



# Reimagining Access: Crip Media Aesthetics and Infrastructures

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This editorial introduction was conceived and discussed jointly: Pooja Rangan wrote the section "Attacking Access," Domenico Napolitano wrote "From Mainstream Accessibility to Reimagining Access," and Annalisa Pellino, who also served as managing editor for the entire volume, wrote "Misfit Film and Media" and "Summary." We have written in three voices and parts to allow readers multiple points of access or egress. This approach has allowed us to embrace the access affordances of the academic tradition of parsing out and separately evaluating individual instances of editorial labor. Multiplicity of form, as contributor Pavitra Sundar acknowledges, is an important principle of accessibility; rendering information in diverse formats makes it accessible for people who may have varied and incompatible access needs (intra, 105-18). In that spirit, we have each compiled comments below that present the interventions of the special issue from our distinct institutional and geopolitical positionalities—which also reflects through the use of both American and British English—and vantages onto the field: following Pooja Rangan's overview of recent disability justice-informed critiques of technosolutionist discourses of access, Domenico Napolitano reviews the implications of disability media studies for Universal Design and surveys the state of the field in Italy, and Annalisa Pellino frames the volume's interventions around "access aesthetics" within the scope of film phenomenology, culminating in a detailed summary of the contributions.

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## ATTACKING ACCESS

Since 2019, I have regularly taught an undergraduate seminar course titled "Disability, Media, and the Art of Access" at Amherst College, a small liberal arts college in Western Massachusetts. Early in the semester, I engage students in an ice-breaker activity where we collectively brainstorm colloquial uses of "access." The results are often revealing and the ensuing discussion always lively. This is the list students generated in Spring 2023, when I last taught the class (presented in unedited form):



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- You access your email (using a password)
- To gain access to restricted areas or information (for eg: using an ID card to enter a building, or having a designation on an ID card that lets you enter “restricted” parts of the building or facility.
- Win an all-access backstage pass (for eg: at a music show, so you get to meet the performers in their green room/rehearsal space)
- Class and Access Resource Center (one of the OICR [Office of Identity and Cultural Resources] resource centers)
- Access to food
- Access to medication
- Free menstrual products in Frost [Amherst College Library] and Keefe [Amherst College Student Center] <https://amherststudent.com/article/providing-free-menstrual-products-on-campus/>
- Restroom Access Act: <https://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/get-involved/be-an-advocate/restroom-access>
- Access denied for file access without permissions (as in, if you don't have the right clearance, you may not be able to delete a file)
- Public access to...
- Access readings, course documents/materials Student/Faculty ID card access
- From Middle English “A sudden attack of illness”; from Latin *accedere* “to approach” (e.g., accede)
- “Library Access Assistant/Supervisor” work positions at Frost
- Access to Five College courses and resources [Amherst College is part of the “Five Colleges” Consortium with four other institutions]
- Access to the 5 colleges via PVTB [Pioneer Valley Transportation Authority] bus (advertised to prospective students as an opportunity; a sense of mobility)
- Access to media/streaming subscriptions
- Access to certain websites or college student discounts with our Amherst college account
- Access to car
- Access to affordable housing
- Access to affordable healthcare
- Access to a support network
- Access to education
- Tech support in stores for the technologically impaired
- Access to schools
- Access training

It does not take long for students to arrive at the insight that serves as a central premise for this special issue: access, as it has been framed for us by a whole range of corporate and bureaucratic interfaces—from the portals that authenticate healthcare and library access to the automated features encoded into software updates—is synonymous with restriction and coerced compliance even as it seems to name a liberal-democratic ideal of inclusivity. As Neta Al-

alexander puts it in her recent book *Interface Frictions: How Digital Debility Reshapes our Bodies*, reviewed in this volume by Dylan Mulvin, “access should not be treated as a ‘self-evident good’ and, instead, should be interrogated to ask, Access to what and for whom?” (2025, 6). Under systems of racial capitalism, colonialism, and carceral confinement, as we go on to discover over the course of the semester, access to affordable food, safe shelter, care, education, recreation, and support networks—material and relational resources that *ought* to be commonplace and available to all, as the entry on public access haltingly acknowledges—is regulated, permitted, surveilled, securitized, redlined, gerrymandered, monetized, privatized, and commodified. The “social model” of disability allows us to understand disability as an outcome of barriers to access, and the law as an avenue for rectifying this wrong, in the grand tradition of civil rights. The intersectional lens of the movement for disability justice, in turn, shows how disability is politicized and capacitated by larger systems of organized debilitation that render the privilege of disability as political identity inaccessible to institutionalized, incarcerated, or racialized populations (Mingus 2011; Puar 2017, 15, 22; Ben-Moshe 2020, 28). Access, that seemingly innocuous and ubiquitous concept, suddenly emerges as the key that unlocks an entirely new imagination of communication and community.

When Annalisa and Domenico approached me to co-edit a special issue of *Cinéma & Cie* on film, media, and disability, I shared my sense that some of the most exciting provocations at this intersection take up questions of access as a central contradiction or dialectic of “dismedia” inquiry. Defined influentially by Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne as a critical attention to “disability as a constituting dimension of media, and media as a constituting dimension of disability” (2017, 366), a dismedia approach calls on media theorists and historians to embrace disability as a method that foregrounds the different and varied ways in which disabled and minoritarian users interact with media—whether that takes the form of “crippled or minor media or of mainstream access” (368)—in their efforts to survive and thrive within an unjust digital landscape. In another pioneering study from that same year, Elizabeth Ellcessor warns against the deceptive positivism surrounding access (the aura of inclusivity of which my students were rightly skeptical), writing that a dismedia theory of access “requires attention to uses and the conception of access as a phenomenon-in-progress rather than an end state” (2017, 8).

Writing a mere three years before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ellcessor, Mills and Sterne could not possibly have anticipated the extent to which the “frenzied” mainstreaming of accessibility and access features (in the words of Deaf-Blind artist John Lee Clark) would come to dominate the post-pandemic world of remote work and 24/7 media consumption. Social media companies and tech giants have been quick to rebrand or “cripwash” the innovative survival techniques and hard-fought legal battles of people with disabilities as proof of their own pioneering achievements in accessibility (Alexander 2025, 59–76), even as a poorly regulated global digital economy takes its slow and uneven toll on human bodies through what Alexander terms processes of “digital debility” (2025,

7; think: the systematic destruction of telecommunications infrastructure during the genocide in Gaza; the chronic illnesses of Global South workers exposed to electronic waste; drought-impacted communities further devastated by water shortages from AI data centers; desk workers plagued by carpal-tunnel syndrome and migraines; the emotional dysregulation and premature cognitive decline of Zoomers). But precisely because of these thinly veiled acts of state and corporate theft, whose multi-pronged and predatory attacks on our bodies and commons recall that earlier, medieval understanding of access as an attack or breach (Fritsch 2016, 23; Smilges 2023, 39–52), the past decade or so has seen a groundswell of crip resistance, activism, scholarship, and artistic innovation—what Lichen (previously Aimi) Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, describing the world-building and -dismantling practices of disabled people and communities, dub “crip technoscience” (2019, 4)—that has laid bare the political and ethical shortcomings of mainstream technosolutionist discourses of access.

A defining feature of these interventions, many of which are important foundations for the contributors to this volume, is that they follow disability justice-informed interventions (eg: Puar 2017; Mingus 2017; Lazard 2019; Ben-Moshe 2020) in rejecting the individualistic, rights-based, assimilationist understanding of access, such as that associated with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, a landmark piece of antidiscrimination legislation that frames access in terms of individual institutional concessions or *accommodations*. Whereas an earlier generation of disability scholars viewed the state and legislative activism as ameliorative forces, disability justice teaches that any effort to rectify access exclusions is incomplete “without a critical assessment of how those exclusions first came to be and how they continue to function” (Fritsch 2016, 25–26; see also Titchkosky 2011, 28). Contributor Chiara Roccattello arrives at a similar conclusion in her analysis of the *Cartoon Able* Model, a pioneering effort by Italian studio Animundi to formalize sensory access in children’s content. When accessibility is prioritized solely at the level of form without corresponding transformations in production cultures, labor practices, institutional policies, and regulatory frameworks, as she finds, it fails to sustain inclusive off-screen processes and practices. Elizabeth Ellcessor embraces this insight as method in her contribution, which examines how disabled users treated domestic security devices like smoke detectors and garage door openers, precursors of “smart” technologies, as platforms for access hacks—or “frictional access practices” (Hamraie and Fritsch 2019, 5) where the “corporeal rubs against the technological” (Mulvin intra, 155)—that illustrate a different understanding of “smartness” that repudiates ableist and securitized discourses of convenience. Combining archival inquiry with analysis of devices and user experiences informed by media and material history, Ellcessor shows that disability media histories require us to combine representational analyses with considerations of “the material, experiential, and industrial structures through which disability informs, shapes, and transforms media technologies and cultures” (Ellcessor intra, 93).

At stake in this reframing are two crucial shifts: an understanding of access as infrastructural rather than superstructural or epiphenomenal and of access

infrastructures as relational rather than solely logistical or technical. Several of our contributors take their lead from the mutual aid work of disability communities and collectives who, having reckoned with the limits of state and institutional accountability, have proactively taken on the mantle of building autonomous networks and infrastructures of care (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019; Adler-Bolton and Vierkant 2022; Schalk 2022). Infrastructure is understood in this volume not only in the spatial sense of the built environment, but also in bio-temporal terms managed and distributed by carceral regimes (Sales intra, 166) and what Azalia Primadita Muchransyah, building on Jina B. Kim's analysis of the "support labor of care, service, and maintenance disproportionately performed by women and people of color, as well as the more informal networks that distribute resources in the absence of state assistance" (2025, 6), calls "relational infrastructures" (intra, 99–115). In Muchransyah's discussion of approaches to inclusivity in the Indonesian film festival landscape, accessibility surfaces as a shifting process of social negotiations and arrangements among festival organizers, volunteers, disabled moviegoers, and commercial partners. Scaffolded by interviews with *bisik* (whispering) buddies and blind audience members, as well as participant observation and program materials, Muchransyah's contribution is a methodological illustration of global south resourcefulness—an example of what Margaret Price might term "adaptation" to shifting access needs (2018, 196)—in the absence of durable infrastructures. My own contribution to this volume excavates the halting and necessarily stealthy efforts of institutionalized and incarcerated people to create access for one another under the punitive gaze of the neoliberal carceral state. I contrast these avowedly anti-carceral efforts at building what Mia Mingus calls "liberatory access" (2017) with the compromised and frequently unethical preoccupations with carceral access that dominate the progressive documentary imagination.

Like Muchransyah, Pavitra Sundar reframes access as a matter of relationships rather than logistics in her analysis of "access intimacy," or the anticipatory, relational work of meeting access needs in *Time Bent, Folded, Exhausted*, a collaborative conversation among two neurodivergent artists, Indonesian composer Jay Afrisando and Afro-German writer Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner, navigating ableism in their personal and professional lives (Mingus 2017). Sundar's exquisite attention to the "access aesthetics" of *Time Bent*, that is, the artists' creative and playful use of access features such as audio descriptions, captions, and subtitles situates *Time Bent* as an important contribution to a growing canon of crip film, video, and performance art that, in the words of artist Jordan Lord (discussed in my contribution as a pivotal voice in this conversation) employs access features as "primary formal material that must be understood alongside other 'creative' filmmaking labor such as writing, cinematography, and editing" (Lord intra, 32). In their own contribution to this volume, Jordan Lord offers a new and exciting account of access work as a practice of critical media literacy and pedagogy. Whereas their first feature film *Shared Resources* (2021) uses access features to both deconstruct and build a new political vocabulary of documentary form, Lord now locates their own evolving

practice as an effort to work against fascist appropriations of documentary realism to promulgate disinformation. Through readings of formally reflexive films and art practices by both disabled and nondisabled artists, Lord situates the new disability arts movement as part of a longer tradition of political documentary that teaches audiences to read what the image does.

## FROM MAINSTREAM ACCESSIBILITY TO REIMAGING ACCESS

Starting in the 1980s, following the civil rights struggles led by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the UK, disability studies emerged in the European context as a critical interdisciplinary field that interrogates disability not as an inherent biological deficit but as a historically contingent and socially produced category (Oliver 2019). Disability studies examines how societies produce, represent, regulate, and govern disability. Within this broader intellectual landscape, media studies has become an increasingly important site of inquiry, recognising that media not only reflect social attitudes toward disability but also actively shape understandings of normality and bodily difference. Visual and narrative conventions naturalize able-bodiedness as the unmarked norm while positioning disabled bodies as exceptional, pathological, inspirational, or threatening (Garland-Thomson 2009). At the same time, digital media embed particular conceptions of the “ideal user,” shaping agential possibilities for some bodyminds while excluding others (Napolitano and Sicca, 2025). In doing so, they actively contribute to the creation of subtle and often invisible accessibility thresholds.

Disability media studies is thus the emerging field that interrogates the norms through which media produce or deny access for particular bodyminds (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 2017). This approach can be critical towards mainstream understandings of accessibility that inform laws and policies. The United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disability (2006) has undoubtedly played a crucial role in establishing accessibility as a fundamental condition for advancing disability justice. At the same time, the conception of accessibility promoted within mainstream legal frameworks is largely centred on Universal Design—an approach that aims to design spaces, products and services that are free from barriers and can be used by anyone (Doussard et al. 2024; Pullin 2009). However, Universal Design has been criticized by disability activists and scholars for its depoliticization of the cause of disability justice. Being addressed to “everyone,” Universal Design implicitly disavows disability, rather than emphasizing its claims (Hamraie 2017). Moreover, this mainstream approach to accessibility has been the subject of significant criticism, particularly within disability media studies. The papers collected in this special issue contribute to this critique by reimagining accessibility in relation to media aesthetics and film. I identify four main lines of critique: the predominance of the physical dimension over sensory and cognitive considerations; the static and one-dimensional

conception of barriers; the normative character of accessibility standards; the reduction of accessibility to mere regulatory compliance.

The first critique highlights how this approach has prioritized physical accessibility while underestimating the challenges posed by neurodiversity and sensory diversity (Titchkosky 2011). For example, Tanya Titchkosky's perspective understands accessibility not only as the design of products and environments but also as an embodied experience—namely, how individuals experience their interactions with barriers: "Access is a way people have of relating to the ways they are embodied as beings in particular places where they find themselves" (2011, 3). Embodied experience, in its complex entanglement of physical, sensory, cognitive, and cultural dimensions, profoundly shapes self-perception and the ways individuals engage with the world. Disability justice activist Mia Mingus introduces the concept of "access intimacy" (2011) to emphasize that accessibility also involves emotional and relational dimensions. For Mingus, the stakes lie in building transformative relationships grounded in earned trust. This entails creating conditions in which individuals can disclose their access needs while sharing the emotional burdens associated with the risks of stigma and discrimination that may arise from such disclosure. This perspective highlights that accessibility is intrinsically tied to questions of care and justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). As Pooja Rangan argues in her contribution to this special issue, access intimacy—especially as practiced among communities who are forced to build alternative infrastructures inside hostile environments or institutions—builds an altogether different, if fragile, understanding of trust and intimacy than those trafficked in mainstream understandings of documentary "access."

The second critique underscores that the meaning of barriers is often taken for granted, overlooking their relational and dynamic nature. Barriers emerge from specific contexts and the power relations embedded within them. They are co-constructed through interactions among people, environments, media, and social meanings, such that a barrier in one context may not exist in another (Faranda 2023; Napolitano and Sicca 2024). Overlooking this dimension risks reducing the actions required to remove barriers to overly simplified solutions. In his *Open Access Manifesto*, nonvisual social practice artist Carmen Papalia defines accessibility as "a creative, long-term process. It's not just about the built environment, but about ideas of agency and power... relating to ongoing practices of holding, claiming, or advocating for agency in various contexts" (2018). This perspective emphasizes that access is not achieved solely through the adaptation of environments but requires rethinking how marginalized groups and individuals can exercise agency within spaces. As highlighted by Azalia Primadita Muchransya and Pavitra Sundar in their respective articles published in this issue, barriers may emerge from historically entrenched forms of social discrimination and normative expectations, even in the absence of visible obstacles. Addressing this dimension involves understanding accessibility as fundamentally relational and as a process that can provoke discomfort, since it challenges the status quo and the entrenched privileges of dominant social groups.

The third critique highlights that accessibility standards are often developed based on stereotypical assumptions about the “ideal user” (Hamraie 2017). Lichen (previously Aimi) Hamraie (2017) notes that the ergonomic and psycho-cognitive knowledge employed in the design of accessible products and environments can ultimately produce heteronormative guidelines for bodyminds. Within this nexus of knowledge and power, accessibility risks serving processes of normalization rather than fostering inclusion. To counter this risk, Hamraie argues that: “Accessibility is an open-ended process, a negotiation, and an intersectional and multimodal issue, rather than an easily achievable endpoint... critical accessibility mapping as ‘convivial design,’ a never finished and always troubled project of access experimentation” (2018, 457). Their concept of accessibility as “convivial design” understands design not merely as a technical process but as a social practice that promotes autonomy and human interaction within a framework of social cohesion. This approach is further explored by Chiara Roccatello and Elizabeth Ellcessor in their respective articles published in this special issue.

Lastly, the fourth critique points out that a compliance-centred approach reduces the cultural and transformative dimensions of accessibility, producing unintended and distorted effects (Hamraie 2018; Cachia 2023). For example, the issue of “legitimacy traps” (Sandholtz 2015) refers to situations in which organizations comply with regulations solely to avoid penalties, without creating the conditions necessary for meaningful accessibility interventions. Additionally, this approach can result in the “invisibilization of barriers” (Titchkosky 2011; Faranda 2023)—for instance, when signs or formal accessibility measures create the illusion of access in places that remain inaccessible in practice, such as bathrooms that are inadequately equipped or ramps that do not meet actual access needs. Compliance, when shaped by rigid regulatory frameworks, produces a limited, simplified, and monocausal understanding of accessibility and of the ways in which it can be enacted.

Accessibility cannot be simply achieved as a fixed outcome; rather, it requires sustained grassroots engagement grounded in mutual support and creative, situated solutions. These solutions, as highlighted by Jordan Lord’s contribution, involve transformations in expressive languages and media practices, not merely to fulfil compliance requirements but as political forces that amplify the ideological stakes of cinematic conventions for diverse audiences. This perspective also advocates for a more immersive and reflexive approach, one that embeds accessibility from the earliest stages of artistic creation. It thus becomes part of the artwork’s aesthetic dimension, transforming it into a generative site for the production of meaning. In this context, accessibility is not solely a matter of ensuring sensory access to artistic and media content (by accommodating different ways of processing sensory stimuli) but also of intervening in the creative process itself, allowing it to be shaped and transformed by the multifaceted nature of access (Alexander et al. 2023).

The Italian artistic landscape presents interesting examples of this approach to “accessibility as an aesthetic principle” (D’Amico 2025). The artists associat-

ed with Al.Di.Qua Artists (Alternative Disability Quality),<sup>1</sup> including performers such as Chiara Bersani, Diana Anselmo, and Cristina Kristal Rizzo, challenge traditional understandings of disability art through radical experimentation with language and artistic practices. Their works explicitly address accessibility in both content and expressive modalities, framing it as an aesthetic and political concern. Diana Anselmo's performances integrate closed captions, sign language, dance, visual and auditory cues to deconstruct ableist stereotypes about Deaf people. *Je Vous Aime* (2024) investigates the relationship between precinema and the history of oppression experienced by the Deaf community. The title refers to the first public projection created with the *Phonoscope*, a device for reproducing moving images developed by Georges Demenÿ in 1891. Lasting less than a second, the work depicts Demenÿ himself pronouncing the phrase *Je vous aime* ("I love you"). While this projection marks a foundational moment in the history of cinematography, it also exemplifies one of the earliest coercive applications of moving-image technology against Deaf people. The film was conceived as a tool for the oralist "treatment" of deafness through phonetic and visual methods—teaching Deaf people lip-reading and spoken articulation—within a framework that prohibited sign language and considered deafness as a pathology rather than a cultural (Virdi 2020). Diana Anselmo's work underscores the close relationship between disability and the history of media—a relationship that has frequently been shaped by processes of pathologization, normalization, and exploitation (Mills and Sterne 2017)—allowing diverse audiences to experience ableism as both a sensory and political phenomenon.

These works recall internationally renowned artistic practices, such as those of Christine Sun Kim<sup>2</sup> (who generously provided the cover image for this special issue), which reappropriate sound from a Deaf perspective; Aislinn Thomas, whose work *Three windows described by three voices [...]* (2018)<sup>3</sup> integrates audio description at the core of visual artworks; and Carmen Papalia's *Mobility Device* (2019),<sup>4</sup> in which the blind performer replaces his white cane with a marching band through the streets of New York, thereby challenging paternalistic imaginaries surrounding accessibility. In these examples, "[a]ccessibility [is seen] not as optional, segregated access features but rather as an aesthetic principle, a formal challenge, and a fount of narratorial invention" (Alexander et al. 2023, 52). Reimagining access thus entails moving beyond individual accommodation and fostering broader transformations—ones that challenge, experiment with, hack, disrupt, and alter media aesthetics and infrastructures.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/al.di.qua.artists/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://christinesunkim.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Aislinn Thomas, *Three windows described by three voices [...]*. Audio, 17 minutes 43 seconds. 2018. <https://aislinnthomas.ca/index.php/portfolio/three-windows-as-described-by-three-voices/>.

<sup>4</sup> Carmen Papalia, *Mobility Device*. Collaborative performance, 2019. <https://www.thehighline.org/art/projects/carmen-papalia/>.

## MISFIT FILM AND MEDIA

What does it sound like to fall in love? And how can sound be visualised when it cannot be heard? “The sound of falling in love,” the caption on the cover of this special issue accompanies an image from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, specifically the scene in which Ariel first encounters Prince Eric. It is drawn from Christine Sun Kim’s *Close Readings* (2015), a four-channel video installation that re-edits scenes from five well-known Hollywood films—*2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989), *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990), *The Addams Family* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991)—in which sound, speech, or sign language play a central role in different ways. While the upper three-quarters of the frame are blurred, leaving Ariel’s close-up partially obscured yet still recognisable, the lower portion of the image—normally reserved for subtitles and captions—remains fully legible. Kim silences the film and invites four Deaf and hard-of-hearing collaborators to write new captions over the existing ones. The same scene is therefore read in multiple ways, challenging the idea of captions as transparent, objective, or neutral translations and instead exposing their interpretive, subjective, and provisional nature. In doing so, it disrupts canonical expectations of the image–sound relation and turns the sensory limitations and exclusions of audiovisual media into a fascinating aesthetic feature. By staging the tension between image and sound, and by making sound a visual instance through an ekphrastic and synaesthetic gesture, the work also rejects the assumption that the image is self-evident and meaningful. Rather, it depends on contextual and performative affordances. Kim’s image of Ariel falling in love thus epitomizes this volume’s central concerns: the disabled spectatorial experience, and the generative force of misfitting film and media as both critique and creative practice.

In a 2019 special issue of *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, Robert McRuer urged scholars to crip cinema and media studies—“a mode of analysis that always gestures toward other possibilities for producing, consuming, reading, and interacting with disability representation” (139). Elizabeth Ellcessor and Andrew Kirkpatrick followed with a complementary call to “study disability for a better cinema and media studies:”

A disability perspective, then, is about decentering the physically and cognitively “normal” character, the “normal” viewer, the “normal” producer, and so on; this has profound consequences for the study of media texts, industrial practices, social relations, media policies, modes of reception, and the design of technologies and spaces. It is about rethinking the stories told, the writers and actors hired, the economics of industries, the politics of access and representation, and the range of possible readings (think “cripping the text” as analogous to “queering the text”). It is about listening to new voices and engaging in new political struggles over power and privilege (140).

Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick describe disability as a “variation of access” (142), thereby opening the way for access to function as an aesthetic category—a concept we take as central in this *Cinéma&Cie* special issue. A distinct strand of

crip aesthetics, the “aesthetics of access” (Ginsburg and Rich 2022)—or, from a different disciplinary perspective grounded in the performing arts and museum practice, “access aesthetics” (Cachia 2022, 2024)—foregrounds access as a generative practice that reshapes media forms and methods. This approach examines how material features that enable accessibility become woven into a work’s sensory and temporal fabric, influencing how audiences perceive, interpret, and experience it, thus fostering modes of *being-with* rather than *looking-at* disability. It redirects attention from representation to relationality, from the spectacle of impairment to the infrastructures of participation, care, and co-presence that enable cultural encounters for diverse publics.

This trajectory from crip theory to access aesthetics provided the theoretical backdrop for our collaboration, which operationalises these conceptual shifts through aesthetic and infrastructural lenses. Grounded in film studies’ longstanding interest in sensoriality (Dorval and Michaud 2025) and phenomenology, the volume asks what emerges when that orientation intersects with crip theory (McRuer 2006), politics, and genealogies that in turn overlap with queer epistemologies (Chen et al. 2023, 40). Moving beyond the Merleau-Pontian strand of phenomenological film analysis prominent since the 1990s (Sobchack 1992, 2000, 2004; Williams 1991; Marks 2000), this collection advances a more explicitly political phenomenology of cinema, one that reads bodyminds on- and off-screen through the lens of disability and impairment.

Disability is here emphasized as both a queer condition and a method (Kafer 2013), not only at the textual level but also in terms of production, circulation, and reception (Lameris, Verbeek 2024), with the aim of questioning “film as a primary site for the consolidation of structures of [...] ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’” (McRuer 2019, 136) and, simultaneously, stretching “the boundaries of conventional spectatorship” (Greenberg 2022, xii). In doing so, we draw on critical access studies (Hamraie 2017), which insist that access is a contested site of political negotiation and epistemic work within a disabling technoculture (Alexander and Sterne 2025), thus moving beyond the “often unwittingly” ableist approaches to cinema studies (Ginsburg and Rich 2022), as well as the representational concerns of “disability aesthetics” (Siebers 2010) and the exoticism produced by stereotypical portrayals of disability in mainstream film (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 172).

Such a phenomenological perspective on spectatorship is informed by disability studies interventions that observe a “phenomenological turn in disability arts” (Sandahl 2020, 125) and call for a “political phenomenology of impairment” (Sterne 2021), allowing us to reimagine embodied cinematic experience not merely as perceptual or aesthetic but as constituted by relations of power and resistance, exclusion and access. Accordingly, the issue extends “access aesthetics” from film analysis to cinematic experience—integrating the former within the latter—and foregrounds the infrastructural dimensions of cinematic practice and context. Embodiment is therefore considered through its relation to media environments and how those relations can produce critical—and at times joyful—forms of misfit.

Given this, and within the framework of access as an operative crip concept for this special issue, I propose using the notion of "misfit" as a heuristic *passe-partout* for reading the collected essays. A feminist materialist concept mobilised by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011, 2024), misfit

emphasizes context over essence, relation over isolation, mediation over origination. Misfits are inherently unstable rather than fixed, yet they are very real because they are material rather than linguistic constructions. The discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is, produces fits and misfits. The utility of the concept of misfit is that it definitively lodges injustice and discrimination in the materiality of the world more than in social attitudes or representational practices, even while it recognizes their mutually constituting entanglement. (Garland-Thomson 2011, 593).

Thus, by shifting attention to the physical world, the term offers a phenomenological account of disability that emphasises the material entanglement of impairment, disability and the physical environment, by highlighting their performative arrangement and potential disjunction. In different ways, the contributions in this issue, investigate how such disjunctions function as sites of critique, creativity, and re-orientation, namely the emancipatory possibilities of crip aesthetics and infrastructures, as well as and their pitfalls. Some essays probe the reverse side of access by examining media ecologies and institutional infrastructures in the public (Lord; Rangan) and domestic spheres (Ellcessor). Others analyse how multimodal strategies may elicit distinct sensory pleasures within media experience (Sundar) or, conversely, generate sensory overload that challenges rather than accommodates impaired bodyminds (Roccatello). Further interventions highlight both the performativity of crip aesthetics (Sundar) and the fragility of access practices (Muchransya), illustrating how material and sensory arrangements shape cinematic experience rather than merely supplement it. By the same token, some contributions explicitly draw on relational modes of access, building on Mia Mingus's concepts of "liberatory access" and "access intimacy" (2017), to show how access practices unfold as situated, negotiated enactments rather than as merely technical fixes. They envision collective, liberatory forms of access in documentary practice (Rangan) that resist abuses of power by state actors, and describe the performative nature of access practices that arise from encounters between disabled and non-disabled bodyminds, media forms and environments—both on-screen (Sundar) and off-screen (Muchransya).

Together, these contributions underscore the volume's focus on access's double-sided nature and on misfitting's generative potential (Garland-Thomson 2024, 7) as central to reimagining cinematic labour, infrastructure, and theoretical frameworks. This orientation is evident in "radically accessible" video art and contemporary artist film (Watlington 2019; Mills and Alexander 2022), experimental documentary—as a "medium of crip creativity" (Rangan 2022)—and, more broadly, in experimental cinematic practices praised for their capacity to alter the spectator's perception by "forcing a new perspective, offering estrangement" (Greenberg 2002, xi). It also operates in animation, with its capacity

to reflexively produce imaginary worlds, and in “creative-genre” films such as porn (Weisner 2024).

For clarity, this special issue does not deal with the idea of “disability body genres,” nor does it present “an anatomy of cinematic disability”—that uses disability as a “representational device” and “narrative prosthesis” (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 156–81).<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the body of work presented here confirms that not only are certain forms, modes, and genres better suited to promoting disability-oriented spectatorship, but that some are also inherently more accessible than others—namely, more (infra)structurally open to disabled engagement. In particular, they possess a narrative and aesthetic permeability that allows them to absorb elements long considered counterintuitive to institutional cinematic language—which privilege suturing features—thereby *misfitting* established film canons and cinema industries—where the assembly line of production and circulation remains standardized and cannot afford to account for non-normative audiences.

This multi-faceted enquiry unfolds across a spectrum of media contexts and practices throughout the volume: animation (Roccatello), politically engaged social documentaries (Rangan, Lord), beyond-cinema performative practices (Sundar), festival curatorship (Muchransya), as well as the domestic media environment (Elcessor). Read together, the essays form a “concatenation of misfits” or, paraphrasing Garland-Thomson, different “instances of [media] misfitting:” generative, “awkward encounters, graceless engagements between things in the material world” (2024, 6).

## SUMMARY

With their distinct authorial agency, Jordan Lord can be situated within a “Disability Cinema New Wave” (Carter Long 2022) or the “New Disability Media, a movement in which disabled filmmakers are at the forefront of the repositioning disability, acting as both creators and subjects while deploying new aesthetic strategies” (Gainsburg and Rich 2022). In their essay, Lord analyses how access practices such as audio description and open captions reshape documentary aesthetics, framing them as matters of access-driven media literacy. Indeed, building on Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin’s characterisation of “audio description as a pedagogical tool” (2015), Lord treats these practices primarily as media competencies and therefore as interpretative acts that function as critical instruments through which meaning is negotiated. They argue that the describer is necessarily subjective and politically positioned, and thus capable of challenging latent ideologies of audiovision beyond the formal editing analysis. By comparing politically engaged documentaries such as Peter Watkins’s

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<sup>5</sup> Nor does it engage with clinical or therapeutic perspectives on film and media, or with what has recently been conceptualised by European scholarship as an Audiovisual Turn in Practices of Care (Sabatino et al. 2026).

*The Journey* (1987), Ra'anan Alexandrowicz's *The Viewing Booth* (2019), and Tiffany Sia's *Do Not Circulate* (2021), Lord emphasises access as critical labour, showing how material, institutional and circulatory arrangements can produce conditions of fit and non-fit—and how such mismatches can be exposed and reconfigured through politically situated practice.

A similar triangulation of critical media literacy, pedagogical concern, and structural commitment—here applied to animated cinema—motivates Chiara Roccatello's detailed contribution. Roccatello examines the Cartoon Able model developed by the Italian studio Animundi (Cinecittà, Rome) in collaboration with the publisher Puntidivista and co-produced with RAI Kids for the series *Lampadino e Caramella nel MagiRegno degli Zampa* (2020–). She offers a close reading of both on- and off-screen choices surrounding the series' production and transmission, and critically assesses the consequences when formal and textual experiments aimed at increasing accessibility are not supported by institutional measures that would render them structurally sustainable and scalable. Although the author regards the Cartoon Able model as offering unprecedented solutions in animation and as indicative of a broader epistemic shift, her analysis also suggests that it remains an isolated instance and a wider reconfiguration has yet to materialise. She argues that a genuine transition—from a primarily entertainment-oriented function towards a pedagogical and cultural one—requires public commitment in the form of operational guidelines, scalable models, and dedicated funding. Indeed, as a public broadcaster, RAI's lack of such institutional support hinders both the production and the distribution of initiatives of this kind.

While Lord's and Roccatello's contributions offer—more or less explicitly—useful insights into conceptualising access work as a form of media literacy (in Lord's case grounded in their teaching practice), Pooja Rangan approaches the issue differently. She mounts a pointed critique of prevailing understandings of access within documentary imaginaries, contesting the access fetishism that upholds the “masculinist and ableist ideal of the fearless filmmaker” (intra, 71)—an ethic common across neoliberal documentary frameworks in which access is valorised as a virtue and an end in itself rather than as a political, relational practice requiring institutional commitments. Rangan demonstrates how unquestioned access can turn documentary into a tool that shields the carceral state from accountability—a resource that accrues documentary capital and protects filmmakers from liability—rather than a means to enable the emancipation of marginalised and disabled subjects, who may be exploited by the very legal guarantees purportedly designed to protect them. Historically deployed in social-issue documentaries as what Rangan terms a “smokescreen for state violence” (intra, 70), access therefore becomes a matter of privilege and bad conscience: “a question of risk management rather than political struggle” (intra, 76). Her analysis of social-issue documentaries addressing carcerality, psychiatry, and their mental-health legacies examines Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), Jordan Lord's Documentary Participation Agreement, and Rahsan Thomas's *Friendly Signs* (2023). Framed as a thesis–antithesis–syn-

thesis trajectory, Rangan's intervention traces a development from access as *accessory* to its radical interrogation and reimagining under different assumptions—uncovering the fallacy of visibility as a form of currency that sustains the voyeuristic gaze, and reclaiming access as a fundamentally relational process rather than a commodity.

Josephine Sales' dispatch on her installation *Total Running Time* (2023, 2026), hosted in the reviews section, extends this critique by moving from the politics of access to the infrastructures that regulate access, recasting time itself as a carceral medium. She approaches access—denied, restricted, and annihilated—through the carceral management of time, understood here as an infrastructure that charts how delay and interruption structure experiences of disability, debility, and "death-by-incarceration." Through clocks, light fields, sonic transducers, and wall reliefs, the installation materializes the relationship between time and debility, refracted through Jasbir Puar's "prognosis time" and Walid Daqqa's notion of "parallel time," offering itself as a piece of pure abstract cinema.

In a different manner, Rangan's diagnosis of access in documentary is echoed in Elizabeth Ellcessor's study of domestic media, where access functions as a tool of neoliberal governance and security. Rangan and Ellcessor converge on a crucial point: access is not neutral but embedded in power relations. Ellcessor's contribution offers a historical counter-narrative of home automation in the late-20th-century US—a period that coincides with milestones in civil-rights struggles such as the emergence of the Independent Living Movement, the articulation of Universal Design principles, and the passage of federal accessibility laws—showing how ableist approaches transformed accommodations into mechanisms of surveillance. Using a "dismediating cultural history" methodology, she expands the definition of medium to include home devices (the smoke detector and the garage-door opener) as technologies of domestic governance that produce meaning, ideology, and forms of control. In her alternative smart-home media-archaeology, Ellcessor shows that disabled people anticipated and helped design many solutions aimed at safer, more accessible environments, even though mainstream media histories—shaped by neoliberal consumerism and techno-solutionism—have largely ignored their contribution. She emphasises the semantic slipperiness of accessibility, convenience, and security as fluid categories that emerge "through varied intersections of material artifacts, cultural discourse, users' bodies, minds, and affective states" (intra, 91). Using a "prismatic" analytic, Ellcessor draws on films, TV commercials, newspaper reporting, women's magazines, disability publications, and industrial archives to demonstrate how audiovisual communication around domestic technologies both leveraged vulnerability and the rhetoric of protection and visually erased disability, targeting a narrowly defined heterosexual, white, middle-class, able-bodied audience.

Furthermore, drawing on the abovementioned concept of "misfit", Ellcessor shows how designs that appear to fit nondisabled users often produce implicit misfits for disabled ones. She thus proposes what can be framed as an oppositional culture of technological mismatch in place of celebratory narratives of

smartness, focusing on the issue of material and situational disjunctions that aligns with and helps to ground the relational models of access developed across the volume. Indeed, linking Ellcessor's material-historic account of misfitting to contemporary practices, some contributors explore how technological and temporal disjunctions are enacted aesthetically and experientially. In particular, crip temporalities provide a useful frame for Pavitra Sundar and Azalia Primadita Muchransya. Both treat access as a relational process negotiated in situ: Sundar via performative practices that crip and bend time, validating distraction, slowness, and non-normative rhythms as aesthetic and political strategies; Muchransya via attentive curatorial labour that assembles a shared projection through ongoing coordination and care. Read together, their work gestures towards access as enacted temporality embedded in "relational infrastructures" (Kim 2025): fragile, contingent, and often voluntary, these infrastructures nonetheless produce communal experience and alternative temporalities that misfit neoliberal regimes of productivity and cosmetic inclusion.

Pavitra Sundar addresses non-neurotypical temporalities by analysing *Time Bent, Folded, Exhausted*, a 2025 performance-lecture co-authored and staged by Indonesian composer Jay Afrisando and Afro-German writer Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner at Berlin's daadgalerie. This screen-based, epistolary work enacts the collaborative thinking and writing processes that emerge from neurodivergent modes of thought, positioning the screen as the geometric centre of the encounter. Consequently, elements often marginalised as optional sensory auxiliaries are transformed into core structural components. The performance foregrounds "the constant negotiation involved in all creative collaborations, not least in one concerned with ableist expectations around time, work, and social interactions" (intra, 112). In particular, the enacted concept of "bent time,"—a variation on Alison Kafer's notion of "crip time" (2013)—subverts neoliberal demands for productivity by validating distraction, perceived inadequacy, and inefficiency. Crucially, it also reveals the possible pleasure of a disabled media experience, inviting neurotypical viewers to inhabit a non-normative world. Sundar vividly likens this experience to an origami exercise, evoking a multimodal perception of folded layers in which interdependency and mutual exchange transition.

Azalia Primadita Muchransya likewise conceives access as fundamentally relational, examining the conditions that enable cinematic experience for integrated audiences of disabled and non-disabled spectators. She investigates inclusive practices developed across three Indonesian film festivals—Minikino Film Week (MFW), 100% Manusia Film Festival, and Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF)—selected for their persistent negotiation of access within cultural contexts where disabled participation is neither assumed nor guaranteed by institutional design. The study foregrounds practices such as *bisik* (live whispering for blind spectators), audio description, volunteer briefings, venue adjustments, and post-screening discussions, which extend well beyond technological solutionism but, at the same time, rely on a form of voluntary labour that is inherently contingent and fragile—as well as precarious. From this relational perspective on access—grounded in mutual coordination, sustained

care and explicit curatorial choices—Muchransya identifies the emergence of a *crip media infrastructure*. Crucially, the prefix *infra-* here does not denote a stable, permanent or easily scalable system; rather, it names an ongoing, interstitial process of inhabiting a third space. While not always comfortable, this space enables community-making to unfold despite structural deficits, bureaucratic obstacles, economic constraints, and logistical hurdles.

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