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# On the art of audio description: Naomi Kawase's *Radiance*

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## ABSTRACT

Audio description improves access to visual culture for people who are unable to fully participate in it due to visual impairments. Because of this direct benefit to disabled people, it is usually defined as an accommodation or inclusion service. Rather than adopting this view, we see disability as a creative force, arguing that it can engender a new dimension of art: audio description as a form of cinematic ekphrasis. This claim is made by drawing on the 2017 movie *Radiance*, by Japanese director Naomi Kawase. This movie puts audio description in the spotlight and stimulates discussion on this underdeveloped and under-recognised art. *Radiance* is structured around the process of making the audio description, thus offering good insight into the artistry and main challenges of this process. Between the words of this meditation on the art of audio description, Kawase also challenges the dominant ocular normative narrative on blindness as a deficiency and provokes a discussion on the contribution that blindness—with its different, still culturally unexplored modes of perception—could make to the interpretation of visual arts. *Radiance* can thus be treated as an artful argument for the greater recognition of disabled people's right to participate in cultural life.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2017 movie *Radiance* by Japanese director Naomi Kawase (2017) tells the story of an encounter. Misako Ozaki is a passionate writer of audio descriptions, and while she is working on a new movie, she meets Masaya Nakamori, a photographer who is gradually going blind. As one of the consultants in the process, together with the group of other visually impaired people, Mr. Nakamori regularly meets with Misako to give her feedback and discuss the quality of her work. During their first meeting, unlike other disabled people in the team who, grateful for her work, do not dare give her anything but praise, he openly criticises Misako. According to him, some of her descriptions are intrusive and do not leave space for viewers' imaginations. *Frankly, it just gets in the way*, he states so bluntly that he leaves the dedicated writer speechless. A story of mutual attraction and aversion follows. Throughout the movie, the two characters are drawn to each other, hurt each other and then tend to each other's wounds; they clash and finally fall for one another.

We claim that this uneasy romance is a medium through which Kawase tells the story of another, equally challenging encounter. In the art of audio description, word must meet image in exactly

coordinated timing and must do so in an unremitting sequence. How to contain the lavishness of an image in a handful of words? How to make the visual verbal and translate the spatial into the temporal? This almost impossible task takes us to the core of ekphrasis, a classic literary figure in which the word attempts to represent an object of the visual arts. The turbulent relationship between Misako and Mr. Nakamori can be read as an allegory of this creative process. A word seeks an image, and an image attracts and yet escapes a word. In the initial confrontation and growing intimacy of both characters, occasionally ruptured by sudden estrangements, we also observe this peculiar poetic struggle: the struggle to break the resistance of the matter and bring the weightless word out of the sensual gravity of the picture. Through the character of Misako and the portrayal of her creative efforts, Kawase elevates audio-visual translation to the rank of art. It is not a *téchne* and not only an instrument to make visual media accessible to the blind—it is poetry at its best (cf. Udo and Fels 2009ba; Cavallo 2015; Fryer and Cavallo 2022).

Between the words of this meditation on the art of audio description, Kawase also tells a non-stereotypical story of blindness. Just as audio description is a technology for the visually impaired and—in responding to their vital need to fully participate in the visual culture—an art, so are the blind people passive recipients of this work and, like the strong and appealing Mr. Nakamori, participants and authorities in the process. Their authority comes not from the fact that they are 'consumers' of audio-visual translation, but is acquired by virtue of their aesthetic contribution to the process of its elaboration. One of the strengths of the movie is the natural way in which the blind protagonists, with Mr. Nakamori at the forefront, start to guide Misako. It is Misako who, while literally seeing the movie, is somewhat shallow in her reception and description of it, whereas blind people, despite their visual difficulties, feel and understand the movie better. Thereby, alongside the notion of 'blindness gain' (Chottin and Thompson 2021), Kawase also rewrites one of the dominant scenarios of our ocular normative culture: she reverses the 'assumed authority of sight' (Bolt 2014, 9) in the interpretation of the blind culture and gives voice to blindness in understanding the sighted one.

This paper argues that in Kawase's *Radiance*, disability is reframed as a creative power, which, in this instance, is engendering a new dimension of art: audio description as a form of cinematic ekphrasis. This argument unfolds as follows: the paper begins by taking the reader on a brief tour



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through the fabular plot of the movie, which Kawase also skillfully couples with its symbolic layers. The third part turns to Mr. Nakamori and other visually impaired characters, examining the non-stereotypical portrayal of blind protagonists and the process of their gaining agency in the interpretation of visual arts, drawing from cultural disability studies (Bolt 2014; Bolt 2021; Chottin and Thompson 2021; Healey 2021; Healey and Michalko 2021; Kleege 1999; Kleege 2018). Similarly, in the fourth part, we accompany Misako in her passage from being a novice in cinematic arts to a keen audio-visual translator. The paths of these two characters cross in the central argument of the paper, described in the fifth part, which, drawing on a semiotic approach to ekphrasis (Krieger 1992; Mitchell 1994) and a close textual analysis of the film (Wildfeuer 2016), discusses the evolution of audio description from being an underdeveloped support for the visually impaired to being recognised as an art of sculpting in words. Moreover, we argue that the evolution of Misako's text in *Radiance* can be read as reflecting different and evolving conceptualisations of audio description in audio-visual translation theory (Bigotte Chorão and Almeida 2015; Fryer 2016; Holland 2009; Orero and Pujol 2007; Thompson 2018), as well as accessibility studies (Fryer and Cavallo 2022; Greco 2019; Romero-Fresco 2019; Udo and Fels 2010). To complete the claim that audio description should be recognised as a new, poetic genre within cinematic arts, we finish this part with a close reading (Lentricchia 2003) of the audio description of the film *Radiance*. Given that *Radiance*, both in its content and inclusive form, draws our attention to the importance of giving blind people access to the content and creation of visual arts (Romero-Fresco 2019, 25), we conclude with a human rights-based argument for treating the provision of this access as a priority among social justice issues (cf. Greco 2016, Greco 2019; Bestard-Bou and Arias-Badia 2022; Casanovas López 2017; Fryer and Cavallo 2022).

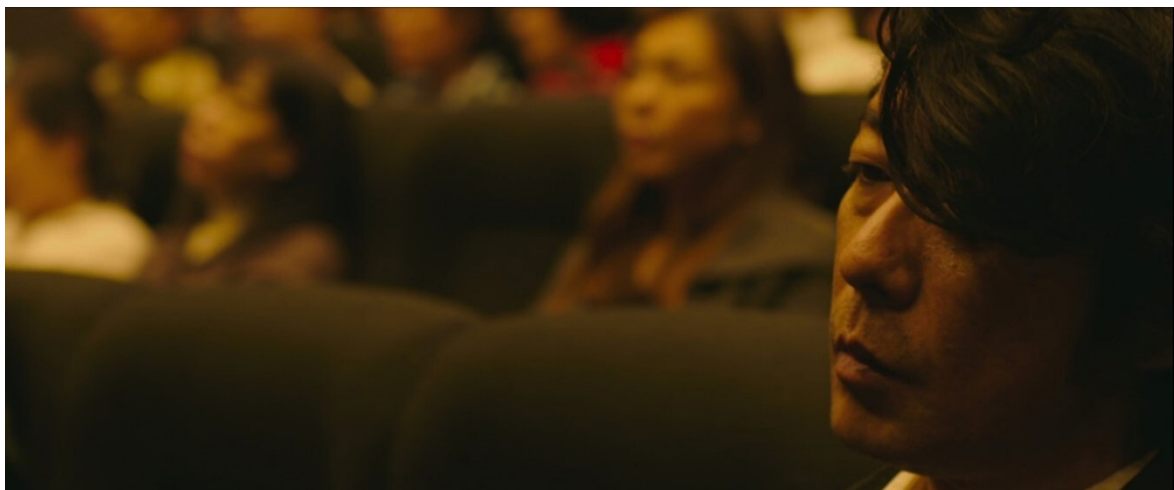
### **Radiance**

As befits a meditation on cinematic art, the storyline of *Radiance* begins and ends in the cinema. A man in a black jacket enters a crowded theatre. In an extreme close-up, the camera almost hangs on his back and follows him as he walks confidently down the rows. In this way, his leading role in the composition is announced right from the start. He takes a seat and puts on

a headset. *Testing, testing, testing. Are your earphones working?* A movie is about to begin (figure 1). The same scene with the man in the black jacket, who, as we later learn, is Masaya Nakamori, will reappear at the end of the movie, and this time we will watch the fragment of the audio-described picture with him. This circular composition makes a clear statement: it is a movie about audio description, and we are witnessing the process of its creation.

The next scene takes us to the White Light, a studio creating audio descriptions for movies. Misako discusses the draft of her audio-visual translation with a control group composed of blind and sighted colleagues. Initially, she receives mainly praise. *'Behind thick clouds, a pale sun is visible', I like that, says Mr. Akitoshi with a radiant smile.* When Misako receives some criticism, it is delivered so subtly and sugar-coated with so much laughter and appreciation that it is hardly distinguishable from approval. The description seems flawless—only the details are missing: they suggest she might replace 'black hair' with 'dark hair' or describe what figure the protagonist is sculpting in the sand. Ms. Ishida is about to say something more, but she stops in the middle of the sentence and later dismisses her opinion as *not really important*. This benign atmosphere shifts abruptly when Mr. Nakamori asks Ms. Ishida to finish her sentence before he adds his own critique: some of Misako's comments are intrusive. The girl is too invested in her work not to take it emotionally, and she replies, *There's no need to be so blunt. I wrote it that way... for all of you.* By opposing him in this way, she discloses a seemingly well-intended yet patronising approach so commonly displayed when assisting disabled people. Mr. Nakamori challenges this charitable attitude: *That's why it's intrusive*, he concludes. Misako, although somewhat resentful, understands and promises to ameliorate all the intrusions.

She does her best. Before everyone returns to White Light to revisit the improved text, the next sequence of scenes shows the various steps Misako undertakes to describe the picture better. In following her creative efforts, *Radiance* unfolds as a coming-of-age story of a beginning and experimental writer, testing the capacious potential of language. One of her initiatives is to meet the director of the movie. Despite the difficulty of obtaining a private appointment with an old master, she succeeds, through which she brings the audio descriptors closer to the artistic vision of the film's director and improves its quality.



**Figure 1** © '*Radiance*' film partners/Kinoshita, Comme des Cinémas; Kumie: close-up of Mr. Nakamori's face against the backdrop of a crowded cinema hall.

Just as, in the art of ekphrasis, word and image seek each other, so, on the level of the story, Misako and Masaya also do. In the following sequence of scenes, we watch their relationship take a new turn and see them befriending each other. Back in the White Light studio, despite Misako's best efforts, her blind collaborators—apparently emboldened by Mr. Nakamori—begin openly expressing criticism for her work. Misako engages in a sharp exchange with Mr. Nakamori, which causes him to leave the studio and her to be taken off this project. Yet, despite this abrupt disconnection, Misako and Masaya continue to long for each other, the way word and image are drawn to each other. Their next meeting is coincidental: Misako spots Mr. Nakamori in a crowded metro and follows him. This is a vulnerable moment for him, as his vision, gradually diminishing throughout the movie, is now completely gone. Misako accompanies him, this time very subtly, and the affection grows between the two.

Meanwhile, despite officially no longer being involved in the project, Misako keeps working on the translation. When the White Light crew meets again, it is not at the studio but in the cinema where the audio-described movie makes its premiere. *Testing, testing, testing. Are your earphones working?* We watch the last scene together with all the guests and marvel at how the images and words go hand in hand.

### Mr. Nakamori and the authority of blindness

According to Healey and Michalko (2021), the word 'blindness' is one of those words that has a meaning and a 'feel' to it. They draw here from Bauman (2001), who observed that some words evoke such powerful connotations that their meaning, in addition to being understood, may also be almost viscerally felt. For example, according to Bauman, the word 'community' feels like a roof to shelter beneath when it rains, or like a fireplace where one warms one's cold hands (Bauman 2001, 1). What is the feeling of blindness? In our ocular normative culture, it is not a positive one. Michalko and Healey recall the way the iconic Al Pacino-starring 1992 film *Scent of a Woman* (Brest 1992) depicts this feeling of blindness. When its main character, a former military officer, goes blind, he declares: *What life? I got no life! I'm in the dark here. You understand? I'm in the dark.* This desperate lament echoes the dominant culture's stance on blindness as a crippling deficiency. Founded on the seeing-as-knowing premise, this attitude suggests that blindness equals ignorance. We see this echoed in certain sayings: 'being in the dark', 'reaching a blind spot' or 'turning a blind eye to something' (Bolt 2014, 20). This metaphor also has a moral undertone: blindness may feel like 'blind rage', 'blind fear' or even a punishment for one's sins—an ultimate, worse-than-death Oedipian tragedy (Kent 1989).

In contrast to this, Kawase's *Radiance* evokes a different feeling of blindness. Mr. Nakamori impresses us with his calm, discreet and controlled demeanour. Rather than lament over his sight loss, he comes across as being at peace. When we first meet him, he retains his partial sight and continues working as a renowned photographer. Yet, as the film progresses, he gradually goes blind. The artificial eye of the camera allows us to accompany him throughout this process in a very intimate manner. One of the readings of the title *Radiance* alludes to this light-drenched vision that unfolds before his eyes when he goes blind. Contrary to its stereotypical cinematographic portrayal, blindness in this context feels more like dwelling in the light than a tragic and solitary 'being in the dark', and this reading is further supported by the French title of this Japanese-French coproduction, which describes Nakamori's journey towards blindness as a path towards the light: *Vers la Lumière*. Kawase introduces us

to this light throughout the entire film. Many shots seem almost overexposed to light: while some are bathed in warm, diffused daylight, others contain a shimmering object (like a crystal or piece of metal) that reflects light across the screen; still others are shot in direct sunlight, blinding a viewer's vision. Kawase hereby mitigates any negativity towards blindness, displaying it as a part of the human condition rather than a tragedy that befalls those unfortunate 'others' (Healey 2021, 12). While accompanying Mr. Nakamori through the process of going blind, we also acquire a certain feeling of blindness, a feeling that is as warm and luminous as radiating light.

This strong contrast in the portrayal of blindness as light might suggest that Kawase is simply swinging to the other extreme of portraying the main character as a blind *seer*. Typically, blind characters are depicted cinematographically either as villains whose disability is a visible sign of their moral decline (Norden 1994), eventually members of some sorry lot ('timid, morose, cranky, resentful, socially awkward and prone to despair' (Kleege 1999, 45)), or, on the other extreme, as blind seers endowed with an amazing sixth sense, such as supernatural hearing or abnormal olfactory abilities. However, both extreme depictions, each in its own way, single out the blind person from a community of equals and are thus both products of the same ocular-centric culture. As Jay (1993, 29) demonstrated, Greek thought, which laid the foundations for Western ocular-normativity, distinguished two types of vision: observation with the two eyes of the body and speculation with the inner mind's eye, which became metaphors of, respectively, empirical and theoretical reasoning. In that sense, a blind seer, like ancient Greek Tiresias, who cannot observe the outside world, is compensated with an abundance of inner vision: fortune-telling, mysticism, prophesying or some other extraordinary gift.

Yet Mr. Nakamori defies both stereotypes. He is a remarkable figure who does inspire admiration, but achieves it without resorting to any compensatory super talent, depending solely on the fortitude of his spirit and his courage, which are inextricably related to his vulnerability. He is profoundly human: we see him suffer; we witness him clinging to his vision and his camera; but we also see him disarming Misako's awkwardness with a smile and, with the same relaxed smile, answering his colleagues' interrogations: no, he says, blindness does not drive him crazy. Perhaps the only stereotypical feature about him is his profession as a photographer, as blind people have often been portrayed as such (cf. Kleege 1999, 59). However, it is justified by the fact that the character of Mr. Nakamori was inspired by Juuji Otani, Japanese painter, writer and athlete, who interpreted his blindness in terms of gain, also with respect to the arts, as it 'made his senses more acute'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover when, in one of the last scenes, he ends up throwing away his previously inseparable prop of the artificial eye, it serves as a powerful symbol of his rejection of and simultaneous liberation from ocular-centric culture as he opens up to new forms of perception. We mature together with Mr. Nakamori, moving beyond the tragic scenario of blindness interpreted as loss and learning to recognise 'blindness gain' and the whole rich spectrum of inventiveness, imagination and creativity that belongs to it (cf. Chottin and Thompson 2021, 35).

This rejection of the 'assumed authority of sight' (Bolt 2014, 9, 99) acts as the source of Mr. Nakamori's authority and the resulting leading role that he plays with respect to Misako and his blind colleagues. In an ocular-centric culture, where seeing equals knowing, sighted people assume their epistemic authority over blind ones. The following dialogue between Mr. Nakamori and Misako illustrates this problem well:

Nakamori: *Also... in the last scene, after the sunset, you decided not to say anything?*

Misako: *I gave it a lot of thought. But for that last scene, I preferred to leave it to the audience to form their own opinion. I was worried that the audio description could influence them in the wrong way.*

N: *So you ran away from it?*

M: *I'm not running away. It's just... I wanted to be less subjective.*

N: *Really? I didn't feel anything.*

M: *That's a problem with your imagination.*

N: *Hmm?*

M: *I always pay close attention, I watch all your faces, looking for your reactions. But your face is always impassive. I don't think it has anything to do with your blindness,—it's just a lack of imagination.*

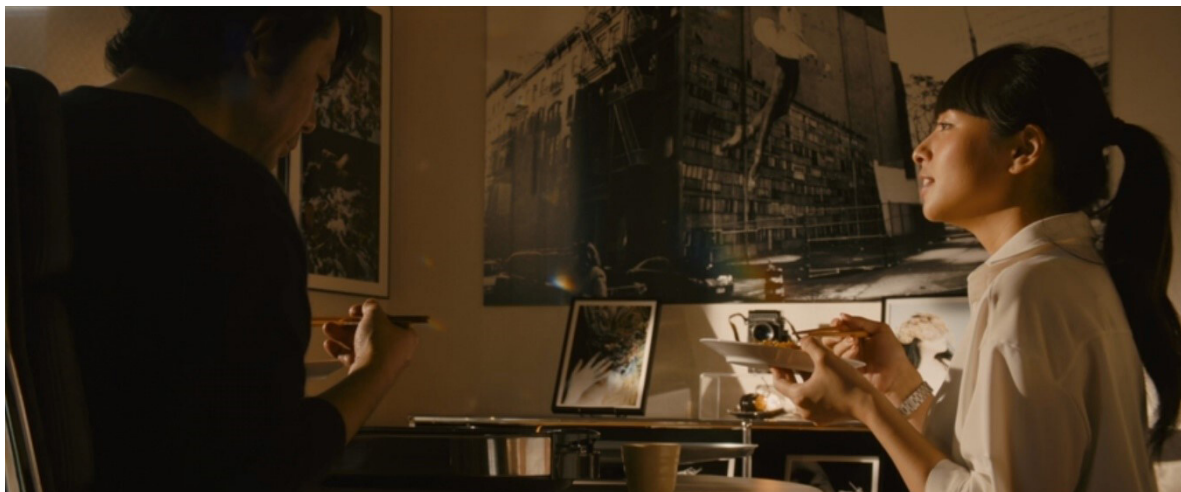
Here, Misako, who, after meeting the director of the movie, realised that she does not really understand the last scene of the movie, refrains from describing it. Rightly challenged by Mr. Nakamori, she resorts to her natural advantage: 'the authority of sight'. In her mind, what is at play here is not her incapacity to capture the abstract meaning, nor her failure to find the right words; it is not *her* problem—it is *his*: his lack of imagination. She can see the movie, and she can also observe his face, so she has no doubt that she knows better. Observation gives her access to what she believes to be objective truth: she knows better what should or should not be said to describe the picture, and believes that this 'knowledge' gives her the ability and right to interpret and judge what he thinks, feels and knows.

With his usual non-chalance, Mr. Nakamori does not accept this treatment: he leaves without further comment. Rejecting the assumed authority of vision, he restores the narrative surrender (Frank 1995) of blind people in the group. Finally, they can speak their minds freely, and they start to openly discuss the movie with Misako instead of only passively receiving her work. If they earn authority in this discussion, it is not by some mysterious gift they possess but by the force of the better argument, as it befits the democratic community (implying that it is free from any assumed authority and dominance, be it a dominance of one sense over another, and those who can use it over those who cannot). Their comments are fresh, insightful and intriguing. They are exemplifying how visual arts are 'more than meets the eye' (Kleege 2018) and as such are accessible to the blind audience through other senses, as well as through their imaginative powers and understanding. Their different modes of perception open the way for original imageries, different

interpretations and perspectives never before articulated. In other words, their difference is not a 'bad-difference' (Barnes 2016, 54), it is a creative one. For example, Masako, a timid woman who previously veiled each of her critiques with a polite smile, initiated an elaborate argument to reveal the profound meaning of the movie, teaching her audience to discern deep currents of feeling flowing through the movie. Interestingly, this role was played by a visually impaired consultant of a Japanese audio description company *City Lights*, Masako Tanaka, who played herself in the film, effectively expressing her actual opinions about the Mr. Kitabayashi movie and cinema in general.<sup>2</sup> She captures her understanding in terms relating to touch: *There is a certain weight, a certain gravity, to this film*. This tactile terminology again resonates with Kleege (2018, 72), who, while describing her touch-tours through different arts museums, regrets that blind people, who are the only few allowed to touch these works of art, are not asked to describe their sensations. She suggests that this unique experience might add another category of aesthetic value and broaden everyone's appreciation of the artwork. This is exactly what happens in *Radiance* when Ms. Masako explains the film in new, tactile terms, inspiring both her sighted colleagues in the film and the film director herself. Interestingly, Kawase expresses the gain she has experienced from working with the blind people in terms of feeling, sharpening the senses and acquiring a new sensitivity in understanding art.<sup>3</sup>

#### Portrait of an artist as a young woman

*The light of the setting sun poured into Nakamori's room. Throughout the room, the light was scattered by a prism. Misako held her hand up to the light. The light from the prism landed on the palm of her hand.* This is just one of Misako's countless exercises in describing her visual experience. She practices incessantly, describing the everyday sight she observes while waiting at the bus stop and trying to capture in words all the images that fill her with wonder. At this afternoon hour, Mr. Nakamori's room is bathed in warm light. The piece of crystal hangs against the windowpane, catching the sunlight and refracting it so that bits of light go swirling merrily throughout the room. The way the light dances around gives the space a blissful weightlessness reminiscent of the ballerina dancing against gravity on one of the photographs hanging on the wall. This close-up description sets the scene for the intimate conversation (figure 2) between Mr.



**Figure 2** © 'Radiance' film partners/Kinoshita, Comme des Cinémas; Kumie: Masaya and Misako eating noodles and admiring the light of the setting sun swirling around his room.

Nakamori and Misako as they eat noodles together. The growing trust between the two inspires Misako to exercise aloud. She then turns to Mr. Nakamori, asking his opinion. *Not bad*, he answers. The girl's face lights up at this understated compliment—she does not even try to hide her pride.

The lyrical ambience of this scene captures the growing intimacy between the two characters, as well as, on a symbolic level, the poetic element undeniably present in the process of turning images into words. Despite this strong *poiesis* component, audio description is typically defined as 'a form of assistive audio-visual translation, or inclusion service, designed to make (audio) visual products available to blind and visually impaired persons' (Perego 2018, 114). The amount of time necessary to complete the translation reflects the level of complexity of this process: according to Cronin and King (1990, 503), it takes between 16 and 20 hours to create an audio description of an hour-long dramatic programme. In the case of dynamic arts like films, for which audio descriptions are typically created, audio description requires a skilled translation from one medium to another in a way that captures the meaning and artistry of the original, and its accurate fitting into the time gaps between dialogues. If a picture is worth a thousand words, how can one convey it in just a few? This sounds like an impossible task, requiring no less (linguistic) acrobatic talent than dancing against gravity—a word must be made spacious enough to contain the vastness of an image while, at the same time, remaining light enough to fit in the given time sequences. Against this background, Elisa Perego asserts modestly, 'in spite of its technicalities and need for precision, audio description is a highly creative process, even comparable to a kind of literary art form (Snyder 2008), that demands a thorough mastering of one's mother tongue' (Perego 2018, 115). This phrase perfectly captures the nature of the problem: despite the linguistic mastery and creativity required, audio description is conceptualised as a form of assistive service or craft, which is only humbly compared with art rather than being recognised as a form of art in its own right. Shouldn't the contrary be the case? Shouldn't audio description be considered a new literary genre within cinematic arts with the potential to benefit both blind and sighted viewers who choose to turn it on? Isn't disability, as the 'artful' (Michalko 1998, 166) form of living, generating in this a new kind of art?

The portrait of an artist that *Radiance* depicts is one argument supporting this hypothesis. Observing the movie's account of how the audio description was made, we also follow the process by which an artist learns what it takes to write a good audio description. It turns out that translating an arthouse film like the one by master Kitabayashi takes even more time than the standard 20 hours and includes, in addition to writing, consulting with the monitor team, meeting with the director and countless exercises that Misako undertakes on her own. Above all, well beyond technical skills and even the best expertise in the industry, it demands embarking on an inner, creative journey. A viewer of *Radiance* accompanies Misako throughout this journey, observing how she changes her attitude towards disabled people, and how she finds a space within herself where she can connect with their experience, coaching her voice to portray this encounter as accurately as possible. In that way, *Radiance* unfolds as a *Bildungsroman*, or, more specifically, a *Künstlerroman*, which, alongside the psychological and moral evolution of the protagonist, also presents her artistic development.

Her moral progress can be tracked alongside the process of renouncing her charity-cloaked dominant position towards blind people and allowing them to lead her instead. As a novice in audio description who also appears to have had little prior interaction

with disabled people, Misako makes many mistakes, both in her writing and in her interactions with disabled colleagues. Yet she is easily forgiven; she is young, very polite and, most importantly, humble enough to take criticism from her disabled colleagues and follow their preferences. Their role as guides is emphasised in one of the final scenes of the movie, when, witnessing Mr. Nakamori losing his remaining sight, Misako neither pities nor consoles him. Instead, she asks him to take her to a place he once photographed, which has acquired personal meaning for her. This scene also sums up the moral transformation Misako underwent. Rather than closing her eyes and naively imagining what it would be to be blind, as she did at the beginning of the movie, she descends into her own personal history and learns to understand blind people through her own vulnerabilities (throughout the film, in parallel to Mr. Nakamori's storyline, we also follow her struggle with a difficult personal history: the disappearance of her father and her mother's illness). Most significantly, she moves beyond her initial paternalist position, where she offered her services *for* the disabled (Michalko 1998, 97), and enters into a conversation and a loving relationship *with* Mr. Nakamori, where both parties are entangled in the dynamics of giving and receiving on equal terms (cf. Bolt 2021, xvi).

This moral evolution directly influences her artistic endeavours. Parallel to her getting to know disabled people, the audio description improves. Her early writing appears to be based on stereotyped notions of how blind people experience and appreciate cinematic art. In her exchange with Mr. Nakamori, when she implies that he lacks the imagination needed to grasp the meaning of the picture, we hear echoes of the classic ocular-centric epistemology, where seeing is equated with knowing. Just as one of its founders, Locke (1999, 129) doubted that blind people, lacking "the most comprehensive of all our senses, conveying to our minds the ideas of light and colours", would be unable to form these ideas in their minds, Misako is displaying a belief that Mr. Nakamori—and other blind people unable to see such a light-dependent production as a movie—also lacks the capacity to form adequate images and ideas about it. In that sense, Misako is a good representative of ocular normative culture, which, with an authoritative voice, pretends to grasp what it means to be blind (cf. Healey and Michalko 2021)—and in this regard, as her more experienced colleague put it, it is she who, in fact, lacks imagination. Her stereotypical understanding of blindness can also be seen as a byproduct of the image of blindness conveyed by audio description standards, which such a dedicated writer as Misako takes to heart. This is why, as she progresses from her stereotypically constructed representation of a blind man to knowing the experienced Mr. Nakamori, the articulate Ms. Ishida, and the sensitive Mr. Akitoshi, she is challenged to abandon her compliant fidelity to the audio description rules and embark on her own creative journey. Alongside this process, as will be described below, audio description goes from being an inclusive service to becoming an art in its own right.

### Three exercises in imagination

*Radiance* is structured around the creative process of making the audio description. The scene in which Misako discusses the audio description draft with her team (figure 3) recurs like a refrain throughout the movie. We also get to know fragments of the audio-described movie: twice, when it is elaborated at White Light studio scene by scene, and a third time, when a man in a black jacket enters the cinema at the movie premiere. Through these three exercises, we track the evolution of Misako's work.



**Figure 3** © 'Radiance' film partners/Kinoshita, Comme des Cinémas; Kumie: Misako and her team watch the audio-described film at the White Light studio.

Each of these exercises adds a different aspect to the understanding of audio description.

As it is a young discipline, it is still legitimate to ask what audio description actually is (Fryer 2016, 8). *Radiance*, guiding us through different understandings of audio description, gives us good insight into the state of the art of this evolving field. The first draft reflects its conceptualisation as an inclusion service for disabled people, thereby also revealing problems and misconceptions related to this definition. The second version, mediated in Misako's encounter with the movie director, Mr. Kitabayashi, elevates audio description to the status of an integral part of cinematic art. The third and final presentation, at the movie premiere, draws on the ancient ekphrasis trope to expose the irreducible dimension of the individual literary talent necessary to create audio description as a form of *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>4</sup>

### Audio description as an inclusive service

In one of its opening scenes, *Radiance* gives us a taste of watching a movie with audio description (conceived as an inclusive service). We hear a voice describing an invisible image: *The light turns green. An employee yawns. A truck enters the bus lane. When an image appears, the voice continues: A man carrying a stepladder crosses at the light. A man in a hurry checks his watch. Passengers wait for their bus, directed by an employee. A man joins the bus line. A bus stops and passengers get off. A group of school children crosses the road. The girls scold the boisterous boys for not raising their hands. Middle-aged women and employees look tired of waiting for their bus. A frowning man waits for a cab. A woman in sunglasses gives someone directions. The station. A sign for Nanto Bank. A bus stop. A cab stand.* This exercise in audio description that Misako undertakes leaves the spectator with the overwhelming sensation of being bombarded with details. Why so much?—we might well ask. Why could not she just describe the impression that this busy Tokyo street makes on her? And why zoom in on the Nanto Bank instead of, say, the expression on the children's faces? This feeling and these questions are a good segue to the following scene, where Misako is presenting the description of Mr. Kitabayashi's movie—this time at White Light. Although this picture is calmer than the bustling Tokyo street, Misako is presenting a similarly detailed description, delivered with an equally dispassionate voice. This is why we can fully agree with Ms. Ishida when, encouraged

by Mr. Nakamori, she observes: *Having all those descriptions is undeniably very helpful, but if all the gaps are filled with words, it can be a bit too much. Yes, she is right: (...) lots of things are described all of a sudden. It is confusing.*

The shortcomings of this first draft can be attributed to a strict adherence to the 'first rule of description' (Snyder 2014). As Holland explained it: "When I trained to be a describer, we were constantly reminded to be 'impartial' and 'objective'. Our job was to say what we see". According to this 'golden' rule of objectivity (Caro and López 2014, 134), also often referred to as the "What you see is what you say" or the 'WYSIWYS' rule (Snyder 2008), the best describer is supposed to operate as a 'verbal camera lens' (Snyder 2014), mechanically processing the visual aspects of the film, for example, zooming in on the Nanto Bank, but refraining from describing people's facial expressions, as that would be considered a subjective interpretation of someone's state of mind, going beyond what is objectively visible.<sup>5</sup> According to a literal reading of this rule, instead of "He's angry", the describer should write about what shows that, for example, "He's clenching his fists" (Snyder 2014, 90). Likewise, the children on the streets of Tokyo should be referred to as 'turning up the corners of their mouths' (Kleege 2018, 100), rather than 'smiling'. As *Radiance* shows us, the objectivity rule, especially if taken uncritically to its extremes, is not without significant trade-offs. Absolute objectivity is an unattainable ideal—a raised eyebrow, for instance, can suggest many different states of mind (Holland 2009, 179), such as surprise, suspicion, anger or humour. Given that the describer must contain their description within a few seconds, it may not be possible to provide the additional context necessary to capture the meaning of the gesture. And even if it were possible, such detailed descriptions would increase the cognitive overload on the viewer (processing the description 'upper eyelids and eyebrows lift and jaw drops' requires much more time and effort than understanding the word 'surprise' (Chmiel and Mazur 2012, 178), not to mention the questionable literary value of such a physiologically laden translation.

This being said, it should be noted that the rule of objectivity, being the most basic, is also a controversial and evolving one. As stated, audio description is a young discipline (officially dating back to the activity of Metropolitan Washington Ear in the 1980s) that has only recently (at the turn of the century) become

an object of scholarly examination (Perego 2018, 116–117). As Chmiel and Mazur (2012, 173) observed, the objectivity versus subjectivity debate is a hot topic among many audio describers. Also, the guidelines of different countries take varying approaches to the objectivity controversy, and they, too, are evolving over time. Adherence to the objectivity rule is more rigid in the USA and more flexible in Canada and Europe.<sup>6</sup> As Martínez (2016) reports, Japan, despite the lack of official guidelines on audio description, also attaches great importance to the principle of objectivity. One of the audio description rules established by the Japan Visualmedia Translation Academy is: ‘Do not put subjective comments on the audio description’ (Martínez 2016, 40). The importance of this principle is also highlighted in Kawase’s movie, as it is the only audio description principle mentioned in the film and is done so repeatedly. For example, when Mr. Nakamori criticises Misako’s descriptions as being too intrusive, he frames her work as an offence against the principle of objectivity. At the same time, when Misako refrains from describing the final scene of the movie (not fully understanding it), she also veils herself behind the unassailable principle of objectivity.

As Perego (2018, 118) points out, most current guidelines are not (sufficiently) based on empirical research (cf. Udo and Fels 2010, 3; Gerber 2007, 29), so they may reflect more experiences and assumptions of professionals rather than the preferences of a blind audience. Nevertheless, as this young discipline develops, more and more empirical studies are being undertaken, including, most valuably, reception studies that investigate the effects of different audio description styles on film comprehension, enjoyment and immersion in the cinematic experience among blind *and* sighted viewers. This emerging discipline has not yet brought conclusive results vis-à-vis the preferences of audio description users (cf. Chmiel and Mazur 2012). Still, many emerging studies demonstrate that divergence from strict adherence to the objectivity rule and including emotional language (Caro 2016; Jekat and Carrer 2018; Karantzi 2020), first person evaluations and other creative elements (Szarkowska 2013; Udo and Fels 2009a) might be preferred by viewers and enhance their experience. For example, Caro (2016) compared the audience’s emotional response to two audio description styles: an objective one versus an ‘emotive’ one, including information about the emotional state of characters, metaphors, subjective evaluations and inferences. It turned out that the ‘emotive’ audio description was widely accepted by the audience and elicited stronger emotional responses in case of most films, especially those evoking emotions of sadness and fear (without, however, statistically relevant difference for emotion of disgust, which may rely more on the visual nature of the scene and as such require its precise description). These results correlate in an interesting way with another study by Caro and López (2014), which compared the effects of standard objective audio description on emotion evocation for different film genres. They tested two mainstream films with clear narrative lines against a third art film which lacked such a clear narrative line and dialogue. They found that while the emotion elicitation for the two mainstream films was similar among sighted and blind viewers, it showed a statistically significant difference for the avant-garde film. As the authors argue, the principle of objectivity and neutrality is not well suited for artistic movies, as it may fail to convey feelings associated with the film’s lyricism or misrepresent its other avant-garde aspects. In this context it is worth mentioning a study by Walczak and Fryer (2017), which tested the impact of a standard and an ‘emotive’ audio description on the reception of naturalistic drama. It turned out that the emotive audio description, which used the ‘strong’ and ‘spicy’ (Walczak and

Fryer 2017, 13) language to match the dark atmosphere of the movie telling a story of alcohol addiction, was preferred by the majority of audience (67% compared with 25% who preferred the standard audio description and 8% reported no preference). In light of this research, it can be concluded that the current audio description guidelines should be revised to allow for more flexibility in the choice of the audio description style and for its creative adjusting to the movie genre and the nature of particular scenes. A good guideline in this context might be the proposal by Mazur and Chmiel (2012) to replace the binary opposition of objectivity and subjectivity with a scale of these values, thus broadening the repertoire of possible audio description styles and giving more room to adapt the language of audio description to the film genre as well as the evidence-based preferences of its users. Above all, these emerging findings suggest that further reception studies should be undertaken to better and more systematically capture the preferences of audio description audiences.

However, the main problem with the principle of objectivity is not even its possible mismatch with some movie genres and preferences of the audience, nor its questionable aesthetic value, but the false (and discriminatory) epistemological assumptions behind it. Considering that the preferences of blind users are still insufficiently taken into account, Georgina Kleege’s voice, as a humanist scholar and a blind person herself, stands out as an important reference point for present standards. ‘I am sceptical, even hostile to current practice’, claims Kleege (2018, 98). Kleege reveals to us the deep philosophical reasons why the strict objectivity principle may disadvantage or even discriminate against blind users. Paradoxically, the rationale behind the objectivity rule is laudable. As Snyder (2014, 90) explains, ‘the idea is to let the blind audience make their own judgements. Perhaps their eyes do not work so well, but their brains and their interpretive skills are intact’. However, despite this commendable ethical motivation (and except, obviously, those cases where the describer goes too far in imposing his subjective interpretation), the principle rests on an ocular-centric epistemology. As Kleege (2018, 101) explains, the insistence on objective neutrality is founded on the false premise that ‘sighted viewers enjoy an autonomous, unmediated experience of visual media, which is more or less the same from viewer to viewer’.<sup>7</sup> This means that ‘if the describer simply chooses the correct words, an image will be transmitted directly to the blind person’s mind’s eye, where she can form an independent, aesthetic judgement about it’.

Clearly, this ocular-centric epistemology overestimates the power of sight. It seems to suggest that the physical eye works as an infallible cognitive mechanism (sort of a camera, microscope and telescope—all in one) that automatically converts visual data into intellectual content. It is based on outdated Cartesian dualist and hypercognitive optics, where the intellect was supposed to inspect entities modelled on retinal images (cf. Rorty 1979, 45). However, the operation of the Cartesian mechanical eye has nothing to do with our physical eyes. It rather reminds us, as Jay (1993) so vividly described, of a disembodied eye of a perspectivist painter who passes the image through a geometrical prism to freeze it into static, objective-like vision. Our real, physical eyes operate rather like those of an impressionist artist, which leave us with more or less vivid and irreducibly incarnated sensations, which, together with the data delivered by other synergistically operating senses, have to be actively interpreted by a viewer. In other words, the visual data are not a readymade product, and delivering it without a necessary interpretation may leave a blind audience with the impression of ‘hiding to nothing’ (Holland 2009, 181).

This ocular-centric epistemological regime is not free from political consequences. By privileging sight and treating it as a primary organ of knowledge acquisition, it handicaps blind people, pushing them into a position of ignorant and passive subjects (Schillmeier 2006). Moreover, as Phelan (1993, 13) astutely points out, the physical act of seeing ‘is a process of loss: learning to see is training careful blindness. To apprehend and recognise the visible is to eliminate as well as absorb visual data’. Given the abundance of details, colours, shapes and styles that every image contains, focusing on one element of vision requires *unseeing* many other ones. This means that behind every act of seeing there is a value judgement, selecting from the visual abundance of each image those aspects that are worth noticing (and as such is guided by hidden criteria, whether of a cognitive, aesthetic, ethical or political nature, eg, a decision to zoom into dominant social groups may unsee minorities). Against this background, Cavallo (2015), a blind performer and audio describer, observes that standard, objectivist audio description involves a subtle exercise of power. The way it presents what one sees as an irrefutable ‘visual truth’ confirms the infallible authority of the ocular-centric regime and its pretence of privileged access to truth. Moreover, it dictates to the audience what they should focus on and how to understand the image without acknowledging the irreducible degree of subjective perspective in this proposal. This is why Cavallo, in their own audio descriptions, challenges this regime by delivering them in the first (instead of the usual third) person, thus dropping the truth-pretence of the objectivist tone or asking the audience interactive questions, thus transferring responsibility for the value judgement to them.

“I am not sure that I have a mind’s eye”, says Kleege (2018, 101), thus challenging this ocular-centric regime. Instead, she writes that she has a ‘mind’s hand’, emphasising the synergic participation of other, not less noble, senses in the production of knowledge and understanding. This linguistic shift is linked to another problem with the audio description guidelines. Treating sight as the master sense leads to discrimination against blind people as knowers. Kleege (2018, 98) writes: ‘rules and guidelines that have become codified seem to arise from problematic assumptions about what blind people can understand and should know about visual phenomena’. For example, many guidelines advise against using specific jargon, including terminology specific to a given art, and ask to keep descriptions simple and understandable for the blind (Perego 2018, 106). They thereby promote the image of blind people as limited in their overall understanding of visual phenomena, and less keen or interested in its artistic side (Fryer 2016, 131). This discriminatory attitude towards blind people as knowers is also well portrayed in *Radiance* by Misako’s initial paternalistic attitude towards blind viewers. It is only after an exchange with Ms. Masako that she understands that blind people perceive the meaning of the film with their ‘mind’s ear’, without her help. As Ms. Masako explains to her:

*Please try to imagine how, when we watch a film, it’s not just about sitting in front of a screen. Our way of enjoying a film is to immerse ourselves in a much bigger world. (...) Without knowing it, I’m already in it. I breathe the same air, I hear the same sounds, and I experience the same sensations as I watch the film.*

It is worth mentioning that emerging reception studies show that blind and partially sighted viewers are indeed more familiar with and interested in film terminology than is assumed in traditional audio description guidelines. For example, in the study by Fryer and Freeman (2013), two styles of audio description to

classic movie *Lean* (1945) were compared: a standard one, and a ‘cinematic’ one, which expressly contradicted the guidelines by incorporating filmic language (with expressions like *wide shot from the opposite side of the street that’s awash with water* or *cut to a close shot of her face screwed up against the rain*). It turned out that 67% of participants with sight loss and 72% participants with some usable vision preferred this more demanding, cinematic style. In the other study by the same authors (Fryer and Freeman 2012), the cinematic audio description to the same *Lean*’s movie was proved to be preferred by blind audience and to elicit higher level of presence<sup>8</sup> and immersion in the movie. These findings strongly support Kleege’s argument that the current guidelines’ assumptions about blind people’s lack of comprehension and appreciation of cinematic language may indeed be contentious, and they call for their evidenced-based revision, which keeps audio description users ‘in the frame’ (Fryer and Freeman 2013, 412).

### Audio description as a part of cinematic art

Kleege (2018, 108) sums up her critical assessment of current practises with a projection into the future. “I hope that audio description can be elevated from its current status as a segregated accommodation outside the general public’s awareness and launched into the new media—a literary/interpretative form with infinite possibilities”. *Radiance* fits into this forward-looking conceptualisation and gives us a foretaste of the transition of audio description from a ‘segregated’ service to a new form of art. A decisive moment in this transformation is Misako’s encounter with the director of the movie, Mr. Kitabayashi. This meeting is an exception, we learn. It is Misako’s own initiative and only her dedication to the profession that make her apply for the meeting, and be delighted when the elusive artist accepts it. When the conversation happens, however, it does not feel like an exchange between, say, a cinephile or someone professionally writing about cinema and a famous artist. It has rather the character of a lesson that Mr. Kitabayashi, portrayed as an old master of Japanese cinema (whose role is, incidentally, interpreted by the master of Japanese acting art, Tatsuya Fuji), gives to a young adept of the cinematic arts. Through this dialogue, Misako gets closer to the original artistic vision of the movie and is consequently better equipped to describe it, and in addition, her own work gets elevated to the status of film art.

Screenwriter, scenographer, music writer, audio describer—what do all these professions have in common? The primary factor is that the creative decisions of each of these people will determine how the viewer receives the film. Even if the script, music and set design are inseparable parts of each picture, and turning on audio description, if there is one, is a matter of choice (for blind people, the choice of better access to the picture, and for other groups, the choice of enhancing their experience), the aesthetic bearing of each of these components is the same. Thompson (2018) explains it by referring to the category of supplement by Derrida (1967), which, while adding something to the original ‘always also becomes part of the work of art that it is thus completing by its very presence’. Audio description, just like the script and music, will build the atmosphere and convey the meaning of the film; it will become part of the represented world and influence the way the whole work is experienced by the audience. As stated, the ocular-centric epistemology assumes that audio description works as a screen reader (a metaphor by Holland 2009, 183, which is supported by the fact that some audio descriptions are recorded with a synthesised voice) that automatically converts visual stimuli into auditory ones.



However, if the moving image contains at least 24 frames per second, the amount of information the audio-visual translator must contain in just a few words makes it clear that there is no room for any automatic conversion. Therefore, just as behind every act of seeing there is a value judgement, behind every description, even the tiniest one, there is an irreducible interpretative choice—a choice made from the vastness of the image that must be translated into words, mediated through an individual's understanding of the film's aesthetics and meaning.

Misako's choices, which received the most attention in *Radiance*, culminate in the final scene of the audio-described movie. When the girl meets with the old mentor, the conversation quickly turns to the subject of this very scene. We heard its first description presented at White Light, and it goes as follows: *His beige coat swells and ripples in the wind. Seen from behind, his shoulders hunched, Juzo walks in silence. As if he could see the absent Tokio in the setting sun, he stares at the horizon. There's sand on his face. His eyes mist over. His face beams, overflowing with the hope of life.* During an earlier meeting, Mr. Nakamori had pointed out the overly subjective and/or interpretive nature of this description, particularly: "As if he could see the absent Tokio" or 'overflowing with the hope of life'. Now, the change with the movie's director discloses the reasons behind these unfortunate formulations. When Mr. Kitabayashi gently explains to Misako that the main character, as an older person, is in fact awaiting death rather than hoping for life, we realise how difficult it was for such a young person as Misako to grasp this nuanced meaning. Her youth, however, was not the only reason. Mr. Kitabayashi further explains: *Juzo would have preferred to die. But could he, at that moment, be in touch with something that transcends the will to live or die?* This comment perplexes Misako, because it betrays her own misreading of the film and it contradicts her own aesthetic preferences. *That seems too abstract. I want cinema to convey a more tangible feeling of hope,* she claims.

This exchange brings us to the heart of the problem that can arise when audio description is treated as an extradiegetic (external to the film itself, cf. Thompson 2018) accommodation rather than an integral, creative part of film design. Audio description, which is added to a film after its production and as such, does not include consultation with other members of the film crew, may not match its aesthetic style and overall meaning. This is especially true of arthouse films, which leave room for broad interpretation (cf. Caro and López 2014). Audio description guidelines attempt to solve this problem by appealing to the principle of objectivity, which, however, only further distances the interpreter's work from the creative process and inevitably condemns them to describe the abstract meaning with a sequence of visible, physical actions that will almost certainly result in banality. In *Radiance*, Misako, whose overall quality of work improved significantly after meeting the director, initially withdrew from describing that scene and left it understated, precisely for fear of violating the principle of objectivity. Therefore, placing audio describers closer to the production process is necessary to recognise the value of their own creative efforts and to allow the word to soak into the image, so that together, word and image form a harmonious whole.

As Haig (2002), a visually impaired filmmaker and the first person to incorporate audio description into her 1997 film *Drive* (Haig 1997) at the production stage, summed it up:

'Everything is a creative interpretation, and I don't see the audio-description as any different. I see it as another part ideally of the creative interpretation of the essential story or piece. And in that sense,

it has to be part of the art form that is the whole film. But it's not an art in the sense that it stands alone, but neither does film music stand alone, neither does the design of the film stand alone, neither does the photography of the film stand alone. All these are constituent elements of the film as a whole'.

The emerging discipline of accessibility studies (Greco 2018) has recently brought forth theories and practices that, continuing Haig's legacy, recognise the importance of including audio description creation as an integral part of the artwork production. The most important are: accessible film-making (Romero-Fresco 2019), integrated access (Fryer and Cavallo 2022), universal design (Udo and Fels 2010) or poetic design (Greco 2019).

The first characteristics of these new creative strategies is therefore integrating access (audio description, surtitling, subtitles for foreigners, etc) into the very process of film or performance production. As (Fryer and Cavallo 2022, 56–79) demonstrate, one of the motivations behind this integration are shortcomings of traditional, objectivist audio description. Strikingly, the deficiencies reported by the theatre professionals interviewed in the book largely match those expressed by audio description users (both in the reception studies discussed above and those expressed by the fictional characters in *Radiance*). In particular, the respondents in the book criticised traditional audio description for being inaccurate in its pursuit for objectivity, too dense (as Ms. Ishida in *Radiance* put it: *lots of things are described all of a sudden*), patronising, delivered in an inadequate voice (cf. Kleege 2018, 106), ocular-centric and not allowing for equal immersion in the movie for blind and sighted audiences (cf. Fryer and Freeman 2012; Caro 2016). Treating access as an integral part of artwork has already brought significant improvements in the live performances (cf. Fryer and Cavallo 2022, 80–98), as well as in the area of filmmaking<sup>9</sup> (cf. Romero-Fresco 2018, 506–508). Szarkowska (2013) provides an interesting example of integrating foreign language accessibility with the work of art at the postproduction stage by basing Polish audio description on the published script of *Volver* by Almodóvar (2006). As reported in the study, the audience enjoyed the vivid and full descriptions (eg, *Evening. They get to the street where Raimunda lives. It seems as if the neighbourhood and the city would end here as contrasted to traditional audio description's Nighttime... The car pulls up outside an apartment building*). They rendered it more entertaining, enabling them to better grasp the motivations of the characters and to follow the plot (Szarkowska 2013, 386).

The second and crucial dimension of integrating access advocated by these new creative strategies is to collaborate with their primary users: disabled people. This is best explained by Romero-Fresco (2019, 25–31), discussing the theoretical foundations of accessible filmmaking. He distinguishes between *access to content* and *access to creation*. As he astutely observes, 'access to content is of course useful, but if not accompanied by other types of access it can be seen to promote a paternalistic and self-serving approach that perpetuates the agency of people without disabilities and the passive role of people with disabilities' (Romero-Fresco 2019, 25). He therefore proposes replacing this narrow notion of access with a 'fuller and fairer' view of media accessibility that includes access to creation, so that groups that traditionally have not had the opportunity to create can participate in the production of audio-visual media products that everyone, including people without disabilities, will need to have access to. As artists interviewed in the study by Fryer and Cavallo (2022, 81) reported, giving access to the creative process to disabled individuals and integrating them in the

team results in a ‘catalyst for creativity’ for those disabled participants and for other members of the crew. One of *Radiance*’s main strengths is how well it shows the process of collaboration, still very rare in occidental culture, and the aesthetic benefit it brings. The creative team in the movie consists of Misako, her two sighted colleagues (Tomako, actress in the audio-described film and Shinatsu, representative of the distribution company) as well as four blind or partially sighted individuals: Mr. Nakamori, Ms. Ishida, Ms. Masako and Mr. Akitoshi. Recurring meetings of this team allow us to closely observe how integrating the creative process with disabled participants enriches Misako’s text. It is the voice of disabled people that allows Misako to move beyond the inaccuracies of her first patronising audio description draft, and most importantly, catalyses her own artistic exploration, teaches and inspires her. It can therefore be argued that in *Radiance* it is the creative contribution of disabled people that allows Misako’s writing to rise to the level of art (importantly the Japanese audio description of *Radiance* was prepared in the same collaborative way<sup>10</sup>). As such, the movie, both in its narrative and its genesis, can work as a catalyst for this (still exceptional in practice) collaborative mode of audio description creation.

This leads to the third and culminating aspect of integrated access, which consists of weaving audio description into the very fabric of artwork. Audio description is always an integral part of the artwork for its users, nevertheless, its integration with artwork also for sighted audience (who may not even know of its existence) goes a step further: it allows to explore and celebrate its creative potential, and it also helps to reverse ocular-centric understandings of the audio description/non-audio description hierarchy (Thompson 2018), possibly inspiring a cultural change. The live nature of theatre performance has already brought fascinating artistic exploration in that respect. A very vivid example comes from Udo and Fels (2009a), who describe an unconventional approach to describing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, adopted by Hart House Theatre in Canada. The audio description for this play is written in iambic pentameter and skilfully placed in the voice of Horatio, whom Shakespeare’s Hamlet asked on his deathbed to tell his story. It is its literary masterpiece and it also manages to go beyond the ocular-centric regime by providing sensory-based images that do not depend solely on sight (eg, saying: *The ball—enflamed in fire from torches lit* which evokes the feeling of warmth instead of only *Red and yellow hues fill the stage*: Udo and Fels 2009a, 8).<sup>11</sup> In the film art, a similar artistic strategy is to include intradiegetic audio description or screen a movie with audio description (Thompson 2018). *Radiance* is a very successful example of this strategy, as it weaves into the film’s storyline a creative interplay between different levels of intradiegetic and extradiegetic audio description: for additionally to be accompanying Misako in the process of audio describing Mr. Kitabayashi’s movie, we also hear her many ad hoc exercises in describing the current movie scenes, as well as a description made at Mr. Nakamori’s request (*Describe the photo to me, so I can visualise it*) by his colleague, also a photographer, depicting for him a photo he made for the cover of the prestigious *Radiance* magazine. The description goes like this: *The image is mostly green. It’s just a girl in the middle of the forest. But the character, the product, the landscape, the light, the shade, the wind, they’re all perfectly balanced. I think that I’ve captured that moment when all those things become one.* This audio description helps Mr. Nakamori visualise the picture and enjoy it—he smiles with appreciation. For the sighted viewers, in turn, this audio description acts as haiku poetry that allows them to enter more deeply into the scene and celebrate the image, thereby also enhancing their experience. Regardless of the art

genre and the strategy of integrating the audio description into it, its own artistic medium is a word, and as such it deserves further literary analysis of its creative potential as discussed ahead.

### Audio description—the case for cinematic ekphrasis

*Panoramic view of Lake Hamana. There is a low-hanging sky. The ridge of mountains across the lake is blurred. Through a thicket of trees, the lake is below. The tiled roof of a traditional Japanese house appears. The window giving on to the garden is wide open. On the lake, a white motorboat approaches the shore, slowing down.* This description, which we hear at the movie premiere, has improved a lot compared with Misako’s first attempts at White Light. Those first crude exercises consisted of a set of mechanically consecutive sentences like: *Through some trees, a calm sea. A house with a tiled roof. A motorboat moves along the shore.* Like Misako’s description of the Tokyo street, this admittedly gave an account of the images observed, yet did not manage to paint a vivid picture in the listeners’ heads. In her later revisions, the words flow with a poetic grace and draw the audience into the current of the story. Also, this time it is no longer the young Misako reading out the description in the tone of a school essay, but rather, the mature voice of the narrator that charms and lures us to immerse ourselves in the fictional world. What caused such a stark contrast between the two versions? To understand this, we need to delve into the aesthetic material of audio description: language. Just as the previous chapter argued for the inclusion of audio description in the cinematic arts in general, this one will analyse its literary specificity. Unlike other verbal art within cinema—a screenplay, which grows out of drama—audio description draws on the ancient rhetorical figure of ekphrasis and moves the author’s poetic resources into the difficult art of painting with words.

Ekphrasis (from the Greek ‘vivid description’, etymologically combining the prefix ‘ex’-‘out’ or even ‘in full’ or ‘utterly’ with the verb ‘phrazein’—‘to speak’, ‘to show’ (Führer and Banaszkievicz 2014, 52) originally referred to an ancient rhetorical or literary trope evoking—through words—an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene (Squire 2015). Modern critics define ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ (Heffernan 1993, 3), or ‘the sought-for equivalent in words of any visual image’ (Krieger 1992, 9). In the case of ekphrasis, it is not just about a description, but one so vivid that it manages to manifest the described objects in a hearer’s imagination. Mitchell (1994) opens his article on literary ekphrasis with a reference to probably the most familiar example: radio. Indeed, anyone who has ever seen a radio play or listened to an audiobook knows that verbal descriptions are able to draw us into fictional worlds and recreate its multisensory experience.

‘Something special and magical is required of language’, writes Mitchell (1994, 158). Indeed, ekphrasis takes us into the heart of the language’s poetic powers. These do not exhaust themselves only in aesthetic beauty, rhythm and rhyme, but also concern its capacity to create new worlds, that is, *poiesis* in the deepest sense of the word (Martin 2020). In the ‘Iliad’, when the allegedly blind poet Homer places the earth, the sun, and the stars of the night sky in the middle of Achilles’ shield and then goes on to describe the two inner cities with their marriages, harvests, crimes and battles, it is clear that he, with almost divine creative powers, is raising a whole new world to existence here. The world, that, as Keats so suggestively put it in another classic example of ekphrasis (‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’), enchants its visitors with unheard melodies that are sweeter than those heard, and with its beauty, that not being sensual, cannot fade. As such, ekphrasis is both

a miracle and a mirage, as Krieger (1992, xvii) points out. A miracle, because, with verbal, invisible colours, it manages to paint an image in our minds, and a mirage, because the poet can only convey the illusion of such an impossible picture through his words. Audio description, too, if it attempts to imitate the world depicted in the film, must go beyond the purely descriptive and referential function of language, and embrace its poetic capacity.

In *Radiance*, Misako managed to bring about this miracle. In the final version, she opens up our imagination and makes us see a *panoramic view of Lake Hamana* so vividly, it is as if engraved on our minds' hands by Hokusai's own chisel. However, the effortful and time-consuming nature of this process, which we follow throughout the whole film, gives us a fair idea of the degree of poetic passion required to conjure up this image, as well as its major difficulties. According to Krieger (1992), the main challenge of ekphrasis is the different matter of the two arts it works with. The domain of the visual arts is extension—the material space they occupy, their physicality—whereas the matter of the intelligible literary arts is time. Looking at the canvas, we can capture all the richness of the image in one second, all the layers of its shapes, colours, tonality, dynamics, the narrative it creates and the impression it makes on us. Verbal description, by contrast, is stretched out in time, with sentences constrained to follow a sequence and describe the image step by step. How to capture all this rich world in words, how to transform sensibility into intelligibility? To freeze the flow of sentences in a 'still movement' (Krieger 1992, 263) of a spacious mirage, the poet must indeed accomplish something as impossible as translating space into time. In the case of film, being the moving picture, the audio describer must face an additional difficulty: multiple frames must fit into an ascetic interval of a few seconds. *Radiance* illustrates this point made by (Snyder 2008, 936), that the audio describer must be a poet gifted in the Japanese art of haiku, which can fit a vivid image and its ideally transcendental meaning into just a few verses.

Due to the paradoxical character of ekphrasis, Krieger (1992, 10), a daredevil who decides to take on this literary challenge is troubled by two opposing impulses. Misako's artistic path and her film-long struggle to find the perfect words for each picture reflect these impulses perfectly. The first of these impulses is exhilaration, which 'derives from the dream—and the pursuit—of a language that can, in spite of its limits, recover the immediacy of sightless vision'. This exhilaration, or, as (Mitchell 1994, 152) puts it, ekphrastic hope to find an ideal, infinitely capacious form, is what motivates Misako's initial relentless energy trying to formulate in verbal description her entire, everyday experience. This pursuit of an ideal is, however, confronted with the other, contradictory impulse, namely that of exasperation (Krieger 1992, 10) or, as Mitchell (1994) puts it, fear born of the impossibility of closing space in temporal frames. When, after meeting the director, Misako withdraws from describing certain scenes, she seems indeed intimidated by the power of the images and exasperated at her unsuccessful attempts to recreate them in words. Also, on an allegorical level, the relationship between Misako and Mr. Nakamori, their game of attraction and aversion, resonates with the ekphrastic tension between images and words: they romantically seek each other out, but, unable to reach each other, become exasperated. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that when they finally fall for each other, the word also begins to harmonise with the image, or as metaphorically put it in his poem, 'Song': 'the ear and the eye/lie down together/in the same bed'. The interplay of the two layers—literal and allegorical—is further emphasised during the final screening of

the film, when scenes from the projected film (now beautifully described) are interspersed with snapshots of Nakamori and Misako's shared history. In their case, the romantic dream of ekphrasis has come true.

Unfortunately, audio description, despite being such an interesting case of cinematic ekphrasis as *Radiance* illustrates, is still an underdeveloped and unrecognised art. There are, however, audio describers (Bigotte Chorão and Almeida 2015; Fryer 2016; Holland 2009; Orero and Pujol 2007; Snyder 2008), accessibility scholars working within the framework of accessible film-making (Romero-Fresco 2019), integrated access (Fryer and Cavallo 2022), universal design (Udo and Fels 2010) or poetic design (Greco 2019) and some literary scholars such as Kleege (2018) or Thompson (2018), who recognise the literary potential of audio description. Amelia Cavallo, a blind performer, audio describer and accessibility theorist (Cavallo 2015; Fryer and Cavallo 2022) offers a fascinating practical example of using ekphrasis as a poetic device in the spectacle *Sheer*, produced by *Extant* company. This spectacle explores many different forms such as aerial circus and burlesque, and its audio description is delivered in the first person by the performer themselves, Amelia Cavallo, while hanging many metres above the ground, suspended in the air upside down, spinning quickly and performing other acrobatic movements. It can therefore also be read as an embodied symbol of the linguistic acrobatics necessary to apply the ekphrastic technique, which, as if against the gravity, has to transport the physicality of the visual into the temporality of the verbal. As Cavallo (2015, 132–133) reports, using ekphrasis allowed them indeed to construct representational interplay between the physical and metaphorical layers, interweaving the description of the physical movement with its emotive quality and the characters' inner experience. Moreover, ekphrasis widened the poetic and metaphorical repertoire necessary to express the sensuality and 'hyperfemininity' of a disabled body, describing, for example, the movements of her 'peachy bum' to the audience (Fryer and Cavallo 2022, 164). This reinforced the political layer of the spectacle, serving as 'a performative commentary on femininity, the male gaze and how gender and sexuality are constructed, performed and sometimes policed in disabled bodies' (Fryer and Cavallo 2022, 165).

However, despite this inspiring practical example and emerging theory within the accessibility and audio-visual translations studies, the reflection on the cinematic emphasis is largely missing from literary theory and film studies. And this against the fact that the contemporary concept of ekphrasis is evolving to signify broadly a 'representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium' and include such uncanonical cases as musical (transposing a painting or a literary text into notes) or cinematic ekphrasis. In this latter respect, the hitherto extremely interesting and pioneering work of Sager (2008) discusses cases of the transposition of the visual arts into the medium of cinema (as in films such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by and *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* by Vreeland 1999), while completely ignoring the more canonical case of image-to-text transposition, as in audio description. Wider recognition of the cinematic importance and literary mastery of audio description would be crucial to take full advantage of the potential of the literary theory of ekphrasis in refining the practice of audio description and establishing its status as an art.

### Cinematic poetry in the audio description of *Radiance*

The Japanese audio description for *Radiance* can be described as integrated. It was created in collaboration with the film's

director, who shared her artistic vision with the audio describer, Takako Matsuda, guiding her to make the description minimalist, not patronising; respectful of the audience's own imaginary powers (similar to the way Misako was guided in the film). Kawase, who, in a gesture of *mise-en-abîme*,<sup>12</sup> created Mr. Kitabayashi's movie inside the movie *Radiance* in order to introduce the problems of audio description into the storyline, also took on the role of Mr. Kitabayashi herself in the sense that she was available for Takako Matsuda to discuss her audio description text. The Japanese audio description can be described as integrated also in the sense that it was prepared in collaboration with blind consultants from *Palabra*, whose real-life comments were included in the film. What follows is an analysis of the French audio description of this French-Japanese production, prepared by Jean-Marc Plumauzille and Marc Vighetti from the Association Valentin Haüy. Even if, for linguistic reasons, the film's director does not have the same relationship with this text as with the Japanese version, this audio description, despite some shortcomings, is a very good example of the cinematic poetry, knitted together with the poetics of the film, and, as such, an asset to blind and sighted viewers' experience.

Referring to the categories discussed in the previous chapters, *Radiance*'s audio description can be classified as a subtly emotive one. It goes beyond strict adherence to the objectivity principle, which would be at odds with the lyrical and picturesque nature of the movie. In particular, it involves (a) information on the emotional state of characters; (b) evaluation of the describer; (c) inference or interpretation of a fact; (d) use of emotionally loaded words in spite of its neutral equivalent and (e) metaphors (cf. the classification by Caro 2016, 7–8). It does so, however, in a subtle, unobtrusive way, never multiplying descriptions beyond what is necessary. To give some examples: in one of the first scenes, we hear a description of the enigmatic Mr. Nakamori as watching the first screening at White Light (a) *with an impassive, almost indifferent face* (*un visage impassible, presque indifférent*), while radiant Mr. Akitoshi is described as having (b) *a kind face* (*visage bienveillant*) and Misako (b) *a sweet, childlike, young face* (*un jeune visage doux et enfantin*). When Misako at the second screening accuses Masaya of lacking imagination, everyone present is (a) *appalled* (*toutes les personnes présentes sont consternées*). In the scene where Masaya, having lost his remaining sight, turns to touch in his exploration of the world and takes Misako's face in his hands, it is described with emotionally loaded verb (d): *caressing* instead of simply 'touching'. At this moment, she (a) *looks at him tenderly* (*elle le regarde avec tendresse*) and closes her eyes to (c) *to enjoy the caresses on her face* (*pour profiter des caresses sur son visage*). Also, the radiating light of the sun is personified (e) in the audio description, as it *caresses Misako's hair and Yasuko's shoulders* (*caresse les cheveux de Misako et les épaules de Yasuko*) or *plays among the trees* (*joue entre les arbres*). While engaging these emotive qualities, the audio description remains nuanced and indeed minimalist in its conclusions and judgement. Unlike Misako's first audio description in the movie, the audio description of it is not intrusive or patronising. In some scenes, the audio description rightly remains laconic. For example, when Masaya realises that he did not distinguish day from night, this longer scene with a close-up of his face is described only with a single phrase: *he freezes* (*il se fige*), allowing the silence to speak for Mr. Nakamori's stupefaction.

Another strength of this audio description is its ekphrastic quality. Plumauzille and Vighetti manage with a poetic lightness to convey the rich shots of nature, otherwise crucial to the pictorial poetics of Kawase. For example, when Misako is

driving to the countryside, the audio description takes us into *the forest*, where *the slender tree trunks project their foliage high into the grey sky. The landscape becomes more mountainous as the winding road climbs a hill. Tree trunks flash past behind the glass, creating a hypnotic stroboscopic effect.*<sup>13</sup> This and other descriptions of nature with ekphrastic charm manage to bring time to a momentary standstill, allowing the viewer to enter the picture and savour the landscapes described. In one scene, Misako observes: *there are so many different sounds here, when I close my eyes, I can hear them even better*. The audio description makes the same effect on the sighted viewers, making them hear better as *the wind rustles the dense foliage of the tall trees* (*le vent fait frissonner le feuillage dense des grands arbres*) and notice the previously unseen details, such as when *a wood fire gives off thick white smoke* (*un feu de bois dégage une épaisse fumée blanche*). In that sense, Plumauzille's and Vighetti's text strongly supports the thesis that, if well-written, audio description can enhance the sighted viewers' experience of art.

It is not surprising that in *Radiance* (*Vers la Lumière*) a very important role is played by light, its colours, activity and almost tactile warmth. Its descriptions in no way detract from the beauty of these visible operations. We hear *the golden clouds slowly stretch across the sky, masking the setting sun* (*des nuages dorés s'étirent lentement dans le ciel en masquant le soleil couchant*) or *diamond-cut crystal hangs in front of a window, refracting the light in tiny rainbows* (*un cristal taillé en diamant est suspendu devant une fenêtre, réfractant la lumière en petits arcs-en-ciel*). The latter extradiegetic description enters into a subtle mirroring interplay with the intradiegetic one, undertaken by Misako in one of her above-cited exercises, which in the French version, as befits the *mise-en-abîme* trope, resembles a crystal hung at the windowpane and reflects the intradiegetic one, beginning as such *light of the setting sun streams into Nakamori's home. A prism shines in a rainbow across the room* (*la lumière du soleil couchant pénètre chez Nakamori. Dans toute la pièce, un prisme brille en arc-en-ciel*). As argued, this radiating light can be understood as a metaphor of blindness, subverting the ocular-centricity of contemporary culture. In visual terms, when the camera takes Mr. Nakamori's perspective, we see the view as partially or, later, when he loses his remaining sight—entirely veiled in a *yellow mist* (*brouillard jaune*); an experience similar to looking straight into the sun with eyes closed. A similar visual effect can be seen in many scenes shot against the sun, when images blur in the blinding light. Through these visual operations, Kawase subtly overcomes the 'othering' narrative of blindness and inscribes it into the universal human experience.

This leads to the audio portrait of the main blind character, Mr. Nakamori. The audio portrays him—just as the visuals do—as a strong, leading figure who, while partially blind, still works as a photographer (and the film makes it clear that he is renowned, admired and professionally still very active, working late into the night and often consulted by others). The portrait of Mr. Nakamori can be read as a very good illustration of the famous quote by Barthes (1981, 15) that 'the photographer's organ is not his eye (...) but his finger (...)'. Masaya's technical and tactile prowess in working with his camera is repeatedly evident in the film and emphasised in the audio description. The following scene is a good example.

*He opens the back of the camera and places a film inside.*

*He engages the film and winds it onto the spool by turning a small crank on the side.*

*He carefully closes the case and continues to turn the crank until it locks.*

*He opens the viewfinder cap.  
He smiles.  
Children approach to take pictures.  
A little boy poses in front of the double lens.  
Masaya takes a picture of him.*<sup>14</sup>

This scene is accompanied by the shots adopting his partially blind perspective, where the *yellow mist shrouds two-thirds of his vision* (*un brouillard jaune masque les deux/tiers de sa vision*) but he operates camera so that *the faces of the two children enter the viewfinder* (*les visages des deux enfants s'inscrivent dans le viseur*). While highlighting agency, hope and 'blindness gain', the movie does not negate the process Masaya has to go through to adapt to his new life with blindness and accept it, as well as some of its practical difficulties. For example, while repeatedly describing how Masaya *guides himself by sliding his hand over the façade* (*il se guide en faisant glisser sa main sur la façade*), the audio description also shows him *slip* (*il dérape*). Yet, even after this accident, when he is robbed of his camera, he retains power and agency: he manages to spot the red shoes of the thief (his former colleague, a photographer), follows him to his house and with a *cold and determined face* (*son visage est froid et déterminé*) makes the latter give back his possession. His agency is also evident in his private life, that is, his developing relationship with Misako, where it is the latter asking him to be her guide and him not allowing a girl to be overprotective towards him. For example, in one of the last scenes, when Misako spots Masaya at the top of a high staircase and wants to run up to him, the latter protests by saying *I'm fine. No need to run after me or look for me. I will come to you, which he does, now completely blind, with the help of his cane* (*en s'aidant de sa canne*).

Despite the many merits of this audio description, one has to mention its minor shortcomings, such as two instances when the audio tells too much (eg, revealing that Masaya is 42 years and Misako 27 years of age, which the sighted viewer does not know) or adds a redundant comment: *Masaya pulls up the blinds* (*Masaya remonte les stores*) when it could clearly be heard. While these shortcomings are minor and also rare, there is one general, more important and more acute shortcoming: the lack of cinematic language. In the case of Kawase's film, where form plays an important and meaningful role, the inclusion of such language would have been enriching. One of the most interesting camera operations is the way it acts as a prosthetic eye in taking Mr. Nakamori's perspective (which is expressed with the reference to *yellow mist*) and in containing many other interesting shots when the vision is intentionally occluded by, for example, Misako's hand or some object (which is not mentioned at all). These camera operations are very interesting for sighted viewers, insofar as they make them realise how much one indeed sees with only partial vision and how a whole image is imaginatively created from only a small part of it. The audio description does subtly refer to the particularities of the perspective adopted, by hinting at cinematic language, for example, in the above quoted *hypnotic stroboscopic effect* of the path through the forest, or another *view from above* (*vue de l'haute*) at the *tree that dominates the forest with its green foliage* (*l'arbre domine la forêt de son feuillage vert*). These fragments may suggest that strictly technical language might have been avoided in order not to 'break the illusion' (Fryer and Freeman 2012, 421) while trying to convey the feeling of different techniques (which can be partially justifying the authors). Nevertheless, in this movie where so many formal experiments also create meaning and a particular 'feeling of blindness', their almost complete omission in the audio description has to be deemed as a lack.

Speaking of shortcomings, it is worth mentioning the deficiencies of the English subtitles as compared with the French ones. Out of many examples that could be cited, one is particularly meaningful for the topic of this paper: whereas the English version of Tomako's phrase *Maybe audio description is a way to connect with those who are not able to see film* points to some inherent lack or incapacity of people *not able* to see films, writing itself into the medical model of disability, the French version shifts this incapacity to the society, which, like Misako at the beginning of the movie, lacks imagination in grasping disabled people's capacities: *Maybe audio description is a way to connect with those who are not supposed to be able to access the film* (*Peut-être que l'audiodescription est une façon de se connecter à ceux qui ne sont pas supposés pouvoir accéder au film*). This example supports the Pablo Romero-Fresco's thesis that the accessible filmmaking should not ghettoise disability by framing it as some 'special' access, but put access for a disabled audience (subtitling, audio description) in the same category as access for foreign viewers (subtitling) and align all these forms of access with the artistic vision of the film director (and, one might add, the ethical thrust of this vision). The above-quoted (and other) examples resulting from the comparative study of two language versions of *Radiance* strongly support this argument.

## CONCLUSION

The first merit of Kawase's *Radiance*, the unique film to put the making of the audio description in the spotlight, is that it raises awareness of this art. Unfortunately, until now, only a small percentage of movies, series, television episodes and other works of visual culture have audio description. Many blind viewers are still not familiar with audio description and the sighted viewers are not even aware of the existence of audio description, even though they, too, could benefit from it (this group typically includes language learners, children, senior citizens, film scholars or simply cinema lovers). Taking into account that the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural life is a human right, as set out in Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) and many other international and national documents, limiting access to the exercise of this right can be considered in terms of discrimination (Casanovas López 2017, 214; Bestard-Bou and Arias-Badia 2022, 30). As Greco (2016) has clearly demonstrated, accessibility is a proactive principle that obliges the relevant actors to take active initiative in providing concrete means of access to cultural life.<sup>15</sup> Given that the right to participate in culture has both a passive and an active side (and thus includes access to content and access to creation), this also calls for the—still very rare—mode of interactive collaboration between translator and blind people in the preparation of audio description that *Radiance* so vividly illustrated. As the cinematic collaboration of Misako and her team showed (and as many of the research studies discussed above have confirmed) such collaboration bridges the gap between creator and viewer, leading to better, more enjoyable and immersive translations, and encourage further artistic explorations by audio-describers, filmmakers and disabled participants. Therefore, ensuring full access to such an important element of visual culture as cinema, through the creation of the best quality audio descriptions, should be seen as a priority social justice issue. As Fryer and Cavallo (Fryer and Cavallo 2022, 25) rightly argue, access to cultural life is a political issue because it is the fulfilment of a human right, and because it mobilises artistic institutions to adapt their repertoire to more diverse, often excluded, audiences and thus to correct social inequalities, both on a symbolic and

a practical level. Cinema, as the youngest and most democratic of muses (free from historical antecedents, eg, the exclusion of women from theatres (cf. Koppers, 2004; Fryer and Cavallo 2022) or underprivileged social classes from opera), is in the best position to lead a full-scale accessibility revolution (cf. Greco 2019, 16)—also in political terms. In both its content and inclusive form, *Radiance* brings us one step closer to this goal.

*Radiance*, however, does much more than just raise awareness of audio description. The movie also takes us right into the middle of the process of its creation, and thereby thematises and stimulates discussion on this art. Accompanying Misako in her hours-long artistic struggles makes us realise that audio-visual translation is a job for poets. *Radiance*, so vividly depicting the artistry of audio description, can thus serve as an argument that the audio-visual translation of arthouse movies should be treated at least on par with the translation of *belles lettres*. Thus, it has the potential to spark a discussion on the artistry of audio description among disability scholars and audio-visual translators, and among film critics, literary scholars and representatives of other humanities disciplines. This theoretical discussion is essential in order to fully establish the status of audio description as art, and for a wider recognition of audio describers and their work. As is well known, the best translators of literature are rewarded with prizes and acclaimed in literary circles. Only the still segregated and evolving status of audio description has prevented this type of translator, despite the equal level of artistry of their work, from receiving similar recognition. It is to be hoped, then, that the expanding knowledge of audio description, to which *Radiance* contributes artfully, will also lead to the increasing recognition of audio describers. Hopefully, in the future, this profession will indeed attract poets, writers and talented graduates of literary studies to provide the blind and any interested audience with art of the highest quality.

Last but not least *Radiance* contributes to changing the dominant cultural narrative about blindness and its place in the world of visual arts. It presents attractive, non-stereotypical portraits of blind characters and by light-drenching the movie on its formal side, conveys an indeed almost tangible feeling of hope about going blind. It does so by shifting the conceptualisation of—or the feeling that belongs to the concept—blindness from loss to gain and from being in darkness to being in radiant light. In line with this narrative shift, Kawase presents access as an art and, in doing so, also gives voice to blind people on the topic of cinematic art. The aesthetic discussions between sighted and blind members of the audio describing team leave a viewer unsatisfied—they make us wonder what we would discover if blind audiences were given more opportunities to engage with visual culture and their original interpretations of it had wider resonance in the art world. In this sense, *Radiance* opens our mind's hands, making us long for the moment when blind people fully possess the right to receive and participate in culture.

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#### NOTES

1. Cf. The interview with Naomi Kawase, supplementary file 1, can be read on the *Medical Humanities* website.
2. Cf. The interview with Naomi Kawase, supplementary file 1, can be read on the *Medical Humanities* website.
3. Cf. The interview with Naomi Kawase, supplementary file 1, can be read on the *Medical Humanities* website.
4. Horace used this expression in his *Ars Poetica* (c. 20 BCE), and it means 'as painting is, so is poetry'. The phrase has come to stand for the principle of similarity between the two arts, a view shared by many writers and artists throughout history and found in common metaphors of literary 'depiction' or 'portrayal' (Baldick 2015, 269).
5. Interestingly, as Udo and Fels (2010) suggest, these guidelines may rely too heavily on their historical antecedents and, as such, do not adequately reflect evidence-based users' preferences. Historically, early guidelines for live audio description theatre were proposed by Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl, who had been also founders of the Metropolitan Washington Ear, a newspaper-reading organisation in the USA. Possibly influenced by those practices, they also used the camera as a metaphor for objectivity, recommending that describers in theatre should 'not evaluate or interpret, but rather be like the faithful lens of a camera' (Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl 1985, 91). It is clear, however, that the standards of objectivity in reading newspaper articles and those required to describe the complex and multifaceted experience of theatre drama are diametrically opposed, as are the very natures of the two services.
6. For instance, the most recent guidelines developed by the European ADALAB (Audio Description: Lifelong Access for the Blind, 2012) project emphasise the need to find 'a balance between a personal interpretation and personal phrasing (subjectivity) and more text-based interpretation and phrasing (objectivity) that leaves room for further interpretation by the blind and visually impaired users'.
7. Holland (2009, 172–173) provides a good example of how erroneous this assumption is. He discusses the findings of a research project in which he compared different audio descriptions of the same touring theatre spectacle (each time the receiving theatre provided its own more or less trained team of audio describers). As he reports, 'The result from the point of view of access is that a blind or partially sighted person attending each of the 10 theatres on this tour would experience 10 totally different productions, whereas their sighted companion would experience the same production 10 times'.
8. Defined by (Walczak and Fryer 2017, 8), as a subjective experience of being in one environment, while physically situated in another, correlated with what other researchers have termed 'suspension of disbelief' (Slater and Usoh 1993, 222) or the 'perceptual illusion of non-mediation' (Lombard and Ditton 1997, 9).
9. Accessible filmmaking brought, among other things (cf. Romero-Fresco 2018, 506–508), such acclaimed artworks as Emmy award-winning *Notes on Blindness* (Middleton 2016) and Archer's Mark production, *Chaplin* (Middleton and James 2019), Lis Crow's productions (*Nectar* (Crow 2005a), *Resistance on Tour* (Crow (2005b)), *Illumination* (Crow (2007)) and Spanish productions such as *Xmile* (Font and Miguel 2016) or *Joining the Dots* (Romero-Fresco 2012).

10. Cf. The interview with Naomi Kawase, which is the supplement material to this article and can be read on the *Medical Humanities* blog.
11. Other examples worth mentioning are Louise Fryer's (Fryer and Cavallo 2022, 158) audio description of the contemporary dance piece *Puzzle Creature* by Neon Dance, which was written in haiku form and rhythmically immersed in the choreography or, another fine illustration, Graeae Theatre Company (1997), which bring audio description to the stage, giving audio describers full, character-based roles in their productions (Cavallo 2015, 126; cf. Udo and Fels 2009b).
12. A reflexive strategy where the content of a medium is the medium itself; a film within a film (cf.).
13. In the original French version: *Misako roule en voiture dans une forêt, les troncs d'arbres élancés projettent très haut leur frondaison dans le ciel gris. Le relief se fait plus de montagneux, la route sinueuse gravit une côte. Des troncs d'arbre défilent derrière la vitre, créant un effet stroboscopique et hypnotique.*
14. In original French version: *Il engage la pellicule et l'enroule sur la bobine en tournant une petite manivelle sur le côté. Il referme soigneusement le boîtier et continue à tourner la manivelle jusqu'à ce qu'elle se bloque. Il ouvre le capuchon de visée. Il sourit. Des enfants s'approchent en photo. Un petit garçon pose devant le double objectif. Massai lui prend une photo.*
15. As Greco (2016, 9) puts it: 'accessibility is a proactive principle for achieving human rights. This requires that the duty-bearers of a human right proactively intervene in order to fulfil that right, and it sets access as a necessary requirement on behalf of the duty-bearers in order to satisfy the human right'. Within this framework, having the right to participate in cultural life should include having access to the enjoyment of this right, that is 'being able to use, interact and enjoy' (Greco 2018, 207), in this case, the good of visual culture.
16. A type of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence to adulthood, through a difficult search for identity (Baldick 2015, 27).
17. German term (meaning 'art novel') for a novel in which the main character is an artist of any kind and the narrative follows their development to artistic maturity (Baldick 2008).

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**On the art of audio description –  
interview with Naomi Kawase, director of the film *Radiance***

To start with, we would like to thank you for your sensitivity in making this film, which is not only aesthetically beautiful, but also (like your other films) raises very important ethical questions about the place of disabled or chronically ill people in our societies and their place in the art world, and which indeed manages to transmit a tangible feeling of hope about these phenomena.

**The role of audio describers in the making of the movie**

*Radiance* is the first movie that puts the spotlight on the very process of making audio description. We would like to ask whether you also consulted audio describers in the process of making *Radiance*; did they influence the film in certain respects? For example, did conversations with them inspire any dialogue or some scenes in the film?

*The production of “Radiance” began with my first encounter with an audio descriptor. When I was directing the film “Sweet Bean”, the subject of which was leprosy, Japan was working to promote film accessibility for blind people and hearing impairment, and the government was providing subsidies for such projects. So, we applied for such a subsidy for “Sweet Bean” and we carried out what we call in Japan “barrier-free showings”.*

*That was when I met an audio descriptor for the first time, and she asked me, “What do you think about having blind people watch the movie ‘Sweet Bean’ through their ears like this?” That was the first time I learned that there was such a profession. To be completely honest, until then, I had never imagined showing my movie to blind people. This meeting inspired me, and I thought, I want to make a movie about these people, the ones who create audio descriptions.*

*So, when filming the movie, many lines were created based on information I learned from this audio descriptor. What she emphasized the most was, “Don’t explain too much.” In the movie, Masaya, a character who is losing his sight, says to Misako, “You’re explaining too much,” “We have something called imagination,” and from there, Misako repeatedly struggles to minimize the descriptions as much as possible.*

*I could really relate to this through my experiences in communication with others, so I was careful to not make it patronizing. I prefer to believe in the viewers, or trust the imagination of the viewers.*

**Audio description as art**

How would you define audio description? Do you think that it is just a “service for the blind”, or it should be considered an art, and if so, why?

*I think it should be considered an art. Because there are audio descriptors that explain too much, thinking this is only a service, like, “I should kindly explain more for the people who can’t see.”*

*However, I think this is not how it should be. Instead, it should be an art form that creates words that evoke visual images in the minds of listeners.*

In our paper we interpret audio description as a form of cinematic poetry, building upon a literary ekphrasis trope, evoking—through words—an impression of a visual representation. Do you think that audio description should be considered a new literary-cinematic genre and analysed by film and literary critics?

*Considering audio description as a new literary cinematic genre that evokes visual images through words is exciting – it's an idea that excites me very much.*

### **The audio description of *Radiance***

In *Radiance*, the audio description prepared by Misako improves significantly when she manages to meet Mr Kitabayashi, the film's director, who explains his artistic vision to her. Our question is: were you 'Mr Kitabayashi' to your audio describers? Were you available to your audio describers, whether in Japanese or French, for consultation? Did they come to you to discuss their problems, and if so, what were those problems?

*Well, there is a movie-within-a-movie in "Radiance". And there's a scene where Misako goes to the studio to meet the director of the movie-within-a-movie, and Misako begins to realize that to express the cinematic visions of this director, just explaining what is happening is not enough.*

*And whether I was Mr. Kitabayashi, that's a difficult question to answer either yes or no. I am the director of the movie "Radiance", so I guess this character Mr. Kitabayashi is me. We had to create this 'inner' movie before we started shooting "Radiance", and when we did, I directed those scenes. While directing that movie, I was imagining how it would be used in "Radiance", and what difficulties (regarding audio descriptions) would be discussed. I calculated backwards to include all of that in my direction, so it was very complicated.*

We watched the movie with French audio description, and we found it very minimalistic, very poetic, and very well done, so there is a parallel between them and your vision. Therefore, what we would like to know is whether you are familiar with the audio descriptions of your movie and whether you are satisfied them.

*I didn't watch the movie with the audio descriptions, neither in French nor Japanese, but, of course, I did check it as a written text, as an audio description script.*

*I'm trying to remind myself now, since it was about eight years ago...it was released in 2017, so productions were in 2016, so it was six, seven years ago. But I remembered that the person in charge of the audio description insisted that I check the descriptions for that movie, and I exchanged many emails with her. She was also the one I had consulted as a supervisor in creating "Radiance", so she was careful not to explain too much – so we were basically on the same page.*

### **Cooperation with blind people**

In *Radiance*, the audio description is prepared in cooperation with blind people. Was the audio description for your own film *Radiance* prepared in this way?

*The audio description company that I worked with always engages in that [cooperative] process. They have blind people experience the audio descriptions as testers, then they discuss which part was excessive, or where they wanted more explanations, and [their input is then] reflected in the final descriptions.*

Is it a common practice in Japan or is this company an exception?

*I will check the facts before I give you a definitive answer, but in Japan, I think they always have blind people test the audio descriptions before they're finalized. I'll also check the name of the company.*

[\*As Naomi Kawase's company KUMIE Inc later shared with us, the group Ms. Kawase worked with was a company called Palabra Inc. The audio descriptor she consulted was Ms. Takako Matsuda]

*And this also overlaps with my answer to the previous question: whether I was satisfied when I watched the movie through audio descriptions, but because I am a person with sight, I cannot decide whether the audio descriptions succeed in communicating to the blind audience what I intended in the movie. I need blind people to watch it to find that out.*

*Masako-san, who plays herself in "Radiance", is really a blind person, and she was crying when she saw the movie. Also, in the last scene, where many people are watching the movie, we had actual blind people watch the movie. And people told me they had cried, and that they had felt like they were inside the movie, as if they existed inside the movie, and this was actually included as a line in the movie. And when they told me that, I thought, yes, this audio description is a success.*

Did you engage blind or partially blind actors to play the roles of some of the blind characters in the movie?

*I kind of answered that question by talking about Masako-san. She is a really fascinating person. The film also features a white dog who is Masako-san's guide. Masako-san has very keen senses when it comes to expression and art, so much so that when it comes to films, I feel she can understand them more deeply than people who can see them.*

### **"Blindness gain" in art**

Two researchers Marion Chottin and Hannah Thompson developed a notion of "blindness gain", arguing that blindness should be not only considered a deficiency, a lack, a process of losing sight, but can be also gain, opening a blind person to new dimensions of experience, enriching their life. Do you think that blindness can indeed be a gain? If so, what gains could it bring in the world of arts, and in particular cinematic arts?

*You mentioned the two researchers, Marion and Hannah developing a notion of "blindness gain", I really think what I see in Masako-san is one example of that.*

*Also, the person I based the character Masaya on was actually a former painter who later lost his sight. He also has acute senses in art, and he mentioned that his keenness underwent further development after he lost his sight. So, I think that, especially regarding the world of movies and art, when you lose something (e.g. sight), you gain something like a gift.*

[\*As Naomi Kawase's company KUMIE later shared with us, the painter that inspired the character of Mr. Nakamori is Juuji Otani (painter, writer, and weight-lifting athlete)].

### **Other senses**

In your movie, a blind character, Ms. Masako, captures the meaning of the movie in terms relating to touch. She uses tactile terms such as weight or gravity to explain her understanding of the film, saying, for example, *“There is a certain weight, a certain gravity, to this film”*. Therefore, we wanted to ask: do you think that tactile quality should be considered an aesthetic value in visual art, and perhaps be something through which blind people, as experts in experiencing tactile dimension of art, could broaden perception and understanding of art of sighted people?

*I think this question is also about Masako-san, and how she uses the words weight and gravity, words relating to the sense of touch. People who can see tend to think of movies as something happening on a two-dimensional flat screen, so they don't really think about the weight, or how it would feel if you touch it, or how it smells. They don't think it's possible to feel those things through movies.*

*Moreover, Masako-san told me that my films stimulate the sense of smell. I mean, also in my previous film, “Sweet Bean”, as in “Radiance”, there is a scene where the characters are cooking fried noodles, and I think in such a scene people can feel something like the smell of fried noodles cooking in the twilight. This is something that I am aware of and that I try to include in my films. It's not just about blind people. I always try to deliver senses that people presume they cannot experience through movies.*

### **Accessible film making**

In the recent years some new artistic paradigms have been born, such as “accessible film making” or “integrated access”, which postulate that audio description should be considered an integrated part of cinematic arts, and that it should be prepared during the production of the film, allowing an audio describer to discuss their work with the director and other members of the crew. What do you think about this idea? Have you considered doing something similar in your movies?

*This is connected to what I said earlier. Rather than exclusively focusing on these people, I think that able-bodied people – although I don't really like that term, for people who have sight, hearing, smell, and have no disabilities may have become more insensitive in a certain way. Think of information: compared to thirty years ago, people today have information flowing into their hands every day from all over the world, through their smartphones. I think we are being affected by that, turning into beings who only process that information, forgetting to really feel anything.*

*Living in a time like this, the experience of watching a movie is, we can put it like this: “watching a single light in the darkness”. So, instead of just having people watch a story formed by that light, I would like to share through movies something that will stimulate people’s sense of smell, touch, and other various senses, maybe even their sixth sense.*

*When you think about it, the history of movies only goes back about 100 years, and since many years before that, humans have expressed themselves in various styles of art, like music and paintings, hieroglyphics. Maybe I especially feel this because I live in a city that is 1,300 years old, but I sometimes have impression that people living in the ancient ages must have had much keener five, or even six senses. Nowadays, all these things are just being mechanically offered to us, and I feel that we may be adjusting ourselves to the machines more and more. I’m not sure if this answers this question, but this is something I always discuss with my staff when I’m making movies.*

*Regarding whether we should include audio descriptors from an early stage of production, my ideal is that it should be done that way. It’s a personal opinion.*

### **Learning from blindness**

In your movie, there is a subtle interplay between Mr. Nakamori’s camera and your camera filming him and taking his perspective. Is there something that you learned from this experiment? In other words, how much of your experience is put into Nakamori’s and how did the experience of filming blindness “as if” from the inside influence your art?

*Now, about what I learned from working with blind people, I think this might not directly answer your question, but it is what I have just described concerning our five senses and even our sixth sense, which we must, as a human race, regain, otherwise we may become altogether incapable of sensing things. And if younger generations begin to limit their own emotional levels, people will lose the ability to imagine how others feel. On the other hand, when people try to communicate with others, they will feel a disconnectedness, like their feelings have been ignored. So, there are many cases where people who lost something struggled to gain something else and ended up receiving a new gift, and we were able to gain this something through our artistic endeavours when we were creating “Radiance”.*

### **Objectivity/subjectivity**

The script of *Radiance* showed that you are very aware of one of the main controversies in the theory and practice of audio description, namely the question whether it should be strictly objective and neutral or should allow for some degree of subjectivity and artistic interpretation of the describer. What is your opinion about it?

*This is a difficult problem, but it’s something that I really am careful about when I create movies. If it’s all too objective, then it becomes like a news footage - just a presentation of facts. Movies must be well-balanced between objectivity and subjectivity. A movie needs originality, as something unique to me, Naomi Kawase. Cinema always involves a certain extent of subjectivity. Whatever is happening around the world, and happening around me, should be presented as how*

*I see it through my eyes. Without that factor, it would not matter who creates the movie, it could be even AI (and maybe AIs are better at delivering completely objective information). But in the art of filmmaking, Naomi Kawase's subjective point of view must be taken into account, and this must be the same for many art forms. Similarly, reflecting back to one of the first questions, if we are to define audio description as a form of art, I think there should be a certain extent of subjectivity allowed in creating it. And some day, maybe there could be several audio descriptions for the same movie, and blind people could choose to go to see a movie written by their favourite audio descriptor.*