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The visual multiplicity of films and its implications for audio description: A case study of the film *What Dreams May Come*[1]

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Multilingualism in film is largely understood in terms of verbal communication. However, multiplicity also strongly manifests itself at the level of visual narration. The many codes within the cinematographic language encourage a broadening of the concept of multilingualism beyond the spectrum of words alone. This article examines the implications of visual multiplicity for media accessibility and, in particular, for audio description. Taking as a starting point Chaume's (2004a, 2004b) classification of signifying codes of cinematographic language, we carry out a detailed analysis of the film What Dreams May Come (1998), discuss the composition of the filmic image and suggest strategies for achieving a successful descriptive integration of the visual and the verbal.

1. Introduction

In film, the visual channel has always been exploited to intensify the so-called "viewing experience". This has resulted in hybrid genres and movies which increasingly merge scenes from everyday life with visually enhanced settings, for example in *Sin City* (2005), *The Science of Sleep* (2006), *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010) or *Detachment* (2011). In these productions, various visual codes combine in new cinematographic contexts, thus redefining the traditional meaning of *multilingualism*. As will be argued throughout this article, the term *multilingualism* can go well beyond spoken languages to comprise other communication systems, such as the visual language or the formal properties of an image, to name but a few. This non-verbal multiplicity becomes of special importance in terms of the adaptation of audiovisual materials for blind and partially sighted audiences, known universally as audio description (AD).

In recent years, verbal multilingualism in films and the strategies for its AD have garnered academic interest from a number of audio description researchers (Benecke, 2012 ; Braun & Orero, 2010; Remael, 2012; Szarkowska, Żbikowska, & Krejtz, 2013). The present article, however, discusses the concept of multiplicity with regard to the visual layer. It uses a bottom-up methodological approach and takes *What Dreams May Come* (1998) by Vincent Ward as a case in point. Taking as

a starting point Chaume's (2004a, 2004b) proposal for a taxonomy of signifying codes in cinematographic language, selected features from the film are discussed in the context of media accessibility in general, and in terms of audio description in particular.

2. Cinematographic language and codes

Films are complex products of audiovisual culture. They usually make equal use of the visual and acoustic channels of communication, operating simultaneously at the crossovers between the two. Indeed, the message cinema conveys is always encoded at a variety of levels, leading to what Chateau and Jost (1979) refer to as the "plurisemiotic" dimension of moving images (p. 280, as cited in Nöth, 1990, p. 468).

From the perspective of Film Semiotics, there are many cinematographic codes, but only one cinematographic language, which can be understood as being "the common denominator for all individual cinematic codes" (Metz, 1974, p. 69). In other words, while there seems to be one language system that is particular to cinema, this can be further subdivided into a large number of different, meaningful codes delivered to the viewer in the form of images.

As Nöth (1990, p. 468) points out, the hybrid nature of cinema makes it difficult to create a closed classification of codes. Metz (1986, p. 38), for example, proposes a general distinction between specialised and cultural codes. While the former cover strictly cinematographic elements (e.g., editing, camera movement), the latter are believed to entail more socially determined features, such as iconography, which are "outside the film – that is to say, within culture" (Metz, p. 39).

According to Delabastita (1989), "film establishes a multi-channel and multi-code type of communication" (p. 196). The author argues that the two main channels of communication (visual and acoustic) can interact with signs of both verbal and non-verbal nature, and also that there are four codes (verbal, literary and theatrical, proxemic and kinetic, and cinematic) that "are used to produce the film's actual meaning" (Delabastita, 1989, p. 196).

The interaction between channels of communication was examined by Zabalbeascoa (2008, p. 24), in whose view the fourfold structure of the audiovisual text is made up of audio-verbal, audio-nonverbal, visual-verbal, and visual-nonverbal signs. Chiaro (2009) makes a similar distinction and argues that the "polysemiotic nature of audiovisual products" (p. 142) manifests itself in the coexistence of non-verbal visual (e.g., lighting, gestures), verbal visual (written information), non-verbal acoustic (e.g., music) and verbal acoustic elements (such as dialogues).

However, film analysis for the purposes of AD is likely to benefit more from an approach that focuses on the interplay of semiotic codes

rather than on channels of communication. Therefore, Chaume's (2004a) proposal for an analysis based on signifying codes of cinematographic language is used in this study. While, according to Chaume (2004a), signifying codes can be transmitted through both the acoustic and the visual channels, in the present article the emphasis will mainly be placed on the latter.[2]

According to Chaume (2004a, p. 18), the following code types can be distinguished:

- Iconographic codes (icons, indices and symbols)
- Photographic codes (lighting, perspective, colour)
- The planning code (types of shot) (close-up, extreme close-up, etc.)
- Mobility codes (proxemic signs, kinesic signs, screen characters' mouth articulation)
- Graphic codes (subtitles, intertitles etc.)
- Syntactic codes (editing)

As Chaume highlights (2004a), it is their constant interaction which marks the "particular idiosyncrasy and sums up the specificity of audiovisual texts from a translational viewpoint" (p. 23). In this respect, visual multiplicity is not only a question of quantity. As will be argued later in this article, one code may have many layers that are revealed at different stages and in various contexts throughout the film. As Geuens (2000) points out,

> cinema speaks on its own terms (through rhythm, camera angles, light, the grain of the film, etc.), that to continue to see it only as a mere illustration of prefigured elements is not to take full advantage of its power. (p. 93)

In this study, specific attention is paid to the iconographic, photographic and syntactic codes. Contrary to, for example, graphic codes, whose immediate field of application is likely to be subtitling and dubbing, they are the most relevant to AD. The analysis of *What Dreams May Come* reveals many instances of scenes where iconography, sophisticated photography and editing play an important role and as such should be considered when preparing the AD script. The most representative examples are discussed in the following sections.

3. The film

What Dreams May Come (1998) is a fantasy drama directed by Vincent Ward. It portrays the history of the Nielsen family, who experience a series of tragic deaths but in the end manage to reunite in heaven.

Marie and Ian, Chris and Annie Nielsen's school-aged children, die in a car accident. Shortly after this, the family is destroyed by yet another loss. Whilst looking after someone injured in a car crash, Chris himself is hit by a vehicle and killed. He goes to heaven and from there he watches his wife sink deeper and deeper into depression. She commits suicide and goes to hell. Despite the difficulty of the task, Chris sets out on a journey to save his wife and win her back for an eternal life in paradise.

A number of comparisons can be drawn between the narrative of the film and several classics of Western civilisation. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is perhaps the reference that comes to mind first. The *Divine Comedy* portrays the journey of a soul towards God. Chris is also on a journey, but he is searching for his wife. While Dante meets saints in heaven, Chris's quest culminates in the reunion with Annie, his soul mate. There is also an allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden for committing a sin. Annie, having acted against the course of nature, is also excluded from heaven. However, she finally manages to ascend to paradise, and the film ends with Chris and Annie undergoing reincarnation. *What Dreams May Come* may seem to be primarily based on Western beliefs, but it also draws on concepts overly rooted in Eastern religious traditions. On the whole, the film challenges traditional imagery and goes beyond popular clichés, reinventing the concepts of life, death and paradise.

The communicative aspect that plays the most prominent role in *What Dreams May Come* is its visual layer. The heaven Chris inhabits is a collage in motion of his wife's paintings. Annie's art becomes the couple's means of communication, and thus adds one more building block to the film's (visual) multiplicity. The majority of the film's landscapes are created using advanced special effects and digital technology. For example, Chris stands in the middle of an oil-painting meadow, drinks his coffee from a real clay mug, and sees a bird tearing through the sky as though a sudden paintbrush stroke has invaded the white blankness of a canvas. Nevertheless, as Black (2002, p. 227) points out, all these elements somehow still manage to look real.

In *What Dreams May Come*, colour permeates the images. Combined with the film's unusual texture, this makes it visually immersive. An explosion of purples, blues, yellows and greens in Chris's heaven contrasts sharply with Annie's grey and ominously dark hell. Repetitive colour patterns and symbolically arranged settings grow to form a special rhetoric – a separate language of their own. The story-telling itself is also deeply anchored in the visual channel. Constant flashbacks and numerous dissolves layer the plot and help successfully to tie the seemingly fragmented history together.

To the best of our knowledge, *What Dreams May Come* has not yet been audio described in English. Therefore, given the film's many special features and its conceptual novelty, it is interesting to study the

way in which this film's visual language can be rendered in AD. In the following subsections, some of the most salient cinematographic codes are discussed in terms of possible AD strategies or techniques. It should be noted, however, that it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a complete AD script.

4. Iconographic codes

According to Chaume (2004a), of all the codes that fall within the scope of the visual channel, the iconographic code is the most important. As Bordwell and Thompson (2004) observe, in its essence, "a genre's iconography consists of recurring symbolic images that carry meaning from film to film" (p. 111). In other words, it is the repetition of patterns of icons, indices and symbols that establishes what will later become the label of recognition of a particular genre.

As Wharton and Grant (2005) point out, iconography "normally refers to objects and settings" (p. 25), and so serves as a quick and efficient means of communication with the audience. Therefore, in traditional translation contexts iconic information rarely requires any linguistic representation (Chaume, 2004a, pp. 18–19). However, in terms of accessibility and, particularly, AD, such verbal rendition is crucial. Only if AD is provided can the full spectrum of meaningful visual elements come together and ultimately form an icon in the mind's eye of the spectator of an AD-ed material.

To a certain extent, *What Dreams May Come* introduces a novelty to the concepts of iconography discussed above. Part of the symbolism it employs leads to the generation of what Wharton and Grant (2005) call "alternative or subversive meanings" (p. 25). The conceptual framework in which the film is anchored is that of the afterlife. Visually, however, the movie has very little to do with traditional cinematographic representations. Heaven is no longer depicted using white clouds and blue skies. Instead, the Western popular imagery is replaced with what Corominas (2005) refers to as "the iconographic tradition of 19th century German Romanticism" (online). There are no angels, and even God is nowhere to be seen. In fact, the only person who bears any resemblance to God in terms of cinematographic stereotypes[3] turns out to be Chris's late son, who acts as his guide.[4]

Chris inhabits his own paradise, arranged, coloured and textured just like Annie's paintings. Anything he touches leaves a thick layer of oil paint on his hands. Wherever he goes, he is immediately immersed in settings portrayed in classical art: idyllic, expansive landscapes, almost entirely deprived of human presence but instead offering a close, somewhat spiritual relationship with nature. In other words, afterlife turns out to be anything Chris wants, or in fact everything he imagines it to be.

The only space in the film that is fairly consistent with Western popular representations is hell. Covered in a thick, dark mist, filled with shipwrecks and belching deadly fire, it accommodates sinners, including, among others, people who have chosen to end their own lives.

In his discussion of traditional iconography and translation, Chaume (2004a) acknowledges that "the challenge for the translator, in cases involving translation of a text associated with icons, is usually to achieve a translation that respects coherence with the image […]" (p. 19). In the case of *What Dreams May Come*, the challenge seems to go beyond the mere maintenance of image-script compatibility. Some elements of iconography this film employs may to a certain extent be classified as "subverted canons",[5] to use Solso's (1994, p. 244) term. For example, the director himself advertises the fact that he intentionally exchanged the concept of a "white bread afterlife"[6] for metaphoric 19th century paintings. Such innovative approaches can be difficult to express in an exhaustive manner in the AD script, which is why the AD of *What Dreams May Come* could benefit from an audio introduction (AI). The describer could then introduce the spectator to the idea behind the production, highlighting the visual uniqueness of its images, whose impact is otherwise likely to be lost or, if only due to time constraints, only partially appreciated in the actual AD.[7] As recent reception studies reveal, audio introductions are a welcome form of film presentation and as such enjoy an ever-increasing acceptance by the target audience (see Fryer & Romero Fresco, 2014; Jankowska, 2013).

5. Photographic codes

Whereas iconographic codes deal more with the question of "the what" of an audiovisual product, photography refers to "the how" of an image.

In the category of photographic codes, Chaume (2004a, p. 19) includes parameters such as lighting and perspective, as well as the use of colour. In this article, we focus on colour and lighting, which we bring together and discuss holistically in section 5.3. below, entitled "The aesthetics of the image". This category has been introduced only due to the exceptional texture of *What Dreams May Come*, and as such should not be regarded as an attempt to amend Chaume's (2004a, 2004b) taxonomy.

Ward's film is a living picture – an image which substitutes reality for paintings in motion. In other words, *What Dreams May Come* takes elements of the photographic code to a cinematographic extreme. It overwhelms the viewer with spectacular colours while playing with sophisticated luminance alterations, ultimately delivering a visually captivating image. Such photographic richness can prove extremely challenging in terms of accessibility for blind or visually impaired people.

5.1. Colour

According to film scholars such as Bellantoni (2005, p. xxviii) and Peacock (2010, p. 2), the use of colour in cinema is often underestimated by viewers. Some blame this on the still deficient capacity of the audience to successfully read "non-representational signs in the cinema" (Dyer, 2002, p. 24), while others relate it to the omnipresence of colour, which we tend to view as yet another "characteristic of the objects that constitute our environment" (Everett, 2007, p. 9).

Meanwhile, colour in film enjoys a broad scope of functions. According to Bellantoni (2005), colour

- acts upon the frame of mind, decision-making processes and affective state of the audience
- guides the audience's visual attention
- elicits emotional responses from the viewer towards the action taking place on the screen. (Bellantoni, 2005, pp. xxiii, 102)

Although far from exhaustive, the list above hints at how film directors take colour beyond its mere pictorial characteristics and use it to influence the audience's reactions and feelings. On a related note, at the level of film narrative and cinematographic story-telling, colour is extensively employed to:

- complete the profile of the characters
- help the audience interpret the story line
- add visual quality to what is happening on screen. (Bellantoni, 2005, pp. xxvi, 13, 58)

In the case of *What Dreams May Come*, colour not only functions in all these ways, but it also becomes a protagonist, its presence throughout the film being very explicit.

The beginning of the movie is marked by red. In the opening scene, young Annie is shown sailing across a lake in the mountains. Dressed all in white, with a red scarf slung around her waist, she is steering a wooden boat with large red sails. She accidentally bumps into Chris's boat and so is able to engage in a conversation with him. The use of red is highly significant to what follows: the couple are then shown sitting in a meadow, talking. Annie clumsily unties her red scarf and smiles at Chris. Literally, the concept here is love at first sight and the use of colour supports this. In other words, as Bellantoni (2005) observes (2005,), "[r]ed becomes our guide to what is not said" (p. 33).

The same red reappears a few minutes later in the film, when Chris is in heaven daydreaming about Annie. He sees her standing in the distance, dressed just as on the first day they met; she tries to unfold her red scarf but it slips away from her hands and gets carried away by the wind. Chris then darts down a slope and dashes across a field of red

flowers. As he gains speed, a brief crosscut to Annie's studio shows a paintbrush gliding across a white piece of canvas, leaving behind a thick, red horizontal line. A flashback then reveals the young Annie looking back over her shoulder and smiling. As the scene cuts back to heaven, the red scarf reappears, fluttering softly in the wind. Chris runs directly into the piece of cloth and falls down in a meadow dotted with red flowers. According to Bellantoni (2005), in this case red is both Chris's "high-octane visual fuel" (p. 22) and at the same time a reminder of his wife, a metaphorical link between now and then.

Finally, in one of the closing scenes, as Chris and Annie get back together she is shown wearing a long, elegant red dress. Here, red could be a visual synonym for closure, a metaphorical bracket around the opening and closing scenes of the film or, to put it differently, a way of saying that the end is just the beginning.

Purple and its shades are also important in the film. At the beginning, Marie and Ian get into a car and drive off to school. As they leave, Marie sticks her hand out of the window and delicately touches the purple flowers that are blossoming along the lane. Towards the end of this scene, Chris is shown standing in the driveway, which is thickly covered with purple petals. The shot then softly fades to white and a scene about the children's funeral follows. Their white coffins are decorated with wreaths made of purple flowers, similar to those growing on their street. From that moment on, purple becomes one of the dominant colours: it is almost everywhere in Chris's heaven, in Annie's life (as she mourns at her husband's tomb in a meadow dotted with purple flowers, she wears a dark purple scarf wrapped around her head), and also in her paintings (such as the tree with purple buds which she later decides to remove). In some sequences, purple is virtually the only colour that stands out, really wanting to be seen. As Bellantoni (2005) points out (2005), "purple is a colour that inspires associations with the non-physical. It sends a signal that someone or something is going to be transformed" (p. 191). In other words, since *What Dreams May Come* is a film about the afterlife, purple is used to constantly remind the viewer about the mystical nature of death.

Later on in the film, green becomes prominent. After Marie and Ian die, Annie is admitted to a mental institution and files for divorce. Chris comes to visit her and they go into the garden. Everything in the garden is green: the bushes, the lane, the ground, and Annie is wearing a green robe. Since the couple manage to reconcile their differences at the end of the scene, the symbolic meaning of green popular in many cultures (i.e., hope) is ultimately confirmed. However, the "really dichotomous" nature of green as highlighted by Bellantoni (2005, p. 160) also applies in this sequence. Despite the fact that Chris manages to convince Annie to stay with him, what follows is danger and decay as Chris dies and Annie succumbs to depression and commits suicide.

The aforementioned colours and many others come together in a vibrant collage within Annie's paintings, and consequently reappear in Chris's heaven. The viewer is exposed to a celestial cocktail of yellows, blues and oranges, skillfully interchanged with the infernal flood of blacks and greys. Colour becomes an animate object; it has texture and shape or, as Chaume (2004a) observes, is "a microsign [...] [which] can also impact directly on the translation" (p. 19). In terms of accessibility, this is yet another reason why the colour code employed in *What Dreams May Come* requires careful analysis.

The majority of AD guidelines advise describers not to shy away from explicit references to colour in their scripts (American Council of the Blind, 2009; Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, 2010; ITC, 2000; MAA, 2012 ; OFCOM, 2010). Taking into account the abundance and visual complexity of chromatic stimuli in *What Dreams May Come*, a more stylistically elaborate description would seem appropriate. Instead of using neutral colour adjectives modified only by the use of *bright* or *dark*, comparisons to food, smells or objects could perhaps be more effective (e.g., lime green, mint turquoise, sunny yellow, etc.).

When they discuss colour, most of the AD guidelines mentioned above refer to green, red or blue, which are basic colours easily found in nature. However, as Benecke and Dosch (2004) point out, there are some "non-natural colours" (as cited in Orero & Wharton, 2007, p. 173) such as purple which could potentially constitute a problem area, particularly for the congenitally blind community.[8] In the case of *What Dreams May Come*, purple is one of the most important colours, chosen not only for settings but also for characters, and as such it should be appropriately described for the audience. Should the description of the film be accompanied by an audio introduction, some space in the AI could be dedicated to additionally explicate the look and feel of the colour purple by means of vivid comparisons. Inspiration for this can be found in O'Neill's *Hailstones and Halibut Bones*, a children's colour poetry book mentioned in the AD standards of the American Council of the Blind (2009, online, p. 5) for the description of colour. Purple is described in this book as the colour of the skies just before nightfall, and is compared to jam or even called the great-grandmother to pink.

Another issue that arises here is the challenge of maintaining the ambivalence and multiple connotations of signs in the description of recurring colours and motifs (Mälzer-Semlinger, 2012). This is particularly true for *What Dreams May Come*, where certain colour patterns are consistently repeated throughout the film. In such cases, Mälzer-Semlinger encourages the use of hypotactic syntax and longer sentence structures which allow the describer to better render the symbolism of the relevant image. However, one could wonder whether or not in the case of Vincent Ward's film purposeful syntactical shifting of emphasis aimed at making the description of colour as unobtrusive as possible could run counter to the expressive intentions of the director. On

the other hand, as Mälzer-Semlinger (2012) rightly states, colour is embedded in the setting "and can't be therefore easily taken into account by the audio description without surprising the audience or being interpreted as a strong hint" (p. 33). In order to lessen the effect of conspicuous repetitions when describing specific colours in the actual AD, some space could be dedicated in the audio introduction to inform the spectator about multiple uses of certain colour patterns. On other occasions, it could suffice first to mention the colour dominating in a given scene, and then, using anaphoric structures, to enumerate all the elements of the setting depicted in a similar shade (as is the case with the colour green in the garden scene: *In the garden, green abounds: it is the colour of the neatly trimmed bushes growing along the lane, of the soft grass covering the narrow paths, and even of the plush robe Annie is wearing*.).

There is also the question of subjectivity which, according to Bellantoni (2005), concerns the fact that "[t]he experience of reading or hearing a word and the physical sensation felt by seeing the actual colour is not the same" (p. xxx). In the case of AD, the final product delivered to the target audience will always be a sum of individual choices made by the describer, who is himself a subject (Cabeza i Cáceres, 2013). Ultimately, as Kruger (2012) observes, "the understanding and enjoyment of film could only benefit from a mode that will allow blind and partially sighted audiences to lose themselves in the magical world of film, like any sighted audience" (p. 83).

Lastly, another interesting aspect is the function–meaning dichotomy of colour. In other words, while colour can only be yet another element in the mise-en-scène with no particular significance to the storyline, it may also acquire highly metonymical, plot-related features. For example, when discussing the ambiguous nature of purple in *Eve's Bayou* (1997), Bellantoni (2005) observes that "much of what activates the story has been whispered visually. And, if you allow yourself, you'll hear it" (p. 203). Whether it is possible to separate these two aspects and make them explicit in AD undoubtedly requires more research, and does not fall within the scope of this article.

5.2. Lighting

In Film Studies literature lighting often accompanies colour. In fact, their functions in the cinematographic composition are to a large extent interchangeable. As Wharton and Grant (2005) observe, "[l]ighting turns cardboard sets and plastic props into convincing three-dimensional reality and creates depth and meaning, but does not always draw attention to itself" (p. 44). In *What Dreams May Come*, the luminance is highly conspicuous, as is colour.

At the beginning of the movie, there is a scene which illustrates an interesting interpretation of the literal and metaphorical meaning of light. When Chris realises that he has died and will never return to the world of the living, a sudden change of setting occurs. He is shown running through the same tunnel in which he had the accident, heading towards a shining white light at the tunnel's entrance. Literally, as in the famous idiomatic expression, there does indeed appear to be light at the end of the tunnel and, metaphorically, Chris escapes towards the light in a gesture representing his acceptance of what happened. He comes to terms with death and acknowledges that he now belongs in heaven.

Another interesting idea is used to portray hell. As Ebert (1998, online) points out, in *What Dreams May Come* hell is paved not with good intentions but with human heads. Indeed, as Chris enters hell to look for Annie, he crosses a sea of heads. There is a sharp contrast in the film between the two settings: while Chris's heaven is full of bright, almost golden light, hell is always dark, evoking feelings of fear and decay.

The film also plays with luminance in order to introduce (visual) mood changes. For instance, when in his fantasy Chris sees Annie jumping into the lake, the scene is shot in fairly neutral daylight. However, when he approaches the shore to reach out to her and realises she does not actually exist in his heaven, the image becomes noticeably dimmer and the mountains surrounding the lake suddenly appear to be covered in a thick grey fog.

As previously pointed out, while the film's iconography seems to draw on 19th-century Romanticism, its visual style is undoubtedly inspired by Impressionism (Corominas, 2005, online). The luminance set-ups are strongly reminiscent of Monet and Van Gogh: there are bright sunrises and iridescent sunsets. As the plot develops, these transform smoothly from thick layers of oil paint into reality.

The question of enriching the AD script with references to particular art movements (such as Impressionism) cannot be answered without empirical research into user responses. Recently, the issue of intertextuality in AD has been addressed by Chmiel and Mazur (2011). In their study of a Polish target audience, comparisons containing references to other audiovisual products were welcomed by 52 per cent of the subjects. In view of the relatively low percentage of positive responses, a balanced description of this type of information in an AI might be the most appropriate option.[9]

In *What Dreams May Come*, there are also a number of scenes which confirm that lighting and soundtrack are to a great extent complementary. For instance, when Chris arrives in hell the ominous sound of the howling wind dominates the audio, and when he finally sees the gates of the inferno the volume of the dramatic background music increases substantially. In such moments, when there are no dialogues, the description could be limited to concise, visually evocative phrases to

allow the audio to tell the story (e.g., *flames piercing through the darkness* or *the afternoon sun drowning behind the mountains*).

5.3 The aesthetics of the image

In their discussion of the significance of film image, Corrigan and White (2009) state that "[t]he aesthetic image asks to be contemplated and to be appreciated for its artistic re-creation of a world or a perspective through texture, line, color, and composition" (p. 128).[10] In *What Dreams May Come*, all of these features come together to form a new and visceral dimension of image aesthetics. The manner in which Chris and Annie communicate via her paintings after his death, and the way in which Annie's canvases now take place in Chris's heaven, all add to the film's intertextuality.

Alongside conventional uses of the elements of iconographic and photographic codes, the film reinvents the idea of visual style, introducing brushwork as one of the visual settings. For example, in his heaven, Chris barely walks. Instead, he glides, leaving behind wet stains of multicoloured paint. He does not simply smell a flower, he squeezes it like a lemon and its thick sap spills all over his hands. Since the theme of art is greatly exploited at both the narrative and the cinematographic levels, *What Dreams May Come* could be approached in terms of accessibility from the same perspective as museum exhibitions. According to the AD guidelines of the American Council of the Blind (2009):

> [g]enerally, a coherent description should provide visual information in a sequence, allowing a blind person to assemble, piece by piece, an image of a highly complex work. [...] After the basic information about subject, composition, and mediums are conveyed, the verbal description can focus on how these many elements contribute to the whole. (online, p. 31)

Following the above quoted proposal, the AD of the first scenes in Chris's heaven could read as follows: *Chris wakes up to what looks like a living oil painting. He sits among lush trees and flowers plunged into an exuberant meadow [...] As he descends the rolling slopes leading towards the river, he flounders across the boggy ground, leaving behind smears of colour. The landscape resembles a gritty canvas covered with bold layers of paint. The thickly textured colour creates a vibrant, Impressionist-like reality*. In this AD, the verbal representation of single colours and motifs is followed by a cumulative description of pictorial conventions employed in the film.

In terms of aesthetics, *What Dreams May Come* certainly represents a considerably high level of abstraction. However, as discussed

earlier in the article, the film's visuals can still be translated into relatively tangible experience, for example through the use of apt analogies (e.g., *he squeezes the flower like a lemon/like a tube of toothpaste*; *the bird's excrement splashes on Chris's shoulder like a massive blob of paint*).

6. Syntactic codes (editing)

According to Chaume (2004a, pp. 21–22), syntactic codes work in two ways: by means of iconic associations, and through the so-called audiovisual punctuation marks. While iconic associations relate more to shot sequences and as such are more pertinent to subtitling and dubbing, audiovisual punctuation marks concern the arrangement of single film fragments into meaningful units and are therefore of greater interest to audio describers.

In the case of *What Dreams May Come*, the main editing techniques are:

- fade-ins to white
- shifts in time announced by intertitles
- flashbacks
- (cross)cuts and dissolves from paintings into reality, and vice versa.

As far as the narrative patterns of time are concerned, the film's plot does not follow the trajectory of linear chronology (Corrigan & White, 2009, p. 249). A large number of scenes occur simultaneously in both Chris's heaven and Annie's life, and some particularities in the story-telling are explained only later by means of flashbacks to the couple's past. However, the moments which are most challenging to describe are those when celestial settings freeze and become paintings again or, conversely, when the camera zooms in on objects in Annie's paintings as if trying to get inside the image, only to take the viewer back to paradise.

Maintaining coherence in the description of scene changes seems to be vital in *What Dreams May Come*. Owing to its fragmented narrative, this film would particularly benefit from one consistent descriptive strategy for each editing technique. Whereas terms such as *flashback*, *fade in* or *fade out* are already widely used in AD, the frequent shifts between paintings and reality require a more careful approach.

In the case of crosscutting, Salway's (2007, p. 165, as cited in Vercauteren, 2012, p. 221) and Vercauteren's (2012, p. 221) work on the description of simultaneous actions recommends the use of conjunctions (*as, while*) which could help establish the right spatio-temporal circumstances. Furthermore, definite articles and demonstrative pronouns could substitute visual repetitions and replications of certain icons.[11] (For example: *The purple paint runs in trickles down the white canvas.*

Meanwhile, in Chris's heaven, the petals from the purple tree also begin to fall, whirling like a swarm of locusts over Chris's head. Back in her studio, Annie leans against the easel, her face twisted in a woeful grimace. As the painting slowly turns into an indiscriminate blur, the tree simultaneously loses all its leaves.)

As far as the dissolves are concerned, verbs such as *freeze*, *revive*, *come to life* or *brighten up* might prove useful when verbalising the painting-reality opposition, and adverbs such as *slowly* or *gradually* could also indicate the nature of the change of setting. Since these transitions are immediate and leave very little space for detailed description, the sense of animation and personification needs to be delivered concisely but effectively (e.g., *Chris wakes up to a garden arch mural which gradually comes to life as a colourful patio*).

7. Conclusions

The main objective of this article has been to reveal the diversity and complexity of the visual layer of film. Through a discussion of image composition elements and the ways in which they can be successfully incorporated in audio description, the article also aims to provide food for thought in the teaching of AD.

The study has focused on *What Dreams May Come*, a movie whose visual narration operates simultaneously on at least three levels of codification (iconography, photography and syntax), bringing each of them to a cinematographic extreme. The film discussed in this article is to a certain extent exceptional, though indicative of the tendencies recently exhibited by the audiovisual sector. According to Chong (2008, pp. 165–166), *What Dreams May Come* reveals "the confidence invested in computer-generated visual effects", with box office hits like *Sin City* (2005) and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005) following its lead. In this type of production, icons turn out to be immersed within the photography, which is then employed as a syntactical tool to create a meaningful whole.

In terms of audio description, such mutual relations and interactions of cinematographic codes entail new challenges requiring a careful and considered approach. In the present article, a number of suggestions as to how to solve a number of potential problems and avoid confusing the audience have been made. However, further research is needed in order to verify the sample descriptions. First of all, a complete AD script for *What Dreams May Come* would have to be created. A reception study could then be designed, involving the screening of the audio described film and eliciting reactions from the target audience. In addition, a corpus of similar films could be created with a view to testing the hypotheses discussed in relation to the case study of *What Dreams May Come*.

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Recerca (SUR) del Departament d'Economia i Coneixement (DEC) de la Generalitat de Catalunya and the Fons Social Europeu (FSE) (call ECO/2060/2011).

2 The acoustic channel engulfs the linguistic code, paralinguistic codes, the musical and the special effects code, and the sound arrangement code. (Chaume, 2004a, pp. 16–18) However, these aspects are beyond the scope of this article.

3 Compared, for instance, to *Oh, God* (1977), where God appears as a human being and accompanies the main character throughout the film; or to *Bruce Almighty* (2003), where God, played by Morgan Freeman, dresses in white suits and, just like Chris's guide in *What Dreams May Come* (1998), walks on water.

4 Cf. in *Divine Comedy* Dante was guided through hell by Virgil, the Roman poet.

5 Meaning canonic forms shown in new, conflicting contexts. (Solso, 1994, p. 244).

6 Retrieved February 14, 2013, from http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/.

7 Retrieved February 14, 2013, from www.audiointros.org.

8 "[B]ut people who saw once in their life might even know how to deal with that. So colour is important!" (Benecke & Dosch, 2004, as cited in Orero & Wharton, 2007, p. 173).

9 See the following section for examples.

10 Cf. Plato: "The lowest form of thinking is the bare recognition of the object. The highest, the comprehensive intuition of the man who sees all things as part of a system." (n.d., as cited in Solso, 1994, p. 231)

11 A technique originally proposed by Chaume (2004a, p. 22) for dubbing and subtitling.

12 Partially retrieved from amazon.co.uk, imdb.com, en.wikipedia.org.