

Accessibility and Audiovisual Language in Early Twentieth Century-Films

Accesibilidad y lenguaje audiovisual en las películas de principios del siglo XX

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Abstract

The emergence of the cinematograph marked the beginning of film history, as well as the evolution of audiovisual language and new forms of interaction between audiences and moving images. Within this context, the earliest manifestations of what would later be known as audiovisual translation also began to take shape. During the developmental stage of the early films, narrative and visual conventions of the cinematic medium gradually began to be established. In this process, figures such as narrators played a key role: they not only facilitated the understanding of films for a largely illiterate audience but also contributed significantly to making this new art form accessible. This study examines several factors that may be regarded as early antecedents of cinematic accessibility in the Spanish context. Despite the scarcity of written or audio records of these narrators' interventions, specific references have been identified in the works of Sánchez Salas (1998, 2004, 2008, 2016), Montero Domínguez (2022), and Mirabent Espinosa (2016). As an illustrative example, this paper analyzes the case of Ramos de Castro, an actor and narrator, who in 1941 recorded explanatory comments for the film *The Rent Collector* (1921), offering a glimpse into this early form of audiovisual mediation.

Keywords: accessibility; audiovisual language; early films; cinema history; audiovisual translation

Resumen

El surgimiento del cinematógrafo marcó el inicio de la historia del cine, así como la evolución del lenguaje audiovisual y de nuevas formas de interacción entre el público y las imágenes en movimiento. En este contexto emergieron también las primeras manifestaciones de lo que más tarde se conocería como traducción audiovisual. Durante la etapa de los *early films*, aún en desarrollo, comenzaron a establecerse las convenciones narrativas y visuales del medio cinematográfico. En este proceso, figuras como los narradores desempeñaron un papel clave: no solo facilitaban la comprensión de las películas a un público mayoritariamente analfabeto, sino que también contribuyeron a hacer accesible este nuevo arte. Este estudio examina algunos de los factores que pueden considerarse como antecedentes de la accesibilidad

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cinematográfica en el contexto español. A pesar de la escasez de documentación escrita o sonora sobre los discursos de estos narradores, se han identificado referencias puntuales en estudios de Sánchez Salas (1998, 2004, 2008, 2016), Montero Domínguez (2019, 2022) y Mirabent Espinosa (2016). Como ejemplo ilustrativo, se analiza el caso de Ramos de Castro, actor y narrador, quien en 1941 grabó comentarios explicativos para la película *The Rent Collector* (1921), lo que permite vislumbrar esta práctica de mediación audiovisual.

Palabras clave: accesibilidad; lenguaje audiovisual; early films; historia del cine; traducción audiovisual

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1. Introduction

The origins of on-screen information accessibility trace back to the silent film era, particularly through the presence of narrators or film explainers. In early twentieth-century Spain, high illiteracy rates—especially in rural areas—posed challenges for understanding intertitles, thereby necessitating the role of the *film talker* (Sánchez Salas, 2008, p. 161), who acted as a linguistic and narrative bridge between films and their audiences (Fuentes Luque, 2019, p. 136). Silent cinema created an immersive, realistic space where viewers engaged with projected realities, made possible in part by these explainers who mediated between moving images and spectators (Letamendi & Seguin, 1998, p. 17).

The emergence of the cinematograph and its early development are vividly depicted in *Vida en Sombras* (Llobet, 1949). The film features the character Señor Sancho, played by Fernando Sancho, who embodies the profession of the film explainer by announcing the show and providing commentary on silent images from the Lumière brothers in a Barcelona attraction (Sánchez Salas, 1998, p. 80). This role signified the beginning of a collaborative approach to audience engagement, where spectators shared in the creation and consumption of cinematic content through the assistance of the film talker. If accessibility is understood as the removal of communication barriers due to linguistic or content-related constraints (excluding sensory disabilities), then the film explainer's role can be considered one of the earliest forms of accessibility in cinema. Accessibility, in this sense, is not merely an academic issue but a fundamental human right (Rica Peromingo, 2022, 2024, p. 364).

Film explainers possessed various skills that enhanced audience comprehension. Their role has parallels with the blind storytellers of Spain's "literatura de cordel" (Caro Baroja, 1988, p. 23) who composed and recited narratives for listeners (Sánchez Salas, 2004, p. 47). The oral discourse of film explainers included show announcements, vocal interpretation of actors' performances, commentary on scenes, and even singing. Their speech, often improvised and enriched with regional expressions, was adapted to the local audience regardless of the film's origin (Sánchez Salas, 2016, p. 273). They used props such as pointers and megaphones to support their narration. Many cinemas had their own resident explainers who read intertitles aloud, translated on-screen text, and contextualized the narrative for illiterate viewers (Nabarro, 1997, p. 145).

A connection thus emerges between accessibility, the figure of the explainer, and early twentieth-century cinema, spanning silent films, talkies, and multilingual versions. This study examines accessibility within early Spanish cinema, focusing on the interaction between explainers and audiences. Few studies have analyzed the figure of the film explainer from a linguistic or translation studies perspective; Montero Domínguez (2022, pp. 147–157) is a notable exception, discussing the explainer's paratranslational functions. This research aims to address the following questions: What elements contribute to film accessibility, both past and present? Can narration be considered a tool for accessibility? The aim is to identify factors that may represent the earliest steps toward film accessibility in Spain, particularly in light of the high levels of illiteracy among enthusiastic early filmgoers.

We aim to highlight the elements that made early twentieth-century films accessible (Sáenz Herrero & Rica Peromingo, 2020, p. 520), including a case study of excerpts from *Jaimito Juez - The Rent Collector* (Larry Semon, 1921), narrated by actor and journalist Ramos de Castro (www.ramosdecastro.es). In 1941, he added *castizo* expressions—vernacular from Madrid—to his narration, effectively localizing the discourse (Sánchez Salas, 2016, p. 273). While other well-known explainers such as Tomás Borrás and Noceda could have been included, a lack of oral or written records limits their analysis (Sánchez Salas, 1998, p. 78).

1.1. Early years of cinema

Cinema is a cultural phenomenon embedded within a specific social framework. As a historical reality, it has continually evolved—driven not only by technological advancements and its own expressive capacities, but also significantly influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which this evolution occurred (González, 2006, p. 9). According to González (2006, p. 9), from its inception in 1895 until 1905, cinema followed two distinct trajectories. On one hand, it was shaped by the scientific and technological innovations of the late 19th century, which included financial interests, industrial development, and the prevailing ideals and representational forms of the time (Heinink, 1993, p. 34). On the other hand, cinema quickly emerged as an accessible form of entertainment for the general public, especially for lower-income audiences who could not afford more exclusive and costly cultural events, such as theatre or operetta (González, 2006, p. 9).

The inventors of cinematography did not anticipate its longevity, nor did they foresee its future commercial exploitation (Martín Arias, 2009). Cinema emerged as a novel form of entertainment that combined both industry and art, transforming many of people's dreams into reality (Bello Cuevas, 2012, p. 1). Capturing the audience's attention and earning their respect became essential (Nabarro, 1997, p. 145).

Cinema portrayed reality, the reality conveyed by films allowed audiences to experience these moments, making them comprehensible to the audience. This created an interplay between the space and time depicted in the film and the space and time experienced by the spectator. Additionally, cinema had an economic dimension: the film industry mobilized producers, distributors, exhibitors, and various related professions, including actors, technicians, scriptwriters, and set designers (Bello Cuevas, 2012, p. 2).

Silent cinema was not a genre in itself; rather, it was the very nature of cinema at that time, as no other forms of filmmaking existed (Cardoso Carballo, 2015, p. 77). Although early films were relatively simple, they required acting and cinematographic techniques that transformed and evolved into a complex spectacle. Silent films were familiar and easily recognizable. Audiences fully engaged with their narratives, film stars, and distinctive gestures—often exaggerated or even satirical, yet always identifiable to the spectator (Cardoso Carballo, 2015, p. 121). However, as Cardoso Carballo (2015, p. 77) notes, silent films were never truly silent; they were always accompanied by sound: the piano, the orchestra, the film explainer, and even the audience's own comments all helped viewers infer the actors' words, despite them being neither heard, accessible nor fully understood.

Innovations in both technical and artistic domains flourished (Cardoso Carballo, 2015, p. 75). Over time, silent films began to incorporate sound, and films produced during the transitional period sought to integrate sound into certain sequences, as in *Don Juan* (Alan Crosland, 1926), *The Jazz singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), or in the case of Spain in *El misterio de la Puerta del Sol* (Francisco Elías Riquelme, 1930). In many cases, films were screened in their original versions, with minimal efforts to explain the plot to audiences unfamiliar with the language (Deltell & García, 2009, p. 63). Soon thereafter, subtitles emerged as an alternative, although their dissemination was hindered by high illiteracy rates in many countries. Almost simultaneously, another approach was introduced: the production of multiple versions of the same film in different languages, primarily in Hollywood (Heinink, 1995, p. 243). These developments could be regarded as the initial

steps in the field of audiovisual translation (AVT). This required the presence of male and female actors, technicians, and directors of various nationalities—French, German, Italian, Spanish, among others—to create versions specifically tailored to each market (Fuentes Luque, 2019, p. 139). In the following section, we will discuss who the explainers were and their role in the cinematic world of the period under analysis.

2. Film explainer

When discussing the figure of the film explainer, commentator, interpreter, or public reader (Fuentes Luque, 2019, p. 136)—two central challenges emerge that contribute to both the enigmatic character of this role and the difficulty of studying it academically. First, as Sánchez Salas (2004, p. 41) observes, film explainers were only acknowledged retrospectively. Awareness of their significance—or even their existence—arose only after historical narratives about the early years of cinema had already been constructed, and these narratives often made little to no mention of them. Second, the oral nature of their work poses a fundamental obstacle. Due to the lack of direct documentation, researchers must reconstruct the explainer's contributions using indirect evidence (Sánchez Salas, 2004, p. 42). In the absence of written records, scholars are often forced to rely on conjecture. An exception is found in Mirabent Espinosa (2016, p. 90), who managed to recover certain dialogues and testimonies from Girona through interviews with individuals who had either witnessed or been told about these events. As a result, much of the available information on explainers stems from second- or even third-hand accounts.

The conditions surrounding film screenings in the early years of cinema remain only partially understood. It remains unclear whether musicians were always present or whether every screening was accompanied by an explainer. The film explainer's primary function was to interpret the images on screen, bringing the silent visuals to life through verbal explanations (Nabarro, 1997, p. 144–145). Explainers read the intertitles aloud—an essential service for the many illiterate viewers in the audience—and translated other textual elements. Although commonly assumed to be multilingual, not all explainers were in fact proficient in multiple languages. In some cases, they fabricated elaborate stories based solely on a single still image. Their rhetorical and narrative skills needed to be sufficiently persuasive to convince exhibitors of a film's commercial potential, as Aguilar & Cabrerizo (2017) mentioned in their blog *Un bigote para dos*. The explainer's role extended beyond narrative interpretation. They were also tasked with engaging the

audience emotionally, sustaining their interest, and clarifying the storyline. As Nabarro (1997, p. 147) explains, their role also involved ensuring the comfort of the audience. Fundamentally, they were a guide, adapting the pace of their commentaries to match the emotional intensity of the images on screen. When both the explainer and the musician had the opportunity to preview the film beforehand, their performances were notably well-coordinated (Nabarro, 1997, p. 149).

López Martín refers to these individuals as “warriors of cinema” (2015, p. 216) responsible for navigating audience misunderstandings and for clarifying the film’s content during its projection. López Martín (2015, p. 208) argues that this figure existed between 1897 and 1912 at the earliest and latest, respectively. According to Sánchez Salas (2004, p. 41), the film explainer gained particular prominence between 1904 and 1910, a period during which projectionists operated from enclosed booths, preventing their voices from being heard by the audience. In such cases, either the stage manager or the projectionist would assume the explanatory role. Mirabent Espinosa (2016, p. 99) notes that film explainers remained active in Spain until the Civil War.

Díez Puertas (2003, p. 327) describes the dynamic interaction between spectators and the explainer as follows:

During film screenings, spectators participated as actively as they did in theatrical performances: they asked the explainer questions, shouted comments about the film, requested songs from the pianist, asked the projectionist to replay certain scenes, and read the intertitles aloud.

Archival articles from the period recount audiences shouting directly at the screen, demanding clarification with cries such as “*Tell us then!*” or “*Explain it to us!*” (Sánchez Salas, 2004, p. 41). These anecdotes offer valuable insight into the explainer’s importance in shaping the early cinematic experience, even if the lack of transcripts makes it difficult to reconstruct their exact words or style (López Martín, 2015, p. 218).

Further historical sources suggest that the explainer’s duties extended beyond narration. They welcomed and dismissed the audience, managed crowd behavior, and provided explanations during technical failures such as projection errors. As film narratives became longer and more complex, theaters and studios increasingly supported the work of explainers, underlining the critical and non-incidental nature of their role (López Martín, 2015, p. 93).

Lee (1908, p. 93) illustrates the contemporary appreciation of explainers in the newspaper devoted to *The Moving Picture World*:

Many moving picture theaters are adding a lecturer to their programs. The explanation of the pictures by an efficient speaker greatly enhances their realism. It is indeed surprising that managers are only now realizing that a lecture significantly contributes to the realism of a moving picture.

According to Montero Domínguez (2022, p. 151), the film explainer acted as an interpreter characterized by fluency of speech and a persuasive tone, fulfilling what are termed “paratranslational functions.” These included narrating films for audiences unable to comprehend the intertitles and clarifying the content to enhance viewers’ understanding and engagement.

In Section 3 of this study, we present one of the key aspects of our research: the accessibility of the narration provided by the explainer.

3. Accessibility

The multidisciplinary role of the film explainer emerged in response to a clear need from audiences, projectionists, and distributors for assistance in understanding films. At the time, the processes of comprehending and interpreting both cinematic and narrative texts were still in their formative stages, necessitating a learning curve for audiences (Montero Domínguez, 2022, p. 152–153). Consequently, the role of the explainer was not only essential for enhancing the appeal of cinema but also played a crucial part in ensuring that audiences fully understood and enjoyed films. In this regard, the film explainer can be viewed as a precursor to accessibility in cinema.

If accessibility is defined as the process of eliminating barriers to communication caused by linguistic or content-related obstacles (excluding sensory factors), then the skills employed by the film explainer can be considered the earliest steps toward accessibility for uninformed viewers. In this context, accessibility is not merely an academic concern but a fundamental human right. The explainer embodied a diverse set of skills, attributes, and abilities that facilitated the audience’s understanding of the cinematic experience.

Accessibility refers to the quality of being easily accessible, readily understood, and intelligible (Rica Peromingo, 2016, p. 131). It guarantees equal access to goods, services, and cultural experiences for all individuals. By definition, it encompasses three fundamental dimensions: mobility, communication, and comprehension (Alonso, 2002, p. 26; Alonso, 2003, p. 27).

In Spain, the legal framework for universal accessibility is articulated in Article 2.c. of Law 51/2003, enacted on December 2, concerning the equal opportunities, non-

discrimination, and universal accessibility of persons with disabilities. It defines universal access as:

Universal access is the condition that must be met by environments, processes, goods, products, and services, as well as by objects, instruments, tools, and devices, to ensure that they are understandable, usable, and practicable by all individuals under equal conditions of comfort and safety, in the most autonomous and natural way possible. This principle presupposes the strategy of “design-for-all,” with appropriate reasonable accommodations as required.

This principle assumes the strategy of design-for-all, supplemented by reasonable accommodations as necessary. Within this framework, accessibility must be understood as inherently universal in scope and ideally achieved through a design-for-all approach. As noted by Mackenzie Molero & Rojas Montenegro (2022, p. 16), universal design entails the creation of products and environments usable by as many people as possible without requiring special modifications. In the context of early cinema, several elements contributed to accessibility. Chief among them was the verbal narration provided by the film explainer—often composed, and at times improvised, after a prior viewing of the film. These oral narratives, projected in real time onto the evolving visual story, offered essential guidance to audiences unfamiliar with cinematic language and storytelling techniques.

Thus, the film explainer’s narration can be regarded as the initial step toward accessibility in cinema, particularly in its linguistic dimension. From a technological perspective, multiple elements contributed to making films more accessible. These included not only the tools used by explainers during screenings—such as pointers, megaphones, and occasionally even speaking trumpets (Sánchez Salas, 1998, p. 74)—but also their tone of voice and their ability to respond to both on-screen events and audience reactions. These aspects undoubtedly helped integrate the public into this new art form.

In conclusion, while the concept of accessibility has evolved significantly, the emergence of the film explainer’s role marks a crucial—if informal—origin of accessible practices in cinema. Although differing from contemporary standards, these early efforts were fundamentally aimed at making cinema comprehensible and engaging for all.

In the following section, we present the methodology employed in this study.

4. Methodology

This study is framed within the qualitative research paradigm, specifically under an interpretive approach, as its primary aim is to understand the narrative and discursive strategies employed in the construction of the cinematic narrative. The objective is not to

quantify data or establish generalizations, but rather to conduct an in-depth interpretation of the elements that generate meaning within a classic audiovisual work. This analysis adopts an interpretive perspective, focusing on the explanation of implicit meanings embedded in both the form and content of the filmic narrative.

The study seeks to identify and characterize the narrative mechanisms present in a silent comedy film—a genre that has been relatively underexplored within academic narratological analysis—and to examine the reach of Castro's narration in making the audiovisual product more accessible at the time of its release.

The object of study is the film *The Rent Collector* (1921), known in Spain and Latin America as *Jaimito Juez*, directed by and starring Larry Semon alongside Oliver Hardy. Although Charles Chaplin did not participate in this film, the comedic character portrayed by Semon was marketed in some countries as *Jaimito*, leading to confusion with Chaplin's iconic character. The film will be analyzed as an audiovisual narrative text, with emphasis on its dramatic structure, the visual mechanisms of humor, and the development of characters through physical action.

The narrative agent will be examined through the notion of the implicit cinematic narrator, a concept drawn from narratological theory as applied to film. In the case of a silent film such as *The Rent Collector*, where there is neither a voice-over nor an explicit verbal narrator, narration is constructed through the specific resources of cinematic language: framing, editing, intertitles, visual rhythm, acting, and *mise-en-scène*. Thus, the implicit narrator is manifested through the formal decisions that articulate the visual narrative.

The research process consisted of several phases. First, a theoretical and contextual literature review was conducted, focusing on film narratology, silent cinema, and visual comedy. This was followed by a detailed viewing of *The Rent Collector*, during which the narrative was segmented into acts, key sequences, and moments of comic tension. Special attention was given to the use of Castro's narration and its potential translation. Finally, the narrated scenes were analyzed, and a translation into English was produced (see Appendix). This final stage enables a closer examination of the commentator's work as a vital link between narration and accessibility in early audiovisual media.

In the following section of this research article, we analyze the selected film by presenting and discussing several examples of its narrative, with the aim of enhancing the accessibility and comprehension of its audiovisual language.

5. Analysis of *The Rent Collector*

Our selection of this film is based not only on its historical context, coinciding with the era of silent cinema, but also on its unique status as the only few known sound recordings of a narration and voice-over by journalist, actor, and film explainer Ramos de Castro. Although this recording was made significantly later than the first silent films (in 1941), its narration and commentary serve as valuable examples for illustrating the role of the film explainer as an instrument of accessibility in early cinema. During the course of this research on the Ramos de Castro version featuring narration and commentary, the material was initially accessible on YouTube until 2024, when it was subsequently removed from the platform. The film, along with relevant information pertaining to this version, was also available on Ramos de Castro website (<https://ramosdecastro.es/>) and some of the related data could be found on the official Spanish dubbing database el doblaje (<https://eldoblaje.com/>).

The Rent Collector (1921) is a silent film directed by and starring Larry Semon and Norman Taurog, an early filmmaker who worked as a director, producer, and screenwriter during the formative years of cinema. Larry Semon was a well-known comedian, easily identified by his white-painted face and bowler hat. Although he did not experience the sound or color cinema, he had a significant influence on the cinematic education of several generations (López Echevarrieta, 2016, p. 31). His character was widely recognized under different names across various countries: Zigoto in France, Ridolini in Italy, and, as previously mentioned, Jaimito in Spain, where he was particularly popular before the Spanish Civil War. In the late 1940s, the distributor Exclusivas Arjol revived some of these silent comic shorts and added soundtracks with narration and commentary. Those who lived through this period recall the voice that Ramos de Castro used to describe the protagonist's actions (López Echevarrieta, 2016, p. 31).

5.1 Synopsis

The protagonist accidentally finds himself in a troubled and rough neighbourhood where the rent collector has left his post due to these problems. Once he is settled in, he will have to confront the gang of slackers and thugs in the neighbourhood.

The 14 minutes of footage comprise a series of acts and scenes, most of which are humorous and involve slapstick. One of his most famous comedic routines typically ended with chaotic, exaggerated physical gags. To analyse the comments of Ramos de Castro as narrative elements that add to the on-screen story, we will describe what appears on screen, as it is a list of separate scenes, some of which have no clear link to each other.

The short film opens with a chaotic neighborhood scene, where two large, burly men are engaged in a fight (one of them, is the renowned actor Oliver Hardy). Meanwhile, many young women step out of a car. In the following scene, Jaimito removes his jacket to cover a puddle for one of the young women attempting to cross it. However, the puddle turns out to be a large hole, into which the young woman falls unexpectedly. Jaimito then flees on a bicycle, only to collide with a pole shortly after. In the next scene, the rent collector attempts to collect the payment from the tenants, only to be forcefully thrown out of a window. As a result, he resigns from his position, and Jaimito takes over the role. Later, the sons of one of the neighborhood thugs steal fruit and vegetables through a window, including a pumpkin, which ultimately falls on one of the characters (Plácido's) head. Back at the house, Jaimito tries to collect the rent again. Since the tenant is unable to pay, he begins seizing furniture, only to discover that the tenant is the wife of one of the burly men. Furious, the husband chases Jaimito, who desperately attempts to escape by climbing a pole and swinging from ropes, only to fall to the ground. He is dragged upstairs, wrapped in a blanket, and subjected to further chaos. In the final scene, Jaimito and the young woman escape together, concluding the film.

5.2 Analysis

The following excerpts highlight selected elements that, in our view, enhance the accessibility and comprehension of the audiovisual language. The table in the Appendix presents all of Ramos de Castro's commentary, with English translations provided by the authors. The primary aim of the analysis is not the translation, but the examination of the explainer's narrative function.

In the opening scene, the protagonists, including Jaimito, are engaged in a fight. Ramos de Castro humorously introduces them as “gentlemen from a distinguished neighbourhood” and characterizes them as “anaemic” and “roly-poly.” He heightens the comedic tone by using culturally resonant names and descriptive commentary (see Table 1).

Ese tuberculoso es Boliche. Y este anémico es Plácido, el amo de la calle que confunde a Boliche con un balón.	The one with tuberculosis is Roly. And the anemic one is Placido, the boss of the street, who thinks Roly is a ball.
Boliche no llora por la guasca sino por el whisky.	Roly isn't crying about the whipping, he's crying about the whisky.
Plácido sigue zumbando a Boliche para distraerse.	Placido keeps swiping at Roly.

Table 1. Examples: opening scene.

One character, Boliche, is kicked, causing a bottle in his pocket to break. The visual action is enhanced by Ramos de Castro's commentary, which plays on the phonetic similarity between "guasca" (colloquial for "whip") and "whisky", adding auditory humor.

In audiovisual discourse, the integration of verbal and visual elements creates meaning, each serving as a communicative tool. The following excerpt features the rent collector being slapped by Plácido's wife (see Table 2).

Segundo acto del drama en casa de Plácido. Este caballero asqueroso es el cobrador.	Second act of the drama in Placido's house. This repulsive man is the rent collector.
Rosalinda le expone con mucha educación que no le da la gana de pagarle.	Rosalind explains politely that she doesn't feel like paying him

Table 2. Examples: visual and verbal humor.

The narrative tone is informal and colloquial, reflecting the comedic style of the era. Ramos de Castro inserts verbal humor in multiple scenes, including one in which Jaimito, as rent collector, attempts to repossess furniture due to unpaid rent. He eventually leans on Plácido (see Table 3).

El empleo y una americana. El empleo tiene que tener miga porque también le dan una libreta.	The job and a jacket. The job can't be much because they also give him a notebook.
Y va bola.	And the ball goes down.
Jaimito, yo te aconsejaría que no presumieses, te estás fumando un puro en un polvorín	Jaimie, do not show off. You are smoking a cigar in an ammunition.

Table 3. Examples: colloquial tone.

The characters are archetypal and exaggerated, which reinforces the comedic genre. For instance, Jaimito is introduced as a "gallant and well-mannered man", yet his actions are absurd and far from heroic, creating a humorous contrast. Plácido, on the other hand, is described as an "honorable family man", but his actions are selfish and comical. These

contradictions are central to early cinematic comedy and reflect themes in early 20th-century cinema such as physical humor (falls, blows, exaggerations), social satire (critique of gender roles, poverty, hypocrisy), and the final moral lesson (“the refined man who suffers a setback must never lose his manners”). These elements were common in films of the time and were used both to entertain and to convey social messages (see Table 4).

Pero el negocio es antes que la diversión y Plácido es un águila par el negocio y, además, un honrado padre de familia	But business before pleasure and Plácido is a shark at business, but also an honest family man.
Moraleja: el hombre fino que se da un morrón nunca debe perder la educación.	The moral is that a refined man who smashes his face in, must remain a gentleman.

Table 4. Examples: actions.

Ramos de Castro constructs a coherent narrative structure, moving beyond a mere sequence of gags by interweaving the storyline with the actions of various characters, who are localized through the use of Spanishized names such as Rosalinda, Boliche, and Jaimito. These characters undergo a series of episodic events, including scenes set in the barbershop and interactions with the fruit vendor, thereby contributing to the continuity and cultural adaptation of the narrative.

In most silent films, gags appear as isolated sequences. The explainer’s comments help to bring these gags together. For example, “Y ahora no digo nada porque hay ropa tendida” (“And now I won’t say anything because walls have ears”) or “Entretanto se produce un pequeño incidente entre Pepito, le llamamos Pepito porque tiene mucha carne, Bernabea y Jaimito” (“Meanwhile a small incident takes place between Pepito—we call him Pepito because he is meaty—Bernabea and Jaimito”).

This analysis may enhance discussions on how the interplay between audiences, creators, and characters contributed to the development of cinematic language and its accessibility in the 20th century.

6. Conclusions

Since the invention of the cinematograph, cinema has evolved not only through technological innovation but also via artistic experimentation, professional specialization, and interdisciplinary collaboration. These elements have contributed decisively to enhancing audience perception, understanding, and enjoyment of the audiovisual experience. Within this context, film explainers played a pivotal role in the early decades

of the twentieth century by facilitating linguistic mediation and communicative accessibility in silent cinema.

This study has examined the figure of the film explainer through the specific case of Ramos de Castro and his narration of the sonorized version of *The Rent Collector* (1921), a slapstick comedy that combines exaggerated visual elements, physical humor, and social satire. Although the recording of the narration dates to 1941—long after the film’s original release—its value lies in how it transforms a series of seemingly disconnected gags into a coherent, culturally localized narrative, thereby enhancing accessibility and audience engagement.

The limitations of this study are evident, particularly due to the unavailability of primary sources—such as original sound recordings or written texts by Spanish film narrators—which would be necessary to fully substantiate the assumptions regarding early forms of audiovisual mediation: the disappearance of audiovisual materials from digital platforms such as YouTube, along with the scarcity of archival documentation on the narrated versions by Ramos de Castro, impedes a comprehensive reconstruction. Annotated scripts, full original recordings, and direct testimonies from the narrator regarding his creative process are not available. There is also an absence of systematic historical records on the practice of cinematic narration in Spain, particularly when compared to the more thoroughly documented *benshi* tradition in Japan or film lecturers in other national contexts. Finally, the limited scope of analysis should also be pointed out, since the study focuses on a single short film and one narrator. Although representative, this case does not encompass the diversity of styles, genres, and narrative strategies employed by other explainers in the same era or different cultural settings.

Nevertheless, Mirabent Espinosa (2016, p. 88–93) succeeded in collecting excerpts from personal interviews with various individuals involved in the cinematic sector—entrepreneurs, projectionists, and others—in Girona. Furthermore, Montero Domínguez (2022) expanded the role of the film explainer beyond mere translation, framing it as a practice of interpretation and *paratranslation* (p. 155). The present study, when considered alongside prior research, supports the view that the functions performed by these narrators were as multifaceted and accessible as previously hypothesized. We argue that the material analyzed here significantly contributes to a deeper understanding of both the comedic elements (*gags*) and the audiovisual language employed in *The Rent Collector*. The notion of accessibility is inherently multidimensional, and early cinema—

together with the role of the film explainer—can be regarded as a foundational stage in the historical development of audiovisual accessibility. This narration, analyzed in this study, serves as a notable example—among other aspects and features—of cinematic accessibility and its implications in the early twentieth century. Therefore, a film’s narration could be considered as an accessible tool.

This brief analysis of *The Rent Collector* illustrates the emergence of a distinct audiovisual language in early cinema, characterized by the integration of humor and the adaptation of AVT practices to a specific local context. Moreover, the analysis highlights the differentiation that arose with the subsequent development of new cinematic genres, such as comedy and slapstick, among others. Additionally, the linguistic mediation provided through Ramos de Castro’s commentary appears to enhance accessibility, particularly with regard to the narrative’s introduction and central themes. This is evidenced through elements such as the description of the setting, characterization, and the provision of contextual information aimed at clarifying the scene for the audience.

Future research could explore comparative analyses of film explainers across different national contexts to better understand the global evolution of audiovisual accessibility practices. The analysis of primary materials—such as annotated scripts, voice recordings, and audience testimonies—would offer new avenues to further examine the explainer’s performative and adaptive strategies. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that combine film studies, translation studies, and accessibility research could shed light on how early cinematic practices inform contemporary modes of accessible filmmaking. Investigating the reception of these narrated films among audiences with sensory or cognitive disabilities at the time could also provide valuable historical insights into the inclusive potential of early cinema.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a revaluation of the film explainer, not merely as an auxiliary figure of the silent era, but as a precursor to modern forms of mediation and audiovisual accessibility. Far from being a passive intermediary, the narrator actively constructed meaning, reinterpreted actions, and contextualized visual content, effectively building a bridge between image and audience. This study has demonstrated that, even within technologically limited contexts, efforts were made to promote inclusion, understanding, and collective enjoyment. *The Rent Collector* and Ramos de Castro’s narration constitute a meaningful example of how accessibility was embedded in the very

origins of cinematic language—long before it became an institutionalized or regulated field of research and practice.

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Appendix

Excerpts from the narration done by Ramos de Castro for *The Rent Collector* (1921) translated by the authors of the article.

Narration	Translation
Aquí tenemos una calle céntrica de un barrio distinguido.	Here we have a central Street in a classy neighbourhood
Y esta es una discusión entre caballeros.	And here's an argument between gentlemen.
Ese tuberculoso es Boliche. Y este anémico es Plácido, el amo de la calle que confunde a Boliche con un balón.	The one with tuberculosis is Roly. And the anemic one is Placido, the boss of the street, who thinks Roly is a ball.
Boliche no llora por la guasca sino por el whisky.	Roly isn't crying about the whipping, he's crying about the whisky.
Plácido sigue zumbando a Boliche para distraerse.	Placido keeps swiping at Roly.
Pero el negocio es antes que la diversión y Plácido es un águila para el negocio y, además, un honrado padre de familia.	But business before pleasure and Placido is a shark at business, but also an honest family man.
¿Reparto de víveres? Plácido no quiere nada para él. Todo para los suyos.	Food deliveries? Placido doesn't want anything. It's all for you and yours.
Aquí le vemos filosofando ante el pantano del Alberche.	Here we can see him philosophising by the Alberche reservoir.
Pero como ciclista... ¡Cuidado, guardia! pero como ciclista, Jaimito es de los que no reconoce obstáculos. ¿No lo dije?	But as a cyclist... Look out! Jamie's one of those who doesn't see what's in his way. Didn't I tell you?
Segundo acto del drama en casa de Plácido. Este caballero asqueroso es el cobrador.	Second act of the drama in Placido's house. This repulsive man is the rent collector.
Rosalinda le expone con mucha educación que no le da la gana de pagarle.	Rosalind explains politely that she doesn't feel like paying.
Y el caballero asqueroso insiste en que quiere cobrar y, como dice que quiere cobrar, se sale con la suya	And this revolting man insists he wants his money, and he finally gets his way.
Una cuenta en el aire y a cobrar se ha dicho.	An account in the sky, and collect your money, they say.
Es indudable que se trata de una factura muy elevada.	It is definitely a very expensive bill.
Después de eso la dimisión y la cura de reposo en Suiza se imponen, ¿no es así, amigo?	After this, resignation and a restful holiday in Switzerland is on the cards. Isn't it mate?
Jaimito, que es uno de los 12 millones de parados que hay en Nueva York, solicita el empleo.	Jaimie, one of the 12 million on the dole in New York, is looking for a job.
De bíceps, no no tiene malos bíceps, Jaimito y le dan el empleo.	No, Jamie's biceps aren't bad and they give him the job.
El empleo y una americana. El empleo tiene que tener miga porque también le dan una libreta.	The job and a jacket. The job can't be much because they also give him a notebook.
Jaimito en casa de Plácido dispuesto a tener un éxito.	Jaime in Placido's house ready for success.

A los niños de Plácido les gusta la fruta, pero al frutero de los pendientes no le gustan los niños de Plácido.	Placido's kids like fruit, but the fruit seller with earrings doesn't like Placido's kids.
Y Plácido resuelve el incidente de una manera diplomática y nutritiva.	And Placido solves the incident in a diplomatic and healthy manner.
Como el frutero usa pendientes debe ser frutera, pero como lleva bigote tal vez sea frutero. Para no equivocarnos le llamaremos la frutero.	As the fruit seller wears earrings it should really be a lady, but he also has a moustache. We'll call him a lady male fruit seller.
Pues bien, la frutero se va a buscar un lío.	Well, the fruit seller is going to get into a mess.
Mira, Jaimito, hijo, no te fíes de los nenes, ¿sabes? Porque parecen muy ricos y muy buenos, pero son unos hijos de Plácido y van a buscarte un lío. Allá tú.	Look Jamie my son, don't trust the young ones. They look sweet and good as gold but they're Placido's kids and they'll get you in a mess.
A Plácido le van a dar calabazas	They're gonna give Placido the brushoff.
Se las dieron. Crimen pasional.	And they did. A crime of passion.
La frutero para el arrastre. Esto es un atropello.	The fruit-seller is dead beat. It's an outrage
Llega Rosalinda y Jaimito presenta su recibo. Rosalinda se muestra afectuosa, pero que muy afectuosa.	Rosalind arrives and Jamie presents his receipt. Rosalind is very affectionate, very affectionate indeed.
La estatua de la libertad iluminando al mundo.	The statue of liberty is lighting up the world.
Y los niños tan ricos, mira, Cagancho, qué ideas tiene.	Look how sweet the kids are. What are you thinking?
Jaimito, tras de un cariñoso "maldito sea su padre", monta en cólera y desmonta la casa.	Jamie after a friendly "damn your father", falls into a rage and trashes the house.
Y va a bola.	And the ball goes down.
Plácido y Boliche presencian el desalojo.	Placido and Roly watch the eviction.
Jaimito, excesivamente satisfecho refiere su heroica hazaña con pelos y señales presumiendo de carácter.	Jamie is very pleased with himself and boasts about his heroic achievement.
Jaimito, hijo, yo te aconsejaría que no presumieses, te estás fumando un puro en un polvorín.	Jamie, my son, don't show off. You're smoking a cigar in an ammunition dump.
Como ignora que la vida es una lotería no sospecha que está a punto de que le toque el gordo.	As he doesn't know that life is just a lottery, he doesn't suspect that he's on the verge of winning the big prize.
A Jaimito se le ocurre una fórmula cordial: los vuelvo a subir y ya está. Eso es, ahora mismo y ya está. Ya está Plácido en el suelo.	Jamie thinks of a kind way to do it: I'll take them up again and that's that. Right now. Placido is already on the floor.
Jaimito se hace el muerto para descomponer la retaguardia al enemigo.	Jamie pretends to be dead, so as to take his enemy off guard.

Eso era al principio, ahora viene el poste, está Plácido.	That was at the beginning. Now comes the next part. Plácido is there.
Cuerda para ocho días.	Rope for eight days.
Se le acabó la cuerda.	He run out of rope.
Novísimo procedimiento para la conducción de accidentados graves.	The very latest way to have a serious accident.
Ahora la arpillera. Vuelven a la normal, pero se olvidan de Bernabea.	Now, back to normal, but they've forgotten about Bernabea.
No te apures, Bernabea, nunca falta un caballero galante. Aquí tienes un Petróneo con toda la barba y pelo ondulado naturalmente.	Don't worry Bernabea, there's always a gallant man around. Here's Petronius with his beard and naturally curly hair.
De ninguna manera, usted primero... Usted primero me da el collar.	No way, you first. You first and give me the necklace.
Secuestro de Bernabea a cabo del Gordo.	Bernabea is kidnapped by the fat guy.
Otra arpillera para Bernabea.	Another blanket for Bernabea.
Plácido se da cuenta de que no se ha afeitado hace quince años.	Plácido realizes he hasn't shaved in fifteen years.
Entre tanto se produce un pequeño incidente entre Pepito, le llamamos Pepito porque tiene mucha carne, Bernabea y Jaimito.	Meanwhile a small incident takes place between Pepito, we call him that because he's meaty, Bernabea and Jamie.
Darle a Pepito con un jarrón es comer chufas con un porrón.	To hit Pepito with a vase is like eating groundnuts with a jug.
Jaimito reacciona y no se asusta, comienza el match.	Jamie reacts but isn't surprised and starts the match.
Cuidado, Jaimito, que te vas a pinchar en el corazón.	Look out Jaimie, you're going to pierce your heart.
No ha sido en el corazón.	It wasn't in the heart.
Y ahora no digo nada porque hay ropa tendida.	And now I won't say anything because walls have ears.
Rosalinda que es un alma viajera quiere pasear.	Rosalind who has a roaming spirit, wants to go for a walk.
Rosalinda se va a Cuba.	Rosalind goes to Cuba.
Después de este baño no nos atrevemos a negar que Plácido está negro.	After this bath, we can't deny that Plácido is black.
Y el barbero no se va a explicar, el infeliz, porqué cobra antes de acabar el servicio.	And this barber, this miserable man is not going to tell us why he gets paid before finishing the job.
Moraleja: el hombre fino que se da un morrón nunca debe perder la educación.	The moral is that a refined man who smashes his face in, must remain a gentleman.