

## THE SOUNDTRACK OF ACCESSIBILITY: BACKGROUND MUSIC'S ROLE IN AUDIO-DESCRIBED FILMS

Paula Igareda \*

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

**ABSTRACT:** Music plays a fundamental role in the audiovisual experience, influencing the viewer's perception, emotion, and memory. However, its treatment in accessibility studies, particularly in audio description (AD), still presents various challenges and approaches. This article examines the role of music in audio-described audiovisual products through two complementary studies. Firstly, it analyses how background music is treated in the AD of various films, identifying strategies and omissions that may affect the experience of visually impaired audiences. Secondly, an experiment is presented in which 80 students were exposed to musical fragments with the aim of assessing their ability to recognize the film or series they originated from. The results allow us to reflect on the degree of iconicity of music in audiovisual identification and its implications for AD. Based on these findings, the article proposes the need for greater integration of music in audiovisual accessibility studies, considering its narrative and emotional impact

**KEYWORDS:** Audio Description; Background Music; Audiovisual Storytelling; Accessibility; Auditory Recognition; Emotion and Music

### 1. Introduction

In the past century, films have undergone many changes, mainly due to new technological possibilities in production, recording, and projection. Sound, colour, Sensurround, Dolby, 3-D, and now digital recording have turned films into a very complex multisemiotic experience. Moreover, film inherently combines multiple modes and signs, integrating visual and auditory elements alongside language, gesture, imagery, and music. However, some audiences may lack direct access to content presented through either the auditory or visual channel. To ensure inclusivity, certain cinematic aspects may need to be adapted into another format (Diget, 2019). One such adaptation is audio description (AD), a verbal narration of on-screen visual elements designed for viewers with visual impairments (Braun, 2008; Holsanova, 2016; Rai et al., 2010; Remael et al., 2016).

Part of this is the enjoyment of music, an integral part of films since before the advent of sound, playing a fundamental role in the audiovisual experience, shaping perception, emotions, and memory. However, the treatment of music in accessibility studies, particularly in AD, still presents challenges that impact the experience of visually impaired audiences. Since music is a key element of films, it must also be addressed within Media Accessibility Studies.

This article explores this issue through two complementary studies: an analysis of the presence and treatment of music in the AD of eight films and an experiment to assess the ability to recognise music in an audiovisual context. The findings provide insights into the iconicity of music in audiovisual identification and its implications for AD, highlighting the need for more integrated approaches in accessibility studies. Based on these results, the

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\* paula.igareda@upf.edu

article proposes improvements to AD practices to enhance immersion and ensure equitable access to audiovisual content, providing also an analytical tool that can be used as a preliminary exercise before the AD of the audiovisual product.

## **2. Making a film accessible**

The current debate and concern for universal access to the media across different academic, professional, and legal fields is ongoing. In recent years, new accessibility laws and policies have been implemented at the international level. Among all the specific and possible topics, this study deals with film accessibility, focusing on the treatment of film music. The corpus and aim of this study concentrate on the AD for recorded audiovisual products for linear television, cinema, VoD, and over-the-top streaming services, although there are many other fields where AD can be applied, such as stage events –theatre, opera, ballet–, other visual arts, and live sports and events.

Regarding music, the main objective of this study is to gather conclusions from an analysis and propose ways to improve audience access to and enjoyment of film music, since film music has always been contemplated as a secondary question within AD Studies, focusing on other topics such as characters, places, actions, credits, among many others. Many scholars, professionals, and guidelines have already dealt with AD when making a film accessible, addressing priorities, elements to describe, appropriate wording, and timing for AD, among other aspects (ADP, 2009; AENOR, 2005; Dosch and Benecke, 2004; Fryer, 2016; Hörfilm, 2005; Media Access Australia, 2010; Netflix, 2023; Ofcom, 2024; Puigdomènech et al., 2010; Remael, 2005; Snyder, 2007; Vercauteren, 2007). The main idea is to describe where the scene is situated, when it takes place, what is happening and who is present, all while fitting the descriptions into the pauses and silences. This is a challenging task given the near-constant presence of sound. It is worth highlighting Netflix's (2023) specific instructions regarding the treatment of music in AD: "Allow room for dialogue, sound effects, music and intentional silence. Plot-pertinent dialogue and songs should always take priority" and later "Only interrupt music, sound effects [...], and intentional silence for vital, timely information that must be described".

## **3. Audio description and background music**

This study is aware that it is not the first to be interested in or concerned with the treatment of music in audio-described products or in making an audiovisual product accessible. In their 2013 report for the ADLAB project, Mazur and Chmiel identified fourteen "Audio Description Crisis Points", placing music first alongside other challenges such as text-on-screen (logos, credits, captions, graphics), setting the scene, describing and introducing characters, flashbacks and scene switches, filmic language and techniques, facial expressions, complex scenes, and others. In their work, the authors stated that most describers noted that the music in the film they were analysing was an essential element of the film's soundtrack, designed to be heard and appreciated without disruption, and that it must be coordinated with the AD. Dosch and Benecke (2004, p. 27) state that noise, music,

and even moments of silence in a film should be preserved; yet, in their experience, their descriptions have become more and more detailed over the years, because their audience has asked for more information. More recently, Mazur (2020) examines the role of music in the source text. The author identifies in her study some scenes that are accompanied by instrumental music, which is traditionally a good place to insert AD, but she recommends not talking over it entirely, as the music also enriches the visual scenes. Moreover, Maszerowska et al. (2014) argued that the soundtrack of *Inglourious Basterds* presents a rich array of references and effects that enhance its potential for AD and its use of sound and silence challenges conventional relationships between audio and visuals, expanding the limits of traditional sound-image interaction. Finally, it is important to highlight the work of Fascioli Álvarez (2019), who states that AD should aim for both intermodal coherence –with dialogues– and intramodal coherence –with sound effects, music, and silence. In this regard, the placement of the description in relation to other elements becomes particularly significant. Similarly, Remael (2012) emphasises the importance of thoroughly analysing and integrating film sound, including music, into the AD process to ensure a coherent and comparable experience for visually impaired audiences.

Most of the AD guidelines consulted recommend not placing AD over dialogues, music, or any other sound relevant for the comprehension of the film, and advise looking for the pauses between them. Not many of these guidelines deal with film music, and when they do, they deal with specific types of music, such as songs with lyrics. Background music is usually defined as accompanying music and within AD studies has not been properly considered. The frequent idea is that if background music and other sounds do not represent an important function for the atmosphere of the film (Hörfilm, 2005; ADP 2009); or if they are not necessary to advance essential information to follow the plot (Benecke & Dosch, 2004; Hörfilm, 2005; Remael, 2005; Puigdomènech et al., 2010), there can be AD over them. More specifically, ADP (2009) declares that “in most instances, a describer may talk over background music” but later “if the musical scoring [...] contributes significantly to the material’s emotion, try to allow listeners to be carried along with the music without interjecting descriptions. Only interrupt for vital information that must be described during the music in order to be timely”. Along the same lines, Hörfilm (2005) states that there should never be AD over sounds and music, only when they do not mean an important function for the film atmosphere. They also say that film music should be considered as a very relevant film element. Benecke, quoted by Poethe (2005, p. 37), says that silence included should be maintained when possible, and background music, among other sounds, should be untouchable. And finally, Media Access Australia (2010, p. 12) proposes the enjoyment of the musical theme tune without any description over it: “let the music and ambient sound tell the story too”. But, in general, the best approach is to place the description within natural pauses and breaks in the dialogue, ensuring it does not disrupt speech, sound effects, or music (Benecke, 2004; Remael et al., 2014).

#### **4. Film music and its function in films**

As mentioned before (Igareda, 2012), a complete review of Film Music Studies is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth mentioning the relevant role played by music in films, as it is stated by many experts (Cohen, 1990, 1999, 2000, 2001; Bolivar et al., 1994; Chion, 1997; Lack, 1999; Smith, 1999; Garwood, 2003; Gorbman, 2003, 2007; Wright, 2003; Lipscomb & Tolchinsky, 2004; Goldman; Kramer & Leppert, 2007; Hoeckner, 2007; Kocjančič, 2008). In the same way it was noted in relation to AD, music has also been regarded as a subordinate element in films: "it is a marginal part of the much larger field of study focused on image, narrative, the cinematic apparatus, and the history of film production" (Goldmark, Kramer & Leppert, 2007, p. 2).

This study is based on the understanding that music is an integral part of the sound film and that the soundtrack is an essential element of the narrative. Music can set the tone of a scene from the very beginning. Whether it's a soft melody accompanying a romantic scene or intense music heightening the tension in a thriller, the musical choice can transport the viewer to an entirely new world. Music creates an atmosphere that enriches the visual narrative, setting the mood and preparing the audience for what is to come (Karalavisual, 2023).

Regarding the possible functions of music in film, most scholars agree on its ability to convey emotions, build the narrative, and identify characters, times, places, and themes, among many other aspects. Particularly relevant to this study are those who assert that film music has the power to evoke a season, a historical period, a cultural coding, or even an ethnic flavour (Gorbman 2003, Wright 2003). Additionally, film music can create stylistic unity, accompany and support action, underscore dialogue, link scenes, emphasise or highlight movement, mood, or humour, show changes in emotional states, and even represent the thoughts of characters rather than their actions (Gorbman 1987; Karlin & Wright 1990; Carey & Hannan 2003). As Vernallis (2008, p. 286) puts it, "Images, music and sounds hold together through shape, movement, color, textures and expressivity."

##### **4.1 Classification of music**

Film music is typically divided into two categories: diegetic and non-diegetic music. Diegetic music is part of the narrative, while nondiegetic music serves as a layer of commentary. However, this article argues that the distinction is based more on technical placement and perception, as noted by Stilwell (2007).

Diegetic music, or source music, is produced by characters or devices within the story space, like radios, singers, or orchestras (Gorbman, 1987; Chion, 1997). Kocjančič (2008) notes that characters may identify with specific songs or radio programs, which can reflect their social life, status, or fashion. Non-diegetic music, also known as underscore or background music, is external to the story space and not audible to the characters (Gorbman, 1987; Chion, 1997). According to Nieto (2003), it serves two main functions: as a structural element to influence rhythm and continuity, and as an expressive element to convey emotions or guide the audience's perspective. Stilwell (2007) emphasises that non-

diegetic music, when in the foreground, can intensify the connection between the audience and the film. Finally, background music, often from an external source like a radio, helps set the atmosphere and can become dominant in the scene's soundscape. It can evoke various emotions, such as anticipation through crescendos or calm through decrescendos (Chion, 1997). Chion also identifies two effects: the empathic effect, where music reflects the scene's emotions, and the anempathic effect, where music continues indifferently after an emotional scene. Studies, such as those by Bolivar, Cohen and Fentress (1994), suggest that background music enhances the meaning of visual elements.

#### ***4.2 The relevance of silence and background music as a leitmotif***

The role of silence in film is as crucial as that of sound, and its impact on the audience should not be underestimated. Silence can convey powerful meanings, creating moments of tension or reflection. There are different types of silence in film. Gorbman (1987) distinguishes between diegetic silence, where no music is used to highlight verbal silence, and non-diegetic silence, where the soundtrack has no sound at all. She also identifies structural silence, which occurs when sound previously present in the film is later absent at corresponding points. Silence, like music, directly affects the continuity of the film, shaping its flow and emotional tone. As Fryer (2010) questions, the way sound and silence are described may not always be necessary, as their significance often speaks for itself.

In addition to silence, background music can also play a key role in reinforcing the narrative through leitmotifs. These are repeated musical motifs or short melodic units tied to specific meanings, such as characters, emotions, or events (Dickinson, 2003; Radigales, 2007; Kocjančič, 2008). Leitmotifs can be presented in various ways: as non-diegetic music accompanying the film, as diegetic music coming from an on-screen source, or even transitioning between the two. They can also be presented as diegetically real, with characters singing or miming a song. The primary function of the leitmotif is to strengthen the connection between the music and the narrative development of the film (Kocjančič, 2008). Vilaró and Orero (2013) explore the concept of leitmotifs in film and their application in AD. The authors argue that AD can play a crucial role in the identification and understanding of leitmotifs for visually impaired audiences and propose an 'anchoring' strategy to explicitly highlight leitmotifs in AD, facilitating their recognition and retrieval in the film narrative. Orero et al. (2016) conclude that silence and leitmotifs are important elements of cinematic language that can enhance the narrative and evoke emotions and that AD should address these elements with sensitivity and understanding, weighing the benefits of providing visual information against the risks of disrupting the film's original intent.

In conclusion, and in line with Branigan's (2010) words, sound in film encompasses much more than just the physical properties of pitch, timbre, and tempo, influencing the emotional and narrative structure of the film in profound ways. Therefore, both silence and background music, when carefully used, can significantly enhance the meaning and emotional impact of a film.

## 5. Analysis of audio-described films with background music

The role and functions of background music have been frequently underestimated. In fact, there are films whose soundtracks consist only of this background music. This music can be either instrumental or sung, and there may be more than one composer involved in a single film. This study analyses eight (N = 8) examples where background music is the main melodic sound within the film.

### 5.1 Methodology

First, the selection of the works to be analysed was carried out. The choice of audio-described films with background music for this study is justified by the crucial role that music plays in shaping the audiovisual experience. In all the selected works, background music not only enhances the emotional impact of a scene, but also provides narrative cues that guide the audience's perception and interpretation of the story. In the context of AD, where visual information is conveyed through verbal narration, the interaction between music and spoken descriptions becomes particularly relevant. To observe whether the practice has evolved over time, a first block of films released in the first decade of the 2000s (N = 5), and a second block of films released in the last two years (N = 3) are analysed.

In order to conduct a qualitative analysis of the presence of music in the ADs of this film selection, an analysis tool was developed to examine the role of music in these products, focusing on the strategies used in AD to describe or integrate music, the cases in which music is not stepped on, and its possible impact on the audience's experience. It also considers the comparison between different approaches depending on the film's genre, direction, country of origin, and the period in which it was made accessible through AD.

Table 1. Analysis of music treatment in audio-described audiovisual products

<b>1. General data</b>	
Name of the film, genre (drama, action, comedy, romance, adventure, etc.), year of release (with AD), director, soundtrack composer, length of the film, language of AD.	
<b>2. Characterization of the music</b>	
Presence of music in the film	Continuous, frequent, occasional, scarce
Predominant musical genre	Orchestral, electronic, jazz, etc.
Main function of music	Ambience, emotional reinforcement, character identification, narrative development, leitmotiv
Key moments where music is prominent	Introduction, climax, resolution
<b>3. Interaction between music and AD</b>	
Level of overlap between AD and music	High (music and AD overlap constantly), moderate (occasional overlaps, but well-balanced), low (AD is presented in musical pauses)
Effect of music on clarity of AD	Improves understanding of the scene, does not interfere, hinders the perception of the message

Volume and mix settings	Music with reduced volume during AD, music with no volume adjustment, music that gets louder at key moments
<b>4. Impact on the audience's experience</b>	
Music contributes to the immersion in the story	Yes, no, partially
Music facilitates the understanding of the narrative	Yes, no, partially
Emotions evoked by the music	

## 5.2 Results

1. *300* (Snyder, 2006). All of the themes composed by Tyler Bates for this film have a title directly related to either the moment they are played in the film or to a message intended to be sent, as in *To Victory*, *The Wolf*, *What Must a King Do?*, *Fight in the Shade*, *Tonight We Dine in Hell*, or *Remember Us*. Some of them have choirs in the background sung in Greek and Latin (*The Agoge*, *Goodbye My Love*, *Come and Get Them* or *Message for the Queen*), which give a *crescendo* to the moment or a dramatic atmosphere. At times background music is composed of several pieces of heavy metal and rock music, especially when the Spartans are fighting (*No Mercy* or *Fever Dream*). This film contains a wide array of styles, moods and atmospheres with all the types of background music, showing a clear awareness of the role of music in shaping the viewer's emotional experience. Unfortunately, the AD allows little space for music. There are many scenes in slow motion and this effect lasts while the music is sounding where music provides the level of rhythm, it emphasises and highlights the movements supporting the action and, most of the time, it follows the movement of the camera. The only thing that can be sometimes heard by the audience is the choirs appearing in the film made up of female humming, as when the Persian messenger arrives to Sparta and it starts to snow, when the king and queen say goodbye to each other or at the end of the film together with the sound of a flute. AD respects these choirs and concedes them some space. This selective preservation of vocal tracks might suggest an intuitive recognition of their emotional weight, although the overall treatment of music is more functional than expressive.

2. *Breaking and Entering* (Minghella, 2006) has examples of background music working as dramatic intensifications of the scenes, as in the beginning of the film or when the main character ponders about his affair. Sometimes it reinforces the happy feelings of the moment, like when the autistic girl is training or when the boy is practicing his moves in the street. Other times, like when the two boys are running away from the police, it emphasizes the movement and the action in general.

Gabriel Yared is the composer of most of the music played in this film. There are two differentiated main motifs for two of the main characters of the film, Jude and Miro. In relation to AD, it allows a lot of space for the background music played during the whole length of the film. Ten key moments were detected in which the background music was related to the plot of the film, and almost all of them found their space to be heard by the audience. Piano and soft classical beats together with some male humming appear when

the main characters, Will and Amira, are together, contrasting with the electronic and drumbeats that can be heard when the background is supporting Miro's actions. This nuanced soundscape seems to be preserved in the AD, which allows audiences with visual impairments to perceive distinct emotional registers associated with each character. This suggests a more deliberate integration of music into the accessible narrative, moving beyond the purely informational purpose of the AD.

3. Something similar happens with *Déjà Vu* (Scott, 2006). The music is mainly composed by Harry Gregson-Williams and accompanies the film from the beginning to the end with different functions: linking scenes, supporting the action, emphasising movements and rhythms, among others. It is an action/thriller soundtrack that has as one of its main themes all those related to Claire's character, as *Claire's Apartment*, *You Can Save Her*, *Humvee Chase* or *Claire's Rescue*. Electronic and metallic percussions, piano sounds repeating more than once during the film, some drumbeats, etc. At least ten key moments where background music plays a relevant role for the film narrative were detected. In 6 out of 10 moments, AD partially or totally overrides the music with verbal description (some of which simply reiterates what the music already conveys, such as explosions or helicopter sounds). This substitution of musical information with redundant sonic descriptions raises questions about the AD's criteria in selecting what to describe and what to preserve. It may reflect a prioritization of clarity over emotional or narrative richness.

4. *The Last king of Scotland* (Macdonald, 2006). Most of the tracks from the soundtrack are composed by Alex Heffes. The film is divided into two parts regarding music: the first 43 minutes contain African songs with lyrics, and in the second part, more background music can be heard by the audience. More than 35 tracks were found in this film; over 25 belong to background music. In general, these tracks consist of African beats, trumpet beats, guitar beats, and some drumbeats when the atmosphere is excited and lively. Other tracks are made up of strong drumbeats covering the environment with suspense, anxiety, expectation and tension. In all these cases, AD lets some space when it's possible. A significant example is the mix between a diegetic song with English lyrics heard in a bar and intense background music around minute 54, where the AD allows no space to music due to overlapping actions. This instance shows the limitations of AD when multiple narrative elements compete for attention –music, action, and dialogue– forcing a decision that inevitably sacrifices one layer of meaning. The end of the film closes with the tracks *On the Runaway* and *Down Over Lake Victoria*. In this case, AD lets a lot of space for the music and some male chorus. This contrast between the middle and final moments illustrates the AD's flexible strategies, adapting to narrative tempo and emotional intensity, though not always consistently.

5. *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008). The soundtrack of this film is mostly made up of songs with lyrics, but there are also great examples from A. R. Rahman's score. The most significant of these examples is *Latika's Theme*, a recurring track with a woman humming. The AD covers almost everything in the first instance, and slightly less in the second and third. Although this repetition of a theme could function as an emotional anchor across the

film, the inconsistent space given by the AD hinders the audience's ability to perceive and emotionally connect with these narrative beats. It suggests a tension between the temporal constraints of description and the symbolic layering of sound design.

6. The soundtrack of *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023) is largely composed of upbeat pop with lyrics, dance, synth-pop, and electro-pop tracks, with influences from disco and hyperpop, an eclectic mix of genres that complements the film's narrative and aesthetics. However, there are also significant instrumental pieces from the original score, composed by Mark Ronson and Andrew Wyatt, that play a crucial role in shaping the film's emotional tone. Apropos of the experiment described below, the first scene of this film includes the song *Creation of Barbie*, a version of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the iconic soundtrack of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. While the AD allows the louder drums to play underneath the description and the sound mix is good, it blurs the original product's intention regarding the girls' rage as they get rid of their dolls in the presence of the first Barbie. 30 minutes later in the film, we hear a version of the same song, this time called *Ken Makes a Discovery*, as the character wanders alone through the economic centre of the city. On this occasion, AD overlaps the soundtrack entirely. One of the most distinctive examples is *Bus Stop Billie* theme, which recurs under different names. The AD constantly treads on the space for sound. The song combines synthesised and orchestral elements with a soft, melodic rhythm that evokes a nostalgic and emotional feeling. It includes ethereal keyboards, subtle strings, and a delicate rhythmic base, creating a dreamy and reflective effect. These repeated intrusions into musically rich scenes (often symbolic and emotionally significant) highlight a missed opportunity for multimodal storytelling in accessible formats. The decision to prioritise image description over music recognition may unintentionally diminish thematic cohesion. The same happens later with *Meeting Ruth*, the same whistled song.

7. *Luckiest Girl Alive* (Barker, 2022). The instrumental soundtrack was composed by Linda Perry and comprises 27 tracks. These musical pieces are characterised by their ability to fuse melodic and emotional elements, creating an atmosphere that complements the film's visual narrative, mainly exploring the emotions and experiences of the protagonist. While some scenes are overwritten by AD, others like *Ani Arrives* and *Confronting Dean* preserve the music's full emotional weight. This suggests an evolution in AD practice, allowing more nuanced integration of sound and image in moments where music is narratively dominant and visual action is less critical.

8. *The Order* (Kurzel, 2024). The soundtrack, composed by Jed Kurzel, is characterised by its tense and emotional atmosphere, music acts as another character (Tudosoundtrack, 2024). Most of the tracks use stringed instruments and synthesisers. Pieces such as *Husk* reflect the intensity and complexity of the narrative and open the first scenes of the film. In this example, the AD adapts as the film progresses: initially leaving room for music, later overlapping it as the action intensifies. Notably, the volume balance still allows music to be perceived under the AD. This compromise model (preserving emotional tone without sacrificing descriptive clarity) may offer a productive way forward.

## 6. Experiment on audiovisual music recognition

The hypothesis that triggered the interest in carrying out this experiment states that the average audience, due to their experience and years of consumption of audiovisual products, has a musical memory that comes from these same films and series already seen. Some findings (Dosis, 2024) support the statement that music significantly influences the viewer's perception, emotion, and memory in audiovisual contexts. Thus, in the case of fragments or complete songs that are reused in other audiovisual products or used as intertexts, the audience will recognise them. This is particularly interesting in terms of how AD should behave with this type of music or with audiovisual music in general.

To carry out this small experiment, the collaboration of 80 students from the audiovisual translation course between the years 2023 and 2025 was obtained. 70,7% of the participants are between 21 and 22 years old, and the rest are no older than 28. Of all of them, 87,3% are women, 10,1% are men, and the remaining 2,5% prefer not to say. This imbalance between men and women is characteristic of translation degree programs at Spanish universities today.

Before starting, the informed consent was explained to them verbally and collected in writing through a Google Forms document to confirm the information process. This way, the students were protected, and their voluntary participation in the study was ensured. Next, the first 20 seconds of 40 songs (including both instrumental pieces and songs with lyrics) were played. The selection of the best movie or TV series songs of all time is justified, on one hand, by their cultural and emotional impact on the audience. These songs have managed to transcend the context of the movie or series they belong to, becoming iconic pieces that evoke memories and feelings in the public. The popularity, influence, and ability of these songs to remain relevant over time are key factors that justify their inclusion in the list of songs to be selected for this experiment. On the other hand, sources such as IMDb, Spotify, Apple Music, Infobae, and Fotogramas were consulted, as they all featured lists of the 'best' soundtracks of all time.

Students were asked to write down the movie or series soundtrack they recognised from the fragment in the same Google Forms document. After all the fragments had been played, a quantitative analysis of the participants' responses was carried out. The objective was to quantify the recognition rate of the musical fragments and analyse potential differences between songs with lyrics and instrumental tracks, as well as explore variations based on the audiovisual genre (e.g. movies versus TV series).

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that there is a high and widespread recognition: 45% of the fragments were recognized by at least half of the participants, suggesting that a large portion of the selected fragments are quite well-known. Furthermore, 70% of the participants recognised 37,5% of the fragments, indicating that, although not all fragments are equally easy to identify, a significant percentage of participants are familiar with these musical themes.

Among the themes with the highest recognition by participants are the instrumental soundtrack of *Titanic* (96,25%), *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* (both with 88,75%), *Ghostbusters* (86,25%), *Jaws* (85%), *Game of Thrones* (81,25%), and *Rocky* (77,5%). Among the songs with lyrics, the most recognised was *The Lion King* (96,25%), followed by *Friends* (93,75%), *Dirty Dancing* (86,25%), *Stranger Things* (85%), *Pretty Little Liars* (83,75%), and *50 Shades of Grey* (78,75%). Lastly, to highlight more data, we can say that more than 50% of the participants also recognised *Mission Impossible* (70%), *The Bodyguard* (66,25%), *Jurassic Park* (50%), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (53,25%).

Among the differences that were to be extracted, there is a higher recognition of instrumental soundtracks, such as the aforementioned *Titanic*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Jaws*, which could indicate that these themes are more iconic and memorable for the participants. This phenomenon might be due to their prominence in popular culture or the recurrent use of these songs in various media, such as intertextual references. There is also a notable recognition of songs with lyrics, like in the case of *The Lion King*, *Friends*, and *Dirty Dancing*. This suggests that lyrics may be a key factor for identification, as songs associated with popular series or movies tend to leave a more lasting impression.

The most recognised soundtracks come from movies and series that have had a significant impact on popular culture, and their music is part of the collective memory of the participants. In the case of songs with lyrics, they are also products that remain widely popular, which reinforces the idea that songs can acquire additional meaning through their connection to memorable characters and scenes. The era in which these movies and series were released has a significant impact on their recognition level. Many of them come from periods when cinema and television experienced an expansion in terms of production, visual effects, and global reach, which helped their soundtracks and songs become ingrained in the collective memory. Additionally, the phenomenon of nostalgia and cultural globalisation has allowed these themes to remain relevant over time.

In conclusion, it can be said that both iconic movies and series have strong recognition, but it seems that classic films (especially those with instrumental soundtracks) have a slight advantage in terms of recognition rate, possibly due to their greater permanence in popular culture over time. As for songs with lyrics, they seem to be especially remembered if associated with popular series or highly emotional films (*The Lion King* or *Friends*), while instrumental themes have a similar impact, though perhaps more related to the visual spectacle or the epic force of the films (such as *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*). Additionally, iconic movies, especially epic adventures and high-budget films, tend to have a higher recognition rate compared to series.

## **7. Conclusions and further research**

Starting with the term “background”, the role of this type of music has traditionally been relegated to a secondary category in AD. Even when it does not directly contribute to the narrative, background music often goes unnoticed by the audience. However, it can convey

a particular emotional intent that the director wishes to express –an intent frequently lost in the AD. As Branigan (2010, p. 41) suggests, “what is heard in a sound depends on how one listens, and with what purpose”, highlighting the subjective nature of musical perception. Similarly, Cohen (2001, p. 253) explains that “the audience selectively attends to only the part of the music that makes sense with the narrative,” underscoring how listeners focus on what aligns with the storyline. These nuances, which shape the viewer's emotional engagement, are often missing in AD. It is difficult to imagine a film without music, as its elements –melody, tonality, harmony, chords, intervals, rhythm, dynamics, tempo, timbre, motif, and others– are integral to the cinematic experience and should ideally be acknowledged in the description.

This article aimed to explore how AD has handled music in films from two different periods: the early 2000s and recent years, through a case study approach. Although the number of analysed cases was limited, the findings suggest a growing respect for music in current audio-described films compared to earlier practices. In the past, AD focused almost exclusively on visual content, leaving music in the background. More recently, accessibility studies and a greater awareness of music's narrative role have contributed to a shift, allowing musical elements more space within AD. Despite this progress, further work is still needed to achieve optimal integration and ensure a truly accessible and enriching experience for all audiences.

Regarding the second objective of this article, the results of the experiment support the hypothesis that musical familiarity significantly aids in the recognition of fragments within audiovisual products. The high recognition rate – 45% of fragments were identified by at least half of the participants – indicates that long-term exposure to iconic films and series strengthens musical memory. This finding highlights the relevance of familiar music in AD and reinforces the idea that such recognition can enhance narrative immersion for visually impaired audiences.

To improve the quality of future AD, it is essential to offer more specialised training to professionals, allowing them to be more specific in how to let the music breathe and incorporate AD, both technically and emotionally. In addition, work needs to be done on improving the sound mix to ensure that the music is properly balanced and not lost among other elements. According to Szarkowska and Orero (2014, p. 128), “the quality of sound missing needs to allow the audience to experience the nature of sounds in the film and to become immersed in the story world they create together with other semiotic channels of the film”. Finally, the use of music should be encouraged not only as a simple accompaniment, but as an essential narrative component that plays a key role in conveying the story, allowing for a richer and more immersive experience for visually impaired audiences. This means integrating music deliberately into AD by identifying key musical moments, timing the description accordingly, and, when possible, collaborating with sound professionals to preserve the score's narrative function. That is: treating music as a co-narrator rather than incidental sound.

As for future research on the relationship between music and audiovisual accessibility, one promising direction is the development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies that automatically detect optimal moments for inserting ADs without disrupting the musical score. Recent studies, such as Wang et al. (2021), introduced a system that predicts AD insertion times by analysing audiovisual cues, enhancing accessibility without compromising the viewing experience. Additionally, projects like OFAI focus on the automatic segmentation and characterisation of audio streams, which could inform the timing of AD in relation to musical elements. Companies such as AI-Media UK are also actively working on automated accessibility solutions that apply machine learning to synchronise AD and captions more precisely with audio content, indicating a growing commercial interest in such technologies. These developments suggest a growing potential for AI to facilitate more nuanced and music-aware AD integration.

In addition, it would be valuable to carry out reception studies involving feedback questionnaires aimed at visually impaired audiences to assess their experience of music in audiovisual products with AD. These studies would provide valuable information on how to improve the integration of music and AD to provide a more accessible and enriching experience for visually impaired audiences.

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**About the author:** Paula Igareda, PhD, is a lecturer at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, has been a professional translator since 2005 and has participated in many European projects relating to equal opportunities and the integration of people at risk of exclusion. Her research interests are Audiovisual Translation, Media Accessibility and Comic Translation.