

From Sight to Insight: A Framework of Subjective Audio Description in Museum Contexts and the Case of Caravaggio

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the value of subjective and less conventional styles in audio description (AD), especially within the field of museum accessibility for BPS audiences. Recent research has begun to explore not only the conventional, objective styles commonly identified in previous corpus-based studies but also more subjective and creative approaches. This article introduces a framework to create subjective AD based on the project we carried out at the Church of San Lorenzo, where a Caravaggio painting was audio-described with objective and subjective approaches. We present ten minority but growing techniques, ranging from metaphor and synaesthesia to the use of music, sound, and sensory cues, and illustrate them through examples from the Caravaggio experiment. The framework is grounded in initial empirical findings, although further research is needed to refine and validate it. The aim is to offer practitioners, students, and researchers an exploratory set of strategies for expanding subjective and experiential AD in museum contexts.

KEYWORDS

Museum audio description, subjectivity, metaphor, creativity, framework.

1. Introduction

As blind and partially sighted (BPS) visitors increasingly engage with museum spaces (Vaz et al., 2020), the range of accessibility tools available to them has expanded significantly. These include auditory media, tactile materials, olfactory cues, and participatory artistic workshops (Luque & Soler, 2018). Despite this multisensory shift, audio description (AD) remains the primary and most widespread accessibility resource in museums. Defined as an intersemiotic translation of images into words (Jakobson, 1959), standard AD aims to help BPS individuals construct a mental representation of what they cannot see (Salzhauer et al., 2003) by verbalizing relevant visual components of an object or scene (Reviere, 2016).

Previous research in museum settings (Luque, 2020; Soler & Luque, 2020) has shown that metaphorical language and subjectivity play a significant role in AD, a trend also supported by established guidelines (RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003; Salzhauer et al., 2003). These findings point to the growing use of metaphor and other language tools or techniques as a tool for both knowledge access and sensory communication in museum AD (Carlucci, 2022).

Recent research on museum AD has begun to explore not only the conventional, objective styles commonly identified in previous corpus-based studies but also more subjective and creative approaches. Recently, two focus group reception studies (Soler & Luque, 2023) investigated how users respond to these varying AD types, including the standard factual style, which emphasises objective AD, and alternative forms that incorporate interpretation, personal tone, or metaphor to convey the

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essence or mood of the artwork. Framed within a cognitive linguistic perspective, the research provides a deeper understanding of how these styles differ in structure and effect. Participants' reflections moved beyond specific stylistic elements to broader considerations of what AD should be, its purpose, and its role in shaping the experience of visual art. This suggests that expanding the use of more interpretive and subjective AD styles could better accommodate varied audience preferences and enrich the overall accessibility and appreciation of visual art.

This article also draws on an ongoing experimental project conducted in 2024 in collaboration with the University of Palermo. In this project, objective and subjective AD versions of Caravaggio's *Nativity* were created in English, Spanish, and Italian and tested with BPS users. Although the findings remain preliminary, they provide empirical grounding for the strategies discussed throughout the article, while also highlighting the need for further research to validate, refine, and contextualise these techniques across different cultural and linguistic settings. Introducing this empirical basis at the outset means that the proposed framework is not purely theoretical but emerges from iterative experimentation and early user feedback.

Metaphor is a central feature of emerging AD styles, playing a vital role in creating multisensory, immersive, and culturally meaningful museum experiences for BPS audiences. Techniques such as synesthetic metaphors (e.g., a colour described as "bitter"), embodied comparisons (e.g., a sculpture's shape likened to human posture), and culturally grounded references help bridge visual and non-visual perception (Luque, 2020). More than a mere descriptive device, metaphor acts as a strategic communicative tool: it persuades, evaluates, explains, and entertains (Semino, 2017). Its growing use reflects a broader move in AD toward more interpretive, expressive, and inclusive forms of museum mediation.

Rather than proposing a full methodology, which would imply a codified, step-by-step procedure, the article offers a systematisation of discursive strategies grounded in theory and preliminary empirical insights. The goal is therefore to explore the process and present a flexible, open-ended set of techniques aimed at practitioners, students, and researchers, contributing to ongoing conversations about subjectivity, creative access, and experiential interpretation in museum AD.

2. Subjectivity and minority styles in museum AD

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the value of subjective and minority styles in AD, especially within the field of museum accessibility for BPS audiences (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2022; Eardley et al., 2024; Soler & Luque, 2023). These approaches move beyond traditional objective frameworks to offer more immersive, personal, and culturally rich experiences that better reflect users' lived realities and cognitive diversity. We present a project developed in collaboration between the Group TRACCE at the University of Granada and the University of Palermo, focused on creating and evaluating subjective AD scripts. Combining practical script development with reception studies in Spain, United Kingdom, and Italy, the project explores how subjective narrative techniques affect user engagement. It also can contribute to the development of interdisciplinary, international standards for inclusive, sensory-rich museum practices, while reinforcing academic cooperation between Southern European research groups. Ultimately, this work supports the

reconceptualisation of AD as a creative and interpretive form of translation (Rojo & Meseguer, 2018).

2.1. Conceptual clarification

In discussions of non-standard AD, terms such as “subjective”, “experiential”, “interpretative”, “narrative”, “sensory”, “multisensory”, “synesthetic”, or “user-centred” often overlap or are used interchangeably. To ensure conceptual precision, this article adopts the following distinctions:

- Subjective AD refers to descriptions that incorporate evaluative, emotional, or personal perspectives, moving beyond strict neutrality.
- Interpretative AD involves offering a possible reading or meaning of an artwork, even if the viewpoint is not overtly personal.
- Experiential AD aims to evoke embodied, affective, or immersive responses rather than simply describing what is visible.
- User-centred AD refers to AD based on the preferences, experiences, and co-creative participation of BPS audiences, often through iterative testing or collaborative design.

Regarding figurative and sensory devices, this article distinguishes between:

- Metaphor as a cognitive and linguistic mechanism that maps one conceptual domain onto another (e.g., describing a figure as “a pillar of shadow”).
- Synesthetic metaphor as a specific type of metaphor in which sensory modalities blend linguistically (e.g., “a warm colour”, “a sharp sound”).
- Multisensory description as language that independently evokes different senses (e.g., smell, touch, temperature) without merging them conceptually.
- Multisensory experience as the actual or imagined combination of sensory inputs—auditory, tactile, olfactory—produced through environmental cues or carefully designed stimuli.

In this article, metaphor is understood in a broad cognitive sense (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), following the view that meaning arises through the interaction of two conceptual domains. Metaphoric language does not merely embellish AD but enables the transfer of structure, affect, and interpretation from a familiar source domain to a less accessible target domain. This process allows abstract, sensory, or aesthetic experiences to be rendered intelligible through language.

Finally, this article differentiates between *narrative strategies* (which structure the description temporally, rhythmically or causally) and *poetic strategies* (which rely on brevity, rhythm, imagery, and emotional suggestiveness). These clarifications are essential because the techniques proposed in the following sections may involve one or more of these dimensions simultaneously. Making these distinctions explicit helps avoid conceptual imprecision and aligns the article with previous scholarship on creative and interpretative AD (Walczak & Fryer, 2017; Randaccio, 2018; Crookes et al., 2022).

2.2. Toward a framework of minority and subjective styles in museum AD

The interest in alternative styles of AD reflects broader developments in media accessibility research, notably Greco's (2018) three key shifts: from particularist to universalist views of accessibility, from producer-centred to user-centred paradigms, and from reactive to proactive practices that engage users and accessibility experts from the project's inception. These transformations call for a reassessment of AD methodologies, particularly in museum and educational settings where personal perception and emotional engagement are central.

Within this evolving framework, the distinction between 'majority' and 'minority' AD styles has become increasingly salient (Soler, 2023). Majority styles conform to institutional guidelines, aiming for objectivity by describing only visible features and avoiding interpretation (Neves, 2016; RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003). These are often preferred in museum AD, partly due to reception studies indicating that some users (particularly congenitally blind individuals) value concise and referential descriptions (Szarkowska et al., 2016; Barnés & Jiménez, 2020).

However, an expanding body of research supports the value of more subjective AD styles, which incorporate metaphor, narrative, sound design, and personal voice. Studies in film, television, and theatre (Fryer & Freeman, 2012; Ramos, 2016; Bardini, 2020; Walczak & Fryer, 2017) highlight how moving beyond objective description can enhance user experience. In visual arts, similar trends are emerging: Neves (2016) has explored how cultural references affect the reception of AD, and studies by Szarkowska et al. (2016) and Hutchinson & Eardley (2022) suggest that interpretive, sound-enhanced AD improves memory and engagement for both BPS and sighted users. Further support comes from corpus-based analyses by Soler (2012, 2021), Luque (2020), and Lima and Magalhães (2013), who identify underexplored yet functionally rich AD styles.

At this point, it is important to clarify that this article does not propose a full methodology. Instead, it offers an exploratory, open-ended framework that systematises a range of subjective and experiential strategies identified across previous literature and refined through our ongoing empirical project in Palermo. This framework does not prescribe fixed procedures, but provides conceptual structure and practical guidance for those seeking to diversify AD practices. What this article contributes, therefore, is not a new methodology in the strict sense, but a systematic articulation of strategies that have been addressed separately in previous research. By bringing them together into a structured framework and grounding them in preliminary empirical evidence, this article provides an integrated perspective that has so far been missing in the museum AD literature.

The theoretical underpinnings of this framework draw from art education and museum studies. Eisner (2002) emphasised engaging learners with a plurality of expressive modes to foster interpretation and emotional resonance. Similarly, Burnham and Kai-Ke (2011) argue for museum pedagogy that prioritises transformation, imagination, and shared meaning-making. These ideas align closely with non-standard AD approaches, where the audio describer acts as both mediator and facilitator of affective access.

This pluralistic perspective underpins current user-centred methodologies, such as focus groups (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014), which allow BPS users to co-construct meaning and reflect on their preferences, decentralizing researcher authority (Tuominen, 2018; Hutchinson & Eardley, 2022). Such methods are crucial for developing inclusive AD practices grounded in actual user experiences, and are a crucial element of the next part of the research.

In this context, subjectivity in AD (especially through metaphor) functions as creative mediation. In visual art, where meaning is fluid and layered, metaphor helps convey complex visual and emotional content in accessible terms. Conceptual metaphor theory and cognitive linguistics (Steen et al., 2010) explain how deliberate metaphors (e.g., marked by “like” or “as if”) foster embodied, imaginative engagement.

Our study explored this through MIPVU analysis and a dual annotation system applied to a corpus of ADs for modern and contemporary art. Findings show that metaphor in AD often expresses affective or ambiguous elements that objective language cannot fully capture.

This approach aligns with the above-mentioned shift toward user-centred, proactive accessibility (Greco, 2018; Romero-Fresco, 2021), viewing AD as a dialogic, interpretive practice that speaks to diverse audience needs.

Ultimately, the integration of metaphor analysis, cognitive linguistics, and museum education offers a solid foundation for developing more inclusive and expressive AD methodologies, helping practitioners create meaningful access to visual art. Recent participatory initiatives illustrate how accessibility is increasingly co-created by communities rather than produced solely by trained describers. Off Stream’s *Meeting Points* project (2023), developed across ten Greek museums, invited disabled and non-disabled participants to collaboratively generate creative descriptions of selected artworks. The resulting multimodal ‘inclusive postcards’ demonstrate a shift toward dialogic, user-centred and community-driven forms of access, reinforcing the idea of AD as a shared cultural and interpretive practice.

2.3. Methodological innovation in museum AD

Corpus-based studies have gained importance in analysing AD, especially in the visual arts, where abstract, ambiguous, and affective elements challenge standard descriptive norms. Our previous research, centred on metaphor, subjectivity, and intersemiotic translation, contributed to a broader push for methodological diversity in AD (Luque, 2020).

Corpus analysis is valuable for uncovering stylistic patterns and rhetorical strategies, particularly metaphor, which bridges visual abstraction and verbal comprehension. By examining AD from institutions such as Tate Modern or the MoMA, our research showed how metaphor operates not only rhetorically but as a tool for communicative and cognitive access (Luque, 2020; Soler & Luque, 2020). These metaphors, marked by metaphorical cues (“evoking” or “suggesting”), or structural shifts, are essential for translating abstract art into AD because they translate the abstract experience of not seeing into a tangible experience, based on the comparisons with BPS visitors’ knowledge. Based on this, we developed a taxonomy of metaphor types, including

personification, synaesthesia, contraposition, participation, cultural reference, optionality, double markers, and vocal emphasis among others.

Corpus-based methods provide an overview of existing museum AD practices, revealing stylistic tendencies and underexplored techniques. While they do not prescribe new approaches, they help identify patterns that can inspire further experimentation, which must ultimately be evaluated through empirical user studies. Through theoretical and practical insights, our work has aimed to contribute to a more inclusive, interpretative, and pedagogically grounded approach to visual-verbal translation, one that opens AD to emotion, imagination, and shared understanding, and is the foundation for the broader classification presented in this article.

3. The San Lorenzo experiment: analysis and creation of subjective resources in museum AD

The Church of San Lorenzo in Palermo is not only an important historical site but also a potent symbol of cultural loss, marked by the 1969 theft of Caravaggio's *The Nativity with St. Lawrence and St. Francis* by the Sicilian *mafia*. A unique replica now stands in place of the original. It has been created by using rare archival photographs, digital reconstruction, and pigment analysis. Installed in the original Oratory, the facsimile restores the artwork's spatial impact, lighting, textures, and presence. This context prompted a fundamental question: how can the emotional, artistic, and historical value of the lost painting be conveyed to visitors, who cannot see the original painting anymore? What about BPS visitors, who cannot see the replica? The recovered painting seemed like a metaphor for what AD implies: making visible the invisible.

This question inspired an experimental AD aiming to create a subjective script that would offer a richer sensory and interpretive experience, tested alongside an objective version. At the core of the project was a classification system of subjective techniques, designed to enhance emotional and cognitive engagement, grounded in both theory and applied research.

The methodology was influenced by art education theory, particularly Eisner's concept of aesthetic experience (2002) and Dewey's view of art as embodied emotional expression (2005), alongside insights from accessibility studies, user-centred design, and AD research highlighting subjectivity as a tool for deeper connection.

Beyond our academic inquiry, the project drew on long-standing collaborations with Spanish museums and the Spanish national organisation for blind people, offering valuable real-world perspectives on adapting theory into practice. These participatory experiences informed a script shaped by empirical data, pedagogical insight, and co-creative design.

Each metaphor, tonal decision, or sensory image was intentionally chosen to invite BPS visitors into a meaningful encounter with Caravaggio's painting. Rather than only compensating for visual absence, this AD is framed as a space for interpretive richness and artistic inclusion. The AD created for San Lorenzo thus aimed not just to convey visual facts, but to offer a multisensory experience, with eleven subjective techniques playing a central role in the experiment.

2.1. Subjective techniques of museum AD

Before presenting each technique individually, it is essential to clarify how these strategies are organised conceptually. Drawing on previous work on creative and interpretive AD (Walczak & Fryer, 2017; Randaccio, 2018; Crookes et al., 2022), the strategies proposed here are grouped into four interrelated but distinct categories:

- (1) Metaphorical and figurative strategies, including metaphor and synesthetic metaphor, which operate through conceptual mappings and figurative language.
- (2) Sensory and experiential strategies, such as tactile cues, olfactory references, or multisensory evocation, which aim to stimulate embodied or affective engagement; these are not metaphors in the strict sense.
- (3) Narrative and poetic strategies, including narrative sequencing, imaginative staging, and poetic condensation, which structure the listener's experience temporally or rhythmically.
- (4) Interpretative strategies, such as emotional interpretations or polyphonic perspectives, which introduce evaluative or speculative elements into the description.

This classification avoids conceptual problems, delineates the scope of each strategy, and positions them within a coherent framework. It also clarifies that not all techniques traditionally associated with 'creative AD' are metaphors; some operate on experiential, structural, or interpretative levels, but they all refer to mappings between domains, that is, they are devices with an objective target domain and a more subjective or creative source domain.

These eleven techniques were applied in the San Lorenzo experiment to offer more than just a verbal description of a painting. The goal was to reconstruct the symbolic and emotional power of the stolen Caravaggio painting and enhance the visitor's overall museum experience. The following section will explore in detail each technique with specific examples extracted directly from the script created for the experiment, always accompanied by the theoretical framework in which the techniques are rooted.

2.1.1. Alteration of the order of appearance of elements

One of the most widely adopted conventions in AD is the spatially coherent sequencing of visual elements, typically from left to right and top to bottom. It is believed that this practice helps BPS individuals to construct a clear and organised mental image of the visual field. Organizations such as the Audio Description Coalition (ADC) in the US explicitly recommend this approach: "whenever possible, describe each scene in the same order (left to right and top to bottom, for example)" (ADC, 2009, p. 10). Similarly, VocalEyes in the UK emphasises spatial coherence in museum and heritage settings, advocating for an order that allows for "scanning from left to right, top to bottom, or front to back" (VocalEyes, 2017, p. 15). Although standards such as Spain's UNE 153020 (AENOR, 2005) do not specify descriptive order, there is general agreement within professional and academic spheres that consistency enhances both clarity and cognitive efficiency.

Recent research invites a rethinking of conventional descriptive order in AD. Scholars like Barnés and Jiménez (2020) have shown that altering sequencing, particularly

when guided by emotional or narrative salience, can enhance listener engagement and foster a deeper, more interpretive connection with the artwork.

Moving beyond neutral spatial logic, this approach prioritises elements for their symbolic or expressive value, allowing describers to craft more immersive and personalised experiences. These intentional shifts support the emotional resonance of the AD and align with broader trends in user-centred, interpretive accessibility practices within museum contexts.

In our subjective AD, the elements are not described in order of appearance. For example, Baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary are described before Saint Lawrence, the angel and Saint Francis, though they appear in fourth and fifth order in the painting. This shift toward interpretive AD, marked by the flexible sequencing of elements, may offer a richer, more emotionally resonant experience than the traditional objective, spatially ordered approach, which does not rely on interpretation of the image. By prioritising narrative, symbolic, or emotional significance over strict visual positioning, this method allows for deeper engagement and personal connection, aligning more closely with how sighted viewers often perceive and interpret art in museums (Nodine & Krupinski, 2018).

2.1.2. Metaphor

Metaphor plays a central role in AD, particularly in the art context where abstract or symbolic visuals must be made accessible. By drawing on familiar visual or sensory references, metaphors help listeners construct mental images and access the aesthetic dimensions of artworks that would otherwise remain out of reach.

Various studies have emphasised the importance of metaphorical and creative language in AD, particularly in artistic and educational contexts. Walczak and Fryer (2017) showed that viewers preferred a vivid and emotive AD style over a neutral one, reinforcing the significance of user experience as highlighted by Fryer and Freeman (2012). Walczak and Rubaj (2014) demonstrated that metaphorical language in AD helps visually impaired students comprehend and retain educational content, while Zabrocka (2019) found similar benefits for children, including enhanced understanding, enjoyment, and linguistic development. Szarkowska (2013) proposed the “auteur description” approach for artistic films, incorporating the director’s creative vision and metaphors to create a more immersive and authentic viewing experience. In the museum context, Edo (2018) showed how metaphors and similes can make abstract art more accessible to visually impaired visitors. García Vizcaíno (2023), using a functionalist approach to intersemiotic translation, emphasised the effectiveness of metaphors (particularly those involving synaesthesia and vocal emphasis) in describing multimedia video installations, highlighting the balance between creativity and fidelity to the original artwork. Spinzi (2019) also explored the importance of metaphor as a creative strategy in museum AD, reinforcing its role in aligning with the aesthetic purpose of the work.

In our own research, it has been demonstrated how metaphors serve as powerful cognitive tools that enable the translation of complex visual information into tangible, evocative language (Luque, 2020). By framing visual elements through metaphors, audio describers can render the abstract more concrete and enhance cognitive

accessibility for BPS audiences. Our research also emphasises the importance of metaphor types such as synaesthesia and personification, which enrich the listener's sensory experience. These figurative strategies not only facilitate comprehension but also make space for personal interpretation, emotional engagement, and imaginative participation. In sum, metaphor is not an optional embellishment in AD; it is a fundamental tool for shaping how BPS audiences access and experience visual art.

In our AD, various types of metaphor are employed deliberately to enrich the listener's sensory and emotional engagement. For instance, the description “dozens of stems of papyrus, the umbrella plant, a metre high and bright green. They look like fireworks, or perhaps a small jungle or an oasis of tall, slender palm trees” uses novel and layered imagery. This offers the listener interpretive flexibility while evoking vivid mental pictures through unexpected but relatable comparisons, highlighting the optionality and creative potential of metaphor. Another example, “the delicate sheen seems to float on the softness of the wood,” draws on synaesthetic metaphor, mixing visual and tactile sensations to create a more immersive, almost tangible impression of the surface. In describing “the newborn Baby Jesus, lying on the ground... on white cloths and a bed of fine straw, symbolising the poverty of his birth”, the language foregrounds the symbolic dimension of the image, inviting reflection on emotional themes. Finally, in “the light in the room is natural and softly fills the space through these windows”, personification subtly transforms light into an active presence, enhancing the atmosphere and underscoring the significance of place as part of the aesthetic experience. These examples illustrate how metaphor in AD is not just decorative, but a carefully chosen tool that enables deeper access, understanding, and emotional resonance for BPS audiences.

2.1.3. Sensory metaphors and synaesthesia

It is important to distinguish from the outset between synesthetic metaphor, multisensory description, and multisensory experience, as these terms are often conflated. Synaesthetic metaphors (e.g., “a warm colour”) linguistically blend sensory modalities; multisensory descriptions evoke different senses independently (e.g., smell, temperature, texture); multisensory experiences involve simultaneous sensory stimulation, whether real or imagined. This article uses “synaesthetic” strictly in its linguistic-metaphorical sense and reserves “multisensory” for experiential evocation.

This technique thus combines sensory metaphors with synaesthetic strategies to enrich AD by evoking a multisensory experience that transcends the visual domain. By drawing on the listener's sensory imagination, it encourages associations across sensory modalities, such as describing colours as “echoes of brass”, or a figure's presence as “as heavy as velvet”, to communicate aesthetic and emotional dimensions of the artwork through sound, smell, touch, and movement.

Vikmane et al. (2023) offer a compelling example of this approach in their study at the Raiņa un Aspazijas Memorial Museum in Latvia. This project engaged visitors through tactile objects, olfactory cues such as coffee beans, and curated soundscapes, providing alternative sensory routes to cultural content. Although the authors do not explicitly define these elements as metaphors, their function can be interpreted metaphorically, creating connections between material stimuli and abstract meanings.

These interventions exemplify how non-visual stimuli can serve as affective and cognitive anchors, enriching the interpretative potential of AD.

Simultaneously, synaesthesia as a technique, defined by the blending of distinct sensory experiences, adds a valuable conceptual and practical layer to this approach. My research explores how synesthetic metaphors (e.g. translating visual intensity into auditory rhythm or tactile pressure) can enhance the AD of pictorial elements (Luque, 2020). These metaphors foster deeper sensory engagement by inviting listeners to experience artworks through composite impressions, not merely through isolated sensory references. By evoking the auditory, tactile, or olfactory character of visual elements, synesthetic metaphors allow for an expansive, embodied understanding of art that aligns with the principles of sensory accessibility.

Further reinforcing the potential of this multisensory strategy, Cliffe et al. (2024) demonstrate how augmented auditory realities can create meaningful and emotionally resonant experiences in museum contexts. In their research, virtual soundscapes embedded into objects (such as an old radio playing period broadcasts) activated emotional memories and deepened visitor engagement. Although not explicitly framed as synaesthetic, these overlapping sensory experiences function similarly, enhancing the spatial, temporal, and emotional perception of artworks and exhibits.

By combining metaphorical and synesthetic strategies, this technique invites AD practitioners to go beyond literal representation and engage the senses in ways that resonate with individual experience, memory, and imagination. These layered, interpretative cues provide a multisensory grammar that allows BPS audiences to construct meaning through sensory memory and association. Ultimately, this approach encourages a shift from information-based description to a more immersive, and inclusive form of interpretation. It enriches the expressive capacity of AD by using multiple sensory modalities (sound, smell, texture, and emotion) thereby facilitating deeper and more engagement with artworks.

In this context, the following example from our AD illustrates how synaesthetic metaphor can be used to convey intensity and emotion through layered sensory associations:

Remember when we said that the colours in the painting didn't burn? In this case it's different. The saint is dressed in an ochre tunic, but it shines so so brightly in the light that bathes some parts of the painting, that it looks like fire. It's as if the sun is colliding with the canvas, revealing its warmth and power to us. According to historians, it may symbolise the fire that envelops its dark end.

This passage uses synaesthesia to transform visual brightness into the sensation of heat and impact, merging visual, tactile, and thermal impressions. The phrase "the sun is colliding with the canvas" invites the listener to feel the force and intensity of light as a physical encounter, evoking warmth and movement rather than just appearance. Additionally, the shift from the earlier neutral description ("colours didn't burn") to this fiery metaphor marks an emotional and interpretive crescendo, reinforcing the saint's symbolic significance. The allusion to historical context ("the fire that envelops its dark end") grounds this sensory experience in narrative meaning, enhancing both affective and cognitive engagement. Through such multisensory language, AD transcends

literal translation and opens a space for experiential understanding that mirrors the complexity and emotional depth of visual art, such as in the case of Caravaggio.

2.1.4. Description of the emotions of the characters and the artist

This technique enhances emotional connection by describing the moods and feelings expressed by characters in a work of art. It moves beyond visual details to interpret emotional undercurrents, offering a fuller sensory and aesthetic experience for BPS audiences. Kemp and Cupchik (2007) show that thematic content and pictorial style influence viewers' emotional responses, works of art with negative or subdued tones often evoke deeper reflection. In AD, conveying cues like expression, posture, and spatial relationships help communicate a piece's emotional atmosphere.

One example is the way the Virgin is depicted in our subjective version: "The Virgin, here in the guise of an ordinary woman, looks extremely melancholic, perhaps foreshadowing the fate of her son, who is lying on a small bed of straw. This is not a Virgin who seems to be on her way to heaven, but a tired young woman recovering from childbirth". This description shifts the focus from mere physical attributes to the emotional weight carried by the figure. By interpreting her as "melancholic" and "tired", the AD not only humanises the Virgin but also invites the listener to empathise with her lived experience, her maternal vulnerability, exhaustion, and grief.

2.1.5. Subjective context

Matamala and Orero (2007) argue that AD should move beyond objective transcription, embracing its role as intersemiotic translation to convey not just visual content but also emotional and contextual elements. When grounded in the artwork's intent, such subjectivity can enrich the user's experience. Although not specific to AD, Wong's (2015) analysis of museum discourse supports this view, suggesting that language in museums functions as a tool to assert values and shape meaning, not just transmit information. Together, these perspectives support an AD model that balances objectivity with interpretive sensitivity to offer BPS users a deeper, more aesthetic encounter with art.

Incorporating subjective interpretations in AD can be a valuable tool for improving accessibility and deepening the aesthetic experience in cultural contexts. Let us take this passage from our AD:

He doesn't look like the baby Jesus we're used to. He's so small that we might not have seen him without the strong light shining on him from above. He's a real child and we don't know what's going on in his mind. Caravaggio painted him as a flesh and blood, newborn child, and these creatures don't think of anything yet. He's helpless, cold, almost abandoned. The historian Roberto Longhi said of him that he "lay on the ground like the shell of a clam". It's a powerful image, far from the sanctity of the child, but it reflects very well the sense of fragility and sadness that sometimes dominates the painting.

This offers a layered, emotionally resonant interpretation. The addition of art historian Roberto Longhi's metaphor, likening the baby to "the shell of a clam", amplifies this sense of abandonment and fragility, anchoring the interpretation in expert knowledge

while also deliberately opening a space for emotional response. Such subjectivity invites listeners to engage with the painting on a human level, as viewers often do in museum contexts when they respond to a guide's personal reflections or scholarly commentary.

2.1.6. Use of music and sounds to translate images

This technique employs music to reflect the tone, rhythm, or emotional atmosphere of an artwork, transforming visual elements into auditory experiences and introducing an intersemiotic dimension to AD. Rather than serving as mere background, music and sound function as a form of sensory translation that can enhance emotional engagement and facilitate meaning making for BPS audiences.

Neves (2010) introduces the concept of soundpainting, which proposes that music can translate visual components such as colour, texture, or movement into auditory language. This process requires interpretive choices, as the selected music must resonate with the aesthetic and emotional content of the visual artwork. Soundpainting does not aim for literal translation but instead prioritises affective resonance, using sound to evoke a similar impact to the one visual experience might offer sighted viewers. Within this framework, music becomes an expressive and subjective tool aligned with evolving standards of accessibility, which increasingly embrace interpretive and multisensory methods.

Complementary research by Hutchinson and Eardley (2024) supports the use of enriched AD incorporating musical and ambient sound. Their study, conducted in museum settings, shows that such enhancements improve both emotional immersion and memory recall in both BPS and sighted participants alike. Music was found to deepen the sense of presence and support emotional and episodic memory, particularly when integrated in a carefully curated and contextually relevant manner.

Additionally, the work of Yates and Løvlie on subtle sound design in museums (2023) emphasises how sensory elements like sound can evoke emotions and memories. Their research highlights the role of sound in creating an immersive, emotional layer to the museum experience, reinforcing the idea of using non-visual elements to enhance emotional engagement in AD.

These findings suggest that musical integration and sound in AD can function on both cognitive and emotional levels, especially within the context of contemporary art where non-visual interpretations hold particular significance. The strategic use of music thus represents a valuable interpretive tool, expanding the sensory and aesthetic reach of AD.

In our AD, the musical theme *Masses, Book 13: Missa Hodie Christus natus est: Missa Hodie Christus natus est: Agnus Dei* is introduced before the AD. After it, we propose this question: “What did you feel, do you have a picture in your head?”. Then, we introduce this soundscape passage:

(Sound of shuffling footsteps and straw)
(Sound of an ox breathing)
(Sound of an ox mooing)

(Sound of a calm baby)

The examples illustrate how music and sound can function as powerful interpretive tools in AD. The use of sacred music and ambient sounds, such as footsteps, straw rustling, an ox breathing, and a calm baby, creates an immersive, emotional atmosphere that prepares the listener for the visual narrative. Rather than simply setting the scene, these elements translate the mood, tone, and rhythm of the artwork into auditory form. By prompting the listener to reflect, the AD encourages emotional and imaginative engagement, demonstrating how music and sound can enrich accessibility through a multisensory, affective experience.

2.1.7. Use of the description of smells and flavours

To avoid confusion with synesthetic metaphor, “smell” and “taste” techniques are classified here as multisensory experiential strategies rather than metaphors unless a conceptual mapping is explicitly present.

This technique involves translating visual elements into olfactory and gustatory AD, enabling BPS audiences to imagine smells or tastes through metaphor. Verbeek et al. (2022) argue that scent is not merely atmospheric but can serve as a narrative and emotional device that enhances cultural mediation and accessibility. Though not focused on AD, their framework supports the integration of olfactory metaphors into AD, offering emotional triggers and memory cues that deepen engagement.

Describing the scent of incense in a church or the taste of ripe fruit can evoke rich, personal imagery. Such cues foster a multisensory, embodied connection with art. Museums like the Mauritshuis (The Hague) have begun exploring these strategies, aligning with broader movements like the association Kaleidoscope Access, cofounded by the author, that promote synaesthetic, inclusive experiences. In this context, olfactory and gustatory elements in AD are not just embellishments: they represent a transformative step toward more immersive and accessible interpretation.

In our AD, we can find this excerpt, which can give us an understanding the usefulness of description of smells and flavours:

What smells does the painting evoke in you? We can almost perceive the dampness of the cave, the cold straw, the thick fabrics of the cloaks and robes. The presence of the ox reminds us of a smell that is not so pleasant, but we associate it with this scene, the smell of dung. What other smells does the painting evoke for you?

In this example, the AD uses olfactory cues to evoke a rich sensory environment, helping listeners imagine the atmosphere of the scene beyond the visual. This multisensory approach not only grounds the audience in the setting but also creates a more intimate and immersive experience, demonstrating how smell-based language can deepen emotional and cognitive engagement. Also, this leads into our next technique.

2.1.8. Use of tactile descriptions to translate images

Tactile evocation is treated as a multisensory experiential strategy, distinct from metaphor and from actual haptic interaction, though often complementary to both. Integrating the sense of touch into the museum experience is a key strategy in the promotion of sensory accessibility, especially in contexts where visual perception is limited or absent. Comes (2016) argues that haptic devices and tactile experiences not only compensate for lack of vision but also offer a distinct type of knowledge: one that is bodily, immediate, and multisensory. From this perspective, touch is not just a tool for accessibility but also an interpretive medium.

This approach has direct implications for AD, as describing textures, shapes, and volumes with sensory precision allows listeners to imagine how it would feel to ‘touch’ or ‘feel’ the represented elements of an artwork. Research by Graven et al. (2020) reinforces this idea by studying how BPS people process tactile-auditory images in museums. Their study shows that combining tactile and auditory information not only improves understanding of the artworks but also enhances the emotional and cognitive experience of visitors. Participants positively valued descriptions that included detailed tactile references, as they helped them build a clearer and more vivid mental representation of the objects.

If we go back to the example used to illustrate the smell and taste technique, we can see that “We can almost perceive the dampness of the cave, the cold straw, the thick fabrics of the cloaks and robes” is related to tactile experiences and can reinforce an immersive experience. When accompanied by well-crafted sensory metaphors, this strategy becomes a legitimate and effective way to translate the image into a complete sensory experience.

2.1.9. Narrative description

This technique is classified under narrative and poetic strategies, as it structures the listener’s experience temporally and interpretatively rather than metaphorically. The use of this type of narrative structures in AD represents an effective strategy for facilitating understanding and enjoyment of visual artworks, particularly in museum contexts. Sitzia (2016) argues that narrative is a fundamental mechanism for generating meaning in the museum experience. According to her analysis, structuring information as a story with an introduction, development, and conclusion allows visitors to build coherent and memorable interpretive frameworks, enhancing learning and emotional engagement. This perspective can be applied to AD as a form of intersemiotic translation that goes beyond mere description, integrating both temporal and symbolic aspects into a sensory narrative.

In a similar vein, Barnés and Jiménez (2020) again demonstrate how a narratively structured AD improves user engagement with the artwork. Through careful narration that introduces the context, develops visual elements in sequence, and culminates in a synthesis or conclusion, a more immersive and meaningful experience is achieved. This technique not only enriches aesthetic perception but also captures the rhythm and internal meaning of the artwork, mimicking how people naturally interpret images as stories.

This excerpt from our AD exemplifies it:

Imagine you're in a cave or an old, closed room. Now imagine that through some holes in the wall, the rays of the evening sun, or even orange spotlights, penetrate some parts here and there: the forehead and the right arm of Jesus, the face of his mother, the sturdy legs of St Joseph or his thick hair, the habit of St Lawrence or the part of the angel's body closest to us. These parts are glowing, warm and close, you can almost feel them.

The AD adopts a narrative structure by inviting the listener to imagine a setting and then gradually introduces visual elements as if they are being revealed through shifting light. This approach seems like the unfolding of a story: it sets the scene, guides the listener through key details in a paced, deliberate sequence, and evokes a sensory atmosphere. This narrative technique transforms static visual elements into a living, evolving moment, enhancing accessibility through storytelling.

2.1.10. Poetic description

Poetic strategies are understood here not as metaphors per se but as stylistic condensations that rely on rhythm, imagery, and affective suggestiveness.

The use of poetic language in AD introduces literary elements such as rhythm, metaphor, and imagery to evoke the sensory and emotional essence of an artwork. Rather than offering a purely objective account, this technique seeks to recreate the affective atmosphere of the piece according to the audio describer, enriching the listener's engagement with the artwork.

From a functional translation perspective, Hutchinson and Eardley (2020) argue that different AD styles should coexist, ranging from factual to highly interpretive approaches. They liken AD to poetry translation, where multiple methods, each varying in creativity and subjectivity, serve different interpretative goals. This perspective supports a shift toward more expressive forms of AD that prioritise meaningful, aesthetic experiences.

An example of this is the “gist” style described by Soler (2021), based on the work of Claire Bartoli, a blind writer and actress. Bartoli's AD, such as her description of Daniel Buren's *Murs de Peintures*, present a selective, impressionistic account of visual elements without strict spatial or conceptual links. Using paralinguistic features like voice modulation and rhythm, Bartoli conveys the repetition and form of the composition through sound, translating visual patterns into auditory experiences.

A similar approach was applied by Kaleidoscope Access in a poetic AD of Jackson Pollock's *Summertime: Number 9A* (Tate Modern), focusing on sensations and emotions rather than visual fidelity. Rooted in the ethos of abstract expressionism, the AD used metaphors and expressive language to evoke the movement and energy of the painting.

Poetic AD challenges traditional notions of access by embracing creativity and subjectivity. It highlights how AD can serve not only as a descriptive tool but also as

an aesthetic medium, deepening emotional and sensory connections for BPS audiences.

This technique is applied in our AD when we introduce the scene:

Darkness. Baby Jesus in the middle. Next to him, the Virgin and St Joseph. Behind, St Francis, St Lawrence and a shepherd. Above, an angel. Lights gently touching some parts of the painting. Recollection.

In this example, poetic description is achieved through brevity, rhythm, and evocative phrasing. Rather than detailing visual aspects analytically, the AD evokes a moment, suggesting contemplation and intimacy. This poetic approach invites the listener to feel the emotional tone of the artwork, transforming AD into a shared and emotional experience. This could also be enhanced with the use of difference voices.

2.1.11. Polyphonic perspective

Polyphony is included within interpretative strategies, as its function is to expand the interpretative horizon rather than describe strictly visual features.

The integration of multiple perspectives, or “polyphony”, in AD is an emerging strategy aimed at enriching the viewer's experience by layering voices, interpretations, and emotional registers. This approach draws inspiration from contemporary museological models that value subjectivity, diversity, and intercultural dialogue as cornerstones of knowledge.

Carroll (2022) examines how the traditionally univocal and authoritative audio guide can be transformed into a polyphonic tool by incorporating a variety of voices (curators, artists, visitors, or members of communities related to the artwork) who construct a collective narrative about the piece. This perspective not only democratises interpretation but also allows for the reflection of the historical, political, and emotional complexity of the works from different sensitivities. The listener, rather than receiving a ‘closed’ version, is exposed to a network of meanings that enhances their agency as an active interpreter.

In a similar vein, Cunningham (2004), in her work on the role of interpreters in museums, also highlights the need to incorporate multiple voices to better represent the plurality of the audience and cultural contexts. This approach is especially valuable for AD, as it offers the user a richer, more dialogical, and open experience, facilitating empathy and identity recognition through different ways of narrating art.

If we look at our AD, we find a polyphonic perspective here:

What is St Joseph doing? With his head turned back and his right hand open in a gesture of conversation, he seems to be talking to the figures surrounding the baby whilst gesturing towards it. Perhaps he's thanking them for their visit to the portal, perhaps, exhausted and nervous, he's asking them who they are and what they want.

It is reflected through the use of interpretive multiplicity. Instead of offering a single, authoritative explanation of St Joseph's gesture, the AD proposes several possibilities: he might be thanking the visitors or perhaps anxiously questioning them. These speculative voices create a dialogue within the AD, inviting the listener to consider multiple emotional and narrative interpretations.

3. Conclusion

In this article, we have introduced a methodology for creating subjective and experiential AD, that is, a set of discursive strategies that become a translation methodology or model. At the heart of this initiative is the AD of *The Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence* by Caravaggio, developed in both objective and subjective versions. Rather than focusing on the results of user testing, the article aims to outline the creative and methodological process behind the AD, offering practitioners, educators, and researchers a flexible framework for producing more expressive and user-adapted descriptions.

AD has traditionally been conceptualised as an intersemiotic transfer aimed at providing access to visual content through objective, factual language. However, as museum practices and accessibility paradigms evolve, so too do the expectations of BPS audiences, who increasingly engage with cultural heritage in multisensory, interpretive, and affective ways. The findings presented in this article, drawn from theoretical analysis, corpus studies, and an ongoing experimental project in Palermo that we aim to present in the next few months, demonstrate the potential of subjective and experiential strategies to enrich museum AD and foster deeper connections with artworks.

Rather than proposing a fully developed methodology, this article has put forward an exploratory framework that systematises a set of techniques emerging across recent scholarship and creative practice. These include metaphorical strategies, sensory and experiential devices, narrative and poetic approaches, and interpretative techniques. The framework provides conceptual clarity by distinguishing between different types of subjectivity and between metaphor, synesthetic metaphor, multisensory description, and multisensory experience, areas that have sometimes been conflated in the literature.

The preliminary empirical data gathered from the Caravaggio project in Palermo reinforce the relevance of these strategies, although they remain indicative rather than definitive. So far, we have conducted three focus groups with BPS participants in the UK, Spain, and Italy. Each group consisted of 4 to 5 participants and was held online, following a structure similar to the one developed by Soler and Luque (2023) in our ECREA study. Participants were given both an objective and a more subjective, creative AD version in advance. The sessions, typically one to two per group, were designed as open conversations, with the researcher acting only as a facilitator, encouraging dialogue without directing it. Participants' responses suggest that subjective AD can enhance immersion, emotional resonance, and personal meaning-making, yet preferences vary across individuals, contexts, and cultural backgrounds. These findings highlight the need for ongoing user-centred research to test, refine, and adapt subjective strategies in diverse museum settings.

Importantly, this work positions AD not merely as a tool for “visual translation” but as a form of cultural mediation, capable of acknowledging the interpretative plurality inherent in art perception. This shift does not contradict the framework proposed here; rather, it situates it within a broader understanding of museum communication, where accessibility is inseparable from interpretation, participation, and affective engagement.

Future research should continue to investigate how subjective and experiential strategies interact with audience diversity, linguistic variation, and different museum environments. Larger-scale empirical studies, cross-linguistic comparisons, and collaborations with BPS communities will be essential to developing more nuanced, responsive, and context-sensitive AD practices.

By offering a structured yet flexible framework, grounded in emerging scholarship and early empirical evidence, this article aims to support practitioners, students, and researchers in expanding the expressive possibilities of museum AD while remaining attentive to user preferences and ethical considerations.

In conclusion, to foster more creative, subjective, and user-adapted AD, future methodologies and guidelines must move beyond rigid standards. They should encourage diversity, personalisation, and co-creation. BPS audiences are not a single type, since their needs, preferences, and ways of engaging with art vary widely. A flexible AD model can open more inclusive, imaginative pathways in museum accessibility, allowing users to choose how they access and connect with artworks on a deeper, more meaningful, and more subjective level.

Data availability statement

The dataset used for this study contains confidential information and is subject to non-disclosure agreements with the participants. Hence, the data are not publicly available.

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