

Accessibility as a Conversation

 **Pablo Romero-Fresco** 

University of Vigo

 **Kate Dangerfield** 

Independent researcher

Abstract

Film has a long-standing relationship with the notion of universality, which has often been used by Hollywood to perpetuate a dominant and unified worldview and to disseminate certain (Western) values that contribute to establishing what should and should not be considered normal, including the idea of the normative individual. Audiovisual translation and media accessibility could undermine the notion of universality in film; however, media accessibility has somehow reinstated this idea through reference to universal design and the use of the phrase “for all”. This can mask the exclusion of certain users who are not catered for by most mainstream accessibility guidelines.

The first aim of this article is to explore how the notion of universality has been used in media accessibility and how it is reflected in official guidelines and in current practice. The second aim is to introduce the work of an emerging wave of (mostly disabled) artists who are proposing an alternative approach to media accessibility, one that is openly subjective, increasingly creative and that often works as a political tool in a wider fight against discrimination and for real inclusion. These artists consider access as a conversation involving meaningful contributions by disabled and non-disabled people.

Key words: accessibility, conversation, creativity, difference, “for all”, inclusion, normativity, subjectivity, universality.

Citation: Romero-Fresco, P. & Dangerfield, K. (2022). Accessibility as a Conversation. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 5(2), 15–34. <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v5i2.2022.228>

Editor(s): M. Carroll & A. Remael

Received: December 5, 2021

Accepted: July 6, 2021

Published: December 21, 2022

Copyright: ©2022 Romero-Fresco & Dangerfield. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). This allows for unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

 promero@uvigo.es, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2166-5792>

 access2film@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0200-5433>

1. The Universal in Film

Film has had a long-standing relationship with the notion of universality. From the beginning, silent film was presented as a universal language that operated in a realm “beyond translation” (Dwyer, 2005, p. 296). Yet, translation was always a part of film, including the silent era, which required the modification of intertitles, the use of live interpreters and the alteration of storylines for both linguistic and ideological reasons (O’Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). The introduction of sound only reinforced the importance of translation and threw a spanner in the works of the film industry, which suddenly had an urgent problem to solve. After testing several strategies such as multiple language versions, which involved making and remaking the same film in two or three languages with the same director and sometimes in up to 14 languages with a different director and actors for each language version, the industry opted for dubbing and subtitling (Izard, 2011).

In theory, translation could have introduced linguistic and cultural difference and challenged cinema’s “intrinsic claims to the universality of its language and to the realism of its representations” (Kapsaskis, 2017, p. 249). However, the industry managed to make dubbing and subtitling invisible, relegating them from the production process to the distribution stage, where they became an afterthought. This enabled sound cinema to reinvigorate its claims to universalism, through which it has managed to “colonise the subconscious of multiple cultures” (Shochat & Stam, 1985, p. 53), promoting the English language as the idiom of cinema and strengthening Hollywood’s hold on world film markets by homogenising ethnic and class difference and shaping mass-culture according to a certain set of themes and values (Hansen, 1991). Here, all aspects of production and distribution (including translation) aim to perpetuate a “dominant, hierarchically unified worldview” (Minh-Ha, 1992, p. 207) and to represent a subjective, fragmented and artificial reality as if it were objective, unified, authentic and normative (Hansen, 1991; Kapsaskis, 2017). This universal view contributes to determining what is or should be expected as normal and, by extension, the normative individual. From the perspective of disability studies, Goodley (2011, p. 79) considers the normative citizen of the 21st century to be

Cognitively, socially and emotionally able and competent; biologically and psychologically stable, genetically and hormonally sound and ontologically responsible, hearing, mobile, seeing, walking, normal, sane, autonomous, self-sufficient, self-governing, reasonable, law-abiding and economically viable, white, heterosexual, male, adult, breeder, living in towns, global citizen of [Western Europe and North America].

The further an individual is removed from this description, the more excluded they are from society, which positions disabled people (as will be discussed in the section below) as the Others.

As well as allowing the Hollywood film industry to exert control over society, the invisibility of translation and the denial of difference that comes with it has proved convenient for theorists and critics. As noted by Eleftheriotis (2010, p. 187), subtitles must have played a key role in the filmic experience of the French theorists who formed the dominant school of thought of the apparatus theory during the 1970s. However, they never analysed or even acknowledged the presence of

subtitles, which would have posed a threat to the perceived objectivity and universality of their claims. For Eleftheriotis (2010, p. 187), this has two implications:

The first is a logical extension of the apparatus theory rationale and suggests that films operate by constructing universal positions that transcend difference, in other words, that the cinematic apparatus and its effects are universal and immune to national/cultural variations. The second is the apparatus theorists' inability to acknowledge the specificity of their own position as one of necessarily partial and limited understanding rather than perfect mastery over the "foreign" text.

In sum, as well as enabling the film industry to represent a subjective and artificial reality as if it were objective and authentic and to determine what should and should not be considered as normal, the notion of the universal presupposes that the reception of cinema remains unaltered across borders and grants the necessarily partial and subjective claims of critics and scholars the status of unassailable and objective truth.

Sometimes, though, translation is too noisy to be silenced. This is the case of polyglot films such as *Kameradschaft* (1931), *Le Mépris* (1963) and *Lost in Translation* (2003), whose storylines feature and even revolve around the messiness of linguistic diversity. Polyglot films embrace difference and explore the potential of translation to become a generative and artistic tool. In doing so, they shake the ground upon which claims to universalism are staked. They also reveal the inevitable loss involved in language transfer and how translation is all about admitting this lack, or loss, and making it functional. As put by Beckett, it is about failing better. This idea of translation as both a failure and a promise, as speculative practice rather than a guarantee, is central to the notion of media accessibility (MA) put forward in the sections below.

2. The Universal in Media Accessibility

Just as the need for translation could have challenged cinema's claim to universality (as put by Kapsaskis, "the universality of the language of cinema is denied by languages in the plural" [2017, p. 250]), the same could have happened with MA (Dangerfield, 2022). Film can hardly be presented as universal if, even when translated into another language, it still remains inaccessible to many viewers. Yet, as it strives to bridge this gap and provide access to film for those who are excluded from it, including deaf and blind audiences, MA seems to have embraced the idea of universality. This is evident not only in the application of the notion of universal design to MA but also in the common use of the phrase "for all" in conferences (the biennial Media for All and Fun for All events), projects (Digital Television for All, Hybrid Broadcast Broadband for All, Content4All) and publications (Díaz-Cintas et al., 2007; Díaz-Cintas et al., 2010; Remael et al., 2012).

The stress on the universality of MA has proved useful to increase and improve the quantity and quality of access services. Since its origin as a professional practice and area of study at the end of the 20th century, MA has had a vocation for advocacy. Researchers, trainers and professionals have

often joined forces to push for new legislation and increase access quotas at international and national level on TV, in the cinema and now in VoD platforms. One of the most powerful arguments is precisely what Greco (2018) describes as the universalist account of access. Unlike particularist accounts that circumscribe access to the sphere of disabled people, a universalist account sees access as concerning all human beings. Subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) or captioning (as SDH is known in countries such as the US, Canada and Australia) is a typical example of this curb-cut effect. Initially designed to provide access to audiovisual media for people with hearing loss, subtitles are now being used by everyone. This is shown by the often-quoted report from Ofcom (2006) stating that, of the 7.5 million users of SDH on TV in the UK, 6 million do not have a hearing loss, and by the large study conducted by Oregon State University (Linder, 2016) showing that 71% of students without hearing difficulties use captions in the US, as well as recent data indicating that 85% of Facebook videos are watched with the sound off, and thus largely with captions (Patel, 2016). This universalist nature has provided MA with the strength in numbers it needed to become an unavoidable issue for broadcasters and streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video or Disney+.

As the access quotas increased, researchers in MA gradually turned their attention to quality, which, as driven by legislation, has often revolved around the elaboration of guidelines. Although some of the first guidelines on MA and audiovisual translation were based on the personal experience of expert professionals (Carroll & Ivarsson, 1998), this is now a thing of the past. The cognitive turn experienced by (audiovisual) translation and MA over the past years (O'Brien, 2006; Chaume, 2018) and the proliferation of audience-reception studies, most notably those using eye-tracking technology and/or questionnaires, have provided a much-needed scientific basis and a user-led dimension for research in MA. It could be argued that guidelines are becoming more democratic, universal, and objective, in so far as many of them now include the input of a majority of viewers, or of a group that is statistically significant enough to be considered as a majority.

From this standpoint, the notion of the universal has been instrumental in increasing and improving quantity and quality in MA. However, there is another side to this discussion.

In the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, universal design is defined as “the design of environments, products, services, information and programmes that can be used by all people without specialised design or adaptation” (UN 2006, Article 2). This applies therefore to any person, “irrespective of cognitive and/or physical impairment, ease of access to and ability to use them” (Imrie, 2012, p. 874). The problem here is that those people whose needs are not easily met by current MA services (such as deafblind users, as will be argued below) are excluded twice: firstly, from the (supposedly universal) original version of a film, and secondly, from the “for all” promised by MA for the accessible version of the film.

Furthermore, ever since universal design became a marketing tool in the 1990s to sell the idea of accessibility to architects and designers, its advocates have typically used disability-neutral language, such as “all users”, “everyone” or “the entire population” (Hamraie, 2016; Dolmage, 2017). For

Hamraie, this fails “to distinguish between marginalised users and the broader non-disabled consumer majority” (2016, p. 297). Ellcessor (2015) links this to the argument put forward by universal design advocates that everyone is or will be disabled in one way or another – i.e., everyone is “deaf” when watching a Facebook video with captions and no sound. In her view, this denies the “lived experiences of disability and the importance of a disability identity or culture for many people”. Universal design offers, from this viewpoint, “a depoliticised orientation toward disability, which invokes human variation as a value but refuses to understand difference as tied to systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, or ableism” (Hamraie, 2016, p. 302).

When universal design is regarded simply as common sense, accessibility measures become options or customisations, that is, a matter of consumer choice rather than an issue of civil rights and political participation (Ellcessor, 2015). For these authors, the problem here is not only that universal design may fail to acknowledge the discrimination experienced by disabled people in an ableist society but also that it can reinforce “social hierarchies in which what really matters are the benefits that universal design brings to other (normative, able-bodied) people” (Ellcessor, 2015). An example of this as applied to MA is the often-discussed issue of subtitling speed. Research has shown that many viewers with hearing loss (particularly deaf viewers who are sign language users and thus read subtitles in their second language) find it difficult to read at the same speed as hearing viewers (Gregory & Sancho-Aldridge, 1996; Cambra et al., 2009). This may be explained, amongst other reasons, by the educational barriers they have had to face. Many academics have long advocated for subtitling speeds that can accommodate these viewers (for instance no more than 15 characters per second), even if this means that some subtitles will need to summarise or condense the original dialogue a bit more than usual. This is not the direction that the industry is taking, though. In its most recent SDH guidelines, Netflix (2022) sets a speed of 20 characters per second, which is at the very limit of what hearing viewers can follow (Kruger et al., 2022) and very unlikely to be of use to many viewers with hearing loss. There are, predictably, financial reasons behind this: fast captions are more affordable than slow ones, as they require less editing of the original dialogue and therefore less time to make. Yet, the issue remains that the original target audience of these subtitles (deaf and hard of hearing viewers) may struggle to follow them while for a majority of normative, able-bodied (hearing) viewers who are also using them, they will serve as a useful extra layer of support (Davies, 2016). As put by Dolmage (2017), “the needs of the majority once again trump the needs of those who have been traditionally excluded”.

The notion of the universal can also be regarded as problematic when it comes to quality in MA. As mentioned above, many of the studies that have provided MA guidelines with a much-needed scientific foundation have used eye-tracking technology. While acknowledging the undeniable value of their findings, Brown (2015) identifies three aspects of eye-tracking studies (as applied to original films) that may be problematic: (1) with their emphasis on statistical significance, they tend to focus on majority views and neglect marginal viewers or marginal ways of watching films; (2) they have so far been biased in favour of Hollywood and mainstream films and have not been so concerned with “marginal” films; and (3) they have a political agenda or, at least, political impact, in that, by focusing on attention, they validate and encourage a type of homogeneity that is more common in commercial

films than in independent or more idiosyncratic cinema. Although it presents itself as apolitical (Brown, 2015), eye-tracking research is anything but. It reveals what viewers look at, which can help to identify what is successful and may end up having an influence on what and how directors and producers decide to film. Despite the undeniable benefits brought about by the use of eye-tracking in MA research, some of the criticism outlined by Brown may apply to this area. Many guidelines now include the input of a majority of viewers (they have been democratised), but it is important to consider what has fallen by the wayside.

Eye-tracking studies in MA have inevitably placed strong emphasis on statistical significance. What matters is where most of the participants look (Puss in Boots in Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Gaze Behaviour of 15 Viewers Converging Around the Central Figure During a Clip From the Teaser Trailer for Puss in Boots



Source: Smith, 2013.

This helps to identify scientifically solid patterns and to learn how different groups of viewers process audiovisual media, but it also tends to flatten out differences. Researchers focus mainly on what is common to all, on what is universal, at the expense of what is not. The average data of a group of viewers is more important than the full data provided by a single participant. A case in point are participants whose cognitive behaviour, or whose gaze patterns in the case of eye tracking, differ dramatically from the rest (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

Marginal Gaze Behaviour of One Viewer During a Clip From the Teaser Trailer for Puss in Boots



Source: Smith, 2013.

These participants are classified as outliers and their data are often discarded in empirical research as problematic, unrepresentative, and useless (Zimmerman, 2010). The first issue identified by Brown above thus also applies to AVT/MA: The view of the majority is favoured over marginal ways of watching films or marginal viewers. This is perhaps particularly worrying in the case of MA research, which should be concerned with accounting for those who are excluded from accessing audiovisual media (Díaz-Cintas et al., 2007). These outliers are likely to be the same people who, as discussed above, may be excluded both from the original and the accessible versions of the film. It should be possible for researchers in this area to engage with them meaningfully in a way that complements the quantitative and statistically significant data obtained with experimental reception studies.

The bias towards Hollywood and mainstream films over more marginal films, the second criticism directed by Brown to eye-tracking studies in film, may also apply to MA, which further confirms the above-mentioned stronghold that Hollywood has on world film markets. However, it is the third criticism (validation and encouragement of a more or less homogenous approach to filmmaking) that is particularly relevant here. As guidelines are increasingly underpinned by empirical research and informed by the results of reception studies (a very positive move away from the expert-based approach that prevailed in the past), they are also more homogeneous and inevitably less creative. As Brown (2015) puts it, “Cinema is both business and art, but if art is one thing it is unique/different, and so a move towards homogeneity is a move towards the reduction of art in favor of business”. Likewise, current guidelines typically encourage the same use of MA regardless of the particular nature of any film. Every other stage in the filmmaking process is adapted to the idiosyncrasy of the film in question, except for MA, which tends to build the same ramp for every building. This can result in situations where while the original viewers of a film can access the creative vision of the filmmaker, the audience of the accessible versions are provided with a much more standardised access route. In line with the empirical nature of the studies that support them, MA guidelines normally advocate for an objective approach to subtitling, captioning and audio description, one that is designed to aid the

comprehension of all viewers. There are exceptions that suggest that the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in MA is better presented as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. For instance, many authors (Thompson, 2018; Kleege, 2018) believe that AD, whether or not guidelines-based, can only be subjective. Still, most guidelines do advise describers to stay away from subjectivity and to be as objective as possible (Rai & Greening, 2010). And broadly speaking, subjectivity is typically advised against.

Undoubtedly, this type of standard MA has proved very efficient and is essential for millions of people around the world. However, it is also a type of access that conceals the individuality of (1) the users, because it targets them all as a group based on their common traits, rather than as individuals with their differences; (2) the professionals, who by striving for objectivity may end up providing sanitised, voice-of-god type of access regardless of the film they are working on; and (3) the researchers, who, as is normally expected in experimental writing, tend to use the passive voice, rather than the first person. In this paper, we have chosen to use the first person plural not because we would like our research to be about us, but as “a gesture of responsibility and accountability” (Rascaroli, 2017, p. 5). As a white, middle class, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman (Kate) and man (Pablo), we have not experienced discrimination on the basis of sexuality, class, race, disability or age, and our lived experience is one of relative privilege. This is the place from where we are seeing the world and writing these lines.

To conclude this section, just as the notion of the universal has enabled film to present a subjective, fragmented and artificial reality as if it were objective, unified, authentic and normative, the universal in MA allows researchers and access providers to address accessibility as an objective, unified, and normative truth that reaches all, even though this is not always the case. The next section presents the work of a new wave of academics and artists, most of them disabled, who are pushing for a different type of access that can coexist with the currently prevailing standard access described here.

3. Creative/Alternative Media Access

Examples of creative audiovisual translation and MA may be found throughout history, ever since the invention of cinema (O’Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). Indeed, creativity is an integral part of both audiovisual translation and MA. However, over the past two or three years, a new movement has emerged of artists, writers, advocates and scholars from heterogeneous backgrounds (filmmaking, audiovisual translation, MA, visual arts, disability art, disability studies, gender, and race studies) who are rethinking and questioning the current provision of access and putting forward alternative approaches. It is perhaps still too early to accurately identify the scope of this movement and its common traits, but it does not seem anecdotal and it is taking place across countries and continents. We will be referring to it in this article as creative MA or alternative MA, thus highlighting two of its most distinctive characteristics.

Creative MA refers to 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 and to enhance user experience in a creative or imaginative way. Often already considered during production, this is an alternative approach to traditional MA that stands in opposition to many of the current guidelines (especially to their emphasis on objectivity) and that often explores the generative and transformative potential of access. Creative MA practices are sometimes anchored in a wider fight for inclusion and diversity and, as such, they may be used as a political tool to vindicate the users' right to full participation in the arts and in society as a whole (Romero-Fresco, 2021b; Romero-Fresco, forthcoming).

Creative/alternative MA is thus a reaction to the objective, unified and normative approach described in the previous section. As suggested by Kleege (2016) and Thompson (2018), for all their merits (visibility in society, consistency, professionalism) guidelines often fail to acknowledge the creative and transformative potential of MA. Deaf poet Raymond Antrobus (2021) points out that by removing subjectivity, captions are often presented as "the voice of God", which chimes with Kleege's view (2018, p. 101) that in audio description, "the illusion of objectivity is reinforced because the description is delivered without authorship, as if it represents some unassailable truth". Creative/alternative MA is often subjective, malleable and, especially when produced by disabled artists, political.

The subjective and poetic nature of captions is explored by artists such as Liza Sylvestre, the group Collective Text and the American artist Christine Sun Kim (2020). Profoundly deaf from birth and ASL user, Sun Kim proposes a deaf-centric approach to MA that turns captioning into poetry. In an initial piece entitled *Close Readings* (Sun Kim, 2015), Sun Kim asked a group of deaf viewers to provide sound captions for clips from *A Space Odyssey* and *The Little Mermaid*. The heterogeneous and poetic captions produced by these viewers ("regret swells", "the sound of a problem that is not a problem") led to Sun Kim making a short film entitled *Closer Captions*. The captions she produced for it describe sounds ("feet slapping onto bathroom tiles"), images ("sweetness of orange sunlight") and often address the question of whether sound can be a feeling ("the sound of hurt feelings scabbing over"). Sun Kim's work exposes the fact that captions are normally produced by professionals who have a very different relationship with sound to that of their (main) intended audience. It also reveals the ableist assumption often made by many of us, non-disabled people, that equates sound with silence as far as deaf people are concerned. Indeed, captioners are normally instructed not to use the words "the sound of" in their captions because it could be offensive for viewers who have no (experience of/access to) sound. Yet, as noted by O'Daniel (2021) and Booth (2021), sound resonates, vibrates, and is generally thought of, felt, and embodied by many viewers with hearing loss in a much more profound and imaginative way than most guidelines for media access care to consider.

In her latest public artwork, *Captioning the City*, commissioned by Manchester International Festival (MIF, 2021), Sun Kim created a series of large captions that were displayed all around Manchester on streets, buildings, a boat, and even flown from a plane. They range from the mundane and specific ("the sound of pigeons searching for crumbs", displayed in enormous letters on the ground of a large

square) to the humorous (“the sound of patting yourself on the back for being on time” on the façade of the Manchester Piccadilly Station), and social (“the sound of ignorance crumbling” on the wall of the Science and Industry Museum). In the short film [*Tour of Captioning the City*](#) (see figures 3–8), the images of these captions are accompanied by a soundtrack that is captioned by Sun Kim in her style, with a degree of detail and colour that is not normally found in captions provided as per official guidelines.

Figure 3

Opening Shot of Captioning the City, With a Caption That Sets the Style (Openly Subjective) for the Rest of the Film



Source: Sun Kim, 2021.

Figure 4

A Caption Displayed on a Boat and Further Subjective Content in the Yellow Captions at the Bottom of the Screen



Source: Sun Kim, 2021

Figure 5

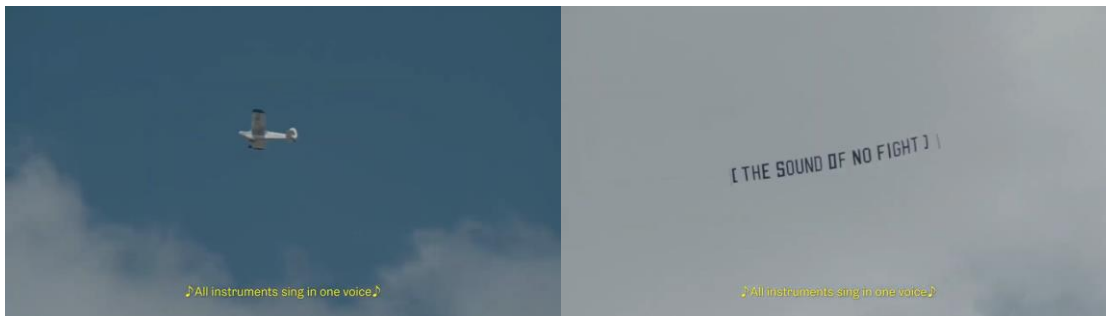
A Caption Displayed on the Windows of a Theatre Venue as the Captions at the Bottom of the Screen Veer Towards the Subjective



Source: (Sun Kim, 2021)

Figures 6 and 7

A Plane Pulling a Banner With the Caption “The Sound of no Fight”



Source: Sun Kim, 2021

Figure 8

The Caption “The Sound of no Other city” Displayed From Bottom to top on the Façade of the Building



Source: Sun Kim, 2021

Sun Kim’s work asks passers-by to consider what captions can tell us not only about sonic properties, but also about “things, emotions, times, thoughts” (Sun Kim, 2021). Sound becomes a collection of memories and feelings that invites people to engage in a new relationship with their city and with its/their place in society. More importantly, Sun Kim reminds us of the rich relationship that Deaf people have with sound and uses creative MA as a political tool to bring the Deaf perspective into a world made for and by the hearing: “I want these works to actively impose Deaf people’s existence and culture into the everyday lives of hearing people” (Sun Kim, 2021).

This alternative and creative approach to subtitling and captioning can also be found in other modalities of MA, such as audio description. As in the case of captioning, when it originates in the area of disability arts, it often becomes a political tool. In the UK, Simon Hayhoe (2018) introduced the notion of “flipping descriptions” to refer to a new approach to audio description that consists of “taking the description out of the hands of the sighted person and handing it to the audiences it was designed to support”, as well as “making description part of the artwork or making description its own form of performative art”. This is very much the ethos behind the work produced by theatre companies such as Extant, Fingersmiths and Graeae.

In the US, the podcast “[Reid my Mind](#)” has recently emerged as a useful platform to identify alternative and creative approaches to audio description. The podcast was created in 2006 by Thomas Reid (an IT developer who lost his sight as a result of cancer two years before) to address the lack of coverage and negative portrayal of his peer groups: African Americans and people with vision loss. In July 2021, he started the series “Flipping the Script on Audio Description”, which gives voice to professionals, companies, and artists working on creative and alternative audio description, normally designed from the inception of the production. For Reid, despite the increasing visibility and universal use of audio description, blind people still do not have a place at the table when it comes to making decisions and to creating descriptions.

One of the guests invited to “Reid my Mind” is Nathan Geering (2019), who has developed a new method to describe dance that acts as a counterpoint to the guidelines-based descriptions:

In the UK, it was common practice for the audio description [of dance] to be really kind of objective. It was delivered almost like a science experiment. There was a monotone voice, like “the dancer lifts her up, moves her head to the side”. And the thing is, our art is subjective. If you have that objective voice coming in over it, it can be quite disturbing and take you out of the immersive artistic experience.

With the so-called [Rationale Method](#), Geering asked people with visual impairment to come up with the beatboxing sound effects that, for them, best represent the movements made during a particular dance. The way these sound effects are used in the description gives users an idea of the speed of the movement, directionality, intensity, and other aspects that would take a long time to describe through words. Geering acknowledges that the combination of beatboxing, poetry and enhanced sound design may not suit all tastes. The idea here is to open the choice, so that access experts and artists can “unlock their own creativity” and “try and tap into their authentic self” (2021) and, in the process, allow more blind and partially sighted directors and choreographers to become involved.

In “Flipping the script...”, Reid also interviews Cheryl Green, access expert for the company Kinetic Light (2021), whose mission statement sums up what creative/alternative access is about:

We treat accessibility as an aesthetic of the work and an integral part of the creative process. (...) Access is not a retroactive accommodation. We want you to experience the art, not a description of it. Kinetic Light has gathered together an amazing team of disabled artists and

culture-makers, describers, ASL interpreters, and disability aesthetic experts who work with us. (...) Access at this scale is not a checklist of things to do; it is a way of building relationships with you, our audience, our community. Access is a process. We recognise that we will never get it “right,” because access is not a product or a checklist. We do access as a conversation, a growing together. If something is not working for you, please let us know and we will continue the conversation.

This flexible conception of access, which is at odds with the unified and normative stance derived from the application of the universal in MA, chimes with the work of the disabled artist Carolyn Lazard (2019), and especially with her guidelines for accessibility in the arts:

Conversations about disability often rely on the idea of accessibility as a set of particular, pre-set interventions, but accessibility requires great flexibility. It demands a malleable infrastructure that shifts, in real time, with the needs of the community. We cannot account for every need that every person will ever have. To this end, this guide is in no way meant to be comprehensive, but will hopefully change the institutional landscape of the arts. Accessibility is a promise, not a guarantee. It’s a speculative practice.

As mentioned in Section 1, language transfer often involves an inevitable loss, which means translation is also about admitting this lack, or loss, and failing better. Similarly, creative/alternative MA recognises the failure inherent to access (the impossibility of producing media for all) and looks at it as a promise, instead of as a guarantee. As put by Dolmage (2017), “a form of hope, a manner of trying”. A conversation that must involve disabled and non-disabled people.

Unfortunately, some people are being left out of this conversation, and of access altogether. They are the outliers mentioned in Section 2, who are excluded from both the original and the accessible versions of the film or live performance and who thus embody the failure of the promise of the universal in MA. This is the case of many deafblind people, for whom standard access may not (always) work. In his provocative and insightful essay *Against Access* (Lee Clark, 2021), American deafblind poet John Lee Clark explains that standard access, as per most official guidelines, makes all the difference for many people. It is an essential and almost life-saving element in their lives. For many of them, it is complementary to reality: captions that allow deaf viewers to make sense of the images they are seeing or audio description that enables blind people to understand the soundtrack and dialogue they are listening to. For those deafblind people who have no access to visuals or audio, though, for whom captions are fed into Braille displays so that they can follow a film, access is not complementary. It is a replica, a sorry excuse for what originated it in the first place. A dead end with two possible outcomes: “death by fitting in or death by failing to fit in” (Lee Clark, 2021). Here, Lee Clark adds an issue that has already been touched upon by other artists featured in this paper and that is essential to the understanding of the motivation behind alternative MA: the unidirectionality of access. Access is normally presented as a one-way process whereby, for the most part, non-disabled people provide access to work produced by non-disabled people for the benefit of (amongst others) disabled people. It is access as a monologue, rather than as a conversation that can welcome non-disabled people into, in this case, the world of deafblind people:

The way those things [access services] are lobbied for, funded, designed, implemented, and used revolves around the assumption that there's only one world and ignores realms of possibility nestled within those same modes. Why is it always about them? Why is it about their including or not including us? Why is it never about us and whether or not we include them? (Lee Clark, 2021)

As well as a road with one-way traffic, Lee Clark (2021) sees standard access as a commitment to the status quo:

I began to understand why people who work around access cling to the concept of accuracy. This commitment to accuracy, to perfect replication, is a commitment to the status quo. We are expected to leave it untouched, or, if it must be altered, then to do so as little as possible. Access, then, is akin to nonreciprocal assimilation.

As an alternative, Lee Clark proposes to touch, alter, transgress, and transform reality, and to invite non-disabled people into the world of the deafblind. He put this in practice in April 2020, when an online journal asked him for a photo of him (and a description of the photo) to go along with three poems it was publishing. Lee Clark refused, arguing that there was no reason for him to provide a headshot as if he knew what it conveys when he is not familiar with this particular species of media. Instead, he proposed he provide a tactile description, which is more in line with the Protactile language he uses as his main form of communication, a type of sign language that is based on touch and that is practiced on the body (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

John Lee Clark Using Protactile Language



Source: Lee Clark, 2016

Following Lee Clark's exchange with the online journal, all members of his research group, the Protactile Research Network, have followed suit. No pictures on the website, only bionotes made with tactile descriptions. No need to conform to the conventions of the able(ist) world. Instead, an open invitation for non-deafblind people to enter the deafblind world (see Figure 10 and 11):

Figure 10

Example of a Tactile Description

Hair of feline softness. Warm and smooth hands. A scent of patchouli. Flutters betray his exhilaration.

Source: (Lee Clark, 2016)

Figure 11

Example of a Tactile Description

Wears fashionable, textured attire. Wiggles her fingers on you when she is deep in thought. When you talk to her, you feel a steady stream of taps and squeezes. Sometimes, when she is really excited, she slaps you. Engage at your own risk.

Source: Lee Clark, 2016

4. Access as a Conversation

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

(Quote heard by visual artist and activist Lilla Watson in the early 1970s at an Aboriginal Rights group in Queensland, Australia).

The "universal" is a tempting concept to use in order to escape the messiness of life. This may go some way towards explaining why it is used so often, not least in film, translation, and MA. In film, traditionally described (especially in the case of silent cinema) as a universal language, it has been useful to present a subjective and artificial reality as if it were objective and authentic. It has also helped to disseminate certain (Western) values and to set what should and should not be considered

as normal. Its importance is evidenced by the fact that it has often managed to silence and render the difference that translation brings into cinema.

MA has benefitted from embracing the notion of universality, both in terms of quantity and quality. Mainstreaming access services to the wider disabled and non-disabled public has become an effective argument to push for legislation and for standards and guidelines that are now largely underpinned by research conducted with large groups of users. There are, however, downsides to this: the universal has allowed researchers and access providers to present accessibility as an objective, unified and normative truth that reaches all, even though this is not always the case. “Media for all” is an effective slogan but it is not an accurate representation of reality. Many viewers are still excluded from both original and accessible versions of audiovisual media and many of the current official MA guidelines are not particularly conducive to heterogeneous, idiosyncratic and creative uses of MA or to the participation of disabled people. Standard, universal access is still a road with one-way traffic. A monologue.

The examples of alternative and creative MA presented here, and many others that are currently being produced all over the world, are a reaction to this view of access. They celebrate subjectivity and embrace the creative and transformative potential of access, often as a tool to fight discrimination in an ableist society. They promote the inclusion and participation of disabled people in the non-disabled world, and vice versa.

The universal as applied to MA has contributed to concealing the individuality of the users (as the focus is placed on the group and their common traits), the professionals (who in their effort to be objective end up providing similar types of access regardless of the film they are working on) and the researchers (who use the passive voice and do not normally expose themselves or their position). Alternative/creative MA chooses a different path, as it targets individual users. It leads to idiosyncratic practices that reveal the professional behind the access and it asks researchers to address the role of MA, and most importantly their own role, in society. In this paper, we have chosen to use the first person plural (instead of the passive voice) as a gesture of accountability and simply as a way to expose the position of relative privilege from which we are analysing and promoting this new form of MA, which is making us question many of the assumptions we had made about access in line with traditional MA and which (we hope) can coexist and interact with these older forms of MA.

The notion of “media for all” may be problematic if it is used as a slogan and accepted as a fact. It is, however, useful if used as policy rhetoric, as an aspiration and a path to follow (inevitably paved with failure to deliver), where access is a promise and a form of hope, rather than a guarantee. We consider access as a two-way process of trial and error including disabled and non-disabled people (Dangerfield, 2022); as a conversation with everyone involved sitting round the table, carrying equal weight, and willing to address these three questions:

Who is still excluded?
Who gets to create and decide?
Where is my position in all of this?

References

- Antrobus, R. (2021). *Inventions in Sound*, BBC4 Radio programme produced by Eleanor McDowall. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000t4km>
- Booth, K. (2021). The Resonance of Silence. *Mc Sweeney's 64: The audio issue*. https://audio.mcsweeneys.net/transcripts/resonance_of_silence.html
- Brown, W. (2015). Politicizing eye-tracking studies of film, *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*, 25.
- Cambra, C., Silvestre, N., & Leal, A. (2009). *Análisis de la comprensión por parte del alumnado sordo de los documentos televisivos subtítulos y criterios de mejora* [Analysis of deaf students' comprehension of subtitled document and criterion to improve], *Quaderns del CAC* 31–32, 155–159.
- Carroll, M., & Ivarsson, J. (1998). *Code of good subtitling practice*. European Association for Studies in Screen Translation.
- Chaume, F. (2018). Is audiovisual translation putting the concept of translation up against the ropes? *JoSTrans – The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 30, 84–104. https://jostrans.org/issue30/art_chaume.php
- Coppola, S. (Director). (2003). *Lost in Translation* [Film], Focus Features
- Dangerfield, K. (2022). *Within sound and image: The practice and theory of accessible filmmaking* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation], Roehampton University.
- Davies, L. J. (2016). Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power. In L.J Davis (Ed.) *The Disability Studies Reader* (pp. 1-14). Routledge.
- Díaz-Cintas, J., Matamala, A., & Neves, J. (2010). *New insights into audiovisual translation and media accessibility*. Rodopi.
- Díaz-Cintas, J., Orero, P., Remael, A. (2007). *Media for all: Subtitling for the deaf, audio description and sign language*. Rodopi.
- Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press.
- Dwyer, T. (2005). Universally speaking: Lost in translation and polyglot cinema. *Lingüística Antverpiensia New Series*, 4, 295–310.
- Eleftheriotis, D. (2010). *Cinematic journeys: Film and movement*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Ellcessor, E. (2015). Blurred lines: Accessibility, disability, and definitional limitations. *First Monday*, 20(9). <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/6169/4904>
- Geering, N. (2019, April 5). *BBC Breakfast News – Rationale method of audio description* [Video], YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlzMI5V_wcQ&t=5s
- Geering, N. (2021). Flipping the script on audio description – A Hip Hop approach [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Reid My Mind* <https://reidmymind.com/flipping-the-script-on-audio-description-a-hip-hop-approach/>
- Godard, J. (Director). (1963). *Le Mépris* [Film], Momentum.
- Goodley, D. (2011). *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction*. Sage.
- Greco, G. M. (2018). The nature of accessibility studies. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* 1(1), 205–232.
- Gregory, S., Sancho-Aldridge, J. (1996). *Dial 888: Subtitling for deaf children*. ITC.
- Hamraie, A. (2016). Universal design and the problem of “post-disability” ideology. *The Journal of the Design Studies Forum*, 8(3), 285–309.
- Hansen, M. (1991). *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American silent film*. Harvard University Press.

- Hayhoe, S. (2018). Flipping descriptions: A new phase of democratising audio description. VocalEyes. <https://vocaleyes.co.uk/flipping-descriptions-a-new-phase-of-democratising-audio-description/>
- Imrie, R. (2012). Universalism, universal design and equitable access to the built environment. *Disability & Rehabilitation*, 34(10), 873–882.
- Izard, N. (2001). Doblaje y subtitulación: una aproximación histórica [Dubbing and subtitling: an approach]. In M. Duro (Ed.) *La traducción para el doblaje y la subtitulación* [Translation for dubbing and subtitling] (pp. 189–209). Cátedra.
- Kapsaskis, D. (2017). Translation as a critical tool in film analysis: Watching Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* through a translational prism". *Translation Studies*, 10(3), 247–262.
- Kinetic Light. (2021). About Kinetic Light. <https://kineticlight.org/about>
- Kleege, G. (2016). Audio description described: Current standards, future innovations, larger implications". *Representations*, 135(1), 89–101.
- Kleege, G. (2018). *More than Meets the Eye: What blindness brings to art*. Oxford University Press.
- Kruger, J., Wisniewska, N., & Liao, S. (2022). Why subtitle speed matters: Evidence from word skipping and rereading. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 43(1), 211–236.
doi:10.1017/S0142716421000503
- Lazard, C. (2019). Accessibility in the arts: A promise and a practice.
<https://promiseandpractice.art/>
- Lee Clark, J. (2016). Protactile Research Network. <https://www.protactileresearch.org/>
- Lee Clark, J. (2020). *Pro Tactile ASL for DeafBlind children* [Video] YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRC3WQdqaho>
- Lee Clark, J. (2021). Against Access. *Mc Sweeney's 64: The audio issue*.
https://audio.mcsweeneys.net/transcripts/against_access.html
- Linder, K. (2016). *Student uses and perceptions of closed captions and transcripts: Results from a national study*. Oregon State University Ecampus Research Unit.
- Manchester International Festival. (2021). *Tour of Captioning The City* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UbBYGlcCp0>
- Minh-Ha, T. T. (1992). *Framer framed*. Routledge.
- Netflix. (2022). *Timed text style guide: General requirements*. Netflix Website. <https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us/articles/215758617-Timed-Text-Style-Guide-General-Requirements>
- O'Brien, S. (2006). *Cognitive explorations of translation*. Bloomsbury.
- O'Daniel, A. (2021). *Interview with Grégory Castéra on captioning strategies to honour the Deaf and Hard of Hearing experience and reimagine the aural world*. Activating Captions,
<https://www.argosarts.org/activatingcaptions/magazine/alison-odaniel-on-captioning-strategies-to-honour-the-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-experience-and-reimagine-the-aural-world#read>.
- Ofcom. (2006). *Television access services review*. Office of Communications.
- O'Sullivan, C., & Cornu J.-F. (Eds.). (2019). *The translation of films, 1900–1950*. OUP.
- Pabst, G.W. (Director). (1931). *Kameradschaft* [Film], Janus Films.
- Patel, S. (2016). *85 percent of Facebook video is watched without sound*. Digiday <https://digiday.com/media/silent-world-facebook-video/>
- Rai, S., & Greening, J. (2010). *A comparative study of audio Description guidelines prevalent in different countries*, Royal National Institute of Blind People.
- Rascaroli, L. (2017). *How the essay film thinks*. Oxford University Press.

- Remael, A., Orero, P., & Carroll, M. (2012). *Audiovisual translation and media accessibility at the crossroads: Media for All 3*. Rodopi.
- Romero-Fresco, P. (2021a). Creative Media Accessibility: Placing the Focus Back on the Individual. In M. Antona & C. Stephanidis (Eds.), *Universal access in human-computer Interaction. Access to media, Learning and assistive Environments*. HCII 2021. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol. 12769. Springer.
- Romero-Fresco, P. (2021b). Creativity in media accessibility: A political issue. In Translation plus: The added value of the translator [Special Issue], *Cultus*, 14.
- Romero-Fresco, P. (forthcoming). Creativity in audiovisual translation and media accessibility. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*.
- Shochat, E., & Stam, R. (1985). The cinema after Babel: Language, difference, power, *Screen*, 26(3–4), 35–58.
- Smith, T. J. (2013). Watching you watch movies: Using eye tracking to inform cognitive film theory. In A. P. Shimamura (Ed.) *Psychocinematics: Exploring cognition at the movies* (pp. 165–190). Oxford University Press.
- Sun Kim, C. (2017). Close readings. <https://www.deappel.nl/en/archive/events/1116-close-readings-presentation-of-close-readings-video-installation-by-christine-sun-kim-and-classified-digits-video-by-christine-sun-kim-and-thomas-mader>
- Sun Kim, C. (2020, October 13). *Closer Captions* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfe479qL8hg>
- Sun Kim, C. (2021). *Private view: Christine Sun Kim*. Nowness. <https://www.nowness.com/series/private-view/christine-sun-kim>
- Thompson, H. (2018). Audio description: Turning access to film into cinema art". *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(3).
- UN, (2006). Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 2 Definitions. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-2-definitions.html>
- Zimmerman, D. (2010). Increasing the power of nonparametric tests by detecting and downweighing outliers. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 64(1), 71–78.