

## Audio Description in Abstract Art: Using Metaphors From a Functional Perspective

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the linguistic techniques used to create audio description (AD) for a multimedia video installation in an art museum. Considering AD as a type of intersemiotic translation, a functionalist approach to audio description (Mazur, 2020) was adopted as our theoretical framework. Taking into account that the main function of art is aesthetic (Iseminger, 2004) and considering the main goals of the exhibition, we embarked on a challenging decision-making process to determine what linguistic and creative techniques to use for our particular piece. Among those techniques, metaphors proved to be very effective tools (Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego, 2020). The results indicate that the main metaphors to describe abstract art were synaesthesia and vocal emphasis. Another conclusion is related to the degree of creativity in audio describing abstract art and the boundaries that the audio describer can easily trespass by crafting metaphors that go beyond the source domain of the original work. It is precisely here where the function of the art piece and the purpose of the exhibition play a crucial role in finding that balance between fidelity and creativity.

**Key words:** audio description, video installation, abstract art, intersemiotic translation, functionalist approach, metaphor, creativity, accessibility, invisibility, conversation.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the increase in the number of museums that have incorporated audio description (hereafter, AD) into their exhibits to provide accessibility for all and enhance their visitors' experience, AD for audiovisual installations is almost non-existent. Likewise, most of the research studies on AD in art museums almost exclusively focus on figurative and abstract art pieces that are static, but not on video installations. A video installation consists of a particular visual art technique that uses image projection. In the 1960s, video installations emerged and provided different opportunities to artists who could use private and public spaces to present their art pieces:

on and around a gallery's walls – split, overlapping, serialized, mirrored, rotated, and made miniature or gigantic. The spectator's attention turns from the illusion on the screen to the surrounding space and the physical mechanisms and properties of the moving image. (Iles, 2001)

This timing also coincides with the time when conceptual art appeared, challenging traditional non-motion art pieces, and incorporating image projection as a medium to display art pieces.

It is important to note that video installations separate themselves from fixed-framed paintings and sculptures because of their cinematic features. This might lead one to think that AD for video installations should follow the same guidelines as AD created for films. However, this is not the case since two main aspects differentiate audiovisual installations from films. First, there is no dialogue imposing time restrictions in video installations, so AD for art installations enjoys greater freedom than AD for the screen or the theatre. In that sense, as Hutchinson & Eardley (2019) indicate, the main difference between museum AD and screen AD is the interdependence between source and target text, that is, "in screen, the target text must be seamlessly integrated with the source text, which requires it to fit exacting timing constraints as the AD should not typically interfere with the dialogue or sound track of the film or programme" (p. 45). Second, video installations challenge the visitors to participate, get immersed, and decode the message while moving freely through the room. This invites the audio describer to incorporate more interactional elements to engross the visitor in the artistic experience, consequently producing a more creative and subjective AD.

Therefore, taking into account the gap both in the practice and research on AD for video installations, this article aims to share the challenges faced in the process of creating AD for a multimedia video installation and to analyse the linguistic techniques used to convey the functions and goals embedded in a piece. The notions of creativity, subjectivity, and "invisibility" of AD in abstract art will play a role in the decision-making process of creating the AD. This invisibility or objectivity is one of the main challenges video installations pose for audio describers. The oft-referenced "first rule of description" (WYSIWYS – "WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU SAY") underscores the priority of objectivity in AD — "Because the image is created in the minds of our constituents, we avoid labelling with overly subjective interpretations and let our visitors conjure their own images and interpretations" (Snyder, 2014, p. 90). In that sense, creative AD has been advocated in numerous works by many scholars such as Fryer & Freeman (2013), Kleege (2018), Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego (2020), Romero-Fresco (2021), Walczak & Fryer (2017) and Walczak (2017). These authors question traditional

approaches to AD and defend more innovative alternatives that defy the standard AD rules regarding objectivity and subjectivity, and that could assist the spectator in forming an independent aesthetic judgment and, in the case of video installations, help them to get immersed in the multimedia artistic experience.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: A Functionalist Approach to AD

In this paper, AD is conceived as a type of intersemiotic translation, that is, a translation from images into words rather than from one language into another. The art piece to be audio described would be the source text and the AD itself would be the target text or translation. Considering AD as a type of translation, the theoretical framework adopted in this project is one that centres on the type and *skopos* of the source text, that is, a functionalist approach. In particular, the functionally-oriented AD model by Mazur (2020) provides the contextual, macrotextual, and microtextual levels of analysis needed to undertake the AD of this video installation.

Taking as the basis for her model the classification of text types by Reiss (1989), the functions of the source text leading to certain translation strategies (Nord, 2005, 2006), and the purpose (*skopos*) of the target text (Vermeer, 2000), Mazur proposes a model to develop audio described target texts inspired by functionalism and the multimodal nature of AD. The starting point is the notion that AD is a multimodal text. As such, AD needs to be approached by first analysing the type of text that it is, which in turn corresponds to a language function. In this fashion, informative texts convey the referential or informative function of the language, which focuses on the message; narrative texts are those whose main purpose is to tell a story; expressive texts focus on the form of the message; persuasive or operative texts are those whose main function is to influence the viewer<sup>1</sup>, and entertaining texts include what is called by Mazur as “light” entertainment (Vermeer, 2000, p. 230): game shows, contests, and the like.

To this taxonomy identified by Mazur for AD purposes (2020, p. 230), the author of the present article adds two functions that are relevant to this work—the poetic and the phatic functions. These are two of the additional three functions that Jakobson (1960) identified: poetic, phatic, and metalingual functions. The poetic function forces readers or listeners more than other linguistic functions to attend to the signifiers in linguistic signs, away from the signified (Tsur, 2010). This function is also known as the aesthetic function of communication and centres on the code of the message itself; it is characteristic of literature and, especially, poetry. This function would be closely related to the expressive text type mentioned above and it is precisely this function that is more pertinent in our case study since we start from the premise that the main function of art in general is aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> The referential, expressive, and appellative functions were identified first by Bühler (1934) in his organon model of language. This model supports the idea that these three main functions are linked to specific elements of communication – message, sender, and receiver, respectively – classified by Nord as “extratextual factors” (Nord, 2005).

(Iseminger, 2004). The phatic function centres on the channel between the sender and the receiver, establishing a connection or relationship between the participants.

The identification of these functions linked to text types helped to prioritize the goals of the source text and guided the audio describers in their decision-making process as to what and how to convey into the audio described target text. In this sense, a functionalist approach like this understands translation as one where “translators choose their translation strategies according to the purpose or function the translated text is intended to fulfill for the target audience” (Nord, 2006, p. 131), taking into account that text functions are not watertight compartments, but dynamic and context-dependent. Hence, it is possible that the target AD text does not fulfil exactly the same function(s) as the source text or that these functions may change at a certain point in the creation process.

In order to carry out this function-based decision-making process in translation or AD, Mazur proposes a structure of three layers or stages: contextual, macrotextual, and microtextual levels of analysis. The contextual analysis includes the context where the AD takes place or what Nord (1997) calls the “translation brief” or commission (the intended text functions, addressees, time and place of text reception, medium, and motivation). After the context and AD commission have been analysed, the next stage is to undertake a macrotextual analysis of the source text differentiating between content (title, subject matter, plot, main characters, dialogue, music, sounds) and form aspects (structure, language, time constraints, filmic language). Finally, at the microtextual level, a specific AD unit will be examined in light of what function it fulfils when it comes to the functions identified at the contextual and macrotextual levels.

### **3. AD of *From My Home to Yours*: A Functional Analysis**

After presenting Mazur's functional approach to AD, I will apply it to our case in point. It is worth mentioning that in our abstract video installation, the aspects included in the content and form at the macrotextual analysis would be completely different since elements such as dialogue, plot, main characters, or film language, just to cite some examples, would not exist. However, although Mazur's model was conceived to be used mainly for AD in films and documentaries, it can be adapted to other AD types such as AD for art or theatre, as she herself suggests. Accordingly, in the next sections I will be applying this functional model of analysis to the video installation in question.

#### **3.1. Contextual Analysis**

The contextual and macrotextual analyses help determine the global strategy for the AD taking into account the primary functions of the source text based on the brief or commission. The Montclair Art Museum (MAM) needed AD for the main piece in the exhibition *From My Home to Yours* by artists Caroline Monnet and Laura Ortman in February 2022. Since a course on AD was being taught in the Spring Semester 2022 in the Department of Spanish and Latino Studies at Montclair State University,

an AD team within that course was appointed to work on this commission. The team was made up of the following students: undergraduate students Tetsuo Hiromitsu and Michelle Roblero-Moreno, and graduate assistant Richard Solis. The two undergraduate students were in charge of writing the AD script and doing the voiced narration and our graduate assistant was responsible for audio editing. I supervised the whole project and gave guidance and feedback at each stage of the process.

The art piece that the MAM commissioned consisted of a 30-minute kaleidoscopic audiovisual installation, which is eloquently described by MAM curator Laura Allen in the following paragraph:

The exhibition is anchored by a 30 minute, large-format, two-channel projection created through a call-and-response method between Monnet and Ortman, who are longtime friends and collaborators. The film's atmospheric visuals and score echo and unite across miles, linking footage of Monnet's surroundings, home movies from her grandfather, and elemental scenes with a composition made by Ortman in Brooklyn that features her experimental violin as well as environmental and domestic field recordings. The resulting collage combines fragmentary memories, a powerful sense of place, and a yearning for connection. As the sensory experience ebbs between harmony and tension, stillness and vigor, we are able to pause, be absorbed, and momentarily transcend time and space. (Allen, personal communication)

This video is accompanied by three large-format vinyl prints of Monnet's geometric artwork that reference the travel of sound, and there is comfortable seating arranged around the video so that visitors can linger as long as they like in this space, where nearby speakers also contribute to creating an immersive experience. The exhibition opened on May 7, 2022, and along with this exhibition, the MAM organized a series of events consisting of lectures by the artists and three performances, which gave the AD team useful insights to support the creative process of the AD in question.

It is important to mention the space where the exhibition was shown since that element will be relevant to identify the primary function of the source text. *From My Home to Yours* was exhibited in the Rand Gallery where the MAM usually houses its Native American art collection, which had been temporarily displaced for this exhibition. This "dislocation" is not coincidental, but responds to two important factors. First, the two artists share an indigenous background: Monnet is Anishinaabe and French, born in Outaouais, Quebec and currently living in Montreal, and Ortman is White Mountain Apache, born in Whiteriver, Arizona, and living now in Brooklyn. Second, one of the goals of this exhibition was to transform Rand Gallery from a static display of objects into a changing space for continually reactivated indigenous presence offering visitors a dynamic artistic experience, different from what they usually encounter in that space. The MAM boasts a renowned collection of American and Native American art that uniquely highlights art-making in the United States over the last 300 years. Thus, giving this space to house this abstract multimedia video installation is an active statement and invitation to visitors to expose them to a completely different Native American artistic experience.

Further, Rand Gallery has traditionally displayed objects and artifacts that reflect the museum's history and contain a colonial focus. In relation to this, this project was conceptualized curatorially to

change the molecules of museum worlds with performance and digital media that assert Indigenous perspectives and activate static spaces. By focusing instead on ephemeral, multisensory, and shared experience in exhibition spaces and the transformative power of performance, we can offer an intentional counterpoint to the emphasis on materiality in the museum. This creates new opportunities for artistic agency in subject matter, medium, and representation as well as impactful experiences for museum visitors. (Allen, personal communication)

This statement of purpose by curator Laura Allen was our point of departure in undertaking the creation of the AD for this video installation, which can be found at <https://www.montclairartmuseum.org/FromMyHomeToYoursAV>.

Finally, the MAM shared with us documentation listing the specific project goals as stated by MAM curator Laura Allen:

- Help indigenize MAM gallery spaces that showcase Native art and ideas. To transform Rand Gallery and the greater Museum into a space for ongoing, continually reactivated Indigenous presence.
- Increase the recognition of MAM in the arts community as a venue of possibility for contemporary Native artists to develop dynamic media, for example temporary spatial transformation, video, audio, digital art, dance/physical performance, song, and poetry/oratory/spoken word.
- Acknowledge the continuity and constant reworking of these types of artistic practices among Native communities and help perpetuate their practice.
- Advance MAM's overall commitment to art forms outside the customary canon of painting and sculpture.
- Offer visitors a powerful, meaningful shared experience that may be outside of their expectations for MAM
- Help establish MAM as a regional leader in supporting artists of Eastern Woodlands Native heritage.
- Help reposition the Rand Gallery as an exhibition space that changes.
- Increase and broaden MAM's Native and non-Native audience.

(Allen, personal communication)

These broad goals helped us frame the intended purpose or *skopos* of the AD. The intention of the MAM was to expose the visitor to something different from what the MAM had exhibited in that space so far. Another goal of the MAM was to make museum-goers experience something unexpected, encouraging them to leave their comfort zone. Hence, the linguistic functions to be conveyed in the AD would be expressive, poetic, and phatic. Identifying the primary purposes of the museum and the curator was fundamental and greatly influenced our decision-making process to determine what linguistic and creative techniques to use for the AD of this art piece.

### 3.2. Macrotextual Analysis

After analysing the nature and function of the source text, the next step is the macrotextual analysis which happens while viewing a film or program “in its entirety paying attention to all the AD relevant elements both in terms of form and content” (Mazur, 2020, p. 238). Accordingly, the AD team watched the entire video installation several times bearing in mind the main distinction of content and form at this macrotextual level; the first and most immediate conclusion was the need to distinguish between abstract and figurative artistic content. These two genres convey different functions and entail different degrees of difficulty in choosing certain linguistic strategies to create the audio described target text.

The reasoning behind this is linked to the fact that in abstract art, unlike in figurative art, visuals do not have a unique and direct semantic representation. Let us imagine, for example, a painting of a landscape depicting a wheat field under a sky of grey and dark clouds and a red barn in the distance. That painting (source text) has a direct literal translation from images (the barn, wheat field, and grey clouds) into words (the target text). Audio describers can see three main entities to describe in that painting: a barn, a wheat field, and clouds, and it is up to them to choose more or less poetic words to describe those objects (personification verbs such as “lingering in the distance” or adding an adjective of emotion such as “ominous” to describe the clouds) to convey a mental image for the non-sighted person. And, finally, it is up to the receiver of the AD to make sense out of those words and forge an interpretation in their mind (the barn is empty, there may be someone working in the barn, it is about to rain, etc.) and, most importantly, to feel an emotion (peace, loneliness, tension, danger, etc.).

However, in abstract art a particular object can be seen very differently by different audio describers, conveying different mental images in the mind of the receiver and hence forging quite different interpretations or meanings. Let us show an image of our video installation (see Image 1). That image is hard to describe verbally: what can you see? You basically see dark and light masses moving back and forth, but can we find a more specific word for those masses? For some people, there would be pieces, portions, shards, fragments, and so on. So, here we see the challenge of finding a direct “translation” from images into words: the difficulty of finding a direct semantic representation for an abstract entity. Then, of course, words have connotations that trigger different emotions. Thus, we needed to be aware of the fact that our selection of lexical items to describe those abstract images would influence not only their mental image in the non-sighted person’s mind, but also the way this person would feel about them.

## Image 1

### *Example of Abstract Image in the Video Installation*



*Note.* Time: 2:35 – In steady movements, white fragments mesh toward a dark space in the centre.  
2:56 – Fragments converge and disperse slowly.

Therefore, considering all of the above, the macrotextual level helped us structure our analysis by identifying two different types of contents: abstract and figurative, which in turn correspond to two different functions. On the one hand, in the abstract parts of the video installation where the kaleidoscopic effect takes place, the aesthetic or poetic function of communication was the primary one due to the fascinating patterns of light, shape, and colour, so our AD decisions would be centred on the code and the linguistic signs. Yet, other (secondary) functions, such as the expressive, the phatic, and the conative one, would be present as well in specific segments, so that needed to be taken into account as well. On the other hand, in the film footage sections where excerpts of family home movies are shown, the main function is narrative as a sort of story is told. Therefore, our translation decisions in terms of what AD strategies to use were made from a more creative and free approach in the former case than in the latter, where a more descriptive and literal approach was adopted since the function that is conveyed here is more referential and focused on the message.

### **3.3. Microtextual Analysis**

According to Mazur (2020), the micro analysis involves

looking at a specific AD unit, be it a scene or even a take, while describing and determining what the functions of the visual (and auditory) elements are and how relevant they are for the TA [target audience] to understand or appreciate the programme. (p. 234)

Therefore, once the macrotextual level structured our analysis into abstract and representational content with different language functions in each of them and the source text was divided into sections according to the type of content and function, we began examining specific units and deciding what linguistic mechanisms could convey the functions identified previously into the target



text or AD. For the purpose of this article, we focused only on the abstract sections since they were the most challenging to be audio described (covering all the sections would exceed the limits of the present work). Accordingly, the first step was to decipher what those kaleidoscopic images in the abstract parts represented, and how to transfer them into words that would convey the functions of the source text. It was then that we found metaphors to be a very useful and effective tool to convey the expressive, poetic, phatic, and persuasive functions identified at the contextual and macrotextual stages of the analysis.

Metaphor has been conceptualized by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) as a cognitive operation by which an element of reality (target domain) is compared to another conceptual domain (source). In AD, metaphor is a tool to translate the visual component of artistic texts (considered the “target domain”) into a conceptual field (considered the “source domain”) for blind or visually-impaired people (Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego, 2020). In the present work, we adopted this definition<sup>2</sup> and used the taxonomy of metaphors proposed by these authors as our main linguistic tool at the microtextual level of analysis to convey the “functional salience”<sup>3</sup> of particular units of the source text. These authors establish a classification of two main groups of metaphors according to the type of conceptual domain that the work is compared to (personification, synaesthesia, cultural reference, form, and technique) and according to the linguistic strategy used to convey the metaphor (participation, optionality, opposition, double marker, and vocal emphasis). Next, the types of metaphors used to convey the source text functions in the AD of the abstract content parts will be explained.

### 3.3.1. Personification

This type of metaphor occurs when human qualities are attributed to things, animals, or abstractions. For example, to describe the movements of the particles in Image 2, verbs typically ascribed to human actions such as “congregate” or “unite” (in bold below) were used. Using personification brings the content closer to the recipient through a more personal linguistic choice and hence, makes the signifier more prominent based on the salient poetic function of this section.

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<sup>2</sup> With the only exception being that we defend the idea that AD can enrich the artistic experience not only for blind and visually-impaired museum visitors, but for anyone. Elaborating on this question would, however, exceed the scope of the present article.

<sup>3</sup> Given that blind and visually-impaired audiences will need to process the AD in a linear way, unlike the sighted who will process the text in a more holistic way, the audio describer needs to select the most relevant or “salient” elements to audio describe. While Kruger (2012) differentiates between visually-salient and narrative-salient elements, Mazur (2020) highlights the “functional salient” elements or those that play a crucial function in a specific scene or take (p. 235).

## Image 2

### *Use of Personification in Describing Movement of Particles*



*Note.* 15:16 – On a black background, groups of thick yellow sparks wildly fuse together. 15:24 – The sparks become thinner. 15:35 – They separate from each other and fly aimlessly. 15:40 – As they flare, the sparks **congregate** in the centre. 15:50 – They become sparse. 16:20 – At the bottom, the sparks gradually **unite** changing their colour to a darker yellow.

Another similar example of using verbs denoting human movements or actions is the use of “converge,” “disperse,” or “emerge” to describe the way some inanimate objects were represented in the video. Aside from this, the semantic value of all those verbs evokes the back-and-forth communication of the two artists who created this installation precisely by exchanging music, audio, and visuals via email or WhatsApp from Brooklyn to Montreal: *From My Home to Yours*. Therefore, the converging, dispersing, and emerging of the fragments on screen convey that sense of “yearning for connection” that curator Allen attributes to this piece and that was identified in the contextual level of analysis (see section 2.1. above).

### 3.3.2. Synaesthesia

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, synaesthesia is “a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of colour) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated”. Therefore, synesthetic metaphors are those that recreate a sensation through a sense that helps one to understand it through body experience. Authors and AD users alike (De Coster & Mühleis, 2007; Neves, 2012; Smith, 2003; Wendorf, 2017) explore multisensory approaches to AD for the visual arts, highlighting the importance of other senses such as touch, smell, and hearing. Yet, these additional senses may not only be added to the oral AD for an artistic piece, but can also be integrated into the words chosen in the AD script itself, that is, words can evoke tactile experiences, smell qualities, or acoustic feelings. It is called “soundpainting” by Neves (2012): the notion of using the sound of words as an artistic form in AD to convey the most evocative role of language: to make the target text (the AD) fulfill the poetic or aesthetic function of the source text (the video installation).

There are many instances in our AD where words have been chosen to suggest a particular sensation or feeling. For example, from minute 20:39 to 22:39 feathers of different colours fall from above very slowly, but steadily against a black background. To convey the softness of the feathers the adverb “gently” was chosen to confer a smooth feeling to that “pouring down” (see Image 3)<sup>4</sup>. Further, we decided to specify the colours one by one voiced by Tetsuo and Michele taking turns and pausing in between each colour to match the pace in which these feathers are descending from the top of the screen. This delivery contributed to realising the expressive and poetic functions suggested in this segment.

### Image 3

#### *Use of Synaesthesia Describing Feathers Falling Down from Above*



*Note.* Time 20:44 – On a black background, an assortment of pink, yellow, green, purple, blue, brown, and orange feathers, gently pour down.

Other examples of haptic sensations evoked by adjectives are the frequent use of “grainy” to describe how the screen turns into a sort of particle-texture surface (Image 5), especially when signalling the transition between footage parts (Image 4), or the use of “textured” in Image 6.

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<sup>4</sup> “Describing how things feel is also important because people with low vision rely on their sense of touch to know where things are, their shape and their texture” (Wilburn, 2013).

**Image 4**

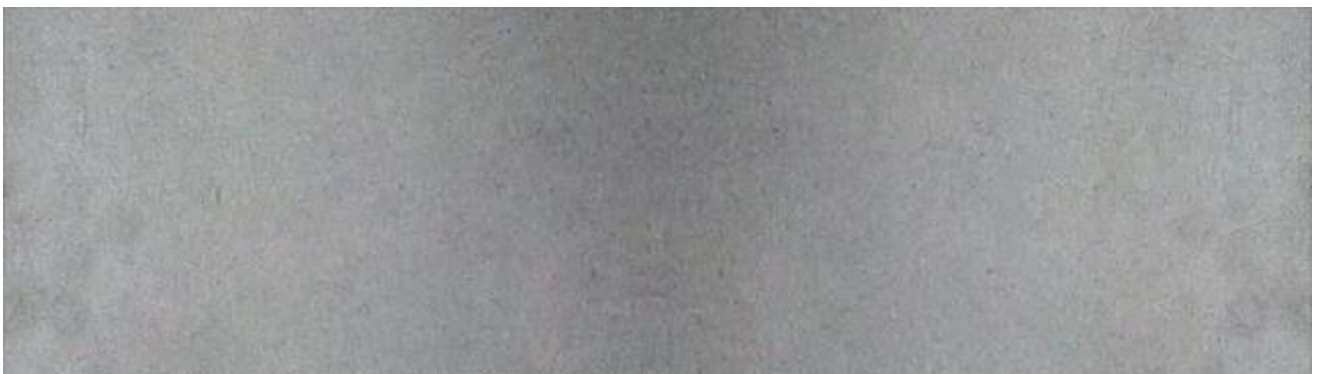
*Excerpt of Family Home Movies*



*Note.* 9:52 – The girl with the red swimsuit kisses a man on the cheek.

**Image 5**

*Transition between Film Footage Sections of Family Movies*



*Note.* 9:55 – The screen turns grainy.

## Image 6

### *Example of Image Evoking a Particular Haptic Sensation*



*Note.* 14:32 – Behind **textured** glass, two intermediating burnt orange, yellow, and white lights flash on a deep dark background.

However, it is not only tactile sensations that can be evoked by certain words; oral and audio qualities can also be elicited by particular phrases. In the example in Image 6, the AD (14:48) goes on as follows: “They continue to flash in rhythm with the music”. Here, the phrase “in rhythm with the music” in conjunction with the verb “to flash” contribute to recreating a cadence of metrical patterns that goes hand in hand with the violin music at the same time that it emphasizes the fact that the soundtrack enhances the emotional involvement of the visitor with the piece.

### 3.3.3. Technique metaphors

Authors such as Georgina Kleege (2018) or Silvia Soler Gallego (2018) discuss whether it would be relevant to mention in the AD of an art piece the process of how it was made and the technique used. In the case of Jackson Pollock’s *One: Number 31, 1950*, for example, Kleege asserts that knowing about the dripping and dropping paint technique appealed to her in an exceptional way: “This description of the process provides me a distinct sensation in my mind’s body, and a sound in my mind’s ear” (2018, p. 115). And following the goals of the exhibition listed by the curator at MAM, providing visitors with sensations and sounds was precisely what we wanted to achieve with the AD for our video installation.

A two-channel projection was the method used by the two artists who created this video. According to the arts organization EAI (Electronic Arts Intermix),

a multi-channel video installation consists of two or more display devices, such as monitors or projectors, used in the same work of art, in the same viewing space. The viewing space may be expanded to multiple monitors throughout an entire museum, or two projections situated side-by-side or overlapping. (<https://www.eai.org/resourceguide/exhibition/installation/basicquestions.html>).

In our case, the two projections were situated side by side as shown in Image 7.

At first, the AD team had decided to simply state “a two-channel projection”. However, at the microtextual level of analysis and taking into account the expressive function of this section where the sender is conveying a powerful sense of connecting two worlds in the same piece, we realized that it was important to offer not only the information about the technique that produced this video, but to communicate the visual effect that this technique provokes. This is why “in a mirror effect fashion” was added to the AD unit since this is exactly what a two-channel projection generates (see Image 7). Making explicit the effect that this technique produced was aligned to our goal of provoking a sensory experience and conveying certain emotions and reactions to the visitor. In addition, this duplicity that the mirror effect creates is akin to the call-and-response method that the two artists (Monnet and Ortman) used in order to create this installation. The artists shared in one of their talks that they would send images and audio files via email or WhatsApp back and forth from Montreal to Brooklyn (*From My Home to Yours*). So, this reciprocity lies at the very core of the inception of the piece and explains why we decided to use both the method and the effect: “In a two-channel projection, in a mirror-effect fashion”.

### Image 7

#### *Example of the Two-Channel Projection Method*



*Note.* 00:00 – In a two-channel projection, in a mirror effect fashion,  
00:10 – In black and white  
00:20 – A landscape of a forest sways back and forth

### 3.3.4. Participation metaphor

This type of metaphor refers to a different way of making the visitor part of the artistic piece. Their participation can be elicited through questions, guidance, or references to the visitor experience. In our case, the AD team decided to involve the visitor in the installation in several parts to convey the main functions identified in the source text. In order to achieve that, in some AD units, rhetorical

questions and direct commands to the viewer were used as well as other vocal resources. Below we analyse a couple of examples.

At 11:24 there are images of multiple paths in a forest, where trees, branches, and grass move backward and forward. Those moving images seem to want to tell the viewer something urgent. It is as if these moving trees and branches were talking directly to us; consequently, the most salient function here is persuasive: centred on the receiver of the message. Thus, we decided to use an imperative: “Choose your path” pronounced with an elongation of the final “th” to enhance the ominous aura of the visuals. In addition, the word “path” was chosen because of its double meaning: it is the track physically forming between the masses of trees in the forest (see Image 8) and it is also “path” in the sense of “way of life, conduct, action”. Therefore, the visual double image and the double effect of the two-channel projection match the linguistic double meaning. Finally, a low pitch distorted voice effect was applied to the voice-over of that segment to enhance the illocutionary force of the imperative and to add to the eerie effect of the AD unit.

Another example of participation metaphor can be found between minutes 26:12 to 27:50 when we are shown a vivid cool forest and masses of trees and paths meshing and blending (Image 9). We decided to use the same acoustic low pitch distorted voice effect that was applied to Image 8. Again, in a similar fashion, the audio describer asks a rhetorical question to the viewer: “Where am I? Where am I going? Which path am I on?” Thus, this participation metaphor proved to be a creative AD resource since we do not only describe what we see, but also, we questioned the viewers and imposed a certain effect on them<sup>5</sup>.

### Image 8

#### *Example of Moving Images of a Forest*



*Note.* 11:24 – Choose your pathhhhh

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<sup>5</sup> “Creative media accessibility (CMA) encompasses those practices that do not only attempt to provide access for the users of a film or a play, but also seek to become an artistic contribution in their own right, often enhancing user experience in a creative or imaginative way” (Romero-Fresco, 2021).

## Image 9

### *Example of Masses of Trees Meshing and Blending*



*Note.* 27:40 – Where am I? Where am I going? Which path am I on? (Distorted voice)

### **3.3.5. Vocal emphasis**

This metaphor refers to the paralinguistic markers used to evoke specific insights or feelings, especially by different intonations, tones of voice, or pitch. It is one of the most subjective and creative resources used in several parts of our AD to convey the expressive and phatic functions prominent in many parts of the video.

Michel Chion (cited in Flückiger, 2009) introduced the term *added value* to the sound-image relationship. According to him, that added value denotes an energetic flux between two concepts, one of them displayed by an optical and the other by an acoustic representation. These representations modify the perception of each other by adding or stressing certain attributes while attenuating others. Accordingly, we decided to apply voice-altering audio effects such as underwater, echo, and distortion to the narrators' voices in certain parts of the project where the salient function was the phatic or expressive one. Those vocal resources contributed to suggesting feelings of anxiety and discomfort.

For example, in the section above where a path in the forest was mentioned (Image 8) between minutes 11:24 to 12:15, we decided to incorporate a distorted voice effect. In order to achieve that, we recorded Tetsuo's voice in a neutral tone and added a low pitch audio effect to that part afterwards. The result is a ghostly voice that conveys the uncomfortably strange energy of the footage. We agreed that using non-common sounds such as a low-pitched voice can cause an uneasy sensation because that is how a human brain reacts to non-common sounds.

Another example to illustrate how certain sound effects were created for our AD target text can be found between minutes 24:47 to 26:08 where an underwater and echo acoustic effect was applied. The reason is that the abstract images shown give the impression of fish tails moving slowly



underwater (see Images 10–12). This underwater voice effect presented a challenge: just like someone talking underwater, the words were not intelligible and disrupted communication. Since we wanted to make sure that the message was conveyed clearly and that the sound effect would trigger the desired response, we found an alternative solution and used an echo effect with a short delay. This sounds similar to the underwater effect without limiting comprehension of the narrator’s words and creating the tension we sought to provoke in the recipient.

### **Images 10–12**

*Abstract Images Mirroring Fish Tails Shapes*



### **Conclusions**

After applying Mazur’s three-layer analysis to our source text to create an audio described target text, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the functional approach proved to be truly helpful since our main objective was to convey the MAM and the artists’ intentions to the museum-goer and to provoke the same reactions (triggered by the video installation) in the AD user as the ones

experienced by the original viewer. Carrying out an analysis at multiple levels – contextual, macro, and micro – allowed the AD team to identify primary and secondary language functions in each segment and make informed decisions as to what linguistic tools to use in each segment.

Second, the taxonomy of metaphors proposed by Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego (2018) provided us with a verbal mechanism (metaphor) versatile enough to communicate the primary functions identified in the analysis of the source text – expressive and poetic – as well as the secondary ones – phatic and persuasive. However, unlike what Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego conclude, the main metaphors used to describe abstract art in our case were not the optionality and participatory metaphors, but the synaesthesia and the vocal emphasis metaphors. The reason behind this is connected to the very nature of the abstract art – a multichannel and multimedia video is very different from a static, visual-only, abstract painting — and it is also connected with the purpose in the commission of the AD – to create an aesthetic and immersive experience. In particular, the vocal emphasis metaphor (through the use of paralinguistic elements such as acoustics and vocal effects) and rhetorical questions turned out to be among the most effective means to provoke certain reactions and craft a more engaging experience for the visitor. In this sense, there seems to be a great potential to exploit sound and audio in more artistic and experimental ways<sup>6</sup>.

Third, the present AD work and process made us aware of several implications related to the degree of freedom and creativity in audio describing abstract art and the boundaries that the audio describer can easily trespass by creating metaphors beyond the source domain of the original work. One of them has to do with collaboration among the people involved in both the creation and the accessibility of the piece. The urgent need for collaboration between the creators/artist/filmmakers and the translators/subtitlers/audio describers has long been discussed in Romero-Fresco's works (2019, 2020, 2021). One of the words that best encapsulates this spirit is the idea of access as a "conversation" (Romero-Fresco & Brown, 2023): "by entering into the artistic conversation, translation and access often become one more tool that can be used to reinforce the style or vision set out for a particular film". It is worth mentioning that we did not get any feedback about our work from the authors during the AD process. Only after creating the AD and meeting the artists in person at the opening of the exhibition, did we mention to them briefly some of the metaphors we used; they basically agreed, although they did not show too much enthusiasm. It definitely would have been desirable to have a closer collaboration and interaction with the authors.

Finally, another implication and consequence extracted from this process is related to the degree of invisibility that the audio describer of an abstract art video installation should ensure in their audio described target text. In many instances, the AD team struggled between the moral and professional obligation of being faithful to the original piece and the compelling need to step out of the original work and produce something equally immersive and creative, but obviously different. In this exercise of "restrained creativity", we were confronted with the ineludible question of to what degree should

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of creative uses of audio and emotional impact of sound effects, visit <https://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/art-of-noise-a-history-of-experimental-radio>

the AD be an artistic piece on its own with autonomy from the source text or just subordinate to the original. It is precisely here, where the nature and the function of the artwork together with the purpose of the exhibition as a whole can play a crucial role in finding that balance between fidelity and creativity.

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