



Crip Access, Media Literacy, and the Work of Ideology

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This article connects my experience as a filmmaker and teacher working with disability media access forms like captioning and audio description with filmmaking and teaching practices that seek to cultivate and question media literacy. Putting Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin's "Audio Description as a Pedagogical Tool" (2015), my 2021 film *Shared Resources*, and Christine Sun Kim's *Close Readings* (2015) and *Closer Captions* (2020) in conversation with Peter Watkins' film *The Journey* (1987) and Ra'anan Alexandrowicz's film *The Viewing Booth* (2019), I consider how the act of describing images and sounds actively reflects conditions of audienceship, where makers, students, and audiences are confronted with the interpretive and ideological dimensions of description. In particular, I consider how the work of description equally reflects how ideology puts audiences/describers to work to defend their world views. I then apply this intersection of ideology and description to consider models of media literacy posed in recent films by Tiffany Sia (*Do Not Circulate*, 2021) and Miranda Pennell (*Man number 4*, 2024) that are largely concerned with how to read images, sounds, and the networks of circulation around them. Ultimately, the article seeks to understand the use of these media literacy practices for disentangling the circulation of media, juridical logics, and state violence and how these practices act in tandem with crip access forms.

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THE IDEOLOGICAL WORK OF DESCRIPTION

For the last seven years, I have made audio description (AD) a fundamental part of how I teach filmmaking. Asking students to interrogate the common sense notion that filmmaking is an art of "show don't tell," we instead consider how different senses can neither be disentangled from each other nor from the ocularcentric and other sensory preoccupations that have dominated popular ideas of what it means to watch films and how to make them. As such, media access forms are invaluable tools we can use for understanding what's at stake

in the use of documentary evidence in service of (and against) ideology,¹ state power, and disinformation. Rather than limiting a consideration of media access forms to those that explicitly center disabled audiences, this article contests the segregation not only of disabled audiences from one another but of disability access from other forms of access and media literacy, in an attempt to bridge crip, abolitionist and anti-colonial knowledges, struggles, and strategies. Ultimately, I focus on three films—*The Viewing Booth* (2019) by Ra'anan Alexandrowicz, *Do Not Circulate* (2021) by Tiffany Sia, and *Man number 4* (2024) by Miranda Pennell—each of which poses a method for describing, listening and making sense of images, in ways that account for how these images' circulation are entangled with state violence and refuse juridical modes of contesting it.

My thinking here draws from my own filmmaking and that of my peers,² who work with disability access like AD and open captions as a primary formal material that must be understood alongside other “creative” filmmaking labor such as writing, cinematography, and editing. It also emerges from years of conversation and a series of workshops Tiffany Sia and I have led on this topic at Wendy's Subway³ and LUX.⁴ I am also responding directly to the models proffered by Blind scholar Georgina Kleege and theater director Scott Wallin in their 2015 article “Audio Description as a Pedagogical Tool,” where they note the contradictory imperatives of AD standards that advocate objectivity and how this breaks down in the face of instructions that ask the describer to “cull” from what they see. As Kleege and Wallin note, “This filtering and prioritizing is thus actually an unavoidably subjective perspective that renders the describer into an interlocutor who shares her own interpretations and values.”

This insight has formed the basis of much of my work with description in my own films. My film *Shared Resources* (2021) incorporates AD in a few different forms: AD that I write and read aloud in voiceover, interwoven with essayistic reflections; AD provided live by my sister and mother, as they watched scenes from the film without the sound; and audio fragments taken from a conversation

¹ To clarify my use of this term, I use ‘ideology’ to broadly refer to a systematic belief system and how the presumption of common sense is used in its defense. When writing this article, I had not yet read Jean-Louis Comolli’s “Technique and Ideology” (2015) nor Comolli and Jean Narboni’s “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” (2014) and was helpfully pointed to these essays by one of the peer reviewers. While I share similar concerns around the entanglement of film and capitalist ideology and a material analysis of how the cinema’s purported reality is, rather, a production of capitalist ideological imperatives, the examples I consider here are invested in other related ideological systems around gender, ableism, Zionism, and the law.

² Sharlene Bamboat, Amelia Bande, Jenny Brady, Leah Clements, Zeinabu irene Davis, Amalle Dublon, JJJJJerome Ellis, Emma Hedditch, Johanna Hedva, Carolyn Lazard, Park McArthur, Alison O’Daniel, Josephine Sales, Finnegan Shannon, Heather Shaw, Liza Sylvestre, Christine Sun Kim, Krishna Washburn, Sara Wylie, and Constantina Zavitsanos, to name a few.

³ <https://wendyssubway.com/programs/workshops/after-hours-jordan-lord-tiffany-sia>.

⁴ <https://lux.org.uk/event/online-reading-and-listening-media-literacy-lab-with-jordan-lord-and-tiffany-sia/>.

between my mother, dad, and me, recorded after they have just seen a version of the film. I am particularly interested in how my mother fulfills multiple purposes with her description. For instance, she describes over a medium shot of me interviewing my dad: "This is a video of *your* dad talking to you. Your dad is such a composed man. Look at him, sitting there with his hands folded. He's not intimidated. His body language is so strong" (Lord 2021, 00:23:29).



I think about this moment a lot because my mother is describing one of my least favorite images in the film. To me, the framing is somewhat awkward (I'm more to the edge of the frame than my dad, despite my attempt at symmetry); the color is washed out; it feels cheesily literal that my dad and I look like mirror images of each other. Moreover, the original footage was lost somehow in the five-year-long editing process, so it's actually taken from an export of an early edit, rather than the uncompressed footage. Nevertheless, I never had any question whether this scene would appear in the final film, not only because of how my dad describes his personal philosophy to debt collection in the interview but also because my mother's description of this image taught me something fundamental about how many different forms of work are at stake in description.

My mother's description of my dad seems to be in direct response to something my dad says at the start of the film: he "loathes" the film (an early edit we had just watched together) because it makes him feel "weak." In real life, this footage was recorded immediately before my mother recorded her AD, describing and responding live, as she watched the edit for a second time, without my dad. While he was not literally in the room, my mother seems to be speaking at least partly to him, both catering to his desire to be seen as "not weak" but also, in my view, engaging in a kind of defense of an argument

Fig. 1:
Still from *Shared Resources* (Jordan Lord, 2021)

she makes against why my dad hates the film. Explaining why he hates what he's just seen, he says:

I do have a life other than just sitting in the recliner. Your mother has a life other than just cleaning the house. That's not my life [...] People that watch that don't know me. They're gonna think, "That's a lazy piece of garbage over there. [...] All he does is lay in the chair while his wife's out working, doing housework" (Lord 2021, 00:08:24).

My mother responds, first by correcting him about the fact that there was only one scene of her doing housework. I explain further that I will include my dad's reactions as voiceover over the footage he objects to. When my dad says that this won't "overdo" the visual part of it because "humans are visual," my mother says: "But by them listening to what you're saying [...] it's going to show that that isn't how you are in an everyday life. That was an excerpt of your life." (Lord 2021, 00:09:27).

While this moment could understandably be read as my mother defending the use of AD or simply defending me and trying to make me feel better about my dad not liking the movie, I also hear something else. In re-listening to her description of the interview footage and my dad's body language, it's worth breaking down how many different people she seems to be talking to: me ("look at your dad"), the audience she's been asked to describe the images for ("Look at him, sitting there with his hands folded"), and also my dad himself. In describing my dad as "composed," "not intimidated," and "strong," she's on the surface propping him up. But she's also rebutting his argument that he's only shown seated in the chair, while she's out working. Here, she's not only factually correcting him but also responding to the fact that he sees the representation of her working as the representation of him *not* working.

Challenging this binary means taking on more work; tending to both my dad's as well as my hurt feelings, alongside the access work she's performing for my dad and blind or low vision audience members by describing what she sees. But rather than thinking about this moment as just the work she does for others, she's also putting AD to work to defend herself. While she affirms how my dad wants to be seen (as "strong" or not dependent on her), in doing so, she also rebuts my dad's lumping together of his chronic illness and her work to support him as sources of shame or things that he doesn't want to see or be shown about their lives together.

One of the things I've learned from responses to *Shared Resources*, as well as many years of student work in response to prompts that ask them to integrate AD into their filmmaking, is that description holds a fascination for sighted audiences around the fact that different people will describe the same things differently. Indeed, as I watch this scene, I neither see what my mother sees, nor would I describe it how she does. But in trying to think about what this actually means, I actually wonder if what's more relevant is how she weaves into her description things that are not necessarily in the image but rather tell us more about what she would like to see in it or, at least, how she would like others to

see it. AD doesn't just show an absence of neutrality; rather, description serves as a cipher for the act of seeing, only insofar as what one sees and how one describes it are inseparable from our own beliefs and what we want others to believe about them.

I point to this moment of my mother's description as an example of work, not to separate out care work from that of being cared for, or merely to think about what is gendered about this work. Rather, for me, it shows how the work of AD is also entangled with the work of ideology, as a system of belief we are put to work for and that we work to defend. Or as Kleege and Wallin write, "because audio description is inextricably part of whatever discursive practice it seeks to relate, we can explore the aesthetic, ideological, political and ethical underpinnings of this work of representation and its described object or event" (2015).

ACCESS WORK AS CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

I have recently been working, both in my own films and in my teaching, to question whether these underpinnings of the work of ideology that are both active and made perceptible in access work, particularly description, might be a means of fostering media literacy, as media becomes not only harder to separate from streams of disinformation but also is increasingly used to proliferate fascist and authoritarian regimes. I am especially interested in how description gives us ways to understand how ideology circulates not only through the construction of a film but also how audiences perceive it.

While most of my filmmaking practice has worked with the ways in which AD "shows seeing" or involves the audience in understanding where the description comes from, my interest in what access work tells us about positionality and ideology comes equally from artists and filmmakers working with captions as a primary material, both to show how hearing is constructed in a film but also to displace the meaning of sound as contingent on hearing it.

For instance, in both her video installation *Close Readings* (2015) as well as her video *Closer Captions* (2020), Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim shows that captions hinge on the positionality of the captioner(s). *Close Readings* consists of three monitors, each of which plays a selection of popular Hollywood films like *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) that have each been captioned differently by a Deaf captioner. Rather than just showing us the subjectivity or differences in what each person chooses to include in their captions, the video also questions hearing as a required or even useful capacity for writing captions, showing us how access work is, as the title suggests, an act of reading how sound produces meaning in the film. Often, this triggers a confrontation between how sound is valued differently by the Hollywood filmmakers, hearing audiences, and Deaf captioners. For instance, one captioner describes a scene from *The Little Mermaid* in which the titular mermaid Ariel must improvise a new way to communicate with her object of desire, Prince Eric, after giving away her voice to the seawitch Ursula as "the sound of a problem that's not a problem."

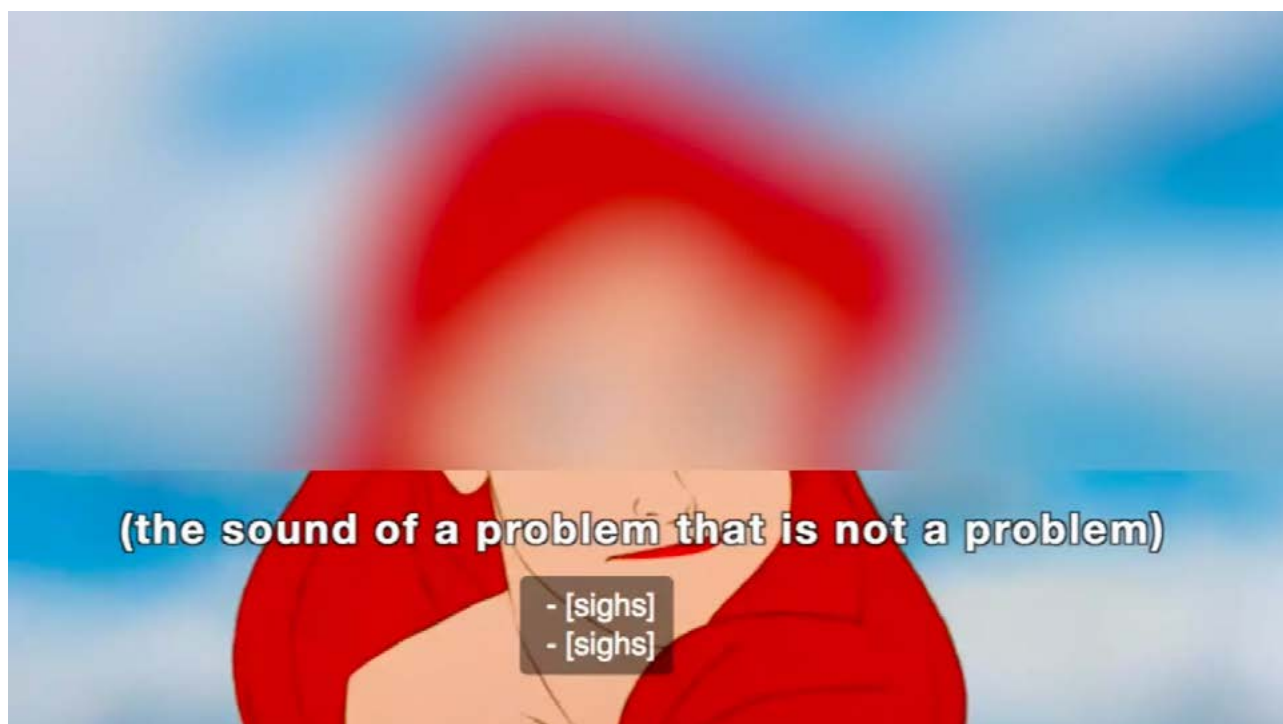


Fig. 2:
Still from *Close Readings*
(Christine Sun Kim, 2015)

This capacity of captions to read sound takes on further dimensions in *Closer Captions*, a demonstration of how closed captions often provide insufficient or even misleading information for Deaf audiences about sounds that are not dialogue, as well as a questioning of why captions should be limited only to sonic information. Beginning the video onscreen, signing directly to camera, Sun Kim makes a case for more descriptive captions, particularly regarding music, which tells the audience something about “what that sound is made of” (Sun Kim 2020, 1:04). For instance, rather than “[music]” or “[mournful violin music],” she suggests “[mournful violin music that sounds like crying alone in an empty bar] [in 1920s Paris] [you’re wearing a very tiny but fashionable hat]” (Sun Kim 2020, 1:30) Here, sound is again not reduced to its content but rather what it is intended to mean or convey—time, place, aesthetic, emotion and what the captioner associates with them.

Here, Sun Kim transitions into a demonstration of what it would look like if she “wrote the captions [her]self,” and the video becomes a kind of city symphony of a day in Berlin from beginning to end. The captions variously serve to narrate “[day begins like the first line of a poem],” to translate sounds, particularly those that might be inaudible unless very close “[the sound of eyelids opening],” and to evoke other senses “[the sound of shampoo scent floating among the fog].” (Sun Kim 2020, 2:05, 2:2, 2:32, 3:17).

Sun Kim displaces the authority of the hearing audience as the one, who has the capacity to receive and interpret the sonic information of a film. She likewise challenges the notion that sound is itself limited to the act of hearing, asking us instead to consider what “sound is made of,” in other words, how it acts on the audience and what they make of that.

READING THE “MONOFORM”

In connecting the materiality and subject positions presumed by access practices with those of media literacy, it is worth noting the frequency with which essay filmmaking practices that engage parallel dimensions of description also intervene in the use of media by state power. For instance, a scene that I show in almost every filmmaking class I teach is toward the end of the first episode of Peter Watkins’s fourteen-hour film from 1987, *The Journey*. While it concerns global movements for nuclear disarmament, the first part ends with a set of instructions to the audience about how to watch the film that also serves as a way to read news more generally. The scene begins with a woman reporter speaking in French and overdubbed in English, seen from the side, lit up by the camera’s light against a dark exterior, as she gives a report about the 1985 Shamrock Summit between US president Ronald Reagan and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. The screen then goes black, as Watkins narrates,

Throughout this film, we will be showing you examples from around the world of current television public affairs coverage, particularly the evening news. And in order to show you the increasing rapidity of television cutting, a phenomenon which is as marked in the contemporary cinema, we will indicate each direct cut or edit from one image to another with a noise such as [beep] or [boop] or [honk]. You will hear [bloop] when additional information such as a map or caption is jumped onto the screen on top of the original image (Watkins 1987, 00:44:09, sound descriptions in brackets mine).

Footage of a news broadcast appears of a plane taxiing; a French-language reporter can be heard quietly; as the word “Quebec” appears onscreen there’s a [bloop] and a [flash] sound effect, as the text disappears. Brian Mulroney and his wife exit the plane, and Watkins’s narration continues over the reporter’s voice: “We will also indicate in this way the internal cuts we have made to our scenes of dialogue in the film” (Watkins 1987, 00:45:03). As a smiling Mulroney and his entourage are about to exit the frame, there’s a cut, accompanied by a [beep] to the camera following the group from behind. Watkins narrates, and as he does is periodically interrupted by [beeps] as the news cuts from images of Mulroney to his wife and eventually to the newsroom where this footage is being edited:

Please remember that each of these cuts or changes in image means that a specific editorial decision has been made by the television producer or by the editor or by the film director to change the primary visual information we are receiving at that moment in time. In other words, if a scene is on the screen for, say, five seconds and then it is changed or cut, a specific editorial decision has been made that we the audience are only to be permitted five seconds during which to consider that image and its sound and all the complex information they may contain. (Watkins 1987, 00:45:12).

The sound of a videotape rewinding then gets louder, as the camera moves back and the tv monitor shows the news footage being rewound. Of course, in many ways it is counterintuitive to read this sequence through a lens of access work; neither the sound effects nor even the narration are captioned, and the images are themselves not described. But the descriptions and the accompanying sonic language Watkins teaches the audience to listen with do the work of naming less the content or even the ideology of the images themselves and more the ways in which these things are contingent on a certain kind of *inattention*. In attending to, describing, and interrupting how these images and sounds have been edited—and making their editing the primary content of what Watkins wants us to see or hear in them—Watkins interferes with their capacity to communicate with the audience ideologically and teaches the audience to anticipate and, in theory, build the capacity to interfere with media's role in transmitting ideology, by instead focusing on the form in which it is transmitted.

This demonstration of how to bring attention to the process of how media works to divert the audience's attention does not, of course, actually deny the ability of media (including Watkins' own film) to proliferate ideology, particularly where it is supposed to be neutral. What Watkins' strategy of teaching the audience to read the image does is, rather than read the image directly, carve out spaces in which the audience might have time to reflect and/or interpret the meaning of the "specific editorial decision-making" of the cuts, text onscreen, and cutaways in the news broadcast. Watkins elsewhere theorized the "increasing rapidity of cutting" across tv and cinema as the "monoform:"

a formatted and repetitive TV language-form of rapidly edited and fragmented images accompanied by a dense bombardment of sound, all held together by the classical narrative structure. [...] This standardisation—and the imperatives behind it—has become worse in the last decades, and now embraces virtually all forms of 'professional' film and TV usage, including 'reality TV', sports broadcasting, most documentary films, etc. (2010).

While Watkins responds to the conditions of "centralised mass distribution," the problem with the monoform as an analytic for fostering media literacy in the present moment is that, while the formal language he identifies remains as prevalent as ever in the spaces in which he identified, the distribution of audiovisual media has since become equally *decentralized*. The type of news coverage he discusses in this scene continues to be edited in a similar fashion but is now no longer simply distributed to audiences via television channels but also dispersed across social media platforms. There it is cut, excerpted, remediated, and interpreted by those not only posting the news coverage but also commenting on and sharing it. This decentralization is equally inseparable from how these clips are then circulated, reinterpreted, and sorted (where they might then be censored or simply left unwatched) by algorithms, bots, and/or AI.

MEDIA ANALYSIS AS “MIS-READING”

The media literacy practices that Watkins helpfully offers here hinge on reading media in the context of “editorial decision-making,” which presumes that we can narrow our literacy skills to reading the work of those who edited the video material. Despite this different historical context, Watkins’ model of media literacy has proved extraordinarily useful to my own sense of what’s powerful about access work and, particularly, how to develop a strategy of reading media that is not only also a form of filmmaking but also a direct interruption or intervention in how media functions by obscuring its ideological function. Here, the act of marking and describing these moments of construction are also a way of analyzing or interpreting how ideology works through editing. However, it’s not just technological and economic changes since Watkins’ reading that have led me to question other ways his argument might be used. In teaching media access alongside media literacy practices, I have become concerned how analytical tools that depend primarily on questioning editorial decision-making can also be used to actively *mis*interpret video evidence.

I first had this thought while watching Ra’anan Alexandrowicz’s film *The Viewing Booth*. It largely consists of recording sessions, where he films the reactions of a Temple University student, Maia, as she watches video documentation of life in occupied Palestine, produced by right-wing and IDF sources as well as first-person footage recorded by Palestinians of state violence, gathered and circulated by the Israeli human rights organization B’tselem. The film is meant to question the limits of video evidence and documentary images as a tool to change the minds of those who are already fixed in their beliefs. It shows Maia in the process of seeming to waver in her Zionist ideology, when presented with evidence of the violence of Israeli settler colonialism in the West Bank, only for her to end up casting doubt on the veracity of the images she sees. She decides that the images alone cannot be trusted without more “context” to make them believable. In asking questions about the authorial intent and framing of the videos—wondering if there was something off-camera that would change how she sees them—Maia confirms her “belief system,” not through a lack of media literacy, but actually through tools of media criticism akin to those proposed by Watkins in *The Journey*.



Fig. 3:
Still from *The Viewing Booth* (Ra'anan Alexandrowicz, 2019)

At one point, she reacts to a video recorded by a Palestinian father of his frightened children, woken up in the middle of the night by the IDF raiding their home. She compares the beginning and end of the video—the fact that we don't see what happened before or after the video was recorded—to cuts in a Hollywood film or tv show, arguing that the spatial and temporal frames of a video are forms of editing in themselves and, therefore, cannot be trusted as the whole truth. In watching multiple other videos, she reacts emotionally at first to hearing a baby crying, only to then mock it as an “effect” (Alexandrowicz 2019, 00:25:47). Here, she persistently attributes a kind of editorial decision-making to a genre of videomaking—first-person documentation of state violence—in which this notion of the cameraperson as the one in control of what happens on camera requires a divorcing of the image from the embodied reality they record, in this case, even making babies cry on cue. As Alexandrowicz points out to her, there are mappable distinctions we can make between video evidence, documentary film, and fiction. However, she remains unconvinced and becomes increasingly confident in her counter-reading of the images as constructed and, therefore, untrustworthy.

In discussing this film with a class last year, I was deeply troubled that a student in the class agreed with Maia that—though they could admit that she was *misreading* these images if they were direct documentation of encounters between Palestinians and the IDF—there was also no way for them to know for certain whether the footage was “faked” or not. Agreeing with Maia's point that the B'tselem logo indicates the video's untrustworthiness, they took Maia's reading of a baby crying as an “effect” literally, speculating that it could have been a sound effect, piped in by B'tselem in post-production. When I raised the point that there has never been any proven example of B'tselem having faked footage, the student remained unconvinced; here, all video footage circulated by B'tselem was inseparable from their feelings about the distribution network itself.

These feelings do not simply belong to Maia; the problem is not simply that different audiences have different feelings. The urgency in Alexandrowicz's film seems less, in the end, to be his inability to convince Maia of the horrifying truth of what she sees. Rather, it lies in how her feelings that video footage recorded by Palestinians and distributed by B'tselem cannot be trusted, and continue to be used to exonerate and expand the violence of the Israeli occupation and its genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

In *The Documentary Audit*, Pooja Rangan (2025) examines how various films and media practices including my own, and those of Alexandrowicz, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Forensic Architecture, and Brett Story have proposed other ways of listening that question the ideological underpinnings of a presumed common sense. In her reading of *The Viewing Booth*, Rangan describes Maia's work in the film as an example of "juridical listening" (143) that situates her audience-ship and reactions to the B'tselem videos as a kind of trial in the court of public opinion as part and parcel of a Zionist ideological and social strategy.

[Maia's] defensive reading [...] exemplifies what the media anthropologist Rebecca Stein has called a Zionist pedagogy of repudiation that systematic state-sponsored Israeli media campaigns against videos of Palestinian death and injury have normalized as a social script. [...] Maia checks all the conventional boxes of the Zionist repudiation script, which has worked its way from a conspiratorial corner of the internet to the political center of Israeli state and public discourse over the roughly twenty-year lifetime of testimonial videography; indeed, this very discourse has been used to justify Israel's genocidal siege on Gaza (147).

Alexandrowicz's film, as well as his essay on it, "Maia and the Boundaries of the Frame," (2020) situates the goal of the film as an experiment in trying to understand whether it is possible for documentary media and documentation of human rights abuses to change the mind of an oppositional viewer. However, Maia's defensive reading (and Rangan's analysis of it) show that she cannot be understood as solely an individual viewer. As Maia makes clear, despite wavering in the face of the emotions raised by what she sees (sadness, embarrassment, confusion), her belief system is already settled, and the film becomes a document of how she defends it. Maia's feelings and media analytical strategies for negotiating what she sees and describes about it are an assemblage of her own feelings and state-endorsed social and ideological pedagogies for processing them and putting them to work. In her descriptions of what she sees in this footage, she is not only speaking to Alexandrowicz but also to her parents, who she believes in their skepticism of B'tselem, and fellow members of the audience, who share her "belief systems," feelings, and training for maintaining them.

READING THE CONDITIONS OF CIRCULATION

In a different geopolitical context and with different goals, Tiffany Sia's film *Do Not Circulate* parses a similar archive of video evidence and a parallel context for its dissemination (for activist use to indict state violence, to elicit West-

ern sympathies, called into question for its veracity). Reading the circulation on Twitter timelines of livestreamed footage and citizen-recorded journalism of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, much of which has since been criminalized under a sweeping National Security Law censoring protest footage, the film centers on video footage of the 8/31 brutal police attack on unarmed civilians in Prince Edward Station. As Sia reproduces this footage, she narrates over it to consider not only the dispersed perspectives from which different pieces of footage documented the events of 8/31 but also how the footage was distributed and received amid “rumor, speculation, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, mistranslation, superstition, and more” (Sia 2021, 01:25).

Here, it’s not enough to simply name the genre of these videos—citizen-recorded journalism or first-person video evidence of state violence—or how they circulated on Twitter. This network of circulation is itself a multi-faceted warping of the images’ status as evidence: from bad or insufficient information to the state’s active pollution of information through “disinformation bots” to *non*-factual systems of interpretation that erode objectivity but become real, nevertheless, and foment narratives that run counter to / are posed as a threat to the state (Sia 2021, 06:11). Here, Sia shows how an analysis of what these videos document is not as simple as stating the facts.

The images of Sia’s film primarily consist of footage of the 8/31 police attacks playing on loop, their volume lowered, not only in the vertical format of how they would have been seen at the time of their circulation, but also conjuring the emotional *mise-en-scène* of the livestream as “the shortest distance to the frontlines” (Sia 2021, 3:06), affecting the audience in a similarly insistent, recursive, visceral display of their violence. Rather than reading the content of this footage, Sia’s nearly uninterrupted stream of voiceover narration focuses on how it functioned materially. She begins this material analysis by naming the 8/31 footage and the emotions it elicited—“shock, sorrow, confusion, rage”—as “fuel” for both “direct action” and the subsequent “fallout” of the images’ circulation (Sia 2021, 1:10), interpretation, and speculation about the videos’ veracity, what they failed to show, or why the public had been allowed to see them in the first place. In framing the images’ substance, not as what they show but rather they make their audience *feel* and, in turn, what those feelings made people do, Sia provides the audience with an invaluable media literacy tool. It is no longer enough to merely reflect on the intention of the video’s makers, or even whether the footage was made / released by protestors or the state. Whatever these videos are / mean / do is inseparable from the feelings they give rise to and the social actions and state repressions they impelled. Their circulation (and the conditions and restrictions placed on their circulation) are themselves events that have to be understood in order to understand what the video itself documents.

THIS FILM CONTAINS FOOTAGE, DEPICTIONS, ACTS THAT MAY CONSTITUTE
CRIMINAL OFFENSES UNDER PREVAILING LAWS. THE FOLLOWING
OFFENSE-RELATED MATERIAL IS MEANT FOR DOCUMENTARY PURPOSES ONLY.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED TO THE RESPECTIVE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

DO NOT CIRCULATE.

We could hope that, by the end of the video, Sia will be able to restore facticity or provide at least her own interpretation of whether these images were, in fact, planted by the state. Instead, her narration follows at dizzying speed—the ground shifting beneath the audience’s feet—to describe how the emotions fueled by these videos worked to incite protest; to provide evidence of the Hong Kong police’s brutality; to raise questions about where / when / why a video showing the full perspective emerged after fragmented perspectives had already been widely circulated; to create counter-forensic and fact-checking practices among demonstrators; to try (and fail) to intimidate protestors; to spread rumors about the cops in the video having killed activists; to haunt the police with the ghost of said protestors (real or imagined); to crack down on grief rituals for the rumored dead as acts of illegal dissent; to indict Chief Executive Carrie Lam in leaked audio, which was then itself claimed to be faked; to become media memory, both alive and repressed; to censor and erase both video evidence of the protests as well as of the disinformation released by the state, “an archive of proliferating dead links” (Sia 2021, 13:51).

In this stream of moving meanings and emotionally fueled reactions, we can of course see the ways in which doubt and counter-facticity serve as a cover-story for state ends. However, Sia’s film also notes that, if the longer video was circulated to scare people from protesting, it did not succeed. *Do Not Circulate* does not merely lament the collapse of reality, which Erika Balsom summarizes in her 2017 article, “The Reality-Based Community:” “post-truth politics,

Fig. 4:
Still from *Do Not
Circulate* (Tiffany Sia,
2021)

the death of facts, fake news, deep-state conspiracies, paranoia on the rise.”⁵ Rather than seeking to restore reality as independent of its framing, Sia shows us that we need new methods of reading what these images mean, what they materially consist of, and how they circulate. Tellingly, Sia does not engage in a counter-forensic investigation, like the protestors she mentions engaged in to map out where each of the cameras were in the dispersed perspective, in order to reconstruct the events and determine the veracity of the longer footage that appeared later. Regardless of what the footage shows—and in its relentless violence, it can’t help but show the unsparing violence of the police and the disposability of the brutalized civilians / protestors—it cannot be reduced to its contents but rather is meaningful primarily in terms of the feelings it provoked and the many different forms of work these emotions do and put people to work in service of.

Moreover, Sia is herself implicated in the very legal order that she chronicles as the film is inseparable from the juridical realities it depicts. As the title card that begins the film notes, the inclusion of outlawed footage in itself “may constitute criminal offenses under violating prevailing law” (Sia 2021, 0:01). Here, the matter in question shifts from the appropriate, factual, or even counterfactual interpretation of this footage to how its very existence is subject to and constituted as a threat to state power / how this threat is enforced through not only disappearing the footage the film contains but also as a process of suppressing memory of it ever happening.

Ultimately, attending to the ways that the 8/31 footage acts as different kinds of media memory for the audiences, who “viscerally [remember it] as if their own” lived experience (Sia 2021, 13:20), on the one hand, and those for whom it is part of a vague set of recollections of images showing the protestors as perpetrators, Sia works against the suppression of these media memories and the infrastructures that created them. As Sia’s film shows, to read the use of first-person video documentation of state violence is also to read its suppression, and in order to understand how this works, we must attend not only to the literal conditions of its circulation but the affective assemblages that fuel them.

These are not mere feelings, as Sia’s and Alexandrowicz’s films both show. I’m also thinking here of the critical insights that Laliv Melamed makes in her book *Sovereign Intimacies. Private Media and the Traces of Colonial Violence* (2023). Discussing homemade videos made by Israeli families commemorating dead loved ones, “soldiers who died as part of Israel’s long-running regime of security and military aggression,” (Melamed 2023, xi) Melamed describes how in policing the boundaries of grief as a private, apolitical affair—even in seeking to

⁵ Sia’s video points very clearly to what I find most confusing about Balsom’s arguments in this essay. Balsom flippantly advocates for “salvaging” Enlightenment principles and empiricism, without attending to their use as colonial tools of reality-making through violently dominating and denying the reality of colonized subjects. In seeking to redeem empiricism as a means of restoring reality or facticity, she does not consider the ideological, economic, or material function of representing facts as itself part of the conditions of “reality.”

indict the Israeli state for its role in the death of their loved ones—these videos paradoxically enshrine love, grief, and intimacy into the workings and violence of sovereign politics: “a fraught bio-political and affecto-political power, where it can quickly be used as a strategy for containing militarism and colonization rather than rupturing them” (x-xi).

Taking these insights together points to the need to develop media literacy practices that attend to how video functions, both in terms of its conditions of distribution and how these conditions hinge on putting the emotions of audiences to work toward ideological ends. Wallin and Kleege’s framing of AD as situated discourse that illuminates the work of ideology in the act of seeing, as well as Sun Kim’s demonstration of captioning having the capacity to tell us what sound is “made of” point toward places where we might be able to understand access work as a kind of media literacy. In turn, media literacy requires a nuanced understanding of the many forms of work access, audienceship, and emotion do—that they extend beyond the individual subjectivity of the describer or audience member.

What I’m arguing here is not just that we should incorporate media access practices into our work, but also seek to contest their instrumentalization by fascist and state ends. The dispersed perspective of description—which speaks to many audiences at once, engages the emotional attachments and partialities of the describer, and engages in the work (consciously or not) of defending an interpretation of the image or sound—implicitly troubles a single common sense. The political and media context of censorship and criminalization of video evidence, in which Sia is working, points equally to the need to expand notions of what we mean by access and the conditions under which it is withheld, as well as a reframing of where we access reality in the face of its so-called collapse—less in the image (or the documentary) itself than in the terms of its circulation. This includes whose body is on the line for circulating it, how the feelings about that determine how and *what* it circulates and, in turn, what it produces or makes happen.

TROUBLING SEEING / UNDERSTANDING

Miranda Pennell’s film *Man number 4* equally engages these questions by moving us through and around a single photograph of an Israeli war crime against Palestinians. Starting hyper-zoomed in, the view is shown too close to reveal the image’s contents; Pennell instead shows us a smattering of pixels, over which the filmmaker John Smith narrates. Rather than directly analyzing the image, the narration primarily describes things that are presumably visible in the wider view. While it sounds similar, these descriptions are notably not AD, as what Pennell does show onscreen—the pixels—are not described. As Pennell stays zoomed in on the pixels, the audience comes to depend on the narrator’s description of the wider view we are not shown, as well as the sound design, in order to glean anything beyond the image’s surface.

Smith narrates, “reddish sand and earth,” against the sound of crickets chirping and frogs croaking, evoking a place outside of the time and place of the image. Smith continues, “An open air pit has been dug.” Now the blur of reddish brown pixels can be imagined to show the pit of reddish sand and earth, while a cursor moves over the image. Smith then elaborates, first introducing a new detail, that this image is connected to a “report,” conflating the “you” of the audience with the “you” of Pennell, engaged in the process of looking at the image:

The report mentions a “berm.” You look the word up on the internet and you learn that a “berm” is “an artificial ridge or embankment.” Within the berm, hundreds of men dressed in similar dark costumes form a blue mass. You have trouble understanding what it is you are looking at. (Pennell 2024, 0:50).

Here, the act of description traces the live action of trying to make sense of what one should be seeing or, perhaps, more to the point, what one is being shown and why. The revelation that these blue pixels are, in fact, not only people but hundreds of people, reverses the order in which the spectator might first have trouble understanding: Israeli soldiers holding Palestinian men captive in an open air pit. The narrator’s visual description both functions to make sense of what we are shown, while also unsettling the act of seeing as, in itself, a way of understanding the picture. Rather, the act of seeing the image troubles understanding, necessitating something other than seeing.

In a series of reflections on the video, “A Change of Register (Notes on *Man number 4*)” Pennell (2025) remarks on what’s at stake in this method of zooming in and focusing at the point of not understanding what it is that she / we are being shown: “I need to erase what I think I already know [...] I’ll magnify the evidence and start again.” The tense of these descriptions are key, as they involve the audience in the liveness of the narrator’s image description. Description, or starting again from the surface details, becomes a way of both erasing what we “already know” and getting closer to what the image actually might tell us. The narrator’s description of the image itself opens out to consider what’s outside the frame and to speculate on the fundamental question of why it was taken—the position / intention of the photographer. Smith narrates:

Beyond the berm, a different kind of shape. The photographer, you decide, is standing on a raised mound above the pit. You wonder what’s in the box. In the foreground, a figure wearing a soldier’s uniform directs an LED lamp which illuminates a group of five men. (Pennell 2024, 2:09).

Here, the narration disturbingly reveals that not only does this image document a war crime; it in fact records the documentation of a war crime, or the act of staging captive Palestinian men for the camera’s capture. An Israeli soldier uses an LED lamp to illuminate five of these men, while hundreds are held in a pit behind them.

While the earlier moment of having “trouble understanding what it is you are looking at” seems at first to issue from the horror of the cruelty the photograph

documents, here, we are confronted with the fact that the image's maker has not, in fact, presumed that horror is the appeal of the image. This, then, is not an image that can be processed via a liberal-juridical logic, in which evidence is a tool for producing shame and/or redress from the perpetrator of the crime the photograph documents. Rather, it is as Pennell describes in her reflections, "a trophy" of the war criminal, and the humiliation of the captive Palestinian men in the photo is its purpose. Pennell's video seems to ask a different question in trying to confront what is difficult to understand about this and, in the process, offers us some useful ways of thinking about the role of access and description in media literacy or sense-making, in the face of images whose circulation is a form of violence and domination.

The act of description becomes itself a way of both naming and deciphering the image's contents; "Hospital green. Man number 4 is a doctor, a surgeon" (Pennell 2024, 4:02). These descriptions are then blurred with Pennell's tracing of how the image circulated across platforms and what information was both revealed and left unknown. The image "was originally posted in the Reporters' Chat section on the website of Channel 12, by the channel's military correspondent Nir Dvori" and was then forensically tracked to a specific set of coordinates in Beit Lahia, using "geo-mapping technology," by Twitter user @Fdov21 (Pennell 2024, 4:44). From this forensic analysis, a number of other details were revealed, including the identity of the doctor held captive in the foreground of the image, Dr. Khalid Hamoda. A title card at the end of the film names that "his wife and small daughter were killed in an Israeli airstrike" in the weeks before he was abducted by the Israeli military; he was released several weeks after the photograph was taken, and his whereabouts are "unknown" (Pennell 2024, 9:03). But the purpose of the video is not to simply lead up to these facts. In "A Change of Register," Pennell herself reflects on being "disappointed" (2025) by the outcomes of this forensic mode of investigation: "I had not questioned the identity of the surgeon, nor the testimony of the local witness who had claimed him as his friend and mentor. I had not doubted the nationality of the soldier, nor the authenticity of the photograph as a whole. Proof of what, for whom? I wonder."

Rather than submit to the logic that doubt is a rational response to such an image (for which there are so many similarly, unimaginably cruel instances to compare it to), nor that authenticity will then authorize the authenticator to hold the perpetrators accountable, Pennell refuses to frame the relevant line of questioning as what the photograph proves. Instead, the video follows this thread of "wondering:"

You can't help thinking about the soldier with the lamp. And you wonder about the unseen photographer; whether in fact the presence behind the camera is the journalist Nir Dvori, who will post his photograph on the Reporters' Chat section of the website. You think about the editor of that website, and the producer of the TV news channel; the commander of the army, the president of the country, the rulers of your own country; the people on Facebook—looking and commenting. And you, sat here, listening to gentle music as you look on. (Pennell 2024, 7:10).

What this wondering, instead seems to evoke, are the entanglements between the staging of captive Palestinians by the IDF, the photograph's circulation by an Israeli journalist, its role as an act of military and public relations strategy, of state power, and of interpellating audiences according to their positioning under these power relations—those who are meant to feel powerless in the face of Israel's impunity to conduct war crimes and genocide on camera; those meant to feel emboldened by this impunity.

Here, witnessing or understanding what we are shown does not prove an argument about the image but rather locates it according to its function; Smith's narrator wonders aloud with the audience what we might do with it, in turn. Beyond the use of description that sounds very close to (while not being) audio description, this is one of the things the video has most in common with crip forms of access work, a live demand to reckon with the dependency between film and audience, as contingent on capacity and incapacity, describer and listener.

CONCLUSION

Rather than reducing the image to evidence or presuming to know in advance the strategy by which the evidence will lead to justice, Pennell's descriptions in the video give access to both the work of making sense of the image as well as the work the image is attempting to do upon the audience. In many ways, the same is true of Sia's analysis of the networked circulation of the 8/31 footage in *Do Not Circulate*, as well as Alexandrowicz's engagement with Maia's live reactions and attempts to make sense of the video evidence of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and reactions to her reactions in *The Viewing Booth*.

In *The Documentary Audit*, Rangan points to the ways in which Maia's observations and analysis of the B'tselem footage in *The Viewing Booth* shares listening habits with the dominant modes of justice-oriented documentary, including that of the human rights videos she casts doubt on. As she writes; "Juridical listening of the kind that Maia practices—adversarial, fragmented, forensically driven, speculative, disaggregated, and doubt-cultivating—is not the unfortunate result of postmodern derealization: It is its engine" (150). These listening practices are those offered by the dominant paradigm of the adversarial trial, "not exceptional or even particularly modern" (150). Rangan counterposes this to Alexandrowicz's own practices of listening, which refuse the juridical logic of settler law.

The media literacy / access work that I'd like to argue these films do, or impel us to imagine, is not unlike that of how Rangan describes Alexandrowicz's listening: "It is a listening that reveals what juridical listening refuses to hear about its own listening. There is nothing cynical about such listening; it calls for an altogether different way of imagining the political beyond sides, beyond the adversarial logics of legal forums of recognition" (153).

In other words, it is not only a form of listening that allows us to name the substance of what is heard/unheard, seen/unseen, and the instrumentality of

emotion in the process. It is a form that allows us to imagine justice without carcerality. Here, the substance of our analytical work is not to win the trial or indict the state—we will lose on those terms. Rather, Rangan suggests a way to watch, listen, and read in a manner that abolishes the state's carceral imperatives and how they put us to work in its defense.

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