benefits of an inclusive approach to museum AD have not been fully explored yet. However, if screen AD is assumed to be able to contribute to "literacy development, language acquisition and language learning" (Mazur 2019: 131), it could be argued that the same may be true in a museum context, where different communicative formats may complement the visit and further enrich one's linguistic skills, in one or more languages.

Conceiving museum AD as a social, inclusive tool enables museums to bring diversity issues to the fore and encourage shared experiences between sighted and non-sighted visitors. This innovative approach is still at an early stage of development. The studies briefly mentioned, which call for more consistent research into the impact of AD for all (Eardley et al. 2016), have pointed to the need for broadening the horizons of museum AD beyond "the 'niche' realm of disability access" and projecting it into "the mainstream of 'sighted' museum experience" (Eardley et al. 2017: 203-4), which will radically affect our understanding of inclusion and diversity in museums.

6.2 Insights from an analysis of museum-specific AD guidelines

In order to investigate and revisit the conceptualisation of museum AD, an analysis of the guidelines currently informing museum AD practices was deemed useful to explore whether and how such practices promote a wider and more inclusive approach to access strategies. A relevant selection of insights from an analysis of museum-specific AD guidelines is thus presented here.

Table 1 shows the guidelines collected and examined, which include two sets from the US (Snyder 2010; Giansante 2015), two from the UK (RNIB & VocalEyes 2003; VocalEyes 2019), one produced as an output of a European project (Remael et al. 2015) and one from Italy (Descrivendo, n.d.). For some of them (i.e., RNIB & VocalEyes 2003; Snyder 2010; Remael et al. 2015), only relevant sections were considered, i.e., the ones regarding museum and visual art accessibility, as reported in the right-hand column of the table. Although these guidelines differ in terms of length and scope, all of them provide general strategies and best practices, rather than official regulations or standards. The guidelines from the US and Italy are practice-based, while the ones from the UK and Europe are research-based.

Title	Year	Author(s)	Area	Relevant section (if applicable)
<i>10 punti per realizzare una descrizione efficace</i>	n.d.	Descrivedendo	Italy	
<i>The Talking Images Guide</i>	2003	Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) & VocalEyes	UK	Section 6. Improving access: audio guides
<i>Audio Description Guidelines and Best Practices</i>	2010	Snyder (American Council of the Blind)	US	Visual Art / Exhibitions Section
<i>Pictures Painted in Words: ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines</i>	2015	Remael et al. (eds.)	Europe	Section 3.4.2. Descriptive guides: Access to museums, cultural venues and heritage sites (Neves)
<i>Writing Verbal Description Audio Tours</i>	2015	Giansante (Art Beyond Sight)	US	
<i>Thinking of creating a recorded audio-descriptive guide for your museum?</i>	2019	VocalEyes	UK	

Table 1: Museum-specific AD guidelines that were collected and analysed

The analytical framework adopted was developed by drawing on existing analyses of screen AD guidelines (Vercauteren 2007; Rai et al. 2010; Bittner 2012), based on key questions mainly regarding what should be described, as well as when and how it should be described. For the purpose of the present paper, following Rai et al. (2010), the guidelines were closely examined to consider “the intended users of audio described material.” As such, only a limited selection of relevant results is discussed, which specifically focus on the conception of the intended audience of museum ADs.

The analysis undertaken shows that such guidelines primarily refer to access provision either implicitly (in the case of the Italian guidelines) or more explicitly, i.e. by mentioning “blind and partially sighted visitors” and “disabled people” (VocalEyes 2019: 1), “visitors with sight problems”, “visually impaired

people” and “people whose access is otherwise limited” (RNIB & VocalEyes 2003: 42), as well as “people who are blind or have low vision” (Giansante 2015: 1).

Nonetheless, the UK guidelines also sustain that museum AD “can be useful for many audiences, including visitors without sight loss” (VocalEyes 2019: 1), thus also addressing “sighted people” and ultimately “all visitors” (RNIB & VocalEyes 2003: 43). These guidelines conceive AD to engage with a “very diverse visitor base” (RNIB & VocalEyes 2003: 46), including both “visitors with particular needs such as children or people with sight problems” and “a mainstream audience” (2003: 41). Therefore, the guidelines invite museums and their consultants to devise a tool that may cater for all by reporting the opinion expressed by an auditor: “you want an inclusive guide – you don’t want a specific guide” (RNIB & VocalEyes 2003: 43). Likewise, the European guidelines include “an increasingly large number of sighted viewers” (Remael et al. 2015: 15) as AD users, such as immigrants, children and people with the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

In the US guidelines, Giansante (2015: 1-2) interestingly notes that AD can “provide a new perspective for people with sight” and thus “satisfy a mixed audience.” He adds that creating audio tours that serve both non-sighted and sighted visitors allows museums to reduce expenses and offer “an inclusive experience with blind and sighted people enjoying an exhibition together” (Giansante 2015: 3). In line with the UK guidelines, this has also the aim “to aid the social aspect of visiting” (RNIB & VocalEyes 2003: 55), thus allowing a shared museum experience inclusive of non-sighted and sighted alike. Giansante’s reflections derive from his experience as a describer and museum consultant, whereby he has appreciated that “sighted people have come to expect descriptions of what their eyes can easily see”, as a detailed description can “confirm their perceptions” and “focus attention, making for a richer experience” (Giansante 2015: 4) Similarly, Snyder comments on the experience of sighted museum visitors benefitting from extensive AD included in standard audio guides. Adopting a UD approach, standard audio tours can be integrated with ADs, thus offering “an ‘all-in-one’ or ‘universal design’ concept” (Snyder 2010: 52).

Finally, Snyder (2010: 61) advocates for a new application of museum ADs in combination with discussions about the described works of art or objects as “part of a class that precedes or follows a museum visit”, which could help students improve their “awareness of their environment and enrich their vocabulary.” The idea underpinning this proposal is that AD can offer “an aid

to literacy” to “children who are blind, who have low vision and [to] *all* children” (Snyder 2010: 61-2, emphasis in the original).

Overall, in spite of other possible discrepancies and of the major focus on people with visual impairments, most of the guidelines for the creation of museum ADs also envisage other groups as possible AD users, who may benefit from museum ADs for a variety of reasons, as well as the general sighted audience. While the analysed guidelines show an openness to a wider conceptualisation of museum AD, they do not seem to provide specific suggestions on how to cater for such a diverse audience, without excluding non-sighted and sighted individuals, through an inclusive, systematic approach to accessibility.

7. Conclusions: from accessibility to inclusion

The museum has to function as an institution for the *prevention of blindness* in order to make works work. And making works work is the museum’s major mission. [...] Works work when, by *stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perceptions, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives*, bringing out new connections and contrasts, and marking off neglected significant kinds, they participate in the organization and reorganization of experience, in the making and remaking of our worlds. (Goodman 1985: 56, emphasis added)

At a first glance, this quotation may seem out of place in this paper, as it does not refer to disability, inclusion and access issues. Nonetheless, Goodman was making a point in favour of museums by remarking their purpose to “prevent blindness”: some of us may not be blind but may need support to look at and appreciate museum exhibits. AD seems the perfect fit for museums to undertake this mission.

Trailing recent research into diversity and inclusion in museums, this paper has sought to revisit the concept of museum AD as an inclusive tool that can support the visitors’ experience “by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perceptions, raising visual intelligence, [and] widening perspectives”. Reconceptualising AD for all can help museums remove barriers, not just to access but also to inclusion: it means recognising the particularities while ensuring a shared, accessible experience for all. Although this idea may not be new in AD research, the considerations already made should arguably be taken up and expanded to lay the foundations for future research, also

considering the challenges that an inclusive approach to museum AD brings with it, as well as the expertise needed.

In the past few years, the focus of attention has slowly shifted from sensorial “disabilities” to “distinct abilities” (Neves 2018: 416), i.e., from a disability-based to a capability-based model, which shows efforts towards emancipating research on disability. The concept itself of “dis-ability” (i.e., the lack of ability) has been reframed and redefined as “the result of a disabling society” (Eardley et al. 2016: 265). A new awareness has recently started to gain momentum, recognising that the conception of access strategies and tools as forms for “compensating for each type of sensory loss in isolation” (Eardley et al. 2017: 205) only reiterates and reinforces exclusion, thus contributing to further marginalise minority audiences. Providing visually impaired people with ‘special’ aids such as touch tours or AD without allowing sighted people to do the same is equally discriminating (Neves 2018).

It is not a matter of thinking about an instrument aimed at a specific audience. There are no special tours for special audiences, but there are instruments that enrich everyone by encouraging curious, attentive observation and improving visual literacy. Attaching labels such as ‘for the deaf’ or ‘for the blind’ to museum interpretative aids seems to reflect a limited perspective, wrongly assuming that people who do not recognise themselves as part of those groups would not find such aids equally useful. Museum AD could simply be made available to all, regardless of their profile, by embracing a UD paradigm, providing different optional or customisable layers of interpretation and allowing people to choose. This implies “making all content available in multiple formats, with different levels of complexity and allowing for diverse modes of interaction” (Neves 2018: 422).

If “audio description – access to the arts – is about democracy” (Snyder 2008: 197), perhaps museum AD itself can be considered as a democratic – or democratising – tool, enabling museums to enact their social responsibility and develop their ability to be inclusive to diverse communities (R. Starr 2016). This requires a shift from an accessibility-oriented to an inclusion-oriented model, in which access is not a minority issue but regards society at large. Greater exposure of museum AD to everybody would thus bring to the fore the accessibility cause that all cultural institutions should support. Furthermore, providing AD as part of the general museum interpretation for all visitors can contribute to making the ‘invisible’ visible: on the one hand, cultural heritage is made visible by ‘unveiling’ it for all; on the other hand, different individual abilities, needs and perceptions are brought to the light, thus giving prominence

to and raising awareness about diversity issues. By moving away from the notion of blindness as a disability, museum AD for all can be an enriching opportunity for “blindness gain” (Thompson and Warne 2018), potentially able to open our eyes to different ways of ‘seeing’.

Museum AD can metaphorically become a sort of interstitial space or “third space” (Bodo 2008), whereby individuals can cross the boundaries of belonging – identifying themselves as part of one or more museum communities – and share a social, aesthetic and cognitive experience around cultural heritage. In an attempt to stimulate new possible research paths, this paper can only conclude by quoting Kleege (2016: 108):

“I hope that audio description can be elevated from its current status as a segregated accommodation outside the general public’s awareness and launched into the new media – a literary/interpretative form with limitless possibilities.”

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