

Action Research in Motion for Dance Audio Description

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ABSTRACT

Audio description, an intersemiotic translation modality which makes the visual verbal, enables blind and partially sighted people to access cultural manifestations such as films and pictorial art. Over the last two decades, it has become a burgeoning research theme and an ever-growing accessibility service, especially in the audiovisual sector. However, audio description is still in its early stages in fields such as dance. This article presents step by step the phases of an action research project undertaken with a three-fold aim: fostering knowledge transfer between researchers and practitioners, involving the target audience in the audio description process of a contemporary dance performance, and, at the same time, advancing research on dance audio description.

KEYWORDS: accessibility; action research; dance audio description

1. Introduction

“Lady Ernest Waterlow has marked a further stage in the work she has undertaken of helping the blind soldiers of St. Dunstan's to visualize entertainments that appeal only to the sight” (*The Beacon* 1917). These could be the opening lines of the first written account of audio description (AD) (Fryer 2016:15), understood as an accessibility practice and service mainly targeted at blind and partially sighted people which “renders the visual world accessible” (Hirvonen 2012:21). According to this report, Lady Waterlow had been successful in experimentally introducing verbal description in both theatrical performances and film screenings thanks to her “happy way of creating mental pictures by flashes of suggestive description interjected at appropriate moments” (*The Beacon* 1917). However, it was not until eight decades later that AD started to take root in television shows and films (Reviers 2016:239).

Nowadays, AD can be encountered not only in TV and film screenings and festivals, but also in operas, museums and heritage sites, to name but a few examples. In addition to becoming an accessibility practice in more and more settings, AD is broadening its scope in terms of the audiences it can benefit. It has been argued that AD can be a useful pedagogical tool for language learning (Vermeulen and Ibañez 2018), can assist people with emotion recognition difficulties (Starr and Braun 2020) and can result in more memorable experiences for sighted museum visitors (Hutchinson and Eardley 2021).

However, AD does not enjoy the same degree of availability and standardization in all contexts and countries. Screen AD is the most widespread; main guidelines such as the Spanish standard UNE 153020:2005 (AENOR 2005) or the British Ofcom's Guidelines on the Provision of Television Access Services (2021) have focused on this AD modality, which is supported by regulation (e.g., the Spanish General Act on Audiovisual Communication) and has gathered its fair share of scholarly attention within multimodal Translation Studies and media accessibility.

Although screen AD is still prevalent in practice, academia, and training courses (Reviers 2016; Mendoza and Matamala 2019), AD for the performing arts (theater, opera and dance) (Orero et al. 2019), museums (Chica Núñez and Jiménez-Hurtado 2020; Taylor and Perego 2020; Barnés-Castaño 2021) and other live events has been gaining ground in recent years. Focusing on our object of study, we could identify initiatives for making dance performances accessible for blind and partially sighted people (e.g., Scottish Ballet 2020), though they are still outnumbered by their counterparts in theater and opera. Similarly, most research on accessibility of the performing arts for blind and partially sighted audiences revolves around theater and opera (Di Giovanni 2018:192). Only a few authors (Geiger and Snyder 2010; Snyder 2013; Kleege 2014; Margolies 2015) have contributed to how to best audio describe dance performances, while specific guidelines (Fryer 2009; Snyder 2010) and training resources (Fryer 2018a; Fryer 2018b) are scarce in general, and absent in the Spanish-speaking world.

This paper sets out to present a pioneer action research project bringing together practitioners, the target audience and researchers with the aim of making a contemporary dance accessible for a Spanish blind and partially sighted audience while advancing knowledge on the under-researched area of dance AD.

Action research (AR) is a research strategy which starts from the perspective of “a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation” (Reason and Bradbury 2015:1) and is

characterized by a “constant confrontation of reflection and action, theory and method, theory and practice aimed at producing understanding and effective action” (Dick and Greenwood 2015:195). Researchers are not observers of the phenomena under investigation. Conversely, they are agents for change who encourage reflective practice. Another key to AR is its iterative nature, as it “proceeds through a number of cycles in which the early cycles are used to decide how to conduct the later cycles” (Dick, Passfield and Widman 1995:3). As Melrose outlines: “the use of critical reflection in each cycle allows the action (or change, or improvement or intervention) to be integrated with research (or building understanding about the process and the practice or evaluation progress or generating theory)” (2001:166).

This research strategy has been advocated in the context of multimodal translation environments by Josélia Neves, who has put it into practice in several museum accessibility projects (2016). Elena Di Giovanni and her colleagues also adopted a participatory research approach in the more proximal context of opera AD (2018). For Di Giovanni, “if translation studies is often considered as an applied discipline, this is all the more true of audiovisual translation and especially media accessibility. For the latter, the connection between the practice and any theoretical or methodological reflection is always central” (2018:192).

This project started with an exploration cycle in which the overall approach for scripting the AD and the main challenges that dance poses were discussed. In search of answers to the questions that arose in this initial step, the existing contributions to dance AD were reviewed. Given that no reception studies could be found in the literature, we involved the potential audience in the process, enlisting twenty-eight legally blind participants to share their thoughts on the style and type of dance AD they would prefer. The results of this survey informed the first draft of the AD script, which was put to the test in an audio described rehearsal of the full dance performance. One congenitally blind woman and one partially sighted man attended this rehearsal and were debriefed afterwards, providing their comments and suggestions for improvement. Their recommendations fed into the second draft of the script. Feedback collection was not constrained to the pre-performance cycles of the project. Blind and partially sighted attendees at the live performance were also invited to complete a questionnaire aiming at discovering the success of the AR project as a means of making the accessible performance enjoyable and memorable for blind and partially sighted audiences and paving the way for new avenues for research and dance AD practice.

2. Action Research Project Launch

In February 2019, the HUM-770 research group (TRACCE, <https://tracce.ugr.es>) was contacted by the inclusive dance company Cía. Danza Vinculados (<https://ciadanzavinculados.com>) to provide advice on how to make a shortened version of the Federico García Lorca-inspired contemporary dance performance *From Sacromonte to New York* accessible for a blind and partially sighted audience (Cía. Danza Vinculados 2019).

The research group, which has nearly two decades of experience investigating accessibility for blind and partially sighted people through AD in contexts ranging from audiovisual productions (e.g., Soler and Jiménez 2013) to museums (e.g., Jiménez and Chica 2020) and heritage sites (e.g., Álvarez de Morales 2018), assisted the dance company director, Carmen Vilches (also the lead choreographer and third author), and the audio describer Luisa Bernstorff (second author) on how to make the performance more meaningful to the blind and partially sighted audience. An early version of the AD script was proofread, and guidance was given on how to complement the live AD with a pre-show touch tour, as is common practice in other performing arts, such as opera and theatre.

Building on this earlier experience, a year later the dance company director contacted TRACCE again for further advice on the AD of the extended version of the performance, programmed for March 2020. This second time was seen as an opportunity to strengthen collaboration between scholars and practitioners, involve the intended audience in the process and conduct research on the underdeveloped area of dance AD.

The AR project reported here started with a briefing session, in which the audio describer, an experienced interpreter who had delivered the live AD the previous year, informed one of the researchers about the approach that both she and the company director wanted to adopt in the AD.

One of the first decisions an audio describer is confronted with as a macro strategy is whether to adopt a “what you see is what you say” view, meaning that information is conveyed without any interpretation on the part of the audio describer, or whether to align with a more interpretative style. Here we understand a macro strategy as the overall approach that “will guide the describer’s lower-level decisions as to what and how to describe” (Mazur 2020: 236).

Subjectivity remains a controversial topic in AD. While AD guidelines “equate objectivity in AD with quality” (Hutchinson and Eardley 2019:43), corpus studies have shown that subjective language is a familiar construct in AD (e.g., Luque and Soler 2018; Magalhães and Lima 2018) and reception studies have concluded that users prefer more interpretative and emotionally laden AD in films, artworks and theater plays (e.g., Udo et al. 2010; Ramos and Rojo 2014; Szarkowska et al. 2016). Furthermore, it has been argued that audio describers, rather than uncritically embracing objectivist guidelines, should be aware that, as translators, they “inevitably leave traces of themselves and their decisions in their texts” (Hutchinson and Eardley 2019:44). This view chimed with the choreographer’s position, who regarded the audio describer as a further interpreter of the dance performance, considering her subjectivity on an equal footing with that brought by the dancers or the musicians.

It was discussed that a subjective approach was also best suited to the choreographic intention and the poetic nature of the dance performance. *From Sacromonte to New York* is both a tribute to Lorca and to *Omega* (1996), the ground-breaking album by the Andalusian composer and flamenco singer Enrique Morente and the Granada rock band Lagartija Nick, which drew on Lorca’s *Poet in New York* and Leonard Cohen songs. In the same way as *Omega* blended rock and flamenco, *From Sacromonte to New York* intermingles flamenco with contemporary dance.

Another issue that emerged in the conversation was the challenge of information selection, as sometimes it was difficult to paint an accurate picture of what was happening on stage without impinging on the *Omega* songs and the recited Lorca poems that pervaded the dance performance.

Given the absence of published reception studies on information selection and subjectivity in dance AD, it was decided that before taking a stance on the AD strategy and scripting the first draft of the AD it was necessary to delve into the available theoretically driven articles and guidelines specific to dance AD.

3. Literature and Guidelines on Dance AD

One of the first publications discussed by the AR team was that of Georgina Kleege (2014), who reflects upon dance AD from the perspective of a partially sighted dance enthusiast and testimonies from a dance audio describer. The author states that “verbal description of live

theater, film or television, is infinitely easier” (Kleege 2014:9). Eleanor Margolies, scholar and theater-maker, also finds dance AD particularly challenging: “It is of course impossible to convey in words all the visual information a spectator takes in at a glance” (2015:17). Therefore, “describing a performance means selecting from a vast field of simultaneous visual experience” (Margolies 2015:18). In this respect, Kleege exposes some key questions that a dance audio describer could face:

Should the description attempt to name every step or gesture, or summarize a series of movements as representing a single action? Should the description focus on the prima ballerina or attempt to render a sense of the action of the corps de ballet? (2014:9).

Existing recommendations and online training materials (Snyder 2010; Fryer 2018a) provide some answers essentially grounded on the experience of practitioners in English-speaking countries (the Spanish standard does not specifically address dance AD). For instance, there is some consensus as regards the first question. For Joel Snyder, “a description that attempts to convey *everything* will convey nothing well” (2010:33), while Louise Fryer states that “a description listing a sequence of kicks, skips and jumps would become dull very quickly” (2018a:4). Instead, it should be taken into account that “the specifics of each move are less important than the overall patterns created by their combinations” (Snyder 2010:33).

Leaving aside these observations, for Kleege the most important point that the AD should address is aesthetic experience (2014:9). She links this aesthetic experience with what she names “kinesthetic empathy”. “Kinesthetic empathy” is connected to the mirror neural system, which “may constitute a neural bridge between action and perception” (Hagendoorn 2004:80). Thus, dance viewing would be characterized by the fact that “even someone who has never stood on the points of her toes or executed a pirouette feels something in the corresponding parts of her body when she watches dancers onstage doing these things” (Kleege 2014:11). Drawing on neuroscientific research, Margolies also stresses that attending a dance performance is an experience which goes far beyond visual perception (2015:20). She mentions a study which looked at whether trained dancers’ brain activation patterns were different when looking at familiar or unfamiliar types of movements (Calvo-Merino et al. 2005:1244). Results

showed that “the brain’s response to seeing an action is influenced by the acquired motor skills of the observer” (ibid.).

Eventually, these acquired motor skills leading to a higher or lesser degree of kinesthetic empathy could have an impact on dance enjoyment, which raises one important question, can blind people who have never seen or experienced in first person the audio described movements enjoy dance performances? For Kleege this kinesthetic gap between the blind and partially sighted audience and sighted viewers is a strong reason to argue for subjectivity. She claims that the blind and partially sighted audience is more likely to live an aesthetic experience through an interpretative AD (2014:11). The suggestions by Fryer, both a scholar and practitioner, also go in this direction: “A person who has been blind since birth might respond less to a description of what a move ‘looks’ like, while being highly attuned to a description of what it ‘feels’ like as a body moves through space” (Fryer 2009:7). Describing what a move feels like requires an interpretative effort on the part of the audio describer. In the same vein, Margolies supports this view, stating that dance AD requires “writerly practices analogous to the translation of poetry” (2015:17). In Fryer’s dance AD training video (2018b), it is encouraged to resort to metaphors, meter, rhythm and rhyme, and even grammar deviations (e. g. leaving out linking words, verbs or pronouns).

A further argument questioning objectivity lies in the fact that “even in the most narrative classical ballet [...] the dancers’ movements are not necessarily naturalistic pantomimes of plot elements” (Kleege 2014) for “movement has a looser relationship vis à vis meaning than [...] language” (Bannerman 66:2014). Fryer (2018b) recommends distinguishing between abstract and representational movements. The abstractness of some dance movements can certainly complicate some of the key questions that according to Snyder audio describers should ask themselves:

What main idea does the dancing communicate to the viewer, what is the essence of the dance? What information would be most important to allow a blind audience member to experience the performance as fully as possible, to help him follow the meaning of the choreography? (2010:32).

However, Kleege doubts that even a subjective AD can be fully satisfactory. Therefore, she advocates for an unmediated experience of dance through other senses, such as touch. Words could “stand in the way of the blind person’s understanding and enjoyment of dance” (Kleege 2014:11). Margolies takes a more optimistic stance: rather than rejecting AD as a conveyor of the dance experience, she suggests that it can be regarded not only as an access service but also as an annotation method useful for dance researchers (2015:23).

Margolies is not the only researcher connecting dance AD with movement analysis. It has been hypothesized that if AD employs one of the most widespread movement analysis methods – Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) – it can be more successful in improving end-users’ understanding of dance performances and movement sequences (Geiger and Snyder 2010; Snyder 2013:116). LMA was originally devised by Rudolph Laban (1879-1958) and further developed by other dance theorists, such as Irmgard Bartenieff (1900–1981). Snyder presents a wordlist in English organized from the LMA perspective which can offer the audio describer a nuanced lexicon for movement description (2013:120-122).

Out of this literature review and guidelines examination it was concluded that subjectivity seemed to be the preferred approach in dance AD, thus supporting the initial stance of both the audio describer and the company director. However, as Kleege (2014) warns, subjectivity alone might not convey the aesthetic experience of dance and fully enhance the understanding of the choreography. For this reason, more importance was attached to the pre-show touch tour, as hands-on experience could potentially compensate for the lack of kinesthetic imagery.

Regarding information selection, giving an overview of the choreography instead of focusing on every single movement was clearly favored. The aforementioned questions posed by Kleege (2014) were used for guidance in conjunction with the wordlist based on LMA (Snyder, 2013).

Nevertheless, it was considered that, in keeping with the participative spirit of AR, the authors’ reflections and recommendations (which were practice-based or drew on their personal experience) were considered only a starting point to guide the AD process. Therefore, a survey was conducted with a two-fold purpose: to throw more light on subjectivity and information selection; and to accommodate the AD to the real needs and preferences of potential attendees.

4. Survey

4.1. Methodology

Twenty-eight legally blind participants (16 women, 12 men) were recruited, most of them at the headquarters of the National Organization for the Blind (ONCE) in Granada. Seventeen (60.71%) had severe sight loss (mean number of years after the onset of sight loss: 31), six (21.42 %) were late blind (mean number of years with total blindness: 25) and five (17.85%) had no visual memories, as they were either congenitally or early blind.

After being informed about the goal of the project and verbally giving their consent, they answered a profile questionnaire. Participants had a median age of 52 years (age range: 23-78; standard deviation: 15.4 years). The percentage of participants who held a university degree reached 42.85, 25% had completed upper secondary education, 14.3% had pursued vocational training, while 17.85% terminated their education after primary school.

Afterwards, participants were asked the following questions in the form of a one-to-one pre-performance interview in which no further prompts were given by the researcher:

- a) Do you prefer an objective or a subjective audio description style? (close-ended)
- b) What information would you like to be provided in the audio description of a dance performance? (open-ended)

Qualitative content analysis, “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1278), was used for a closer examination of the answers to the open-ended question. Given the exploratory nature of the topic under study and the aim of gaining a “richer understanding” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1286) of information needs and preferences regarding dance AD, an inductive approach was taken. No pre-defined coding scheme was used, rather codes were data-driven. The procedure was flexible and iterative, so that the final coding scheme provided “a good fit with the material” (Schreier 2014:173).

First, the interview data was read thoroughly. This close reading revealed that respondents had gone beyond the questions asked. They had put themselves in the shoes of the audio describer and even mentioned their experience with dance.

Then, the data files were imported into the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner Lite v.2.0.8. The process of open-coding (Elo and Kyngäs began 2008) began case by case across the dataset. Subsequently, these codes were grouped into categories following the criteria of unidimensionality (covering only one aspect of the material), mutual exclusiveness (setting the boundaries between categories in order that they are sufficiently distinct to cover different aspects of the material) and exhaustiveness (ensuring that no important aspect is left out of the coding scheme), as defined by Margrit Schreier (2014:175). To ensure that the coding scheme is applied consistently across the analyzed material, Schreier proposes to compare two rounds of coding, which can be conducted either by the same coder at different points in time or by two independent coders. The first option was followed here.

Finally, the code scheme included five categories:

- a) Aspects to consider in dance AD: key information that should be provided in either the AD script or the touch tour (e.g., “You will have to describe how the dancers are dressed, if possible”).
- b) Expectations: outcomes expected from the experience of attending an accessible dance performance (e.g., “What would I like? To enjoy the performance and to let my imagination go with the music”).
- c) Dance AD perceived challenges: the difficulties that participants assume a dance audio describer might face when rendering the visual verbal (e. g., “I would not have high expectations with dance AD because I think that there are things which are extremely difficult to describe”).
- d) Experience and attitudes towards dance and dance AD: previous experiences with dance and dance AD, along with their willingness to attend a dance performance (e.g., “I have never listened to a dance AD. I cannot picture it. Maybe if I had some dance experience, it would be easier”).
- e) Dance AD comparisons: parallels drawn with other AD modalities or accessible experiences (e.g., “Trying to audio describe dance is like attempting to interpret sung music into sign language”).

4.2. Survey Results

Opinions were divided as regards the first question (“Do you prefer an objective or a subjective audio description style?”): 53.6% (15) stated that they liked subjective AD, whereas the preference for an objective AD style came close with 46.4% (13).

Regarding the second question (“What information would you like to be provided in the audio description of a dance performance?”) and starting with the category of “aspects to consider in dance AD”, the most frequently mentioned item was the choreography, followed by the scenography and the costumes. Subjective aspects, such as the meaning of the dance performance, the feelings or the expression of the dancers were also highlighted by the participants. For instance, one partially sighted man said: “Let’s say that there’s a boy and a girl and that their dancing is similar to a courtship or a dispute. In addition to saying ‘The dancers get close to each other and she takes a step backwards’, it should be added ‘they’re representing a dispute’”. Curiously enough, one of the participants who had opted for objectivism shared this opinion: “You should audio describe what is being represented, the meaning of the dance”. Intonation was mentioned by another one: “If there’s emotion, it’s good that emotion is shown, as in audiobooks”. Some mentioned that they would like to know the appearance and complexion of the dancers. Four participants outlined the importance of intermodality: “The less descriptive, the better, mostly because it has to allow you to hear the music”; “describing a ballet or a dance performance makes you shift attention away from the music”.

Table 1: Aspects to consider in dance AD

Code	Percentage of coded segments belonging to each subcategory
Choreography	57.1% (16)
Scenography	17.9% (5)
Costume	17.9% (5)
Meaning	14.3% (4)
Intermodality	14.3% (4)
Feelings	10.7% (3)
Dancers	10.7% (3)
Expression	3.6% (1)

Some participants alluded to the outcomes they expected from attending a dance performance (category “expectations”), these being picturing the dance, enjoying it, understanding the performance, being moved, and escaping from reality (Table 2).

Table 2: Expectations

Code	Percentage of coded segments belonging to each subcategory
Picturing the dance	14.3% (4)
Enjoying the performance	7.1% (1)
Understanding the performance	3.6% (1)
Being moved	3.6% (1)
Escaping from reality	3.6% (1)

Although participants were not asked whether they thought that audio describing dance was challenging, 28.6 % of the participants (8) alluded to the complexity of this submodality of intersemiotic translation (category: “perceived AD challenges”). One participant who became totally blind at the age of 15 said: “I believe that there’re movements which are really difficult to describe, and I think that only blind people who have seen would be in a position to understand them”. Similarly, another participant stated: “I guess that any person will have their difficulties when ascertaining what a pirouette means. For us, it’s even more difficult, we don’t see the pirouette and we don’t have experience interpreting it”. Another participant compared this task with “a sign language interpreter who tries to interpret sung music” (category: “AD comparisons”). Further parallels were made, for example, with audio describing theater or commenting on figure skating.

Some revealed in their responses their experiences with dance or dance AD and their attitudes towards them (category: “experience and attitudes towards dance and dance AD”). As could be expected given the lack of dance AD offerings, 17.9% (5) spontaneously reported that they had no experience attending audio described dance performances, while 14.3% (4, 3 totally blind and 1 with severe sight loss) declared they had absolutely no dance imagery. For 7.1% (2) their lack of dance expertise was perceived as a hurdle to picturing the performance: one participant stated “how do you dance? I don’t remember that, it’s been ages since the last time I danced”. There were some participants who acknowledged that they had no interest in attending dance performances (7.1%), even if they were audio described (7.1%), as the AD stood in their way to the enjoyment of the performance: “If I go to *The Nutcracker*, I’d rather enjoy the music. I can read the storyline anywhere”. One participant clarified that he would not be interested in a choreography-focused AD:

In principle I've always refused to go to a dance performance, there it's not so worthwhile that you describe if the dancer takes a step back or a step forward. [...] I prefer a more emotional description, in a metaphorical vein, of what is felt and not so much of what happens. It's necessary to do it for didactic reasons, but it's less interesting.

5. Applying Findings: First Draft of the AD

A summary of the survey results was sent to the audio describer, who carefully considered them when scripting the first draft of the AD.

The most far-reaching decision taken with these data in mind was regarding subjectivity. It was supported by more than half of participants (53.6%) and indirectly mentioned by even some of those who in principle deemed the objective approach as more appropriate. This is in accordance with most of the literature reviewed (Kleege 2014; Margolies 2015 and Fryer 2018b) and the initial position of both the audio describer and the company director. This decision was extended to vocal delivery: intonation was not to be kept neutral as is the norm, but congruent with the atmosphere and choreographic intention, since “voice in AD can serve as the communicating link between the screen [in our case the dance performance] and the audience creating a single, cohesive experience” (Iglesias et al. 2015:92).

However, it was not to be overlooked that 46.4% of the potential audience preferred objectivity. For this reason, it was decided that the AD would convey the intended emotions and meaning of the performance while still preserving a choreography-focused style (almost 57.1% were interested in this information being provided). In the words of the audio describer: “I want to combine a detailed description with a more global account of the acts and their meaning. I have tried to find verbs and adjectives that convey the emotion one can experience watching the choreography” (Bernstorff 2020). These emotions and the meaning of the choreography were reconstructed in the AD script by the describer working hand in hand with the company director and the creative team so that interpretative excerpts did not only rely on the audio describer's analysis of the source text.

This draft was sent to the first author, who reviewed it in light of the results and assessed whether the proper balance between objectivity and subjectivity was struck. At this stage, an

audio synopsis of the dance performance was recorded by the audio describer and sent to the cultural coordinator of the ONCE headquarters in Granada.

6. AD Rehearsal and Second Draft

The next step was to pilot the script during an audio described rehearsal with one early blind woman and one partially sighted man, both in their mid-forties. Once the rehearsal was over, they were encouraged to give as much feedback as possible. The early blind woman was impressed and overwhelmed by all the information provided. Her first piece of advice was that it would help her to be able to feel some of the described movements. She also noted that the difference between a flamenco and a contemporary dancer remained unclear for her, since she was not familiar with the latter dance style. She remarked on the abstractness of dance. In her opinion, it did not suffice to describe, “they are turning”, how the dancers are turning must be specified, e.g., standing or on the floor. To make the abstract concrete, she proposed comparing movements with familiar objects or actions. She also suggested that when there was no time available to describe the movements simultaneously, it would be better to place the description beforehand instead of providing this information afterwards. For this purpose, it would be advisable to leave a 30-second gap between the end of one scene and the beginning of the next so that there is enough time to convey what is going to happen on stage. This would have allowed her to make sense of the audio described movements coming next.

She also stressed that the audio describer should not make the effort to explain everything because: “if you go into detail, when you get there, it has passed by”. Additionally, the importance of giving room to music and letting the imagination of the blind and partially sighted audience run free was emphasized. She firmly believed that regardless of the quality of the AD, a totally blind person could never enjoy the performance as a sighted one does. On a positive note, she highlighted that she liked expressions such as “they seem stressed out” and how one of the acts was described as “the tender expression of love”.

The partially sighted man also approved of the fact that there were subjective passages in the AD. He added that it was good that the storyline and the choreographic intention were present in the AD so that it resembled a “film in dance”. He further encouraged the audio describer to indicate the meaning of each act, even if this interpretation was not always apparent to the sighted audience. He agreed with the early blind informant that giving an account of every little

detail of the choreography was unnecessary. However, he supported providing as much information as possible in the pre-show touch tour.

Considering this feedback, a second version of the AD was drafted: information selection strategies were finetuned and the subjective nature of the AD reinforced, especially concerning the representation of the choreographic intention and the use of metaphors and similes to describe the choreography.

7. The Dance Performance Opening Night

Due to the circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic (there were no reported cases of coronavirus in Granada yet, but the attendance of the blind and partially sighted audience had been on the brink of being cancelled), finally only one early blind and four partially sighted attendees came to the dance performance, some with their families and friends.

They were welcomed by the audio describer and members of TRACCE at the hall of the Alhambra Theater. Then, they were led to the stage, where the choreographer and the flamenco and contemporary dancers joined them to start the pre-show touch tour. In the first place, the choreographer and the dancers introduced themselves. The attendees could get close to the dancers and touch the minimalist clothing they were wearing, as well as the scenography elements and props, such as old suitcases, flamenco box drums and wheeled steel structures. A great emphasis was placed on the structures since they were one of the key elements in most of the acts of the performance and they represented Manhattan skyscrapers. Structures were moved along the stage so that their sound could be identified later. Immediately afterwards, the dancers performed some recurrent movements while they were being simultaneously audio described. Those who wished could approach the dancers and touch their positions. Other movements were explained and assigned a name, such as “the seed gesture”, which was even rehearsed by some attendees. Thus, kinesthetic empathy was fostered, as they could rely on their own first-hand experience when imagining those movements once they were mentioned in the AD. Following the advice provided in the rehearsal, the choreographer explained the main differences between contemporary dance and flamenco.

Once the first sighted attendees started to enter the theater, the touch tour came to an end and the audio describer took a few minutes to deliver an audio introduction in which the structure

of the performance was mentioned again, especially for those who had not listened to the audio synopsis sent to the ONCE affiliate attendees.

The blind and partially sighted attendees accommodated themselves in the second row of the theatre and were provided with the AD headsets. The audio describer sat in the first row (there was not an interpreter booth available), and delivered the AD via the microphone of an infra-red transmission system to the AD headsets.

8. Post-Performance Feedback and Discussion of Results

Four out of the five attendees were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. This questionnaire was divided into two parts, the first one concerning their experience in the dance performance and the second one their sociodemographic data. The questionnaire was designed *ad hoc* taking into account the literature review and the category analysis conducted with the answers of the first 28 participants, and was reviewed by two senior researchers, an expert in AD reception studies and an experimental psychologist.

As for the sociodemographic data, participants had a median age of 46 years (age range: 27-62; standard deviation: 14.9). Two of them attended dance performances at least once a year or had taken dance classes.

The complete results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 3. Overall, the evaluation of the AD under the chosen dimensions was positive, scoring with a median ranging between 8.5 and 10 on a 10-point scale. All attendees liked the AD and regarded (with a fair degree of consensus, as the minimal standard deviation shows) that it had allowed them to understand and enjoy the performance (last two items in Table 5).

The paralinguistic elements of the AD were also assessed (Table 3). As the AD was recorded and transcribed, it could be checked that it was delivered at a pace of 8 characters per second, below the recommendation of 14 characters per second (Cabeza 2013:197). This speed was rated with a median of 9.5. The intonation also obtained a high rating: 9.25. The audio describer suited the intonation to the mood and rhythm of the music, the songs and poems. What was almost a calm AD whisper when silence flooded the stage turned into a more vibrant and intense pace when the verbal description had to be inserted in between the instrumentals of the *Omega*

songs. Information quantity and language suitability obtained a median rate of 9.25 and 9.75 each. Dance terminology was kept to a minimum and the AD script was peppered with metaphors and similes such as the following: “They keep on making calm and undulant movements as if they were growing plants”; “both roll on the floor, curling up like a fetus”. It also included explanations of the choreographic intention: “Now starts the romantic and tender waltz between Lara and Nacho, which embodies the healing power of love”, or “This act represents how each one stands out from the crowd and finds their individuality, their own language, and how they finally join in a group with mutual support and acceptance of each other’s differences”. The portrayal of the feelings and emotions expressed by the dancers was also to be found: “They look at each other knowingly”; “Looking at us daringly, they get off the stage”.

Consistent with the suitability of the language and the information quantity are the results as far as the understanding of the meaning of the performance with a median of 9.5 (Table 5). A general consensus was reached when rating whether they had been moved by the performance, with all participants choosing a 10 out of 10. Similarly, they reported finding the dance performance highly interesting (9.5). A greater standard deviation (2.2) is to be found in the ratings regarding the dance imageability, in spite of the fact that in the touch tour they were able to interact with the dancers, the scenography and touch the dancers executing some key steps. Interestingly, the greater variability in the results is accounted for by the responses of the early-blind woman, who, in spite of being satisfied with the AD, considered that she could not fully picture the dancers (7), how they were dressed or their movements (5).

Table 3: Overall satisfaction ratings

	Median	Standard deviation
On a scale from 1 to 10, please indicate how much you liked the performance.	9.5	0.58
On a scale from 1 to 10, please indicate how much you liked the AD.	10	0

Table 4: AD ratings

On a scale from 1 to 10, please rate the following aspects of the AD:	<i>Median</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Audio describer’s intonation	9.25	0.95
AD speed	9.5	0.58

Language suitability	9.75	0.5
Information quantity	9.25	0.95

Table 5: Imageability, understanding and aesthetic ratings

On a scale from 1 to 10, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements, where 1 is “totally disagree” and 10 “totally agree”.	<i>Median</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
I could picture the dancers	9.25	1.5
I could picture what the dancers were wearing	8.75	1.5
I could picture how the dancers moved	8.25	2.2
I could picture the scenography	8.5	1.73
I understood the meaning of the performance	9.5	1
I found the performance interesting	9.5	0.58
I found the performance moving	10	0
The AD allowed me to understand the performance	9.5	0.58
The AD allowed me to enjoy the performance	9.75	0.5

Attendees were additionally invited to suggest improvements to the AD. Two made no proposals. For one participant, it was the first time she attended an audio described dance performance and for her it was a really satisfactory experience. For the other, who had taken dance classes, it was positive because she felt the AD and the touch tour had allowed her to “get where she could not normally get”. In that sense, the AD had complemented what she was able to see from the second row of the theater.

Although the third participant thought that the AD was “perfect”, she suggested that there could be two audio describers instead of one. These two audio describers could interact with each other in a way that would rekindle the interest of the audience. She remarked that “if you only listen to one person, you should trust what this person is telling you”. She also wanted to highlight that she liked how approachable the dancers were when they introduced themselves and told the audience what they were wearing and presented the scenography elements.

The early blind attendee also greatly appreciated that the dancers introduced themselves. Hearing them talk and interacting with them allowed her to create a mental image of the dancers and connect more strongly with the performance. Having the opportunity to touch the dancers also helped her to challenge some stereotypes, e.g., that all had to be unusually tall and incredibly thin. Nevertheless, she was more critical when asked about what improvements could be made:

I would explain what happens beforehand instead of afterwards, but I understand that there are moments in which this is really complex. [...] In dance AD you must be quite sharp. Dance is difficult to audio describe, which does not mean that it cannot be audio described, here you've got the proof. Of course, had it not been for the AD, I would have been bored stiff. The AD was all for me. But audio describing dance is quite complex, there are ever-changing movements, movements which are highly dynamic, which are synchronized. I don't think that the AD can ever convey the emotional impact that someone feels when watching dancers synchronized. And how do you describe the expression of each dancer? You know, at the end of the day, art is very subjective. There will be dancers who are better at expressing themselves than others. You cannot go into detail, that isn't good, you make your own picture of what is happening.

As pointed out by this attendee (although it was avoided whenever possible), there were some moments in which the description came afterwards. Here is an example: "During the poem, the stage has been in the dark and there have been light flashes that have allowed us to see a line of dancers coming towards us". On the other hand, facial expressions were not always described, so as not to overload listeners. A general sense of the mood was conveyed, detailing individual facial expressions only when the AD focus was placed on certain dancers following the choreographic intention. No judgment was made on the expertise or the talent of each dancer, a piece of information that would be tricky to supply in AD as what qualifies as talent would even be challenging to define for dance experts. It is perhaps more suitable to stress either in the pre-show touch tour or the AD script the remarkable qualities of each step and combination of steps (e.g., its shape, dynamics or required effort) which would make a sighted viewer acknowledge the mastery of movement by the dancers and their ability to convey intentionality.

The comment by the early blind attendee exemplifies the intricacies of dance AD and the impact of lacking visual dance imagery references on its reception. Although some questions would require more research and ethical and aesthetical considerations, other points would be easier to implement. In some cases, this would be as simple as allocating thirty seconds at the beginning of each act for the audio describer to give a brief overview of what is going to happen onstage. This brings to focus the importance of taking into account that the performance is going to be audio described in the development phase whenever feasible, a practice which has been advocated by media accessibility scholars under the tenets of integrated AD and accessible filmmaking. This highlights the need for considering accessibility services not as an add-on once the piece is conceived, but from its devising stage (be it a performance or a film) onwards, with a view that the creative and audio describing team can work together and make the

adjustments, or even creative changes, that would ensure that the decision-making process in AD is not driven by tight time pressure (Fryer 2018c; Romero-Fresco 2020).

9. Concluding Remarks

This paper has presented step by step an AR project on the under-investigated area of dance AD. Overall, it had positive outcomes as it met the purpose of involving potential attendees in the development of accessibility practices for blind and partially sighted audiences in the contemporary dance performance *From Sacromonte to New York*. In this sense, it can be viewed as an illustration of good practices in accessibility, especially taking into account that no tried and tested guidelines exist for this kind of context and also that attendees had no or few previous similar experiences.

As for the goal of advancing research in dance AD, this paper has contributed the first available results on preferences of Spanish blind and partially sighted participants in terms of style and content of AD in dance performances. These results have echoed some of the issues addressed in guidelines and theoretically-driven studies. However, they have also revealed that participants have divided opinions regarding one of the first choices an audio describer should make: either taking an objectivist or a subjectivist approach. Hence, our data show that this debate is not restricted to AD scholarship in other AD modalities.

Feedback collected after the dance performance suggests that the balanced approach taken in this dance AD was successful, given, among others, the median rating (9.75 in a 10-point scale) assigned on the dimension of language suitability. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that only four attendees could complete the questionnaire. Although 80% of the blind and partially sighted audience gave feedback, it would have been desirable that at least 25 attendees with visual impairment completed this questionnaire in order to achieve more representative results (Orero et al. 2018:110). Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that in AR projects participants are not treated “as mere data sources for objective post hoc generalization” (Greenwood 2015:205). This research strategy is framed within the interpretative paradigm (Cardno and Piggot-Irvin 1996:20). For AR researchers triggering “a process of change and improvement in the real world” (Melrose 2001:176) is more relevant than meeting positivist quality criteria, to the extent that “from the perspective of AR, rigor involves demonstrating that the interpretations and designed actions really work in context” (Greenwood 2015:205). This particular notion of

rigor has earned AR the critiques of positivists, who claim that the results of an AR project, being so context-bound, lack transferability (Greenwood 2015:207).

Beyond any doubt, this AR project significantly improved the accessibility practices implemented at the opening of the Lorca-inspired dance performance, providing a rare learning and knowledge-transfer opportunity for all the participants involved. The outputs of this project clearly transcend the goal of making *From Sacromonte to New York* accessible for blind and partially sighted audiences, as in the process new insights have been gained that may be a catalyst for good practices helping audio describers and stakeholders to prevent “predictable problems” (ibid.). For instance, suggestions by attendees brought to the fore the need for allowing enough time for a brief audio introduction to each dance act. In this way, the audio describer would not have to struggle to find the right time to deliver this information.

Additionally, this project can (re)open research avenues and promote innovative practices in the field. The proposal of the AD being voiced by two audio describers could also be further explored. Given the divided opinions on subjectivity, it could be extremely interesting to put to the test audiences’ responses to a dance performance in which one audio describer adopts a subjective stance and the other an objective approach, taking turns or answering one another. This could convey to the audience that AD is not “a neutral, unobtrusive act of translation that moves information from one medium into another” but rather, acknowledging that “the act of describing is itself an aesthetic performance that generates its own meanings” (Kleege and Wallin 2015). Thus, AD could become an integral part of the dance performance adding new layers of meaning and a creative value, raising the visibility of AD (Fryer 2018c) and turning it into an enriching practice also for the sighted audience.

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