Audio description and the spectrum of materiality: Gaining blindness through narrative negotiation

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Abstract: This article explores how audio description (AD) actively contributes to storytelling by engaging with the material and sensory dimensions of audiovisual content. Building on the broader philosophical tensions between objectivity and subjectivity, it reconceptualizes AD as a co-creative and interpretive process that transcends the neutrality traditionally demanded by the audiovisual industry. Drawing on Hannah Thompson's (2017) concept of "blindness gain" and Marco Caracciolo's (2023) "spectrum of materiality", the study highlights AD's dynamic role in shaping narrative meaning. Thompson repositions blindness as a source of perceptual and creative insight, while Caracciolo (2023) emphasizes the relational and transformative potential of materiality in narrative engagement. By synthesizing these perspectives for the first time, this article frames AD as a relational practice deeply intertwined with the sensory and material properties of audiovisual source texts. Through a comparative analysis of two ADs for the Belgian-Israeli miniseries *Rough Diamonds* (Shamir et al., 2023; Shamir & Verheyden, 2023)—one by Netflix and the other by VRT, Flanders' public broadcaster—the article highlights contrasting approaches to material engagement. The Netflix AD prioritizes clarity and spatial coherence, reflecting fixed and determinate materialities that subtly reinforce ocularcentric paradigms. In contrast, the VRT AD employs abstraction and nuance, aligning with vibrant materialities that enhance the narrative's symbolic and emotional dimensions. These divergent strategies reveal the limitations of the current neutrality standard in AD, which often overlooks its interpretive and generative nature. By situating AD within a framework that integrates blindness gain and materiality, the study reimagines AD as a culturally resonant practice that enriches audiovisual storytelling through multisensory and culturally resonant engagement. Ultimately, this article positions AD as a dynamic medium for narrative negotiation, encouraging further interdisciplinary research into its co-creative material possibilities.
Keywords: audio description; narrative negotiation; spectrum of materiality; blindness gain.

1. Introduction

The tension between subjectivity and objectivity has long shaped academic discourse, particularly in debates surrounding truth, perception, and the nature of material engagement. Objectivity is traditionally framed as the pursuit of universal truths, suggesting an unmediated, neutral view of reality that transcends personal bias or interpretive distortion (Daston & Galison, 2007; Burge, 2010). In contrast, subjectivity is often viewed with suspicion, associated with individual perspectives and the potential for misrepresentation (Merleau-Ponty, 2013; Silverman, 2014). This dichotomy influences both theoretical and applied domains, including fields like audio description (AD), where questions of narrative, perception, and materiality intersect.

Building on these broader philosophical tensions, this article addresses two central research questions: How does AD's interaction with materiality shape narrative meaning? And how do industry neutrality standards impact this interaction? By exploring these questions, the study examines how AD transcends its traditional role as an objective accessibility tool (Bogucki & Deckert, 2020), emerging instead as a co-creative and interpretive practice deeply intertwined with the sensory and relational dimensions of audiovisual source texts.

For the purposes of this article, the term AD refers specifically to screen AD, which is generally defined as a media accessibility tool delivered during pauses in dialogue or other significant audio elements (Taylor & Perego, 2022; Szarkowska & Jankowska, 2024). While other forms of AD exist, such as those provided in live performances, museums, or other non-screen-based contexts, this study focuses on AD for audiovisual media, where describers work within the constraints of pre-recorded audiovisual content. Screen AD, originally developed for blind and partially sighted audiences (Ellis et al., 2018), is now also increasingly relied upon by sighted audiences, such as neurodiverse learners and multitaskers, to enhance their experience of what is happening onscreen (Lewis, 2021; Prime Video, 2024). Widely regarded as "[...] an audio substitute for the visual components" (Bardini, 2020, p. 275) of audiovisual content, screen AD aims to replicate visual information faithfully and impartially, enabling audiences to form their interpretations independently (Snyder, 2013).

Over time, this neutrality requirement has come to dominate the audiovisual industry. It has been reinforced by influential clients, such as national public broadcasters and major streaming platforms (Greening et al., 2010; López, 2023), community-driven professional standards (Fryer, 2016; Perego, 2018), and academic research (Mazur & Chmiel, 2012; Remael et al., 2015). Often referred to as "traditional" or "conventional" AD, this approach is characterized by five key traits: exclusivity, neutrality, non-auteur production, third-party creation, and post-hoc implementation (Udo & Fels, 2009; Fryer, 2018b).

Yet, the industry's preference for neutrality—and its detachment from the artistic, inherently subjective, and partial production process—has not gone unchallenged. Numerous alternatives have been proposed, such as audio narration (Kruger & Orero, 2010; Ramos Caro, 2016), audio drama (Fryer, 2010), enhanced AD (Lopez et al., 2021), creative AD (Walczak, 2017; Zabrocka, 2018; Chottin & Thompson, 2021), co-creative AD (Reviers & Hanoulle, 2023; Tancredi et al., 2023; Eardley et al., 2024;), integrated AD (Fryer, 2018a; Romero-Fresco, 2019), artistically integrated AD (Cavallo, 2015), auteur AD (Szarkowska, 2013), and others.

While promising, these models remain largely aspirational and have yet to be embraced by today's industry leaders: streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ (Choi et al., 2023; Massidda, 2023). For instance, Netflix's (2023) style guide for AD acknowledges that "[...] some subjectivity is unavoidable", yet it also stipulates that "[...] description should not be opinionated" (Netflix, 2023). Similarly, Amazon Prime's guidelines favor a "show, don't tell" approach, discouraging any "editorializing" by the describer, such as inferring emotions or intentions (Prime Video, 2024).

Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned whether objectivity in AD truly desirable—or even achievable. This topic has become a focal point of research, exemplified by the recent special issue of the *Journal of Audiovisual Translation* (Romero-Muñoz, 2023; Schaeffer-Lacroix et al., 2023). Traditional AD has faced criticism for failing to engage creatively with the material it describes (Chottin & Thompson, 2021), inadequately addressing the audience's experiential needs (Greco & Romero-Fresco, 2023), perpetuating ocularcentric perspectives rooted in sighted describers' interpretations (Eardley et al., 2024), and marginalizing alternative ways of experiencing and understanding audiovisual narratives (Kleege & Wallin, 2015; Thompson, 2018a).

Another significant point of contention involves the training of describers (e.g., Mazur & Chmiel, 2021; Romero-Fresco & Brown, 2023), their interpretive choices regarding which visual elements to prioritize (e.g., Di Giovanni, 2014; Bartolini, 2023) and the ways in which they translate visual aesthetics into verbal language (e.g., Hadley & Rieger, 2021; Reviers & Hanoulle, 2023). While these discussions provide valuable insights, they often neglect a broader and underexplored dimension of AD: its entanglement with the material elements it describes.

This article argues that all AD—including traditional AD—is fundamentally shaped by the material properties and dynamics of what it describes. Elements such as textures, movements, atmospheres, and spatial configurations inevitably inform the structure, tone, and language of the description. This perspective resonates with existing work on the narratological and interpretive dimensions of AD (e.g., Vercauteren, 2012; Walczak, 2017; Starr & Braun, 2024), as well as broader scholarship in narrative theory and media studies that foregrounds the entanglement between medium and meaning (e.g., Massumi, 2002; Butler, 2005; Barad, 2007). Far from being a mere replication of the source text, AD actively engages with these material aspects, rendering them into narrative form and integrating them into the audience's sensory and interpretive experience. Far from being a mere replication of the source text, AD actively engages with these material aspects, rendering them into narrative form and integrating them into the audience's sensory and interpretive experience.

The article further asserts that AD does not simply reflect materiality but also produces material effects. In this respect, it aligns with recent research that treats AD as a generative rather than merely compensatory mode of narration (e.g., Thompson & Warne, 2018; Chottin & Thompson, 2021), as well as with theories that describe media as co-constitutive of perception (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Caracciolo, 2023). By translating the visual into the auditory and verbal realms, AD invites audiences to interact with the original content in ways that extend beyond the non-AD-enhanced experience. Seen from this angle, AD emerges as a transformative, co-creative practice that actively constructs meaning rather than merely transmitting it.

Building on these claims, this article examines how AD's engagement with materiality redefines its potential as an aesthetic and sensory medium, challenging its traditional functional framing (Braun, 2011; Fryer & Freeman, 2013; Mazur, 2024). Rather than dismissing the impartiality often associated with traditional AD or celebrating the artistry of alternative approaches, this article seeks to transcend this divide. It argues that all forms of AD are inherently shaped by the materiality of the original audiovisual content, operating along a spectrum that resists binary classification.

To develop these arguments, the article introduces two complementary frameworks: Hannah Thompson's (2017) "blindness gain" and Marco Caracciolo's (2023) "spectrum of materiality". Both frameworks resist dichotomous thinking and instead emphasize relationality, multiplicity, and the transformative potential of sensory and material experiences. Blindness gain reconceives blindness not as a deficit but as a source of perceptual and creative insight, challenging the ocularcentric privileging of vision as the dominant mode of knowing. Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality, in parallel, highlights the dynamic and relational nature of material engagement, showing how material objects and their narrative weight resist reduction to fixed categories such as passive/inert or vibrant/agential. Together, these frameworks challenge entrenched binaries—blindness versus sight, subjective versus objective, and human versus non-human—and foreground the relational, sensory, and interpretive dimensions that enrich the audience's engagement with the narrative at hand.

To ground this theoretical framework, the article analyzes two audio-described versions of the same fragment of the Belgian-Israeli miniseries *Rough Diamonds* (Shamir et al., 2023; Shamir & Verheyden, 2023)—one provided by Netflix and the other by VRT, the public broadcaster of the Flemish Community in Belgium. These case studies illustrate how blindness gain and the spectrum of materiality provide a transformative lens for understanding AD. Far from being merely a functional add-on for accessibility, AD redefines audience engagement with the content on-screen—even when ostensibly adhering to utilitarian objectives.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Blindness gain

The present article's transformative perspective on AD is grounded in critical theories of materiality and subjectivity, which emphasize the interconnectedness of the observer and the observed, challenging the presumed neutrality of traditional notions of objectivity. These theories argue that knowledge is not passively apprehended but actively constructed through dynamic interactions between perceivers, environments, and material conditions.

Feminist scholars Donna Haraway (1988) famously critiques the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity through her concept of "situated knowledges". Haraway (1988) rejects the notion of objectivity as a "god trick"—a view from nowhere, detached from historical and cultural contexts. Instead, she advocates for recognizing the positionality of the observer, arguing that knowledge is always partial and shaped by specific social, cultural, and historical conditions. This reframing positions subjectivity as a strength rather than a liability, embracing the complexity and situated nature of knowledge-making.

Similarly, Brian Massumi (2002) and Judith Butler (2005) offer perspectives that disrupt Cartesian and anthropocentric models of perception. Massumi (2002) foregrounds sensation as a bridge between self and world, highlighting how bodies dynamically engage with networks of affective and material interactions. Butler (2005) reframes subjectivity as relational, emerging through external forces, intellectual activity, and sensory experiences. These perspectives dissolve the notion of a neutral observer, emphasizing instead the interdependence of self, others, and the environment in constructing meaning. Scholars such as Karen Barad (2007) and Sara Ahmed (2006) build on the same ideas, interrogating the processes of knowledge production and emphasizing relational entanglements between perceivers and the material world. Together, these perspectives challenge assumptions of an impartial, external reality, advocating instead for a reflexive approach that values relational engagements between humans, nonhuman, and their environments.

Hannah Thompson's (2017) framework of "blindness gain" resonates with this broader critical tradition by reimagining sensory hierarchies, albeit with a distinct focus on blindness. Drawing inspiration from Bauman and Murray's (2014) concept of "deaf gain" and Georgina Kleege's (2010) reflections on "gaining blindness", Thompson (2017) proposes that blindness offers unique modes of multisensory, imaginative, and inventive engagement with the world. Blindness gain challenges deficit-based narratives that portray blindness solely as a loss requiring mitigation, instead reframing non-visual living as a rich, creative practice involving adaptability and the cultivation of diverse sensory modalities (Thompson & Warne, 2018).

Her framework critiques ocularcentrism, the cultural privileging of vision as the dominant mode of knowing (Jay, 1993). Rather than merely compensating for the absence of sight, blindness gain positions multisensory engagement as generative, creating new ways of perceiving, interpreting, and navigating the world. For blind individuals, this perspective highlights the artistry inherent in living through sound, touch, and spatial relationships. For sighted audiences, blindness gain broadens the appreciation of non-visual modalities, disrupting traditional sensory hierarchies and fostering an expanded understanding of perception.

Thompson's work invites a reconsideration of practices like AD (e.g., Chottin & Thompson, 2021; Eardley et al., 2024), which has historically been framed as a neutral tool to "fill in the gaps" left by visual absence (Schaeffer-Lacroix et al., 2023). Conventional AD typically prioritizes factual descriptions intended to replicate sighted experiences for blind audiences (Kleege, 2016). However, blindness gain suggests an alternative approach, framing AD as a practice that fosters aesthetic, emotional, and interpretive engagement (Thompson, 2018a, 2018b). By embracing the principles of blindness gain, AD shifts from simply replicating sighted perspectives to enriching the sensory and narrative experiences of both blind and sighted audiences (Perego, 2016; Adams, 2024).

In this light, blindness gain aligns with and extends the broader tradition of subjectivity and materiality in critical theory. By highlighting the potential of multisensory engagement and critiquing entrenched visual dominance, it provides a compelling framework for rethinking perception and knowledge production. This perspective not only moves beyond deficit-based assumptions but also opens up new possibilities for AD, emphasizing its capacity for innovative, inclusive, and dynamic engagement.

2.2 The spectrum of materiality

Marco Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality offers a complementary framework to blindness gain, providing a nuanced methodological lens for exploring material engagement. Rooted in traditions such as Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory and Bill Brown's (2001, 2019) thing theory, Caracciolo (2023) builds on their insights while addressing their limitations, crafting an approach uniquely suited to understanding the relational and resistant dimensions of materiality.

Latour (2005) emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman actors, rejecting anthropocentric hierarchies and highlighting the agency distributed across networks of entities. Similarly, Brown (2001) foregrounds moments when objects resist their functional roles and become 'things,' confronting humans with their materiality and breaking free from instrumental utility. These moments challenge traditional subject-object binaries, inviting deeper reflection on the roles objects play in shaping perception and narrative.

While Caracciolo (2023) draws inspiration from both authors, he critiques their binary tendencies. Actor-Network Theory, while rejecting human dominance, often treats all entities within the network as equally agential, potentially flattening the complexity of material interactions. Thing theory, on the other hand, oscillates between two poles: objects as inert and functional versus things as vibrant, autonomous agents. Caracciolo (2023) moves beyond these binaries by conceptualizing materiality as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. His framework introduces intersecting axes that capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of material engagement:

- **Horizontal Axis or Passive vs. Vibrant Materiality**: This axis reflects a continuum where material entities range from lifeless and functional to dynamic and relational, resisting strict categorization.
- **Vertical Axis or Relational vs. Inaccessible Materiality**: This axis emphasizes how material entities both invite and resist human interpretation, highlighting their dual roles as relational and elusive.
- **Diagonal Axes or Physical vs. Abstract and Certain vs. Uncertain Materiality**: These axes add complexity, exploring how materiality oscillates between tangible sensory qualities and abstract symbolism, as well as between clarity and ambiguity.

Figure 1: The spectrum of materiality
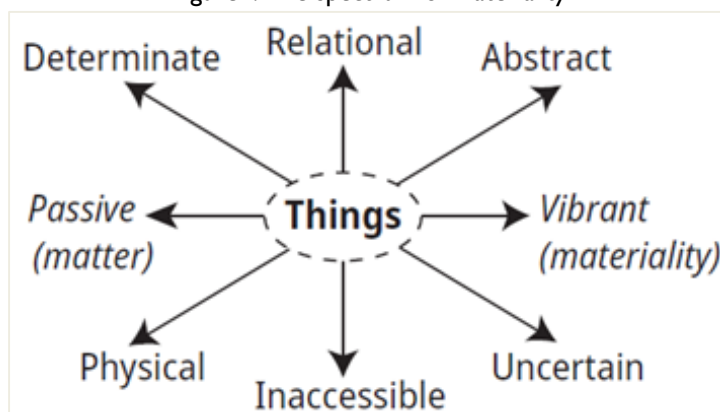
Source: Caracciolo (2023, p. 9)

Central to Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum is the concept of narrative negotiation—the idea that narratives actively mediate the tensions inherent in materiality without necessarily resolving them. Drawing on narrative theory (Greenblatt, 1988; Herman & Vervaeck, 2009; Korthals Altes, 2014; Herman & Vervaeck, 2017), Caracciolo (2023) emphasizes that narratives do not merely represent materiality but interpret and reimagine it. As a literary scholar, Caracciolo (2023) applies this framework primarily to the study of literature, examining how texts navigate the relational and resistant qualities of materiality. His approach highlights how literary narratives engage with material elements—foregrounding their vibrancy, relationality, and elusiveness—while acknowledging the limits of human interpretation.

In this article, Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality is extended to the domain of AD to reframe scholarly discussions about the practice. Rather than aligning with perspectives that emphasize either neutral/objective or creative/subjective approaches, AD is positioned on a spectrum of narrative negotiation shaped by the axes of material entanglement proposed by Caracciolo (2023). This discursive stance shifts the focus from the descriptive qualities of AD to the ways material elements—such as textures, movements, and atmospheres—mentioned in the AD actively shape and resist narrative representation. By foregrounding this interplay, the article highlights how AD operates as a co-creative practice embedded in the relational and resistant dimensions of materiality.

2.3 AD as narrative negotiation

This article argues that AD's engagement with materiality is integral to its narrative potential, a perspective illuminated through the combined frameworks of blindness gain and Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality. Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical lens through which three key concepts—thingness, material entanglement, and narrative negotiation—are examined, demonstrating how AD actively mediates sensory, relational, and material dimensions to enrich storytelling for diverse audiences.

Thingness, as articulated in Bill Brown's (2001) thing theory, emphasizes the qualities of objects that transcend their functional roles. The article argues that AD foregrounds 'thingness' by highlighting the sensory and symbolic dimensions of material elements, transforming them from passive background details into active participants in the narrative. Through blindness gain, thingness is revealed as an opportunity to challenge visual-centric storytelling, encouraging a co-creative relationship between describers, audiences, and the objects themselves, as they collaboratively explore the relational and emotional resonance of material elements.

Drawing on Karen Barad's (2007) concept of "intra-action", this article uses material entanglement to describe the dynamic, reciprocal relationships between objects, humans, and their environments. In AD, material elements acquire meaning through their interconnectedness with emotions, cultural symbols, and narrative structures. By integrating blindness gain and the spectrum of materiality, the article highlights how AD interprets and conveys these relationships, enriching audience understanding of the broader context in which materiality operates.

The article further defines narrative negotiation as the process by which AD mediates competing interpretations of materiality and relationality. In this co-creative dynamic, describers

translate visual stimuli into layered sensory and relational experiences, while audiences actively interpret these narratives, navigating tensions between neutrality and subjectivity in real time. Blindness gain reframes subjectivity as a generative force, while Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum reveals how material elements resist or invite interpretation, creating opportunities for describers and audiences to collaboratively engage with the complexity of AD's narrative construction.

Finally, the article argues that even traditional AD, which adheres to industry guidelines emphasizing neutrality, operates beyond simplistic notions of im/partiality. To illustrate these insights, the article examines two audio described versions of *Rough Diamonds*, focusing specifically on the opening of the first episode—an approximately six-minute, largely dialogue-free segment. This fragment provides a compelling site for analyzing how AD engages with materiality to enrich narrative meaning through the joint efforts of describers, audiences, and the material world itself.

3. Case study: *Rough Diamonds*

3.1 Contextual framing

Rough Diamonds is a Belgian-Israeli Netflix drama co-produced with VRT that delves into the Orthodox Jewish community in Antwerp and the high-stakes diamond trade that underpins their lives. Combining family drama with crime thriller elements, the series explores themes of loyalty, tradition, and survival. At its heart is the Wolfson family, a powerful dynasty grappling with internal fractures and external threats. The sudden death of Yanki Wolfson, a young Hasidic man with a gambling addiction, triggers a series of events that bring his estranged brother, Noah Wolfson, back to Antwerp. Noah, who left his Orthodox roots years ago, must navigate family tensions, the complexities of the diamond trade, and a criminal underworld threatening the family's legacy.

The series has been praised for its authentic depiction of Hasidic rituals and culture, supported by extensive research and consultation with members of the Antwerp Jewish community (VRT, 2023). It captures intricate Orthodox practices, such as handwashing rituals, kosher dietary laws, and Shabbat observances, while also portraying the challenges of balancing faith, family, and business. However, it has faced criticism for perpetuating certain stereotypes about Orthodox Jews, particularly in its portrayal of criminality and familial conflict (Josephs, 2023). Despite these critiques, *Rough Diamonds* has been lauded for its compelling storytelling and multilingual performances, seamlessly blending Flemish Dutch, English, and Yiddish to reflect the unique world of Antwerp's diamond district (Hoet, 2023).

3.2 Focus of the analysis

The choice of *Rough Diamonds* as a case study is particularly apt for exploring the material entanglement of AD, even though the analyzed fragment's linguistic diversity—featuring AD in Flemish Dutch alongside elements of Yiddish and Hebrew in the original audio—presents challenges for an English-language article. Admittedly, the fact that neither the fragment nor the AD is in English adds an additional layer of complexity. To address this, direct English translations of the AD are

provided throughout the analysis to ensure clarity. Despite these challenges, the fragment's unique qualities make it especially valuable for this study.

First, the rarity of having two ADs commissioned by major clients (Netflix and VRT)—both adhering to neutrality standards (Netflix, 2023; VAF, 2025)—provides a unique lens to explore how different narrative approaches in AD render the same material within a framework ostensibly designed to ensure objectivity. Second, the original content contains minimal dialogue, primarily small talk in Flemish Dutch, shifting the interpretive burden to the AD, which becomes a critical mediator of meaning and emotional depth. Finally, the series showcases visually rich storytelling, portraying the daily lives of a community known for its secrecy and infrequent onscreen representation. This rarity potentially invites additional explanation in the AD to contextualize the cultural and social nuances that might otherwise remain unfamiliar to audiences.

This intricate combination of neutrality-driven constraints, sparse dialogue, and evocative visual content makes *Rough Diamonds* an invaluable case study for investigating how even traditional AD, which is expected to aspire to neutrality, ultimately evokes distinct forms of thingness in the on-screen events and actions, thereby summoning different meanings and producing dissimilar knowledge. By comparing the narrative strategies of the Netflix and VRT ADs, this analysis aims to reveal how AD functions as a dynamic and co-creative process. Describers interpret visual elements, audiences actively engage with these interpretations, and material elements shape the storytelling experience. This dynamic ensures that each AD generates distinct meanings and emotional resonances, challenging the viability of neutrality as a standard for AD practice.

The analysis focuses on the introductory sequence of the first episode, leading up to the opening credits. This segment follows Yanki Wolfson as he begins his day, performing mundane yet symbolically charged actions such as waking up, dressing, and walking to his office. It culminates in a pivotal moment when Yanki locks himself in an office and takes his own life. By organizing the analysis around Yanki's activities, the study adopts a classical narratological approach, emphasizing the sequencing of actions and events as central to narrative construction (Genette, 1980; Herman, 2002). This methodology highlights how both ADs structure the story, anticipate audience interpretation, and propel the plot.

To deepen the analysis, the study integrates Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality with Thompson's (2017) concept of blindness gain. These hermeneutic tools examine the Netflix and VRT ADs along intersecting axes: Passive vs. Vibrant, Relational vs. Inaccessible, and the diagonal dimensions of Physical/Abstract and Certain/Uncertain. By situating the ADs on the spectrum of materiality, the study sets out to uncover how they each negotiate material elements, relational cues, and narrative structures.

3.3 Comparative analysis

3.3.1 Yanki wakes up

Table 1: Comparison 3.3.1

	VRT's AD		NETFLIX's AD
00:00:01	In a dimly lit bedroom, a Jewish man in his thirties wearing a yarmulke lies in a narrow bed. He stares somberly at the ceiling, grips his duvet, and turns on his side.	00:00:07	A man with a mustache and beard lies in bed. He wears a white shirt and a white yarmulke on his head. He turns onto his side.
00:00:09	"I thank You, living and eternal King, for restoring my soul to me with mercy. Great is Your faithfulness" [spoken subtitle in Flemish Dutch, recorded over the original Hebrew].	00:00:19	"I thank You, living eternal King, for compassionately returning my soul to me" [spoken subtitle in Flemish Dutch, recorded over the original Hebrew].
00:00:17	The man, Yanki, turns back onto his back, grimaces briefly, and then sits up with difficulty.	00:00:30	He turns back onto his back.
00:00:27	He picks up a silver pitcher with water next to the bed and carefully pours some water over both his hands.	00:00:33	Next to the bed is a bucket with water and a pitcher inside. Yanki leans over the side of the bed and pours water over his hands.
00:00:38	Yanki takes a small towel from the headboard. He dries his hands, swings his legs out of bed, and sits pensively on the edge.	00:00:47	He shakes the water from his hands and dries them with a towel. Then he sits on the edge of the bed.
00:00:46	In a second bed behind him, his wife Gila tosses and turns in her sleep. Without opening her eyes, she turns onto her side and slides an arm under her pillow.	00:00:56	Behind him is another bed, where a woman lies. She turns over, wearing a headscarf.
00:00:58	Yanki glances briefly behind him at Gila and places the towel beside him. After a moment of hesitation, he gets up, looking dejected.	00:01:03	The man briefly turns his head to look at her. Then he turns forward again, staring at his hands.
00:01:10	He quietly leaves the bedroom, and Gila continues sleeping undisturbed.	00:01:17	He takes a deep breath and gets up. The woman behind him keeps sleeping.

Source: Author (2025)

The VRT AD constructs a narrative that emphasizes vibrant materiality, transforming objects and actions into dynamic components of the scene. Yanki's grimace and pensive sitting convey his inner turmoil, while objects such as the "silver pitcher" and "small towel" transcend their functional roles to reflect his psychological state. These details subtly evoke *negel vasser*, the Jewish ritual of handwashing upon waking, which symbolizes renewal and the removal of spiritual impurity (My Jewish Learning, 2025a). By highlighting Yanki's deliberate interaction with these objects, the AD indirectly alludes to the ritual's significance, inviting the audience to consider its deeper cultural and religious context without explicitly naming or explaining it.

The VRT AD further integrates religious materiality through its depiction of Yanki wearing a "white yarmulke". By describing him as a "Jewish man in his thirties" and pairing this detail with his actions, the AD frames the yarmulke as more than a physical detail, suggesting its role as a marker of religious observance. The emphasis on Yanki's handwashing ritual and attire offers interpretive cues that connect his actions to his faith. The AD avoids overt commentary, leaving interpretive space for the audience to link Yanki's behaviors to broader cultural and spiritual practices.

In contrast, the Netflix AD approaches materiality with a focus on clarity and physicality, emphasizing objects and actions as static elements within the scene. Items like the "bucket with water and a pitcher inside" are presented in functional terms, concentrating on their physical presence rather than their cultural or emotional resonance. Similarly, Yanki's actions, such as pouring water over his hands, are framed as routine gestures. The AD mentions Yanki's white shirt and yarmulke as part of his physical appearance, treating these details as neutral descriptors without exploring their symbolic or cultural implications. This approach prioritizes straightforward description and avoids embedding objects within broader narrative or relational frameworks.

Relational dynamics are another area where the VRT and Netflix ADs diverge. The VRT AD emphasizes subtle connections between characters and their environment. For instance, Gila's restless movements and Yanki's glance at her suggest relational tension, which subtly points at *niddah*, the Jewish laws of marital purity requiring physical separation between spouses during certain periods (Vizel, 2018). While the AD does not explicitly reference this practice, its framing of Gila in "a second bed" and her movements relative to Yanki subtly reflect the physical and emotional distance these laws might impose. By situating Gila's actions within this relational context, the AD adds complexity to their relationship and its cultural framework.

The Netflix AD, on the other hand, adopts a more neutral stance, describing Gila as "a woman" lying in "another bed" and wearing "a headscarf". This description acknowledges the physical separation between the couple without engaging with potential religious implications. The mention of the headscarf, however, leaves interpretive space for the audience to consider its cultural or religious significance, even though the AD does not elaborate on it. This approach focuses on providing clear, accessible descriptions while leaving cultural and relational interpretations open to the audience.

The VRT AD also bridges physical and abstract materiality, blending tangible elements with symbolic resonance. For example, Yanki's grimacing and pensive sitting during his recitation of the morning prayer *Modeh Ani* imbue the scene with spiritual and emotional weight. This prayer, a blessing of gratitude for the return of the soul after sleep, is a moment of theological depth within Jewish tradition (Keil, 2025). The pairing of the spoken subtitle with Yanki's introspective demeanor conveys the prayer's significance without explicitly identifying it, allowing the audience to sense its resonance through his actions.

Conversely, the Netflix AD remains grounded in physical materiality here as well. The prayer is presented as a straightforward expression of gratitude, with no additional details suggesting its cultural or theological context. Yanki's act of drying his hands is similarly portrayed as a clear, physical action, focusing on procedural clarity and leaving interpretive depth to the audience.

3.3.2. Yanki gets dressed

The Netflix AD takes a predominantly descriptive approach to materiality, emphasizing objects and actions as static elements within the scene. Yanki's routine actions, such as buttoning his vest and retrieving his coat, are described in functional terms, highlighting their role in spatial and narrative progression without delving into their emotional or symbolic resonance. For instance, the mirror and painting in the hallway are mentioned solely to establish spatial orientation, while the

bicycles parked opposite the door are treated as inert details of the exterior environment. This approach prioritizes clarity and accessibility, presenting objects as discrete components that contribute to the scene's physical layout rather than engaging with Yanki's state of mind or relational dynamics.

Table 2: Comparison 3.3.2

VRT's AD		NETFLIX's AD	
00:01:17	In the hallway, he carefully buttons up a black vest and silently pushes open the door to a children's room.	00:01:25	Yanki buttons his vest as he walks through a hallway. He now wears a black yarmulke.
00:01:28	He pauses in the doorway, letting his gaze drift over two sleeping boys.	00:01:31	Then he opens a door. In the room are two beds with children sleeping in them. The curtains are open. It is daytime.
00:01:36	With a heavy heart, he turns and walks past several windows and a large painting, continuing down the narrow hallway.	00:01:42	Yanki briefly looks at his children, then leaves the room. He continues down the hallway. A mirror and a painting hang on the wall.
00:01:49	In the hall, he takes a long black coat from the coat rack and puts it on. He also puts on a black hat and picks up a heavy silver watch from a sideboard.	00:01:55	At the end of the hallway, he takes a black coat from a coat rack and puts it on.
00:01:59	He fastens the watch around his wrist, hesitates, and finally puts it back.	00:02:04	He puts on a black hat and takes a watch from a cabinet. He looks at it and puts it back.
00:02:05	Then he grabs a badge from the sideboard and steps out of his apartment.	00:02:14	He takes the badge lying on the cabinet before heading outside.
00:02:11	He strides through the lobby of the apartment building, opens the glass front door, and steps outside.	00:02:19	Yanki walks through the lobby of an apartment building. Opposite the door, bicycles are parked.

Source: Author (2025)

Similarly, moments of interaction with objects, such as Yanki's handling of the watch, are framed in a straightforward manner. The AD states, "He looks at it and puts it back," focusing on the physical action without introducing interpretive layers or emotional undertones. The watch remains a functional object, with no suggestion of internal hesitation or conflict. Even when Yanki's badge could be understood as a symbol of his transition from private to public life, it is described simply as part of his routine, emphasizing its external function rather than its relational or narrative significance.

The depiction of characters follows a similar pattern. For example, in the children's room, the AD describes the beds generically and notes, "Yanki briefly looks at his children," framing this moment in terms of factual observation. The children's presence is presented as part of the physical environment, leaving any emotional or relational connections open to audience interpretation. Likewise, while Yanki's black yarmulke and black hat are mentioned as part of his attire, the AD focuses on their physical characteristics without exploring their cultural or symbolic resonance. This neutral framing ensures descriptive clarity but avoids embedding objects and characters within broader emotional or cultural networks.

In contrast, the VRT AD constructs a vibrant materiality, imbuing objects and actions with emotional and relational significance. For example, Yanki's interaction with the watch is described with hesitation: "He fastens the watch around his wrist, hesitates, and finally puts it back". This description transforms the watch from a functional item into a reflection of Yanki's internal conflict, encouraging the audience to interpret the action as indicative of his broader struggles. The badge, too, is framed relationally. By juxtaposing its retrieval with Yanki's hesitation over the watch, the AD suggests a transition from introspection to external responsibility, positioning the badge as a bridge between Yanki's private turmoil and his public role.

The relational depth of the VRT AD extends to other moments in the scene. When Yanki pauses in the doorway of the children's room, "letting his gaze drift over two sleeping boys," the action is imbued with emotional weight. The descriptor "with a heavy heart" highlights the familial and emotional stakes of this moment, encouraging the audience to see the children's presence as a significant connection in Yanki's narrative. Even mundane actions, such as "carefully buttoning up a black vest" or "silently pushing open the door to a children's room," are framed to reflect Yanki's inner emotional landscape, adding layers of narrative complexity.

The VRT AD also blends physical and abstract materiality, creating a narrative where tangible objects and spaces carry symbolic resonance. For instance, while the physical act of Yanki gazing at his children anchors the scene in sensory detail, the emotional undertone transforms the space into a site of relational significance. This interplay between the tangible and the abstract creates a layered narrative experience, contrasting with the Netflix AD's emphasis on factual description and spatial clarity.

3.3.3. Yanki walks to work

Table 3: Comparison 3.3.3

	VRT's AD		NETFLIX's AD
00:02:19	On the street, he glances at some passing schoolchildren, crosses a zebra crossing in Antwerp's train station area, and continues past various jewelry stores with heavy iron shutters.	00:02:27	Yanki walks on a narrow sidewalk, passing children with school bags. At Antwerp Central Station, he crosses the street at a zebra crossing and walks along *Keyserlei*.
00:02:35	On a street blocked by a barrier, he steps onto the sidewalk and walks past several surveillance cameras into the diamond district.	00:02:40	He arrives at a street with a barrier and walks past it.
00:02:44	Under the gray morning sky, Yanki tensely continues past a giant poster that reads "In Antwerp, we speak diamond".	00:02:46	In the distance, there are two patrolling soldiers. Surveillance cameras monitor the street. Yanki walks purposefully onward. He passes a sign reading "In Antwerp, we speak diamond".

Source: Author (2025)

The Netflix AD emphasizes physical and certain materiality, presenting objects, settings, and actions in straightforward, functional terms. For example, the explicit mention of *Keyserlei* as a recognizable Antwerp location adds specificity to the spatial description, potentially engaging audience members familiar with the area while leaving interpretation to those without this contextual knowledge. Other elements, such as the zebra crossing, barrier, and surveillance cameras,

are described factually, highlighting their roles in Yanki's navigation through the diamond district without introducing broader cultural or symbolic meanings. The poster, "In Antwerp, we speak diamond," is similarly presented as a factual detail: it is acknowledged, but not as being necessarily connected to Yanki's journey or the district's cultural identity. This approach prioritizes procedural clarity, ensuring accessibility while avoiding abstraction or relational framing.

In contrast, the VRT AD constructs a more dynamic narrative by oscillating between physical and abstract materiality, embedding objects and settings within broader cultural, economic, and emotional contexts. For instance, the poster "In Antwerp, we speak diamond" is framed not merely as a visual element but as a symbol of the diamond district's global reputation and exclusivity. The VRT AD describes it as a prominent part of Yanki's surroundings, implicitly linking it to the economic pressures and societal expectations tied to the diamond trade. Similarly, the jewelry stores with their heavy iron shutters are depicted with language that evokes security, secrecy, and restriction, reinforcing the guarded nature of the district and hinting at its high-stakes environment. The surveillance cameras, while noted as part of the physical setup, are also contextualized within the pervasive atmosphere of monitoring and control, subtly suggesting the power dynamics that define Yanki's world. These narrative choices link the physical environment to Yanki's emotional state and situate him within a web of cultural, economic, and relational tensions.

Relationality is further emphasized in the VRT AD's description of the schoolchildren. They are not merely background elements but are framed in connection to Yanki's gaze, inviting the audience to interpret this interaction as reflective of his inner state—perhaps a longing for innocence or normalcy amid the tension of his surroundings. In contrast, the Netflix AD notes the children's presence incidentally, describing them as part of the scene without relational or symbolic framing. Similarly, the heavy iron shutters and surveillance cameras in the VRT AD emphasize the exclusivity and guarded nature of the district, positioning Yanki as simultaneously within and distanced from this world. By integrating these elements relationally, the VRT AD deepens the material engagement, fostering a layered narrative experience.

The interplay between physical and abstract materiality is particularly evident in the ADs' treatment of Yanki's movements and the surrounding environment. In the Netflix AD, these are described with precision, anchoring the narrative in physical certainty. For example, Yanki is described as walking along the narrow sidewalk and past the barrier, emphasizing the procedural clarity of his movements. While this ensures accessibility, it leaves interpretive layers to the audience's imagination. Conversely, the VRT AD imbues these same movements with abstraction. The description of the gray morning sky as mirroring Yanki's tense mood links the physical environment to his emotional state. Similarly, the framing of the poster and the shutters integrates these objects into broader themes of exclusivity and cultural identity, situating Yanki within a layered narrative framework where material elements actively shape the emotional and cultural resonance of the story.

3.3.4. Yanki goes to his office

The VRT AD portrays materiality as a dynamic force within the narrative, emphasizing how objects and actions contribute to Yanki's emotional and cultural experiences. The heavy glass door

and security turnstile, for example, are described as imposing and formal, reflecting the exclusivity and tension of the setting. These elements are connected to Yanki's unease and the high-stakes nature of his environment. The grandeur of the marble hall adds to this sense of weight and formality, grounding the audience in the emotional and spatial context of the sequence.

Table 4: Comparison 3.3.4

	VRT's AD		NETFLIX's AD
00:02:54	He pushes open the heavy glass door of a stately building and scans his badge at a security turnstile.	00:03:00	He enters a building. The lobby is secured with turnstiles. Yanki scans his badge and steps through. He then places the badge back in the chest pocket of his coat.
00:03:03	He steps into the building's imposing marble hall, passing two armed security guards, nods as he removes his black hat, and anxiously watches them as he steps into an elevator.	00:03:19	Two guards pass him by. He removes his hat and looks back at them before continuing.
00:03:18	The elevator doors reopen. He takes a deep breath and steps out.	00:03:25	Yanki enters an elevator. When it stops, he takes a deep breath and walks further into the building.
00:03:23	With his head slightly bowed, he walks down a hallway. The long black side curls under his yarmulke sway gently with each step. Clutching his hat tightly in one hand, he stops and rings a doorbell, nervously waiting.	00:03:32	The walls of the hallway are white, interrupted by black doorways. Yanki briefly closes his eyes, breathing deeply as he walks. He tightly grips the edge of his hat. At the end of the hallway, he stops at a door and rings the bell.

Source: Author (2025)

The VRT AD portrays materiality as a dynamic force within the narrative, emphasizing how objects and actions contribute to Yanki's emotional and cultural experiences. The heavy glass door and security turnstile, for example, are described as imposing and formal, reflecting the exclusivity and tension of the setting. These elements are connected to Yanki's unease and the high-stakes nature of his environment. The grandeur of the marble hall adds to this sense of weight and formality, grounding the audience in the emotional and spatial context of the sequence.

Interactions between Yanki and his surroundings in the VRT AD also highlight a layered engagement with materiality. The mention of Yanki removing and tightly clutching his black hat conveys vulnerability and adherence to cultural norms, connecting this action to his internal state. Similarly, the description of his long black side curls swaying gently as he walks introduces sensory and cultural dimensions, linking his physical presence to his identity. These details integrate Yanki's actions with the broader narrative, encouraging interpretive connections between his environment and his personal experience.

By contrast, the Netflix AD focuses on materiality as static and procedural, offering factual descriptions of objects and settings without tying them to relational or emotional dynamics. The turnstiles are identified as security measures, emphasizing their functional role within the spatial layout without exploring their contribution to the narrative atmosphere. The hallway's white walls and black doorways are presented as visual details that delineate the space, and while Yanki's removal of his hat and tight grip are noted, these gestures are not framed as reflections of his internal

conflict or cultural significance. This approach positions the material world as a backdrop to Yanki's actions rather than an active participant in the story.

The VRT AD further emphasizes relational materiality by embedding Yanki's actions within a network of social and cultural dynamics. The armed security guards are described in relation to Yanki's behavior, with his nod and anxious glance underscoring his awareness of their authority and the heightened scrutiny of the environment. This interaction places Yanki within a hierarchy of power and surveillance, amplifying the tension of the scene. Similarly, physical spaces such as the elevator and hallway are connected to Yanki's internal state: his deep breath before stepping out of the elevator reflects his apprehension, and the doorbell becomes a focal point of anticipation, representing the threshold to an uncertain encounter. These descriptions create a dynamic relationship between Yanki and his surroundings, situating him within the broader stakes of the narrative.

In comparison, the Netflix AD frames objects and settings as more detached from Yanki's internal experience. The guards are described as passing figures, without linking their presence to Yanki's behavior or the social dynamics of the scene. The turnstiles are noted for their function as security features but are not contextualized within the exclusivity and formality of the building. Similarly, the hallway and doorbell are described in neutral terms, providing spatial clarity without emphasizing their emotional or narrative significance.

The two ADs also diverge in how they balance physical and abstract materiality. The VRT AD uses sensory details to establish a concrete visual and spatial setting while introducing abstract dimensions to enhance emotional and cultural depth. Yanki's side curls under his yarmulke, for instance, evoke his cultural and religious identity, while his tight grip on his hat suggests vulnerability and apprehension. Actions such as his deep breath or waiting at the doorbell transcend their physicality, inviting the audience to interpret their emotional weight and narrative importance. This interplay between the tangible and symbolic creates a layered experience, encouraging the audience to connect Yanki's physical actions to the broader context of his story.

The Netflix AD, on the other hand, emphasizes physical materiality and descriptive clarity, providing detailed accounts of Yanki's actions and surroundings. The badge, turnstiles, and elevator are described in precise terms, anchoring the narrative in tangible spatial reality. The hallway's white walls and black doorways are similarly depicted as neutral markers of the environment. Abstract dimensions, however, are largely absent. Yanki's gestures, such as gripping his hat tightly or taking a deep breath, are noted without connecting them to his emotional state. The doorbell, while mentioned, is described as part of the physical sequence without acknowledging its role in building narrative tension.

3.3.5. Yanki steals a gun

The Netflix AD prioritizes procedural clarity, presenting objects, actions, and spaces with precision and focusing on their functional roles within the narrative. For instance, the glowing panel reading "Wolfson Diamonds" is described factually as a lit frame within the setting. This description situates the panel as part of the physical environment, but its broader cultural or emotional resonance—such as its potential connection to familial legacy or professional pressures—is not

explored. Similarly, Yanki's forced smile fading as he enters the room is included as a behavioral detail, but the AD does not explicitly tie this to his internal emotional state or the tension underlying his actions. Additionally, objects like Yanki's hat are described in straightforward terms—he places it on a table—without linking this action to his cultural identity or vulnerability.

Table 5: Comparison 3.3.5

	VRT's AD		NETFLIX's AD
00:03:47	DIALOGUE [small talk between Yanki and the guard in Dutch; no AD].	00:03:54	DIALOGUE [small talk between Yanki and the guard in Dutch; no AD].
00:03:58	"God bless you" [spoken subtitle in Dutch, recorded over the original Yiddish]. Yanki walks into a hallway and closes the door behind him. The forced smile he had put on for the security guard fades from his face. He pauses beside a glowing panel that reads "Wolfson Diamonds," enters an office, and places his hat on a desk.	00:04:08	[Yanki addresses the guard in Yiddish] The smile on Yanki's face disappears as he enters the new room. He stops, stands still, and breathes deeply. Then he continues.
00:04:18	Yanki nervously stands close to the open door, pressing his back against the wall and taking a deep breath.	00:04:21	On a lit frame are the words "Wolfson Diamonds". In the next room, Yanki places his hat on a table and stands with his back against a cabinet around the corner of the open doorway. He braces himself.
00:04:34	A guard storms in with a drawn gun. Yanki grabs the weapon.	00:04:38	Yanki stays put. The guard enters.
00:04:40	The two men fall to the ground, and the guard drops the gun. Yanki grabs the weapon and points it at the guard, who looks at him in terror. Yanki quickly leaves the office, runs into another room, shuts the door behind him, and locks it.	00:04:50	They fall. Yanki grabs the guard's gun. He points it at the guard while he scrambles to his feet.
00:05:00	Yanki locks a second door in the room as well. With the gun in his hand, he waits.	00:05:04	Yanki walks away. He locks himself in an office. Yanki locks the other door as well.
00:05:07	"Hear, O Israel. Adonai is our God, Adonai is one. Adonai is our God, Adonai is one" [spoken subtitle].	00:05:09	[prayer in Hebrew; no spoken subtitle].
00:05:20	Three guards break down the door. Yanki places the gun to his temple and... [gunshot].	00:05:19	[unintelligible background noise and shouting, followed by a gunshot].
00:05:26	The screen goes black.	00:05:34	Yanki has shot himself.

Source: Author (2025)

The Netflix AD prioritizes procedural clarity, presenting objects, actions, and spaces with precision and focusing on their functional roles within the narrative. For instance, the glowing panel reading "Wolfson Diamonds" is described factually as a lit frame within the setting. This description situates the panel as part of the physical environment, but its broader cultural or emotional resonance—such as its potential connection to familial legacy or professional pressures—is not explored. Similarly, Yanki's forced smile fading as he enters the room is included as a behavioral detail, but the AD does not explicitly tie this to his internal emotional state or the tension underlying his actions. Additionally, objects like Yanki's hat are described in straightforward terms—he places it on a table—without linking this action to his cultural identity or vulnerability.

In contrast, the VRT AD integrates materiality and relational dynamics into a more layered narrative. The glowing panel reading "Wolfson Diamonds" is described in a way that ties it to the familial and professional pressures shaping Yanki's actions. By situating the panel prominently in the scene and describing Yanki pausing beside it before moving forward, the AD implicitly connects it to the weight of legacy and the high-stakes environment of Antwerp's diamond district. The panel becomes more than a visual element; it symbolizes the economic and cultural pressures that Yanki carries, embedding it within the narrative as a meaningful detail. Yanki's forced smile, described as fading after he closes the door, highlights the dissonance between his outward composure and his inner turmoil, linking his physical actions to his emotional and cultural reality.

The gun is another element treated differently between the two ADs. In the Netflix AD, it is described procedurally: Yanki grabs the guard's weapon, the two men fall, and the gun is used to escalate the conflict. The AD focuses on the sequence of events, ensuring spatial and physical clarity but leaving the emotional stakes implicit. By contrast, the VRT AD emphasizes the relational tension of the moment. It describes the terror on the guard's face and Yanki's desperation, framing the altercation as a charged encounter where fear and power dynamics collide. This relational framing deepens the emotional impact of the struggle, encouraging the audience to consider the symbolical weight of this altercation for both characters.

The treatment of the prayer also reveals significant differences. In the Netflix AD, the original audio of the Hebrew prayer is presented without modification or explanation, leaving it as an auditory detail that is not explicitly connected to its cultural or spiritual resonance. In the VRT AD, however, the *Shema* prayer is explicated through a spoken subtitle in Dutch (My Jewish Learning, 2025b), framing it as a profound moment of spiritual connection that ties Yanki's final act to his religious identity and cultural heritage. This narrative treatment introduces an abstract layer to the narrative, connecting Yanki's physical actions to broader themes of faith, despair, and identity.

Relational materiality also diverges significantly between the two ADs. In the Netflix AD, the guard's role during their conversation and struggle is described in terms of physical action, with no additional relational context. In contrast, the VRT AD adds depth to the interaction. The spoken subtitle 'God bless you'—which the Netflix AD leaves untranslated—highlights a moment of well-intended social exchange that sharply contrasts with the subsequent tension and fear of their struggle. By including this subtitle, the VRT AD underscores the guard's terror and Yanki's sudden shift in demeanor, from pleasant to desperate, framing the altercation within a broader web of relational and emotional dynamics.

The ADs also differ in their balance of physical and abstract materiality. The Netflix AD remains grounded in physical materiality, emphasizing Yanki's actions—placing his hat, locking doors, and bracing himself—with precision. This ensures spatial clarity and accessibility but avoids interpretive engagement. The VRT AD, on the other hand, blends tangible details with symbolic dimensions. The glowing panel, Yanki's deep breath, and the Shema prayer are all described in ways that connect the physical environment to abstract (i.e., emotional and cultural) layers.

4. Discussion

The Netflix and VRT ADs provide contrasting approaches to the practice of audio description, with the Netflix AD aligning with the passive, physical, determinate, and inaccessible axes, while the VRT AD leans toward the vibrant, abstract, relational, and uncertain axes. These differences illustrate distinct narrative negotiations, revealing how AD engages with the original audiovisual content through different forms of material entanglement. While these alignments emerge most clearly through contrast, the analysis suggests that certain tendencies—such as the Netflix AD's emphasis on procedural clarity and object-focused description—reflect broader patterns found in industry-standard AD shaped by neutrality guidelines. In this way, the case study offers a situated yet potentially indicative model for how AD may position itself along Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality.

This is especially evident in the Netflix AD, which emphasizes clarity and procedural precision, describing objects and settings as functional and static elements. Objects are presented with tangible detail, focusing on their immediate physical presence and spatial coherence. This approach ensures accessibility and coherence while situating the narrative in a domain that prioritizes physicality and leaves interpretive depth largely to the audience's imagination. However, despite its seeming adherence to traditional neutrality standards, the Netflix AD is not neutral. By treating the visual components of the source text as discrete, objective data points to be translated faithfully into auditory form, it reinforces the assumption that visuals can be objective—a notion critiqued by the blindness gain framework (Jay, 1993; Kleege, 2016; Thompson, 2018b). This assumption elevates vision as the primary mode of knowledge and meaning-making, reinforcing an ocularcentric paradigm. The blindness gain framework, by contrast, invites recognition that vision is one among many subjective senses, all capable of enriching perception. By reframing sensory modalities from loss to gain, it highlights how non-visual senses can add to, rather than detract from, the immersive AD experience. The Netflix AD, however, privileges sighted modes of perception and interpretation while failing to embrace the generative potential of multisensory engagement or to acknowledge and build upon the subjective choices inherent in the act of description.

In contrast, the VRT AD proactively integrates materiality into a dynamic and relational narrative framework, bringing objects and actions to life as active participants in the story, tying them to broader social, cultural, and emotional contexts. By layering descriptions with abstraction and nuance, the VRT AD subtly guides the audience toward interpreting material elements in connection with themes of faith, identity, and power. This approach demonstrates a more explicit challenge to ocularcentric assumptions by reframing the visual components of the narrative as multisensory and relationally significant, thus enriching the narrative's emotional and symbolic dimensions.

These differences reflect how the Netflix AD prioritizes descriptive clarity in a way that obscures the inherently interpretive nature of AD. This approach reinforces an ocularcentric bias in its assumption that neutrality is achieved through fidelity to the visuals, conflating sight with objectivity. Conversely, the VRT AD demonstrates a narrative approach that organically aligns with Thompson's (2017) concept of blindness gain. By situating material elements within broader cultural and emotional contexts, the VRT AD facilitates a richer, multisensory narrative experience. Through

the lens of blindness gain, this approach highlights how AD can disrupt sighted paradigms by reframing non-visual perception as transformative rather than compensatory. Together, these descriptions highlight a spectrum of possibilities within AD, with the Netflix AD adhering to a more conventional framework and the VRT AD showcasing the potential for AD to function as a co-creative and interpretive medium, fostering deeper sensory and relational engagement with the audiovisual narrative.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that screen AD is not merely a mechanism for translating the visual into the auditory but a deeply dynamic element of audiovisual storytelling. Far from being a supplementary accessibility tool, AD emerges as a profoundly interpretive and creative practice that mediates the relational, affective, and material dimensions of the on-screen narrative. It reshapes how stories are constructed, experienced, and understood by challenging traditional hierarchies of perception and engaging actively with the textures, movements, atmospheres, and spatial configurations of the source material. These material entanglements not only shape the language and structure of the description but also anticipate and invite the audience's engagement, offering new ways to perceive and interact with the source text.

By bringing Thompson's (2017) concept of blindness gain into dialogue with Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality, this article introduces a framework for understanding AD as a process of narrative negotiation. Blindness gain critiques sensory hierarchies and underscores the generative possibilities of non-visual modalities, challenging the dominance of vision as the primary mode of knowing. Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality, in turn, examines how AD navigates axes such as vibrancy, relationality, abstraction, and certainty. Together, these hermeneutic tools reveal AD as an inherently interpretive and co-creative process that transcends simplistic notions of subjectivity or objectivity, redefining the ways narratives are rendered and received.

The case studies analyzed here underscore how blindness gain aligns with Caracciolo's (2023) vibrant, relational, and abstract materialities, revealing AD's potential to enrich storytelling by disrupting ocularcentric assumptions. The VRT AD exemplifies this alignment by foregrounding symbolic and relational materiality, situating objects and actions within broader cultural and emotional contexts that invite multisensory engagement. In contrast, the Netflix AD emphasizes procedural clarity and spatial orientation, aligning more closely with Caracciolo's (2023) passive and determinate materialities. This approach reflects a conventional, ocularcentric perspective that treats visual components as isolated, supposedly objective data points. This divergence illustrates how every attempt at providing an AD mediates the narrative and sensory dimensions of audiovisual content in a unique way, offering distinct forms of audience engagement.

This study underscores the need to move beyond neutrality as an industry standard in AD. Historically, neutrality in AD has been framed as a means of ensuring accessibility, striving to replicate visual experiences without imposing interpretive biases. However, this framework reflects an ocularcentric assumption that sighted experiences are inherently objective and replicable, overlooking the inherently interpretive nature of all descriptive acts. Based on the comparative analysis of the Netflix and VRT ADs for *Rough Diamonds*, this study critiques neutrality not merely

as inadequate but as counterproductive, perpetuating the very sensory hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

Through the case studies, this article demonstrates how AD that adheres to traditional neutrality standards, like the Netflix AD, prioritizes procedural clarity at the expense of engaging with relational and multisensory dimensions. In contrast, the VRT AD illustrates the potential of an interpretive approach to enrich storytelling by embedding materiality within broader cultural and emotional contexts. Building on this comparative analysis, the study argues that moving beyond neutrality enables AD to embrace its co-creative and interpretive dimensions, fostering deeper sensory and narrative connections for diverse audiences. It should be noted, however, that this article is not empirical in nature: its claims are grounded in the close analysis of a single audiovisual fragment. Therefore, its findings should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive. The aim is not to generalize across all AD practices, but to demonstrate how a conceptual framework— rooted in blindness gain and the spectrum of materiality—can reveal the interpretive and narrative potential of AD in specific, materially rich contexts.

While these insights open new avenues for understanding AD, they also leave important questions unanswered, inviting further interdisciplinary inquiry. For instance, how might Thompson's (2017) blindness gain framework and Caracciolo's (2023) spectrum of materiality apply to other forms of AD, such as live performances or museum exhibitions? Could alternative frameworks of material engagement, such as affect theory or sensory studies, complement or challenge these insights? Future research could also examine how AD training and industry practices might evolve to balance procedural clarity with the multisensory richness advocated in this study.

This study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that positions accessibility as a proactive cultural and epistemological principle, rather than a reactive service oriented solely toward end-user needs. In doing so, it resists what Greco (2016) has termed the "ghetto effect": the tendency to frame accessibility within narrowly defined, group-based entitlements that reinforce deficit-based models of disability. By foregrounding AD as a site of narrative negotiation and aesthetic engagement, the study reframes description as a generative medium—one that not only conveys visual content but actively reshapes how stories are told, perceived, and experienced across sensory modalities.

While firmly situated in the realm of conceptual and theoretical inquiry, the analysis nonetheless draws attention to practical divergences in AD styles that may hold implications for industry training, commissioning practices, and future empirical research. Differences in tone, rhythm, and material engagement—illustrated through the contrast between the Netflix and VRT ADs—point to the ways descriptive strategies shape affective texture and narrative interpretation. These insights may serve as a foundation for future empirical and practice-based research to test, challenge, or expand upon the theoretical claims advanced here.

By reframing AD as a transformative medium, this study aligns this practice with contemporary efforts to prioritize diversity, equity, and creativity within the realm of media accessibility (e.g., Fryer, 2023; Hutchinson et al., 2020; Romero-Fresco, 2019). It suggests that AD has the potential to influence and expand storytelling practices, fostering new ways of engaging audiences across a range of disciplines, including film, theater, museum curation, and other narrative arts. Moreover, by foregrounding questions of material engagement, narrative form, and sensory

translation, the study's conceptual framework may also be of interest to scholars working in fields such as aesthetics, cognitive narratology, neurolinguistics, and philosophy of perception, offering a set of theoretical tools for rethinking how meaning is mediated across sensory modalities.

Ultimately, the study advocates for a more holistic approach to AD. It calls for both a celebration of its interpretive possibilities as well as a repositioning of AD as a central contributor to inclusive, multisensory, and culturally resonant storytelling.

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