

Sound Painting - audio description in another light

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Art stimulates perception, thought, feeling, physicality, spirit.

(Meredith Monk)

When one faces the long winding queues at the door of major art museums throughout the world one can only wonder what makes people want to visit them. In general terms, Van den Berg Haarlem (2008) believes that museums raise in their visitors feelings of two kinds: personal feelings and social feelings. On a personal level, visiting museums is said to develop a feeling of entertainment, education and aesthetics; on a social level, it might involve the heightened thrill of sharing feelings, or those of superiority or inferiority in which people measure themselves to the standards of their peers; at times, such social feelings are simply lethargic; but they can also be that of the landmark when each experience is one of “a once in a life time event”.

When art is the focal point, there are reasons to believe that a new set of feelings come into play because, as Monk (1990) puts it:

art offers something else – depth, involvement, a new way of looking at the world that we live in, a fresh approach to what we take for granted, a chance to experience freedom of the imagination. (...) Art becomes a paradigm for whole, integrated human beings using the fullness of their resources as artists and as audiences.

So, whatever the reasons for visiting, when art is at stake, people are given the opportunity to go on personal journeys brought about by a dialogue between each work and its beholder. But what happens when the beholder cannot access the work of art for the simple fact that s/he is visually impaired? Does this mean that the art experience is simply off boundaries?

Smith (2003:221) reminds us that “whatever the reason [for visiting a museum], a visually impaired person hopes to leave the museum fully enriched by the experience”.

For blind people the key to enriching experiences is found in alternative means of access that may lead to similar effects. To this Smith testifies (ibid.:222) in the first person, “[b]y using vivid description, and engaging my senses of touch, hearing and smell, they are able to give me a greater level of access than they would to many researchers with sight.”

Indeed, multi-sensory communication strategies are capable of engaging visually impaired museum goers to very high degrees and there are examples throughout Europe that prove this. At present, the most common multi-sensory experiences at museums are made available through one of the following solutions: special exhibits/museums that have been devised with them in mind (e.g. Anteros Museum, in Bologna, or the Museo Tiflogico, in Madrid); special live tours/touch sessions (e.g. V&A or the British Museum, in London) that take visitors with special needs as their main addressees; or specific audio guides (e.g. Imperial War Museum and the British Museum, in London) that have special descriptions for blind users. Whatever the strategy taken, words and tactile materials appear to be the main resources available to make blind patrons “see” the exhibits. Artifacts, concrete objects and realities that can be related to the universe of people’s daily life are most easily made available to visually impaired visitors, but the issue becomes particularly complex when the visual arts are involved. In that domain, words (in the guise of audio guides) seem to be the best solution to make art accessible to these particular visitors.

In simple terms, works in the visual arts are either tri-dimensional or bi-dimensional. Tri-dimensional art, such as sculpture, is theoretically available to touch even though it is mainly intended to be looked at. With “touchable” art one may think that words are dispensable or merely complimentary. However, it is often the case that description is essential for touch to become meaningful. Bi-dimensional art – such as painting, drawing or photography, which is in essence visual –, is a demanding challenge to anybody wanting to translate it through non-visual codes. Raised drawings (on microcapsule paper) with the main outlines of a picture prove reductive when so many elements – colour, texture, perspective, technique, just to name a few – convene to make a piece of art unique. Realistic, “easy-to-name” images seem less of a problem to describe, but what characterizes art is what lies beyond what can be objectively seen (and named). Subjectivity is inherent to art, and most often than not, what makes a work of art breathe is its *poesis*. A question must then be raised: how can an audio description offer that “extra layer” that is felt rather than spoken? How effective is an objective description of a piece of art, when art is meant to be subjective?

Conventional (live or electronic audio guided) tours to museums are mostly directed towards sighted visitors. They direct the gaze and highlight the elements that make each

exhibit special. In such circumstances, language is used as a go-between. It helps the less knowledgeable to understand the work of art, enhances interest or simply adds the social element to an experience. When visually impaired patrons join in, what is said is what is seen, so words gain special importance. Words can become the art experience itself, a fact that holds true even when alternative haptic solutions are available.

Guidelines, such as those by Axel et. al. (1996) offer concise suggestions for effective audio described guides. Even though emphasis is placed on objectivity, these guidelines suggest the creative use of sound and language to make exhibits accessible.

Very much in line with established guidelines, De Coster and Mühleis (2007:193) put together a proposal for a two tier (intersensorial) type of audio description that comprises three distinct phases:

First, establish a geometrical structure as a frame of reference, and then refer back to this structure later on in the description, i.e. describe the painting in relation to it. Next, proceed to describe the signs that are clear or relatively unambiguous before tackling the ambivalent signs, if this is possible given the picture chosen.

These authors divide the visual message into objective, tangible elements and subjective, untangible elements. They acknowledge visual ambiguity, which is believed to be untranslatable through words. However, they add that “one can give an idea of visual ambiguity (...) if a comparable ambiguity exists in another sensorial field (touch, hearing)”.

De Coster and Mühleis’ proposal could be taken forward if, instead of explaining the meaning of the ambivalent signs, audio describers could find in music, sound effects and words the same “sensorial ambiguity” that is said to be found in art. This different approach could be addressed as “sound painting” or even *poesis*, much in line with what Pujol & Orero (2007:49) define as Ekphrasis: “a literary figure that provides the graphic and often dramatic description of a painting, a relief or other work of art”, that can include “elements that can be considered objective, whereas other elements are completely subjective” (ibid.:53), serving both the “clear signs” and “ambivalent signs” that works of art are made of. If ekphrasis is a “poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (Spitzer 1962:72), sound painting, that suggest rather than explicitates, will give people an opportunity to appreciate art.

It may be risky to be poetic when describing painting, particularly because, as Da Vinci wrote in his notebooks (tr. Richter 1888), “words are never as strong as images”.

However, if the blind person cannot have direct access to the visual work of art itself, might it not be better to be given an “alternative work of art” to enjoy through other senses? Through sound painting people who cannot see the actual images may gain access to them through a new and different piece of art, that will not be a go-between but will actually substitute the original, possibly becoming an original work of art in itself.

In the tradition of word painting (also known as tone painting or text painting) in which the musical technique reflects the literal meaning of the song (i.e. music translates the meaning of words) and that of ekphrasis, *sound painting* may be a new form of audio description that may allow art to be “seen” in a different light.

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