

# Museum AD: A Transdisciplinary Encounter

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## ABSTRACT

This paper first gives an overview of AD in relation to accessibility. Accessibility and transdisciplinarity have in fact become the key notions around which AD has developed in recent times. Accessibility is now seen not only as a means of overcoming physical, emotional, intellectual and sensory barriers but also as a proactive principle of Human Rights. Transdisciplinarity is here meant as a dialogue among disciplines bringing about changes in each of them. In particular, the purpose of this paper is to provide a detailed account of the complex relationship of museum AD with museum studies and visual culture. In fact, museum AD is an example of a successful transdisciplinary encounter: focussing on some features of museum AD, such as language and accessibility, a parallel is drawn between the development of museums and that of museum AD. Particularly significant for museum AD was the passage from the postmodern museum to the 'post-museum', which revises some founding tenets of museology such as elitism, nation, community, education, distinction between high art and low art and predominance of 'seeing' over the other senses. For this reason, an extensive bibliography on AD, museum studies and visual culture covering the main achievement in each field is given. My aim is to offer a reference based guide for those scholars interested in the on-going transdisciplinary debate among these disciplines.

## KEYWORDS

Museum AD; accessibility; transdisciplinarity; museum studies; visual culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: AD, ACCESSIBILITY AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

Over the last thirty decades AD “[has begun] to come of age” (Reviere, 2016: 232) and yet this media access practice is still lacking critical mass in terms of terminology, practice and training (Maszerowska, Matamala, Orero, Reviere, 2014: 5). Increasingly recognised as part of audiovisual translation (AVT), AD, as an ‘AVT newcomer’ (Ramael, 2014, 134), has been variously defined as ‘constrained intersemiotic translation’ (Mayoral *et al.*, 1988), ‘intersemiotic, intermodal or cross-modal translation or mediation’ (Braun, 2008) intersemiotic translation with an inverse definition – an interpretation of non verbal signs system by means of verbal signs (Gambier, 2004, Orero, 2006, Díaz-Cintas, 2007). Audiovisual translation had already investigated the relations between textual information and visual representation, which led to the creation of a multiplicity of multimedia resources addressed to very diverse audiences. Audiovisual products and their diversified users, who must, however, possess the full range of sensory ability to take advantage of such resources, posed issues of accessibility in the new millennium. Modes of accessibility started to be explored with subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) and AD for the blind and VIPs (Díaz-Cintas, J. P. Orero and A. Ramael, 2007, J. Díaz-Cintas, A. Matamala, J. and Neves, 2010, Ramael, Orero and Carroll, 2012, Bruti and Di Giovanni, 2012, Taylor and Perego, 2012, Perego, 2012). Accessibility and transdisciplinarity have been the key concepts around which AD for the VIPs has developed in the last few years.

#### 1.1. AD AND ACCESSIBILITY

The AD services started in Europe and in the United States in the late 1980s. In 1987 the Spanish Association of the Blind, ONCE, launched the Sonocine system, which later became AUDESC (Hernandez and Mendiluce, 2004). In 1989, the Bavarian Association for the Blind introduced film AD and in the same year the French Association of the Blind Valentin Haüy presented the first French film with AD at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1991 the AUDETEL project in the UK prompted the development of AD services in Europe. The growth of AD in UK was largely favoured by legislation; The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) came into law in 1995 and made unlawful for any organization or business to treat a disabled person less favourably than an able-bodied person. The Disability Discrimination Act was based on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990), which established rules for disability access in public entities. AD in the

USA has its precursors in Gregory Franzier and Margaret Pfanstiehl (Pfanstiehl and Pfanstiehl, 1985, 91-92), who introduced AD in the theatre. In 1992, the broadcasting station WGBH began its Motion Picture (MoPix) Access project, which led to providing AD for first-run films in selected theatres nationwide. In 1998 the Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act by adding Section 508 to require Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. Beginning in June 2001, all film, video, multimedia, and information technology produced or procured by Federal agencies had to include AD. The DDA in UK however did not provide the legal rights which came with ADA in the USA. 'Reasonable adjustments' to DDA were made by The Disability Action Plan (2004), according to which service providers had to remove any physical barriers to accessing the building, and also remove attitudinal barriers to allow disabled people to access services. The DDA was eventually incorporated into the Equality Act in 2010. In Belgium and Portugal, first experiences with AD were respectively in 2003 and 1995 (Orero, 2007, 113), whereas in Italy the first AD dates back to 1991 (Arma, 2014, 63).

## 1.2. AD AND LEGISLATION

Media laws in promoting AD was a further step towards accessibility. The 2007 European Union Audiovisual Media Services was a milestone in this respect. The Audiovisual Media Directive in Europe 2007/65/EC specifies that: "Member States shall encourage media service providers under their jurisdiction to ensure that their services are gradually made accessible to people with a visual or hearing disability. Sight- and hearing-impaired persons as well as elderly people shall participate in the social and cultural life of the European Union. Therefore, they shall have access to audiovisual media services. Government must encourage media companies under their jurisdiction to do this, e.g. by sign language, subtitling, audio-description...". In Europe, numerous countries have their own legal obligation to provide AD. The first European country to implement a law including AD was UK with the 1996 Broadcasting Act. Regulations with the force of law can be found in Germany (Rudfunkstaatsvertrag), Poland (Polish Radio and Television Act), Portugal (2011 Television law, which is no longer in effect), Spain (Ley general audiovisual), Flanders, Belgium (2013 Mediadecreet), France (Plan Handicap Visuel 2008-2011), Ireland (2009 The Broadcasting Act), Sweden (Swedish Radio and Television Act) and Finland (2014). A second type of regulation is sector-driven laws such as specific agreement with Public broadcasters, which are implemented in countries like Flanders and Italy. Moreover, in Italy there is also an act (28<sup>th</sup> August 1997, n. 284), which gives regions the autonomy to implement accessibility measures for the blind and VIPs (Reviere, 2016, 234-35). Outside Europe, legal responsibilities to provide AD in USA are enshrined in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (2010). At present, AD

is expanding beyond Europe and North America towards Iceland, Korea, Hong Kong and Mainland China, although services are still limited and restricted only to films (Fryer, 2016, 20).

Although the landscape of AD is still fragmented worldwide, the widespread diffusion of AD and the development of audiovisual translation studies has helped to draw attention on accessibility as an expanding notion. Previously defined as a means to overcome physical and sensorial barriers, accessibility appears now to be a discipline *per se*, a broad field of research comprising audiovisual translation, assistive technologies, audience development, Universal Design, tourism management and services and new media technology. In the world geography where some countries are still struggling with fundamental and humanitarian issues, accessibility is paramount to fight economic inequality and illiteracy undermining the realization of democracy. In this perspective, accessibility becomes a 'proactive principle' promoting 'human rights as a whole for all', whose "benefits would extend to all citizens, not only to those with disabilities" (Greco, 2016, 27).

### 1.3. AD AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

Accessibility has led AD towards new disciplines, such as Information and Communication Technology and Human Rights, thus revealing the transdisciplinary nature of AD. Transdisciplinarity is here meant as a particular view of interdisciplinarity and has been tackled, for example, in critical discourse analysis. Transdisciplinarity asks "how a dialogue between two disciplines or frameworks may lead to a development of both through a process of each internally appropriating the logic of the other as a resource for its own development" (Fairclough, 53). In other words, a transdisciplinary approach implies a dialogue among disciplines bringing about changes in each of them. AD has started a dialogue with many different disciplines and this dialogue has proved fruitful both for AD and for the disciplines involved. There are interesting examples of these disciplinary encounters of AD with linguistics (Arma, 2012, 37-55), with textual linguistics (Di Giovanni, 2014, 63-83), cultural studies (Matamala and Rami, 2009, 249-266), second language learning (Ibanez Moreno, Vermeulen, 2013, 45-61; Walczak, 2016, 187-204), and cognitive studies (Holsanova, 2016, 49-74).

## 2. OBSERVATIONS ON MUSEUM AD

Museum AD is another successful example of transdisciplinarity as changes in museum studies and visual culture have helped its development. Museum AD and museum visits for the blind and VIPs has become an emerging topic only in very recent years (Smith, 2003, De Coster and Muhleis, 2007, Vilatte, 2007,

Holland, 2009, Neves, 2012, Martins, 2012, Jimenez Hurtado, Siebel Gallego and Herrero Diaz, 2012, Jiménez Hurtado and Soler Gallego, 2015, Eardley, Fryer, R. Hutchinson, M. Cock, Ride, Neves, 2017). Studies and projects on museum audio guides have been conducted in England (the *Talking Images* project, 2001-2003, France Vilatte 2007), Portugal (Martins, 2012), Spain (Soler Gallego and Chica Nunez, 2014) and Poland (Szarkowska, Jankowska, Krejtz, Kowalski 2016). Among the many guidelines available for AD, those specifically referring to the verbal description for the museum can be found in *Art Beyond Sight* (Salzhauer Axel et al, [1996] 2003) and in *The Talking Image Guide: museum, galleries, and heritage sites: improving access for blind and partially sighted people* (RNIB and VocalEyes 2003). Other basic guidelines for audio descriptive guides are those of *Pictures Painted in Words* (Neves in Ramael A., Reviere and Vercauteren, 2015). From the literature mentioned above, I will now infer some general observations on museum AD and then relate them to the wider framework of museum studies and visual culture.

First, AD for the museum, like AD for film, promotes accessibility that must be implemented at every level in the museum environment. Access must be 'physical', i.e. the museum building must be accessible; 'cultural', i.e. exhibitions and collections should reflect the interests of their audience; 'emotional', i.e. the museum environment must be welcoming and the museum staff should be open-minded to diversity; and 'financial', i.e. affordability of museum admission, free transport, etc.... Accessibility must also include other dimensions. 'Access to decision-making process' "encompasses the engagement of museum visitors and external stakeholders in order to appreciate their input and enquiry of regular and potential audiences. 'Intellectual access' aims at including people with learning difficulties or with limited knowledge to have access to the museum. Finally, 'sensory access' is concerned with the adequacy of museum exhibitions to the needs and requirements of people with visual and hearing impairment" (Martins, 2012, 94).

Second, the language of museum AD is different from the language of AD for films and theatre. In AD for films and theatre, VIPs can still integrate information coming from film or stage aurally but it is less likely that this can happen with a piece of visual art. Among the various types of AD, museum AD has no "original text" but a "non verbal text" determining the nature and structure of the description. There is "a variety of open co-texts that require contextualization and interpretation and, above all, selection" and therefore there is less concern with "when to say", and a greater emphasis on "how" and "what" to say "about what" (Neves, 2015, 69). According to De Coster and Mülheis (2007), language must be highly descriptive and interpretative. They start from the assumption that every work of art deals with signs, which can be either clear or ambivalent. Clear signs are those signs that give clear piece of information and are perfectly translatable into words. Ambivalent signs instead have more layers of meaning and, although they can still be put into words, are difficult to translate, especially if the visual effects cannot be represented through other senses. De Coster and Mülheis show

an example of ambiguous sign in Gombrich's head that might be that of a duck as well as a rabbit, thus evoking two different images with one structure. This image is a visual phenomenon with strong intensity but if it cannot be translated into another sensual phenomenon (touch or hearing) its ambiguity remains purely visual. They see in this the limit of intersensorial comparison: "when an analogy with other senses proves to be impossible, one can still give an idea of the different meanings of the ambivalent sign (the narrative), but not into a representation of how it works sensually (i.e. its intensity)" (192-193). They make a distinction between translatable and untranslatable visual impressions and give the following guideline: "every sign or meaning of an object of a work of art that can be clearly identified can be translated into words, but one can give an idea of visual ambiguity only if a comparable ambiguity exists in another sensorial field (touch, hearing)" (193).

More recently, Neves (2012) questions De Coster and Mülheis's conclusion and is more radical in her 'multi-sensory approach' to AD. She concedes that there are examples of successful solutions for this multi-sensory communication, such as special/exhibits specifically devised for blind users (Museo Anteros in Bologna and Museo Tiflogico in Madrid), special live tours/touch sessions (Victor and Albert Museum or the British Museum in London) and audio guides (Winston Churchill Museum and British Museum) (180). Nonetheless, the greatest problem to successful artistic communication remains for her the visual ambiguity in paintings. She rejects De Coster and Mülheis's idea that ambiguous signs can still be translated into words and takes on the view that audio describers must render that sensorial ambiguity in terms of "sound painting" (290):

Carefully chosen words and a careful direction of the voice talent to guarantee adequate tone of voice, rhythm and speech modulation can all work together with specific sound effects and music to provide the "story(ies)" and emotions that a particular piece of art may offer.

But in so doing, this multi-sensory AD becomes subjective and ambiguous to the point of providing an alternative work of art accessible to the blind through other senses. This 'creative' language partly draws from, but goes beyond, the AEB's guidelines ([1996] 2003) for verbal descriptions, which comprise a basic methodology to create verbal descriptions of painting, sculpture and architecture, as well as works in other media. According to these guidelines, the verbal description starts with 1) 'standard information' on the museum object's label (artist, nationality, title, date, historical context, size which can be described with an analogy with familiar objects); 2) 'general overview of the object and composition of the work'. A coherent description provides visual information in a sequence, allowing a blind person to assemble an image of a highly complex work of art. Then follows the description of 'colour tones, mood and atmosphere'. 3) 'To orient the viewer with direction' and 4) to describe 'the relationship between the content and the technique of the work of art' are also important information. 5) The fo-

cus on' style', which "is the cumulative result of many characteristics, including brushwork, use of tone and colour, choice of different motifs, and the treatment of the subject" (Salzhauer Axel, Hooper, Kardoulias, Stephenson Keyes and Rosenberg 2003, 231), shows how these features contribute to the whole. 6) 'Clear and precise language' is crucial in AD; pictorial terms and conventions such as perspective, focal point, picture plane, foreground, and background should always be explained to your audience. 7) The description should be 'vivid, give pertinent details and use objective references' so that the listeners can form an image in their minds and come to their own opinions and conclusions on the work of art. 8) 'Indication of the place where the curators have installed a work'. A work's placement in an art institution gives important information about its meaning and its relationship with the other works of art in the collection. 9) The description should 'make reference to other senses as analogues for vision', i.e. translate a visual experience into another sense. Although blind viewers are without sight, their other senses, such as touch or hearing, enable them to construct highly detailed impressions of a work of visual art. 10) The description should also 'explain intangible concepts with analogies'. Some kind of visual phenomena are difficult to describe objectively (shadows, clouds), but through a well chosen analogy it is possible to convey a visual experience of certain types of phenomena. Analogies must be made from common experience. 11) 'Understanding of the description can be encouraged through re-enactment'. Sometimes, the description of the physical posture of a figure depicted in a painting or sculpture, is not transmitted to the viewer. In these cases, instructions can be given to the blind person to mimic the depicted figure's pose. This activity provides a concrete way of understanding difficult poses depicted in the painting. Furthermore, by assuming the pose, the blind viewer can directly perceive important formal characteristics of the work, such as symmetry or asymmetry; open or closed forms; implied action or repose; smooth, flowing lines or angular ones; and the degree of engagement with the viewer. 12) 'Information on the historical and social context of the work of art' should be given. Many visual artefacts have, for example, ritualistic functions. Understanding this function is an integral aspect of understanding the work itself. 13) Besides historical and cultural setting, 'sound' can have an interpretative purpose. For instance, sound can be an auditory analogue for a work of visual art. 14) Visitors should be given an opportunity to 'touch three-dimensional works' and have an immediate and personal experience of the original work of art. 15) When it is not possible to touch the original work of art, 'alternative touch materials' can be provided. These auxiliary aids include three-dimensional reproductions, samples of art-making materials, and replicas of the objects depicted in the work of art. 16) In order to give museum visitors as much information as possible, 'tactile illustrations of artworks' should be available. Tactile diagrams, which are essentially relief images, are an effective way of making visual art accessible. These kinds of black-and-white relief images are schematic diagrams, and they do not represent the actual object in detail. They are always used in con-

junction with a verbal narrative that guides the person through the diagram, and provides additional descriptive and historical information. These guidelines, written in 1996, seems somehow in contrast with Neves's most recent assumptions on AD as 'a multisensory approach' that retains some ambiguity. Salzhauer Axel, Hooper, Kardoulis, Stephenson Keyes and Rosemberg highlight that the language of museum AD must be 'clear and precise', provide visual information in a sequence, describe visual cues with analogues in other senses and intangible concepts with analogies in order to be more objective as possible. Moreover, descriptions accompanied by tactile and auditory cues should disambiguate the work of art and make it more accessible.

Since then, the description of museum objects responding to the blind and visually impaired visitors' needs has attracted critical attention, especially in Disabilities Studies.<sup>1</sup> However, sometimes it seems there is no consensus on a common strategy for describing artefacts. Barry Ginsley, Disability and Access Officer at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, discusses at length the services for disabled people in the renewed Galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum (2001), and considers, in particular, the major changes made for the blind or VIPs. Touch objects were incorporated in the galleries and Braille information were provided. By assessing the visitor's interaction with objects and Braille, consideration needs to be taken on the importance of selecting carefully objects that 'fit in with the story of the gallery and conveys what the curator wishes to say', on their positioning, the grade of Braille used, the production of Braille and management of the installation process. But the Victoria and Albert Museum is moving away from Braille in favour of ADs, which can be downloaded via smartphone. There are ten audios available from the museum's website in a MP3 format, making it accessible to all smart phones and MP3 compatible phones. ADs are complemented by touch tours and described talk that happen when objects cannot be touched. To help speakers to deliver more descriptive talks, the museum has developed guidance very much in line with the ABS's guidelines (Barry Ginsley, 2013).

If Barry Ginsley gives a series of linear guidelines in which AD supports touch tours, Amanda Cachia (2013) sees how the most diverse discursive elements of an exhibition are organised to provide an 'immersive' museum experience. In line with the reframing of disabilities in museum, she is convinced that "perhaps it is the museum and artists that can lead the way in the challenge to overturn the discursive regimes that simplified disabled communities into reductive binaries" (2). In particular, blindness, she says, is one of the most powerful discursive construction equated with lack, while vision has always been identified with knowledge since Plato's times. In order to counter "ocularcentrism", she describes two exhibits, *Blind at the Museum* (2005) and *What Can a Body Do?* at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College (2012). In the second exhibition,

1 For the complex relationship between disability and its representation in museums see: Sandell R., Dodd J. and Garland-Thomson R. (2013)



she shows all its discursive elements such as a catalogue accompanied by a CD with audio versions of all the catalogue text and an extensive exhibition website. Specifically, ADs were made with the contribution of the college students and included the artists' reflection on accessibility and their art-making and the voice of the curator. The result was that AD, and consequently the exhibit website, "began to function akin to the nature of television", giving access to many means in which to engage with the work through various perspectives; for example, in some cases, the visitor had the opportunity to hear up to three different descriptions of the same work. These discursive devices thus "attempted to bring disability into conversation with multisensory experience, the literary practices of close reading and ekphrasis, and gallery protocols" (Cachia, 2013).

## 2.2. MUSEUM AD: THE WIDER FRAMEWORK OF MUSEUM STUDIES AND VISUAL CULTURE

Accessibility and visual, intersensorial and multisensorial language are features of museum AD that play a crucial role for the development of this genre, as testified by the two case studies mentioned above. I will show now how these two features are inscribed within the wider framework of museum studies and visual culture insofar as AD has appropriated the logic of these two disciplines.

Museums all over the world have made accessibility an expanding notion that questioned their roles and functions in the last four decades. In the late 1980s Britain and the United States were at the forefront in the debate on museum accessibility, which brought about a re-definition of the museum space and its capacity of attraction for new visitors (Alexander, 1989, Durbin, 1996, Andersen, 1989, Hein and Roberts, 1997, Hooper-Greenhill, [1994] 1999). The passage from an 'old museology' to a 'new museology' represented the first step towards a critical rethinking of the museum. Peter Vergo expressed this change in his Introduction to *The New Museology*, an edited collection published in 1989. The new museology, he asserted, was a "state of widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old' museology, both within and outside the museum profession...what is wrong with the 'old' museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums..."(3). The old museology was mainly concerned with the 'how' – how to administrate, how to educate, how to conserve – and let instead unexplored the conceptual foundations and assumptions of those administrative, educational and conservation matters which made them significant and which shaped the way in which they were addressed. The new museology started to draw attention on relevant issues neglected in earlier studies and related to accessibility.

The first issue concerned museum accessibility from a social point of view. After a period of stagnation due to the policy of the New Right, led by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, there was a radical change in the expectations and demands from the cultural sector.

Instead of the previous 'proactive strategy of inequality' when "museums [were] exhorted to concentrate on 'the three Es': Economy, Efficiency, and Effectiveness" (Sandell 2005, 402) rather than on the museums' benefit to a wider public, museums were viewed as powerful means of combating social exclusion. Jocelyn Dodd and Richard Sandell in *Building Bridges: Guidance for Museums and Galleries on Developing New Audiences, Museums and Galleries* (1998) were specifically engaged to identify the barriers which excluded different audiences and viewed museums as a resource of social inclusion and urban regeneration.

For Sandell (2005), access means "the opportunities to enjoy and appreciate cultural services", to "the extent to which an individual's cultural heritage is represented within mainstream cultural arena", thus creating "the opportunities an individual has to participate in the process of cultural production" (410). John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, who gave special attention to the visitors's needs in *The Museum Experience* (1992) and developed an innovative 'contextual model of learning' in *Learning from museums: Visitor experiences and the making of meaning* (2000), note that the museum visit involves three contexts: the personal context, the social context and the physical context. They list a series of indicators for assessing and improving visitors' experience, such as the location of the exhibits, the museum orientation and the role of the museum staff, but underline that the fundamental barrier in museums was still emotional and psychological access. Many sectors of the population and the public in those years felt a sense of alienation from museum as social institution where participation and community involvement was denied. Rebecca McGinnis (1999), for example, acknowledges that, in the case of disabled people, access means not only physical access, but conceptual, intellectual and multi-sensory access as well" (281). She claims in fact that sometimes attitude to disabled people represents a psychological barrier that "can be as impassable as physical and sensory barriers" (278). Sandell (2005, 411) therefore hopes for an inclusive museum to contrast social exclusion:

The inclusive museum then, tackles social exclusion within the cultural dimension, although the interrelated nature of the process of social exclusion... suggests that this might lead to positive outcomes in relation to other dimensions. For example, the inclusive museum, in representing the histories and culture of a minority group, will seek to increase its relevance to that audience and, in doing so, helps to create access to its services. Although the goal is centered around social inclusion and increased access to the museum the initiatives might, in turn, have a positive impact on the wider causes and symptoms of social exclusion.

In Sandell's view, the 'inclusive museum' becomes a site for promoting accessibility in social and cultural terms and reveals the relationship between museums, government choices and cultural policies. The strong political and cultural bias of accessibility drew attention on museums as institutions and helped to forge future museum policies. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that from its birth after the French Revolution, the public museum was shaped as an apparatus with two deeply contradictory functions: "that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of

the utilitarian instrument for democratic education” (1989: 63). The public museum also had a disciplinary function that makes it the institutional site where citizens were constantly under control in order to comply with the established order (Bennett, 1995, 59-98).

This contradiction between elitism and democratic education was at the basis of the modernist museum and opened up the way to the deconstruction of Lyotard’s grand narratives upon which museums were founded, of those universal stories intended to enable mastery of a complicated real world. These grand narratives concerned questions of national identity, education, object display, and art perception.

The ‘nation’ is one of the most powerful enduring narratives of the nineteenth century and museums were the major apparatuses for the creation of national identities. They promoted the nation as cultured, elevated in taste and paternal. Visual representations were not only the elements symbolizing and sustaining national communal bonds, but they were also creatively generating new social and political formations. By the end of the nineteenth century the elitist view that the arts was separate from the everyday and accessible only to people with specific sensibility started to take hold. From an historical point of view, the nineteenth century was a time of expansion enabling the consolidation of middle classes and their former disparate interests into a powerful unified culture especially for colonial countries. It was a time of economic growth and colonial expansion. As nation-states became more powerful, so museums granted a solid perspective on history. A nation-state as England needed to be pictured in a way that it could be identified, understood and imagined as the heart of the Empire. As the peripheries of the nation started to be known in increasing detail through collections brought back by travellers, missionaries and colonial administrators and officials, the more it was necessary to “materialize the centre” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a, 28).

But in 1990s the ‘nation’ proved to be an artefact and the single, unified community of many nations was only ‘imagined’ (Hobsbawm, 1990, Anderson, 1991) as we belong to different communities and our membership changes with times and circumstances. Some communities are ours by choice, others are ours because of the way others see us. Community is thus one of the most elusive words (Abercombie *et al.*, 2000, 64) and for some “museum community is a meaningless expression” (Davis, 1999, 59-60). Hooper-Greenhill, however, found a useful way of conceptualising communities in order to understand its multiple meaning within the museum setting. Drawing on Stanley Fish’s seminal work, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (1980), she explores how collective public meanings depend on the interpretative communities to which individuals belong. These communities are “located in relation to interpretative acts” and are “recognised as by their common frameworks of intelligibility, interpretative repertoires, knowledge and intellectual skills” (Hooper Greenhill, 2000b, 121-122). Such communities are fluid and unstable but in museums they

may be defined by different interpretation objectives. Interpretative communities may be further defined by historical or cultural experiences, by specialist knowledge, by demographic/socio-economic factors, by national, regional, local identities or by identities related to sexuality, disability, age and gender, by visiting practices, by exclusion from other communities (Mason, 2005: 206-7).

Education was another building block of the modernist museum of the nineteenth century museum. Based on a model that was European in origin, but which would be exported worldwide, the modernist museum was conceived as instrumental to the production and dissemination of authoritative knowledge directed to an undifferentiated audience. Museums were also considered as means of self-improvement and self-elevation. The pedagogical approach used was founded on “an understanding of objects as sites for the construction of knowledge and meaning; a view of knowledge as unified, objective, and non-transferable; a didactic approach to expert-to-novice transmission; and the conceptualisation of the museum and its audience as separate spheres”, in which learning was “held apart from the popular culture of the everyday” (Greenhill-Hooper, 2000a, 126-127). George Hein’s “constructivist museum” becomes an alternative model for the construction of meaning and knowledge in the late 1980s. According to the constructivist theories underpinning his model of museum, knowledge does not exist independently of the learners’ minds, but it is the result of the learners’ interaction with the world: “learning is now seen as an active participation of the learner with the environment. This conception of learning has elevated experience (as distinct from codified information contained in books) to a more important place in the effort to educate. Museums focus on the “stuff” of the world. They specialize in the objects representing both culture and nature and, therefore, becomes central to any educational effort when the focus shifts from the written word to learners’ active participation through interaction with objects” (Hein[1998], 2002, 6).

Another commonly held view on the modernist museum was that collection, observation, description and classification of artefacts and specimens were of major importance. An ordered sequencing of the artefacts was more important than the visitor’s experience: “the experience of a visitor to the collections was that of a quantified observation of a rationalized, visual order”. Classification, encyclopedic knowledge, discourse of objectivity, objects as sources of knowledge in themselves were still the guiding principles of displays and exhibitions. In the ‘post-museum’, according to Greenhill-Hooper, knowledge results from the renegotiation of the relationship between the museum and its audience. The “who is being addressed, how they are spoken to, and who is speaking and how” takes into account the various voices of audiences, their subjectivity, their interpretation and emotions: “In the modernist museum, knowledge was understood to be disciplinary, or subject-based. Museum were natural history textbooks, or displayed histories of art. In the post-museum, specialist knowledge remains important but is integrated with knowledge based on everyday human experi-

ence of visitors and non-specialists. Where the modernist museum transmitted factual information, the post museum also try to involve the emotions and the imaginations of visitors” (Greenhill-Hooper, 2000a, 143).

The distinction between high-culture and low culture, typical of the modernist museum, is also blurred in the post-museum. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel’s classic study of museum audiences, *The Love of Art* (1999), maintains that only audiences who possess sums of cultural and economic capital can activate their attitudes, artistic preferences and cognitive competences. In a postmodern view, however, they fail “to account for broader patterns of culture and economy that stretch the visual arts beyond the confines of a limited culture elite” and to acknowledge that “the aesthetic and the commercial are increasingly mashed” (Prior, 2005, 132).

Another grand narrative of the modernist museum, perhaps the most powerful, is that museum is the privileged site of “seeing” and that seeing is intrinsically linked with learning and knowing. Greenhill-Hooper reminds us that “the assumption was that looking could enable the brain to absorb information more quickly than by any other means. Learning through the visual was taught to be more effective than learning through words, especially for those that had not had the benefit of lengthy schooling” (2000a, 14). This visual ethos represented the organizing principle of displays and exhibits whose function was to demonstrate and transmit the basic principles of citizenship through clean and ordered space. Furthermore, vision allowed to experience objectivity, truth and reality: “In the museum, objects, or artefacts are put on display. They are there to be looked at. Museums are site of spectacle [...] Museums pride themselves on being places where ‘real objects’ can be seen. The notion of the real is a powerful and enduring one” (2000a, 14). However, ‘visual culture’ that started to emerge as a new field of study in the late 1980, questioned the notion that vision is autonomous and objective. According to the major proponents (Mitchell, 1986, Jenks, 1995, Rogoff, 1998, Mirzoeff, 1999), visual culture is a dialectical concept and a cultural activity. Not only does visual culture define its object as the social construction of the visual field, but it also explores “the chiasmic reversal of this preposition, the visual construction of the social field. It is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals” (Mitchell, 2002, 171). Visual culture at the beginning made painting, sculpture and architecture its object of investigation but soon broadened its focus to include other visual media such as advertisements, photographs, television and films. Rather sarcastically, W.J.T. Mitchell observes that the “boundlessness of visual studies” has not only provoked “defensive postures” and “territorial anxiety” in academic circles, but has also given rise to commonly accepted myths. In order to object to them, he summarises the “counter theses” at the core of visual culture and he does so very effectively. According to him, “visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing” (174) and “there are no visual media,

but all media are mixed media, with varying ratios of senses and sign-types” (170). Mitchell also believes that “the disembodied image and the embodied artifact are permanent elements in the dialectics of visual culture and, therefore, images are to pictures and works of art as species are to specimens in biology” (170). He then claims that “we do not live in a uniquely visual era” and that “the visual or pictorial turn is a recurrent trope that displaces moral and political panic onto images and so-called visual media”. Visual culture for its intersemiotic nature “encourages reflection between visual and verbal signs, and the ratio between different sensory and semiotic modes” (170). The relation between visual and verbal signs Mitchell refers to has been the object of investigation in diverse disciplines, such as linguistics, philosophy, poetry, literature and multimodality. The complex relationship between word and image has also been the domain of ekphrasis. Ekphrasis<sup>2</sup> was originally used as a rhetorical device in ancient Greece to bring the experience of an object to a listener through detailed descriptive writing: the most often quoted example comes from Homer’s *Illiad* where the description of Achilles’ shield appears as part of the narrative. The term ekphrasis, however, has taken on many meanings over the centuries. The contemporary debate defines ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of graphic representation” (Heffernan, 1991, 299), which applies to the imitation in literature of plastic arts (Heffernan, 1993). Ekphrasis can also be seen as the endless struggle of Western civilization to reconcile the ‘natural signs’ of visual arts with the ‘arbitrary signs’ of verbal languages (Krieger, 1991, 300). Mitchell instead adopts a more reconciling position. For him, ekphrasis does not entail a conflict between the verbal and the visual as all arts and media share text and image: “The image/text problem is not just something constructed “between” the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but an avoidable issue within the individual arts and media. In short, all arts are “composite” arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes” (Mitchell, 1994, 94-95). Mitchell interestingly concludes with a broader reflection on visual culture that “entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked; also on deafness and the visible language of gesture; it also compels attention to the tactile, the auditory, the haptic, and the phenomenon of synesthesia” (179).

This ‘meditation’ definitively brings the museums out of the modernist era, and ‘seeing’ becomes one among the many ways in which knowledge and learning would be achieved. The disruptive presence of blindness in museums is poignantly described by Kevin Hetherington (2000, 2002), who, drawing on Lyotard’s deconstructive reading of access, sees the visually impaired visitors as ‘figural’. The figural is both the actual subject and the figure of the disabled subject, ‘the blind visitor’, in relation to the discourse of the museum. This figure

2 On ekphrasis there are some interesting publications in Italian such as Eco (2003), Mazzara (2007) and Cometa (2009).

has multiple effects and “implies some sense of uncertainty, ambivalence, unfinishedness but he can also represents “possibilities of change in the making of social space”. Most of all, he “implies deferral, notably in how the figural defers the discursive by challenging the signifying disposition of what is entailed in the idea of the ‘museum’” (Hetherington, 2000, 446). This would create new forms of access: “For the visually impaired it is touch that is primarily held to be the ideal form of access. It is touch too that often informs their sense of the scopic. The fingertips offer a view point and a point of view – but one that remains Other in the context of the visual spaces of the museum” (Hetherington, 2002, 196-197). In line with Hetherington’s sociological perspective, access policy for the blind and VIPs in the post-museum concentrates on the role of touch as a means of inclusion (Chatterjee, 2008, Candlin, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008). But, through another deferral in museum discursive practices, blind and VIPs can now gain further access through what has been labelled ‘the sensory museology’. In recent years, as David Howes states in his introductory article of *The Senses and Society* (2014), senses have made a comeback in museums, learning has been supported by multimodal approaches, disinterested contemplation has given way to affective participation, and the authority of interpreting objects has been questioned and redistributed. “Museum “from a site for ‘single sense epiphanies’ is becoming a kind of multisensory gymnasium” and the emphasis on experiencing the properties of things “has the potential to recreate the museum as an exciting place of historical, cross-cultural, and aesthetic discovery and inspiration” (Howes, 2014: 265). The development from the inclusive museum to the multi-sensory museum has tackled with issues that have contributed to deconstruct the grand narratives – to keep using Lyotard’s definition – of what museums have been until a recent past. Museum AD for the blind and VIPs are part of this deconstructive process and the changing role of the museum. Therefore, every change in the museum has opened up relevant areas of reflection for museum AD. Accessibility as social and cultural inclusion (Sandell, 2005), the ‘contextual model of learning’ (Falk and Dierking, 2000), the presence of different ‘interpretative communities’ instead of an undifferentiated audience have helped museum AD to be conceived as an increasingly flexible and composite resource. Museum AD also follows the principle that the needs of multiple audiences<sup>3</sup> should be accommodated to the use of assistive technology (Grinter, Aoki, Szymanski, Thornton, Woodruff, and Hurst, 2002a, Aoki, Grinter, Hurst, Szymanski, Thornton and Woodruff, 2002b, Awano, 2007, Ghiani, Paternò, Santoro and Spano, 2009, Lisney, Bowen, Hearn

- 3 Hurtado *et al.* (2012) give a comprehensive list of resources available nowadays in some museums for each type of visitors. For visually-impaired people, they mention: Audio guide (information on the tour and location, AD of the museum space and exhibits); AD of audio-visual products; Voice narration of printed text; (Tactile) Guided tour with oral description: Group or self-guided tour using an audio guide device; Tactile map; Scale model; Model reproduction; Texture; Smell; Heat embossing; Large-print-letter reproduction; High-contrast reproduction, pp. 5 trans.

and Zedda, 2013). For example, The Open Art Projects mentioned above, is based on accessible technology according to the tenets of Universal Design theory<sup>4</sup> and accessible content. The app created in this project allows users to access any description in three different formats (audio narration, subtitling and signing) according to their preferences (304). Museum AD has also led to the re-thinking of education and the display of objects as a reflection of an ordered sequencing of artefacts. In fact, museum AD focusses more on learning rather than assessing what is learned and, consequently, the description of museum exhibits are also seen as functional units of meaning according to their communicative and social function (Jiménez Hurtado, Seibel, Soler Gallego and Herero Díaz, 2012). These functional units of meaning in their verbal, visual, aural and acoustic modes can give rise, as we have seen, to museum AD that are highly interpretative (De Coster and Mülheis, 2007, 181), or in line with the ekfrastic tradition, or as a multisensory 'transcreation' (Neves, 2012, 293).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The development of AD over the last thirty years has involved issues of accessibility and transdisciplinarity. In particular, I have tried to show how the major changes in the museum have proved important for museum AD. The so called 'new museology' made central to its reflection various notions. These are: access to the museum as physical, emotional and social inclusion; new 'interpretative communities'; museum as the site of active learning instead of received knowledge; the blurring of high and low art; the questioning of exhibits as an ordered display of objects, the controversial relationship between word and image and, above all, the museum as the realm of 'sight'. These notions helped the transition from the postmodernist museum to the 'post-museum' and, more recently, to the 'multi-sensory museum', where museum AD is an integral part of it.

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4 It is quite interesting to note that what is known as 'design for all', 'accessible design' and inclusive design' has been at the basis of both museum transformation and new museum AD creation (see Black 2012, 96 and Szarkowska, Jankowska, Krejtz and Kowalski 2016, 303-304). 'Design for all' was developed by the North Carolina State University Center for Universal Design established some principles, which are mentioned as the Principles of Universal Design, to guide a wide range of design disciplines, support the design process and educate both designers and the wider public. The application of these principles must create products with 'equitable use', 'flexibility in use', 'simple and intuitive use', 'perceptible information', 'tolerance for error', 'low physical effort' and 'size and space for approach and use'.



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