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Creativity in Media Accessibility:
A Political Issue[1]

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Abstract

The tension between source-text oriented translation and target-text oriented translation has traditionally been the driver of many of the key discussions that have permeated throughout the history of translation studies: literal vs free translation, formal vs dynamic equivalence, foreignization vs domestication, etc. (Nida and Taber 1969, Venuti 1965). On the free and/or target-text oriented end of the spectrum is the notion of transcreation, which foregrounds the creativity involved in translation (Bernal-Merino, 2006). In audiovisual translation and more specifically media accessibility, the focus has traditionally been placed on comprehension and on compensating for the content that the users miss due to their impairment. The priority of SDH has often been to provide viewers with hearing loss with the information that is available to hearing viewers, whereas AD normally aims to convey to blind and partially sighted users what is being seen by fully sighted viewers.

However, recent developments in media accessibility, such as Greco's three shifts (2019) (from a particularist, maker-centred and reactive to a universalist, user-centred and proactive view of media access) and accessible filmmaking (Romero-Fresco, 2019) (the consideration of accessibility/translation in the production of audiovisual content through the collaboration between creators and translators/media access experts) are pointing to a different way to look at media accessibility. This new approach aims to facilitate the viewers' (multisensory) engagement with the film and focuses on their abilities rather than on their impairments (Romero-Fresco, 2020a, 2020b, Fryer and Cavallo, forthcoming). This is leading to creative practices where accessibility is a crucial artistic element of the film and where the different accessible versions are being treated as original versions rather than as target texts (Branson, 2019). In this sense, creative media

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accessibility may be regarded as a form of transcreation, which in this case is applied to different versions for audiences that may not be in a position to access sound and/or image.

This paper aims to map out the different ways in which creative media accessibility is being applied in both films and theatre plays, almost invariably in collaboration with the creative teams. This includes subtitled versions that are originally designed to reinforce the visuals instead of making up for lost audio content in the subtitles, audio described films/plays that build in key audio content in production to avoid including it in the description and finally "all for all" productions that are designed to include both subtitles and audio description for everyone in a way that is not redundant for any target group.

1. Introduction

Creativity has always played a central role in discussions about translation, given the impossibility of conceiving translation as a mere act of reproduction of an original text without "creative interference" (Boase-Beier, 2011, p. 53). This has been explored most significantly in relation to literary translation, including the role of the translator as writer (Bassnett and Bush, 2006), the so-called creative turn in literary translation (Loffredo and Perteghella, 2006) and the overlaps between literary translation and creative writing (Rossi, 2018).

Audiovisual translation (AVT) and media accessibility (MA) are no strangers to this debate, which in this area has often been linked to the notion of transcreation, understood in the localization industry as the adjustments needed to make an audiovisual product work in all target markets, while remaining loyal to the original creative intent (Pedersen, 2014). Companies offering transcreation services in the localization industry highlight the creative component involved in transcreation and steer clear of traditional translation, which is presented as a more literal, word-for-word service (Bernal-Merino, 2015). Many professional translators and translation studies scholars often see this as a rather narrow and simplistic view of translation (Gambier and Munday, 2014), at odds with a reality of intercultural, interlinguistic and intersemiotic communication in which translation is concerned with "all possible ways of rewriting" (Zabalbeascoa Terran, 2012, p. 197).

While this debate has been going on for long in the areas of AVT and MA, it seems to have become a particularly hot topic lately. This is evidenced by its inclusion in conferences such as *Media for All, Unlimited!* and "The Translator's Visibility: Exploring Creative AVT" and special issues in academic journals such as this one, *Intralinea* (Di Giovanni and Raffi, 2021) and *Jostrans* (Greco and Romero-Fresco, 2021). Further

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evidence from outside academia can be found in lively debates in social media involving professionals and scholars (Sokoli and Pedersen, 2021) and in art exhibitions on creative MA such as "Activating Captions", held at ARGOS (the leading national centre for art film and video in Belgium) and featuring work from some of the artists discussed in this article. Although it may be early to identify all the reasons for this renewed interest in the creative side of AVT and MA, a few factors stand out. Firstly, as more strict accessibility legislation is put in place and as leading streaming platforms such as Netflix, HBO and Disney+ catch up on their translation and accessibility duties, attention is shifting from quantity to quality, with the latter focusing not only on fulfilling guidelines but also on adding creatively to them.

Secondly, as described by Greco (2018), MA is currently undergoing a significant transformation, as it shifts from a particularist account of access to a universalist account (which concerns users with and without disabilities that do not have access to original audiovisual productions), from reactive to proactive models (access from inception rather than as an afterthought) and from a maker-centered to a user-centered approach (the users as contributors to MA). These shifts have materialised in the model known as accessible filmmaking, which considers translation and/or accessibility during the production of audiovisual media, normally through the collaboration between the creative team and the translator (Romero-Fresco, 2019: 5–6). This collaboration between creators and translators (the "translation plus" mentioned in the call for papers of the present issue of *Cultus*) is likely to lead to creative practices in this area.

However, a distinction may be required here between MA and AVT, which are sometimes conflated. As seen in Figure 1, Greco (2019) positions MA within the larger field of accessibility studies and AVT within translation studies:
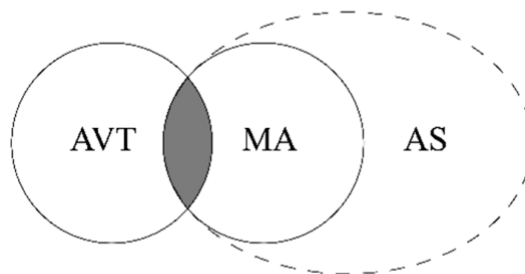

Figure 1. Adaptation of Greco's schematisation of the three accounts of the area of MA (2019)

From this perspective, Greco and Jankowska (2020) distinguish between translation-based MA services (audio description, dubbing, subtitling, sign language interpreting, etc.) and non translation-based MA services (audio introductions audio subtitles, clean audio screen reading, tactile reproductions, etc.). There is, therefore, a great deal of crossover between MA and AVT, but also some key differences in terms of perspective:

> [AVT and MA] look at the world through different lenses. They are guided by different questions, each of which influence the ways they investigate a problem, the explanations they formulate, and, ultimately, the solutions they devise. As a subfield of translation studies, AVT is concerned with translation, and when it observes the world it frames it in terms of translation problems. As a subdomain of AS, MA is concerned with accessibility, and when it observes the world it frames it in terms of access problems. (…) Clearly distinguishing between MA (and AS too) and other fields is eventually critical for how one addresses and responds to those concerns. Otherwise, one may run the risk of curing a cold with a hammer (Greco, 2019, p. 23).

This article aims to identify and analyse current practices of creative and artistic MA but, before that, it proposes a distinction between creativity considered through the lens of AVT and through an accessibility standpoint.

2. Creativity through a translational lens

In AVT, and with the exception of some accessible filmmaking practices applied to translation (Romero-Fresco, 2019), creativity has been analysed mostly after production, that is, as part of the localisation process of an already completed audiovisual piece an involving no collaboration with the creative team. It is not easy to ascertain, however, what is and what is not creative in this process, not least because creativity is routinely used by many of the leading localisation stakeholders (HBO, Netflix, etc.) to describe their practices regardless of the approach they adopt.

Chaume (2021) ventures the following working definition as a starting point to think of creative media localisation: "all forms of non-canonical solutions to localization problems, in other words, a deviation from standard translation solutions and from current guidelines". Even before delving into the definition, though, the first issue arises with the terminology used, as creative media localization stands alongside alternative terms such as transcreation, adaptation and transadaptation, all of which, as explained by Chaume, risk being used simply as a synonym of AVT.

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In the specific case of subtitling[2], scholars have referred to integrated subtitles (Fox, 2018) and especially creative subtitles (Foerster, 2010; McClarty, 2012). However, as shown in a recent Twitter discussion involving practitioners and researchers (Sokoli and Pedersen, 2021), the use of creative may be seen by some as contentious and even offensive, as it seems to imply there is no creativity in standard, by-the-guidelines subtitling. This has opened the door to other terms such as alternative, non-standard, unconventional and even free-form subtitling (ibid).

A valuable contribution to this "terminological conundrum" is provided by Díaz-Cintas (2018), who refers to the unconventional and often creative subtitles used on the Internet as cybersubtitles (see Figure 2). These include fan subs (subtitles made by some fans for all viewers), guerrilla subtitles (subtitles aiming to challenge hegemonic practices in society) and altruist subtitles (subtitles made to promote a worthy cause), some of which can also turn into fake subs when the aim is to openly offer false information in order to entertain the viewer.
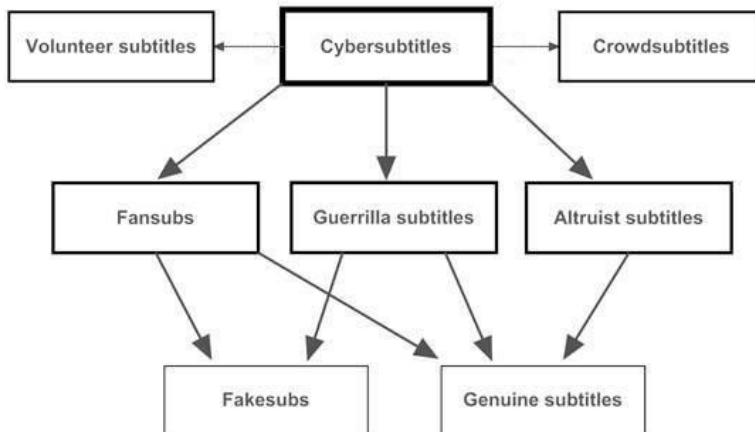

Figure 2. Subtitling activity on the cyberspace (Díaz Cintas, 2018)

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[2] In the US and Canada, "captions" is the term used for subtitles traditionally designed for viewers with hearing loss, which are often, although not always, intralingual. When they are interlingual (and thus translate foreign content) they are called subtitles. In Europe, the terms used to make this distinction are "subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing" and "subtitles", respectively. In this article, the terms used are the ones chosen by the authors discussed.

What they all have in common is that they are made by users "outside the commercial imperatives that regulate professional practice" (Díaz Cintas, 2018, p. 141) and subverting standard subtitling conventions with creativity. Of the different creative features used in fan subs one of the most quintessential ones is arguably the incorporation of topnotes or headnotes to explain concepts that may not be straightforward for the viewers, as in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Use of topnotes by fansubbers (Díaz Cintas, 2018)

Zooming out to include other AVT modalities, examples abound of films, such as *Austin Powers* or *Shrek,* whose dubbed versions are domesticated through unconventional and creative translation solutions to eliminate elements that may seem too alien or foreign to target viewers. A similar objective lies behind the alteration of images from the original to the foreign versions of films such as *Inside Out*. These may be seen as examples of creative (image-based) translation or localisation, performed in this case during the post-production phase, to cater for a global audience. Figures 4-5 include an illustrative example, as the image of the protagonist refusing to eat broccoli was replaced for the Japanese audience by another one where she refuses to eat green peppers, which are apparently more disliked by Japanese children than broccoli (Acuna, 2015).

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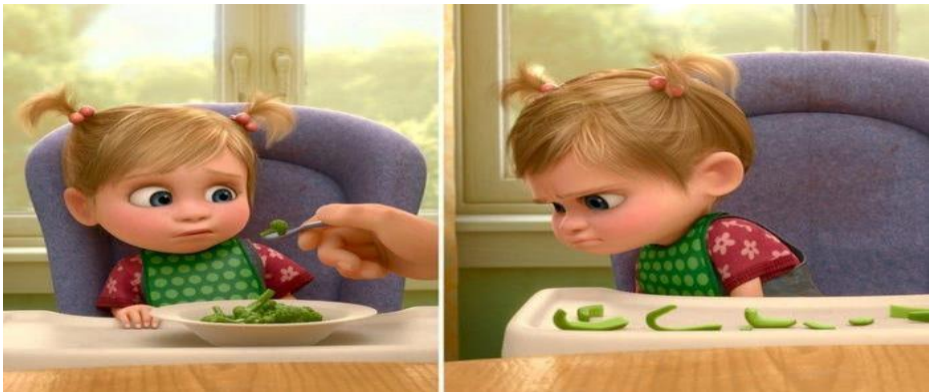
Figures 4 and 5. Alteration of images in the postproduction and distribution of the film
Inside Out

For Chaume (2018, 2021), these creative practices contribute to building audiovisual cultural capital via creative AVT and are closely linked to the concepts of travelling texts (ideas, values and genres that travel over cultural and linguistic borders in translation) and transmedia storytelling (the process whereby fictional stories get dispersed across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified entertainment experience). Drawing on these ideas, Chaume (2021) defines creative AVT as

> Those media localization and adaptation practices that, on the one hand, provide linguistic and cultural access to the media for all, and, on the other hand, claim to become an artistic, imaginative and creative contribution to the audiovisual text, so that they elicit a new experience in the audience and, finally, vindicate the translator's or filmmaker's visibility.

In sum, seen through the lens of (audiovisual) translation, creativity is firstly a terminological conundrum, as it pits the term "creative" (which may imply that there is no creativity in AVT in general) against other terms such as "alternative" or "non-standard" that are likely to have their pros and cons. If creativity (rather than alternativeness or unconventionality) is what needs to be explored, it may make sense to stick to this term but also to propose a spectrum or continuum ranging from less to more creative AVT solutions, thus avoiding a binary approach while recognising the creative element inherent to all translations.

Secondly, creative media localisation is regarded here as a result of recognised globalisation processes such as travelling texts, transmedia storytelling and adaptation practices that bring audiovisual texts closer to

the cultural and linguistic reality of the viewers while eliminating some of the foreignness of the original versions. When produced by fans, these creative practices can provide added information, innovative features not normally included in standard guidelines and even parodic or subversive elements that disrupt the original audiovisual product.

Valuable as it may be, the notion of creativity as seen from the standpoint of AVT is often presented as a bonus, an icing on the cake that makes theoretical sense in a world of globalised storytelling and that is innovative and desirable in terms of professional practice. There is, however, no sense of urgency here. No indication of creativity being a vital element from the point of view of ideology, identity or social equity. It will be welcome if and when it comes, but it is not expected or demanded. This may partly explain why creative practices in AVT and MA have taken so long to develop and why this issue is so different when approached from the standpoint of accessibility.

3. Creativity through an accessibility lens

Over the past years, artists and scholars working in a wide range of areas including film, theatre and other visual arts, AVT and MA, rhetorics and technical and professional communication have shown reservations about some of the official guidelines that are currently being used to provide MA services such as captioning, audio description and sign language translation. As noted by Kleege (2016) and Thompson (2018), while these guidelines may be useful in ensuring a certain degree of consistency and professionalism, they often fail to acknowledge the creative and transformative potential of MA. For Kleege, it is important to "unsettle the notion that when such standards are properly followed they create straightforward, unmediated, and wholly effective translations of visual art and film" (in Chandler, 2018).

For some of these scholars, guidelines are often built on problematic assumptions and they privilege able experiences based on an idea of objectivity that is neither possible nor desirable:

> While a scholarly treatment of a text, painting or film may be scrupulous in sticking to a neutral description, the reader can ascribe the particular word choices to the subjectivity of the author. With audio description, the illusion of objectivity is reinforced because the description is delivered without authorship, as if it represents some unassailable truth (Kleege, 2018: 101).

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This insistence on objectivity has been criticised for leading to standards that are too focused on comprehension, too compensatory and relying mainly on one sense, that is, designed almost exclusively to provide visually- and hearing-impaired users with information about of what they cannot see and hear, respectively (Fryer, 2018; Romero-Fresco, 2021). AVT and MA scholars have long been advocating for alternative approaches that value subjectivity and engagement (Remael, 2021; Szarkowska, 2013), often from the standpoint of AVT and MA. However, in order to consider a different perspective, it is useful to draw on other scholars who have recently looked at this issue from areas such as disability studies, cultural studies and technical and professional communication, using a disability/accessibility lens rather than a translational one.

A case in point is Sean Zdenek, scholar in technical and professional communication and expert in captioning whose work will be analysed in the following section of this article. Zdenek (2018) expresses frustration at the objective, apolitical and acultural manner in which studies on technical and professional communication have been approached until now, often focused on solving problems. Interestingly, this may share some common traits with a great deal of the research conducted so far in the area of MA, which has probably paid more attention to practical issues related to audio description and captioning than to engaging with theoretical principles from areas as closely related as disability studies. As a reaction to this approach, Zdenek proposes to draw on crip theory (McRuer, 2006) to question deep-rooted assumptions regarding captioning and to imagine a more accessible future for viewers with hearing loss. Situated at the crossroads between critical disability studies and queer theory, crip theory is a multifaceted analytical tool for approaching culture from a perspective that centres disabled experiences, embodiments and movements. For McRuer, crip theory is to disability studies what queer theory is to lesbian and gay studies. Both crip theory and queer theory are central to disability studies and lesbian and gay studies, respectively, but while the latter affirm disability and lesbian and gay identities, crip theory and queer theory simultaneously affirm and resist identities in order to forge coalitions across multiple identities. Crip theory and queer theory scrutinize mainstream representations to uncover dominant assumptions and experiences of exclusion (Lewis, 2015). Like disability studies, they take a "radical stance toward concepts of normalcy", fighting against "the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.)" (Sandahl, 2003: 26). They also react against ableism, understood as a type of discrimination against

people with disabilities that is not only manifested through individual opinions, but also through forms of exclusion that get codified and naturalised in various systems of power because they are built into the structure of our societies (Elmén, 2016). Zdenek (2018) proposes to "dance on crip theory's radical edge" and politicise the study of captioning and MA, questioning their values and norms and framing them in the wider picture of inclusion and social justice. Here, the notions of embodiment, multisensory experience and disability gain are key.

Moving away from the notion of the disabled body as an object of medicalisation (the basis of the medical model of disability), embodiment is concerned with how our bodies influence the way we interpret the world (Butler, 2018). In a multimodal context, this refers to the relationship between physical experience, multimodal resources, media practices and social spaces, where meaning making is grounded in physical experience, through bodily form, gaze, gesture, body posture, facial expression, movement and, crucially, through the engagement with the different senses (MODE, 2012).

In Zdenek's view (2018), current captioning guidelines[3] have remained unchanged for too long and are characterised by an alarming lack of innovation as compared to the progress experienced by digital technologies since the turn of the century. Captioned speech, for instance, despite providing access to the dialogue for viewers with hearing loss, is normally stripped of voice and embodiment. Mood/tone descriptions are sometimes added with labels such as "slurred speech" or "ironic", but they become so recurrent that they can no longer depict the idiosyncrasy of a character. All voices look the same in the captions, where speech is "distilled down to the bare essentials—i.e., the uttered words themselves—and presented through the prism of grammatical formalization and the well-worn conventions of standard spelling".

Authors such as Thompson, Kleege and Zdenek see the integration of accessibility into the production process (through the collaboration between the creative team and media access experts) as a necessary step towards a move away from traditional guidelines. However, this step, which is fully in line with the accessible filmmaking model (Romero-Fresco, 2019), is not sufficient, as it can still lead to the application of those guidelines. Here is where a creative approach to MA plays a critical role, as it can produce

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[3] He's referring to US guidelines, but much can be extrapolated to guidelines in other countries.

embodied and multisensory meaning and underscore the transformative/generative potential of MA (Butler, 2018). Drawing on studies on rhetorics and technical and professional communication, Butler proposes the use of integral captions, which are characterised by being considered in production, by being placed strategically so that they provide access to the meaningful content of the video and by using different devices (typography, effects, images, etc.) to enhance the rhetorical and aesthetic quality of the video (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Integral caption used in *Gallaudet: The Film*

Integral captions are designed to embody multidimensional meaning. "As a Deaf woman who communicates through body language and eye contact", Butler (2018, p. 288) explains that sign languages are embodied languages created through the movement and interpretation of coordinated gestures and facial expressions. For her, the body of the sign language interpreter or user embodies the rhetorics of the message. In audiovisual content, it is therefore key to maintain eye contact and connection with the speakers on screen, which is not always possible with traditional, bottom-placed captions. Integral captions allow Deaf viewers to have an embodied response to the images –to feel connected and included (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Integral caption used in *Gallaudet: The Film*

This leads to the notion of Deaf Space, a concept created in 2005 by the architect Hansel Bauman (Bauman and Murray, 2015) to refer to a new approach to architecture and design that is primarily informed by the unique ways in which Deaf people perceive and inhabit space. Conceived as a reaction to a world built by and for hearing people, the notion of Deaf Space was applied in Gallaudet University by and for deaf individuals and led to the design of buildings and other physical spaces that enable embodied and visual-spatial communication. This included u-shaped lecture rooms to allow all students to be visually connected, wide walkways and ramps to allow people to walk and sign at the same time and a heavily visible environment (transparent elevators, diffuse lighting and abundance of mirrors) to increase visual awareness and communication. In contrast with the idea of "hearing loss" (which would not apply to, say, babies who are born deaf, as you cannot lose something that you never had), Deaf Space is seen as a Deaf Gain, that is, an example of what can be gained by being Deaf and how the wider hearing world can benefit from it. For Butler (2018), unlike standard captions, often added at the bottom of the screen as an afterthought, integral captions reclaim a more central (Deaf) space both on the screen, so that viewers can access their embodied meaning, and in the design of the film, which can benefit all viewers.

Whereas creativity as seen through a translational perspective is connected to ideas of transmedia storytelling, adaptation practices and questions of terminology and originality, when considered through an accessibility lens it becomes a way to fight exclusion and to reclaim a more central position for people with disabilities not only in the audiovisual

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industry, but in society as a whole. This is illustrated in the following section, which includes a brief definition of creative MA and an analysis of work conducted by scholars and artists who have resorted to creativity in order to imagine a more accessible future for people with hearing and sight loss.

4. Creative and artistic MA

Although, as explained in section 1, when looking at the role played by creativity in MA, the terminological debate seems to have taken a back seat to more important considerations, there is still no consensus. In AD, alternative approaches or those not based on current guidelines have received different terms that are not exactly synonyms, although they are in the same realm. Drawing on Fels *et al.* (2006) and Udo and Fels (2009), Szarkowska (2013) proposes the idea of auteur description, which uses the screenplay to convey the point of view and creative vision of the director, often departing from the notion of objective description and embracing vivid and emotional language. Related to this is the notion of intradiegetic AD (Thompson, 2018) and the more widely used term integrated AD, which for Fryer (2018) encompasses the following five features: non-neutral (creative and /or subjective); collaborative so as to reflect the director's vision (auteur); considered a priori; and open and inclusive (available to be heard by all). More in line with the focus of this article (which centres around creativity rather than the collaborative, integrated or open nature of alternative MA) is the term creative AD, now commonly used by scholars (Walczak and Fryer, 2017; Zabrocka, 2018), artists (Cox, 2017) and professionals (Elbourne, 2019). A case in point are the "Guidelines for creative audio description" drafted by arts curator Gill Crawshaw (2018), which include pointers that reinforce the ideas of subjectivity, engagement and multisensory experience mentioned in the previous section:

> Don't worry about objectivity – an interesting, enthusiastic description is much better. Feel free to use poetry, sound, story-telling. Tell us why you've chosen this piece. Evoke the senses and engage the audience.

A wide range of terms has also been used for non-conventional subtitles and captions, including alternative, aesthetic, enhanced, kinetic, embodied, integral, integrated, dynamic, and animated captioning (Butler, 2018; Zdenek, 2018). As in the case of AD, they each highlight a different aspect of subtitles/captions that do not conform to traditional guidelines and that

are also often referred to as creative subtitles/captions both in academia and the industry (Butler, 2020).

However, seeing as the use of creativity in MA is part of an overall movement that encompasses all modalities (AD, subtitling, captioning, sign language, etc.) and that works in itself as a means to achieve the wider inclusion of people with disabilities in society, it makes sense to use an umbrella term for this approach. In the UK, the Graeae Theatre Company has been working since 1997 in what they call "the aesthetics of access", which address "the ways in which accessibility concerns are not simply last-minute add-ons but actually influence and shape the work in wonderful, unexpected ways" (Cockburn, 2017). The aesthetics of access go beyond the idea of universal design in that they do not only allow more people to enjoy the show but also enhance the product aesthetically and creatively for everybody (British Council Arts, 2014). As mentioned in the previous section, the implications go beyond aesthetic considerations and touch upon issues of identity and power:

> Although it can take different forms, an Aesthetics of Access always takes the different conditions of perception of a mixed audience into account. The respective performances result from intercultural (Deaf and hearing) productions, which do not only consider the physical and linguistic differences between the spectators, but also the power structures that can be found in theatre and society. Thus, an Aesthetics of Access can involve the demarginalisation and appreciation of sign language and/or serve a didactic, inclusive or political function by reflecting and challenging present hierarchical structures and cultural norms (Ugarte Chacón, 2014: 2).

UK theatre companies such as Fingersmiths and Extant adhere to the creative approach envisaged by the aesthetics of access as one more action in their ongoing fight for a more inclusive and diverse society, one of whose goals is to have more disabled artists on stage. As a matter of fact, just as disability is increasingly being included in the overall framework of diversity, so is the crucial role played by creativity. This is illustrated by the "Creative Case for Diversity", an initiative launched by the Arts Council England in 2011 as a way to engage the arts and culture sector nationally to reinforce the importance of diversity and equality in the arts and all of its forms to reflect the whole of society. All production companies funded by this scheme are asked to show how they contribute to the Creative Case for

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Diversity by demonstrating how their work is accessible and relevant to their local communities.

Based on the different initiatives mentioned so far, it seems that there is a growing interest in what may be called "creative media accessibility", which encompasses those practices that do not only attempt to provide access for the users of a film or a play, but also seek to become an artistic contribution in their own right and to enhance user experience in a creative or imaginative way. This is an alternative approach to MA (as it stands in opposition to many of the current guidelines) that is often considered during production (as per the principles of accessible filmmaking or integrated theatre access) and that is anchored in a wider fight for inclusion and diversity in the arts and in society as a whole. Admittedly, some may argue that there is creativity involved in the production of AD or SDH as per current guidelines. In that case, and although there is a noticeable difference between the examples included below and conventional MA, it may be possible to talk about a spectrum of creativity in MA, ranging from inconspicuous practices (those that blend in the style of the film/play) to more conspicuous practices (those that aim to draw the audience's attention).

The practices included here are considerably conspicuous, not least because some of the captions analysed reclaim a Deaf Space both on screen and in society. Some of them go a step further and constitute examples of what may be called artistic media access, that is, the use of media access[4] not as an artistic contribution in its own right but rather as the very material with which art is made. Here, media access (and its generative and transformational potential) is the very raison d'être of the piece.

4.1 Creative MA

This section includes examples of creative captions added as an afterthought (Simon Zdenek) and others who design was built into the production of the films (*Gallaudet: The Film* and *Dear Hearing World*).

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[4] A term suggested by AVT and MA scholar Aline Remael in personal communication.

4.1.1. Simon Zdenek's dynamic captions

In his ground-breaking webtext "Designing Captions: Disruptive experiments with typography, color, icons, and effects", Zdenek (2018) draws on disability studies and creep theory to disrupt norms and propose "radical alternatives to the taken-for-granted landscape of captioning and sonic accessibility". In 2016, Zdenek received a grant from The Humanities Center at Texas Tech University to produce forty examples of creative captions for popular clips from films and television shows. His aim was to challenge existing norms and trigger a larger conversation about the future of captioning with producers and viewers. Of the different research questions posed by Zdenek, the following two seem particularly relevant for this article:

- "How can we create a closer connection between visual and verbal meaning in closed captioning?"

- "Can we use animation, text effects, typography, screen placement, color, graphics/icons, and dimensionality to convey meaning not only through words and content but also through formal features of visual design?"

Zdenek designed his creative captions to address practical captioning issues that are hard to solve with traditional captions, such as the identification of multiple speakers in the same scene. He proposes the notion of character profiles, which are "composites of type, size, and color selections that are associated with and, ideally, embody each character" (2018). Ideally designed by captioners in collaboration with producers, these profiles are specific to each character, but they can also have the flexibility to adjust to changing identities. This is the case of the following video, in which a human is revealed to be a humanoid robot.

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Figure 8. Example of creative caption produced by Sean Zdenek (2018) to indicate a character profile

Drawing on this example, Zdenek urges captioners and producers to explore the potential of typefaces to evoke feelings, reinforce meanings, distinguish speakers and shape characters' personas.

In his captions, Zdenek addresses two examples of overlapping speech by multiple speakers, a very recurrent captioning challenge. In the first one, as the screen splits into two parts divided by a blue rift reminiscent of an energy wave, all three characters speak at once. While the official captions remain at the bottom, making it very difficult for the viewers to know who is speaking, Zdenek uses the rift to place the captions close to the speakers and with a colour that matches their clothes. The reading speed remains too fast to be read by most viewers but, unlike the official captions, these creative captions manage to convey the point of the scene, which is to know who is speaking and to give access to some of their speech.

Figure 9. Example of creative caption produced by Sean Zdenek (2018) to subtitle overlapping speech

In the next example, filmmaker Kevin Smith is telling a story on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* about a text message conversation with his daughter. Traditional captions would resort to a combination of direct and indirect speech to make a distinction between his description of the story and his conversation with his daughter. Zdenek disambiguates this by using text-based images to show (rather than tell) the dialogue between Smith and his daughter:
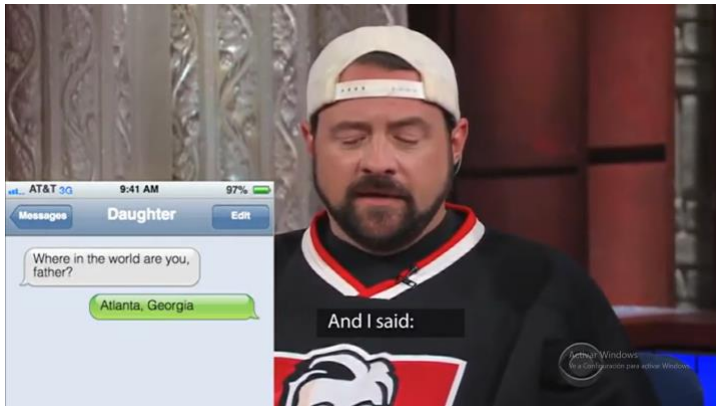

Figure 10. Creative captions produced by Sean Zdenek (2018) to combine direct and indirect speech

In Zdenek's view (2018), captioning has been characterised from its inception by "an unexamined logophilia", the belief that "full meaning can be read off the surfaces of sounds and their contexts, and that words can adequately account for those meanings with little or no remainder, even under constraints of space and time". In some of his creative examples, he proposes the use of icons, symbols and other visual elements to convey sound. This also applies to music, which is often poorly served by traditional captions that often resort to stock phrases and have limited potential to convey melodic nuances. In the following example, the simple and repetitive melody heard by the protagonist is conveyed through images, rather than words, in keeping with the old cinematic principle of "show, don't tell" and the visual way in which many viewers with hearing loss experience life:

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Figure 11. Creative captions produced by Sean Zdenek (2018) to subtitle music

Zdenek offers <u>a final example</u> that may resonate with scholars in AVT and MA, who are often engaged in the analysis of subtitling and captioning reading speeds. A critical aspect when considering the viewers' experience, reading speed is often inevitably presented through a quantitative lens, with figures of average reading speeds per film or programme. Zdenek puts a creative and qualitative spin on this by projecting a reading speed line over the speaker as he sings, thus providing viewers with an embodied experience of a concept that is often presented in a much colder and disembodied manner.
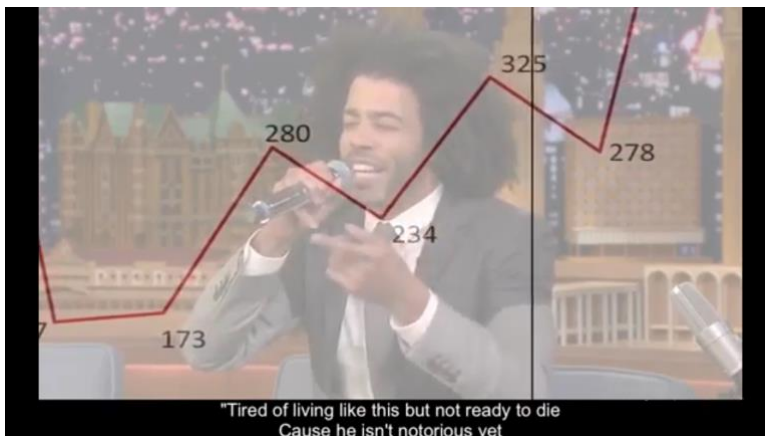

Figure 12. Creative captions produced by Sean Zdenek (2018) to show reading speed

Zdenek admits the limitations of these creative captions. Ideally, they would need to be considered in production and in a way that can account for the time, expertise and cost they require; they can potentially alter the meaning of a film and compromise the viewers' reading speed; and at present, they need to be burned on to the images, as many of the effects used cannot be presented in closed captions. Despite all this, Zdenek believes it is time to make room for captions (both on the screen and in the production process), to experiment with them, to question the "hegemony of the word" and to imagine a different future for this type of access. The final words of his article offer an apt summary of his stance and aim:

> This webtext is an invitation to composition and technical communication instructors to fold captioning into the creative process, to center the needs of viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing, to design for more diverse audiences by questioning the entrenched notion of the default hearing user, and to consider how our understanding of audio accessibility might be expanded to include non-linguistic signs (Zdenek, 2018).

4.1.2. *Gallaudet: The Film*

Gallaudet: the film is an 8-minute short film about life at Gallaudet University (Washington, D.C.), the leading university for the education of deaf and hard of hearing students in the US. Directed by Ryan Commerson, Jules Dameron, Dirksen Bauman and Wayne Betts Jr, the film is an artistic journey into the life of the Deaf community at Gallaudet. It was released on the Internet on 1 June 2010 and it gathered 35,000 views in over 40 countries in only one week. The film opens with a black and white drawing on a sketchpad. The viewers are then drawn closer and closer until they fall into the rabbit hole to discover a new world. This includes a poetic SL depiction of the architecture of a tree, a presentation on the notion of Deaf Space, a re-imagining of the Sixth Street market outside the Gallaudet walls, flashes of Gallaudet history and glimpses of classroom discussions and student life.

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Figure 13. *Gallaudet: The Film*

The film ticks some of the boxes that may be expected in this type of "about us" promotional university video, including an inspirational tone and a carefully selected choice of protagonists to show the diversity and vibrancy of the teacher and student life at Gallaudet. However, the film stands out for its determination to use what has come to be called a Deaf lens (Betts, 2010), a cinematic approach used by Deaf filmmakers to show life as experienced by Deaf people from their visual-oriented perspective and their visual-spatial language. In this film, this involves the absence of any kind of sound, as explained by Wayne Betts (2010), one of its directors:

> Film language had a box around it, and I felt trapped in this box. I struggled to get out of the box by rearranging the rules. Then I realized I should just put the box aside. This box had a set of rules developed over time. Everybody else worked with sound as an essential part of their film. This influenced the editing of the movie -- sound was tied up in all of this. I'm a deaf person. I'm very visual. I didn't even think about sound at all. This realization led me to look within. My world, and how I perceived it.

Some of the main challenges faced by Betts were how to avoid relying on words to plan the film (including the scriptwriting process), how to communicate sound through editing and camera movements instead of

through audio, and how to find a tool to make the film accessible in keeping with the Deaf lens used for the film.

Betts created an ASL script, made up of video footage describing every shot in the film. As for the visual style, he wanted to avoid a fast-paced editing style with many cuts, which he did not consider representative of the Deaf experience. For him, Deaf people are constantly connected through their conversations, maintaining eye contact even when they move. The camera movement had to be fluid and constant, which led to the decision of making the film as a single continuous shot, often resorting to Steadicams that allowed the camera operators to film and walk and the viewers to be more attuned to the action. Finally, the subtitles had to be part of this experience. Traditional subtitles would force the viewers to "cut" their attention down to the bottom of the screen, thus losing the rhythm created by the movement of the camera and the participants:

> Those captions feel just like an abrupt break in the edit. My eyes are drawn to the bottom of the screen. Just as I'm making eye contact with the actor, I have to look away to read the captions. I want that eye contact! I wanted to maintain eye contact, so I had the captions appear around the actors (Betts, 2010).

The subtitles were designed with different fonts and effects to blend in the style and content of the film. As the participants talk about Deaf Space and changing notions of beauty, the subtitles (and the tags identifying the participants) seem to come out of the movements of the speakers, rather than pushing their way into the images. They provide viewers with a translation of the SL used but they also contribute to the rhythm of the visuals and the music created by the movement of the camera and the speakers, thus providing an embodied experience.

> Now my eyes are able to follow the captions as they appear. My eyes can still feel the flow in the sequence. I feel connected to what's going on. And that's my world. That's it.

The subtitles used in this film are thus a good example of creative MA as per the definition included above. They move away from current guidelines and are carefully designed during production so as to not only give access to the viewers but also enhance their experience with an artistic contribution that is in line with the vision of the film and its fight for a more diverse and inclusive society.

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4.1.3. *Dear Hearing World*[5]

Dear Hearing World is a short film directed by Adam Docker in 2019 and based on <u>Raymond Antrobus' poem</u> by the same name. The poem, included in Antrobus' awar-winning debut poetry collection *The Perseverance*, is an adaptation of Danez Smith's popular 2014 poem <u>*Dear White America*</u>, an indictment of the racism built in the American society. *Dear Hearing World* combines Raymond's spoken delivery of his poem with deaf actress Vilma Jackson's performance in British Sign Language against urban London scenes.

Like *Gallaudet: The Film*, *Dear Hearing World* is made from a deaf perspective, although the "Deaf lens" used here is very different. *Gallaudet* presents a university that may be regarded as a bubble designed by and for Deaf people (although valid for hearing people too) –and does so without sound. Many of the teachers and students with hearing loss at Gallaudet may have some hearing, but the film chooses a homogeneous silent scenario to simplify this. In contrast, *Dear Hearing World* does not take place in a bubble, but in the hearing world, where many Deaf people have a complicated relationship with sound[6]. The film is an angry indictment of the attitude of the hearing society towards deaf people. This is very much related to the way in which scholars and artists working on blindness and accessibility denounce ocularcentrism, the longstanding bias toward vision in Western thought and culture that conflates seeing and knowing, and thus blindness and ignorance (Cachia, 2013; Kleege, 2018). The equivalent in *Dear Hearing World* would be the notion of "audio supremacy", which triggers the protagonist's defiant indignation at how the hearing world treats deaf people and especially deaf children.

The creative subtitles used in the film, all in capital letters, share the above-mentioned features identified by Butler (2018). They are not an afterthought, they have been placed strategically so that they provide embodied and multidimensional access to the content of the video and they use several devices (different fonts, effects such as fade in and fade out,

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[5] I'm indebted to Kate Dangerfield for pointing me to this film and for her insights (amongst other aspects) into how it compares to *Gallaudet: The Film* and to the issue of intersectionality.
[6] As explained by Ilya Kaminsky in *Deaf Republic* (2019), "the deaf don't believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing."

rhythm to follow the delivery of the poem, etc.) to enhance the rhetorical and aesthetic quality of the film.

Figure 14. Poster of *Dear Hearing World*

As in many of the examples included in this article, the creative subtitles in the film are just a tool used in the fight against the discrimination of deaf people in society. True to the notion of intersectionality[7], this is in turn related to a more general fight against ableism (hence its above-mentioned relationship with the work by blind scholars and artists) and other forms of exclusion (which explains why the original poem is inspired by a piece against racism).

4.2. Artistic MA

This section includes an example of artistic AD and another one of artistic captioning. Here, MA is not an artistic contribution but rather the very

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[7] Intersectionality is defined by Crenshaw (1991) as a tool for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance) compound themselves to create different modes of discrimination and privilege.

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raison d'être of the pieces, which tap into the generative and transformational potential of accessibility.

4.2.1. Flipping and biased ADs

According to Simon Hayhoe (2018), AD is on the brink of a cultural revolution. Since it was first introduced in the US in the 1980s and then more widely in other countries at the turn of the century, it has found its way on TV, streaming platforms and live events all around the world. Hayhoe notes that this significant development has been mostly technical and linguistic (AD are increasingly publicised, technically accomplished and well-researched), but it has not offered "a revolution of attitudes". This may now be possible with the emergence of what he calls "flipping descriptions", a cultural revolution consisting 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 art work or making description its own form of performative art". Whereas making the AD part of art work falls within the scope of creative MA as described in the previous section, handing over the AD to people with visual impairments and especially making description its own form of performative art leads to the notion of artistic MA or in this case artistic AD.

A good example of this is the British play *The Importance of Being Described… Earnestly?* (2018), produced by Elbow Room and directed by Chloë Clarke, a visually impaired Cardiff-based theatre-maker and AD consultant. The play was conceived out of Clarke's frustration at traditional theatre AD: its conspicuous nature (having to wear headsets makes her feel isolated rather than included), its availability (described shows only running at certain times) and its style (descriptions that attempt to be objective when they are always going to be one person's subjective impression of the play). To counter this, Clarke opted for a subjective and polyphonic AD, that is, multiple subjective descriptions working together to give a rounded picture and to give the audience the choice of what to go with. More importantly, Clarke made AD the very focus of the play.

The Importance of Being Described… Earnestly? is an improvised and interactive/participatory comedy in which director Tobias St. Michael III invites the audience to an open rehearsal of the Oscar Wilde classic *The Importance of Being Earnest* reinterpreted using AD to make it more inclusive. The rehearsing actors attempt to provide their own description of the events that unfold during the play, leading to a comedy of errors. The

show includes songs, physical comedy and the use of AD as a dramatic device that lets the audience interpret the action in a number of ways. As per the advertising line by Elbow Room ("In earnest, throw away those headsets – we're all in this together), the play is designed for a mixed audience of sighted and visually impaired audience, the latter having their needs fully integrated into the performance.

The trailer of the play features images of a high tea in the late 19th century. The female audio description is interrupted by a male describer, who shows his preference for more modern and messier food, which, as the screen goes black, finds its way into the images, accompanied by his description. It is a clear example of generative and transformative MA, as the description generates and transforms the images, and provides the content of the play.

Figure 15. Trailer of The Importance of Being Described… Earnestly?

The experience of making this play leads Clark to believe that attitudes towards accessibility are gradually changing and that more and more artists are beginning to see AD as another tool in their toolbox. Her intention is to incorporate creative access from the very beginning in all her productions as a way to provide a platform for, and a true representation of, disabled and other marginalised groups of people. This resonates with much of what was discussed in the previous sections and is fully in line with Hayhoe's view of AD as a participatory art form with multi-sensorial references, a discourse, a window into each other's cultural experiences and ultimately an instrument of emancipation:

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> Audio description has moved from being a presentation of largely non-visual information to a participatory art form with multi-sensorial references. Through this art form, audio description has also become a discourse between all audience members, sighted and visually impaired alike. (…) Discourse and description can address issues of politics, well-being, emotion and sexuality. More importantly, this discourse can provide people with sight and visual impairment alike a glimpse into each other's cultural experiences and develop a greater understanding of perceptual experience. In this respect, audio description is now less of a support act and is now becoming an instrument of emancipation for the visually impaired community (Hayhoe, 2018).

4.2.2. Christine Sum Kim's *Closer Captions*

Christine Sun Kim is an American artist who works with drawing, painting, performance and video to explore the physicality of sound and to consider how it operates in society. Profoundly deaf since birth and raised by hearing parents, Kim quickly learnt what she calls "sound etiquette", that is, the expected behaviour regarding sound and noise –not to slam a door or make noise when eating. Abiding by these norms enabled her to be considerate but also made her feel a foreigner in a country that was not hers. Following a trip to Berlin, where she is now based, she learnt how other artists worked with sound and decided that instead of allowing sound to disempower her, she would reclaim it through art (Robinson, 2015). Her work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Arts and the Whitney Biennial and she has been named a TED Fellow, a Director's Fellow at MIT Media Lab and a Ford Foundation Disability Futures Fellow.

Kim communicates through ASL and uses captions to access audiovisual material. Unsurprisingly, the way sound is conveyed by captions has often featured in her work. She is very conscious of the fact that her understanding of sound in film relies entirely on a hearing captioner who does not share her world. For her, this entails three phases that are not always perfectly aligned: the sound that is produced, the captioner's interpretation of the sound and the viewer's interpretation.

In her video *Closer Captions*, Kim turns the normally hearing-centric experience of producing captions into a deaf-centric one. Similarly, to artists such as Liza Sylvestre and Carolyn Lazard, Kim reclaims her (Deaf) space in the captioning process. In order to do this, she produces what may be described as flipping captions, which take captioning out of the hands of the sighted person and hands it to the audiences it was designed to support, turning it into its own form of art. Whereas Sylvestre uses captions to

provide an account of her exclusion from audiovisual media and society as a whole (Romero-Fresco, 2021a), Kim (2020) imagines what it would be like to have captions that are closer to her experience:

> I place a lot of trust in the people who write captions. But those people have a different relationship with sound and the world than I do. So I started to wonder… What would it look like if I wrote the captions myself?
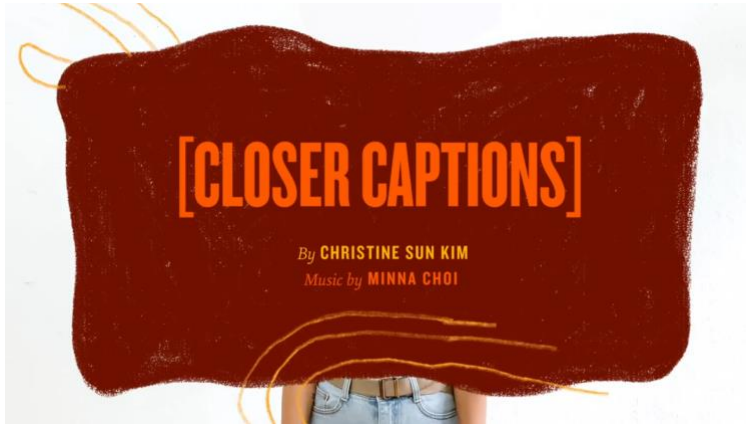

Figure 16. Christine Sun Kim's *Closer Captions*

Kim pours her interpretations and her creativity in *Closer Capions* to stretch the limits of captioning. By answering the question "Can sound be a feeling?", she moves away from the objectivity normally found in guidelines and turns her captions into a poem. Kim's *Closer Captions* sometimes describe sounds…

[clicks of a stirring spoon]
[phone wakes up too]
[feet slapping onto bathroom tiles]
[water in rhythmic drops, drops get bigger, louder]

…other times they describe images…

[sweetness of orange sunlight]
[the sound of skin waking up]
[glitter flirting with my eyeballs]

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…and sometimes they fall somewhere in between, describing neither images nor sound:

> [the sound of hurt feelings scabbing over]
> [the sound of temperature slowly dropping]
> [the sound of stars having a conversation with each other]

Just as many of the captions produced by Liza Sylvestre in *Captioned Series* could be played out as a highly subjective AD for users with visual impairments, could the content included by Kim in some of her captions (for instance, "glitter flirting with my eyeballs" or "stars having a conversation with each other") work as both an AD and captions? Traditionally, AD and captions are worlds apart, as one describes images for those who cannot see and the other one describes sound for those who cannot hear. Can a poetic approach to MA use the same content for both? Is poetry the meeting point between the experiences of AD and caption users?

As explained by Kim, this does not mean that she would like to have poetic captions for every film, but since these captions are possible, she would like to have the choice to opt for them. The same goes for the captioner. Just as Kim chooses the sign language interpreter she is going to be working with (and who will effectively be her voice), she would like to choose captioners depending on the approach she thinks is best for a particular film (Antrobus, 2021). Although this is not feasible at the moment, it is the future that, like Zdenek, she is imagining for MA.

Yet, as was the case of the rest of the artists included in this section, Kim's use of poetic captions and her lobbying for more creative MA are only a means to what Kim describes ultimately as a political aim:

> A lot of us, by default, become activists because we've spent a lot of our lives fighting to get and ensure our basic rights. Whereas hearing people don't even question that right. (…) They are the ones who are looking and creating history and we are just pushed to the side. Being Deaf has always been a political thing. I don't know if it will ever stop being political (in Martirosyan, 2020).

5. A sense of urgency

Creativity is becoming an important topic in AVT and MA, which may be explained by different factors. The increase in the provision of AVT and

MA services not only on TV but also on streaming platforms may be shifting attention to creativity as a differentiating element. Likewise, the growing interest by filmmakers and especially theatre directors in integrating accessibility into the production process is also resulting in creative approaches. However as stressed in this article, it is important to make a distinction between creativity from a translational viewpoint and creativity through an accessibility lens.

Over the past years, and riding on the wave of universal design and Greco's universalist account of accessibility, many scholars have advocated for a consideration of MA as a service that concerns people with and without disabilities. I have supported this wide notion of MA, arguing that having blind and deaf audiences join forces with foreign viewers and other audiences can only lead to a win-win scenario, given that they are all "in the same boat" (Romero-Fresco, 2018: 194):

> Foreign viewers can benefit from the legitimacy and impact obtained by MA through legislation and human rights debates, whereas the traditional groups included within MA (deaf and blind) will finally enlarge their size and get the strength in numbers that they need.

Bringing together the quantitative strength of AVT and the legitimacy of MA has certainly proved useful to raise awareness and to increase the provision of these services but, as noted by Ellcessor (2015), it has also brought about complications. Firstly, appealing to users that are not disabled may contribute to reinforcing "social hierarchies in which what really matters are the benefits that universal design brings to other (normative, able-bodied) people". Secondly, Ellcesor mentions the common argument put forward under the principles of universal design that everyone is or will be disabled in one way or another, which is heavily criticised by the above-discussed *Dear Hearing World* ("I am equal parts sick of your "oh, I'm hard of hearing too, just because you've been on an airplane or suffered head colds""). For Ellcesor, this argument denies the "lived experiences of disability and the importance of a disability identity or culture for many people". In her view, this may perpetuate ableist attitudes by failing to question, change or destroy them. Thirdly, amalgamating MA and AVT (and their users) may result in the consideration of accessibility measures as "options" or "customizations", that is, a matter of consumer choice rather than an issue of civil rights and political participation.

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This article may help to add one more argument to the case made by Ellcessor. When it comes to the introduction and use of creative approaches, conflating AVT and MA or using a translational lens may slow down the process. From a translational viewpoint, creative practices that move beyond traditional guidelines trigger questions about terminology (what is the right term to refer to these practices?), transmedia adaptations (is a creative accessible version one more element in the transmedia storyverse that characterises contemporary multimedia productions?) and originality (is a very creative accessible version still a version of the original or does it become a new original?). These are interesting questions, but they are not pressing in society. It is hard to see how they can persuade the industry to embrace creative practices because they are presented as a bonus, an icing on the cake that may interest directors and producers who are willing to experiment and test new approaches.

In contrast, as seen in the examples included in this article, creative MA is a critical matter when considered from the standpoint of disability studies and crip theory and through the eyes of disabled artists. There is a sense of urgency derived from the belief that current MA provision does not always yield a fully embodied and multisensory experience and that creative accessibility is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve the wider and political goals of inclusion and participation in a society that is still designed by and for able people. The work the artists included in this article and of many others question my (inadvertently ableist) assumption. We may be navigating the same mediascape and using the same access services, but we are not in the same boat.

Here's hoping that the use of creativity in MA can soon be adopted widely as a necessary step in the path towards a more equal and just society.

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