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(sound of falling in love)

**REIMAGINING ACCESS:
CRIP MEDIA AESTHETICS AND INFRASTRUCTURES**

EDITED BY DOMENICO NAPOLITANO, ANNALISA PELLINO, AND POOJA RANGAN

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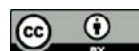
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ONÉVA & OE

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EDITED BY DOMENICO NAPOLITANO, ANNALISA PELLINO,
AND POOJA RANGAN

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REIMAGINING
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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):



- 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 “cripped 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),¹ 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 Kim² (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)³ integrates audio description at the core of visual artworks; and Carmen Papalia's *Mobility Device* (2019),⁴ 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.

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

2 <https://christinesunkim.com/>

3 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/>.

4 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).⁵ 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

⁵ 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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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, JJJJerome 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."

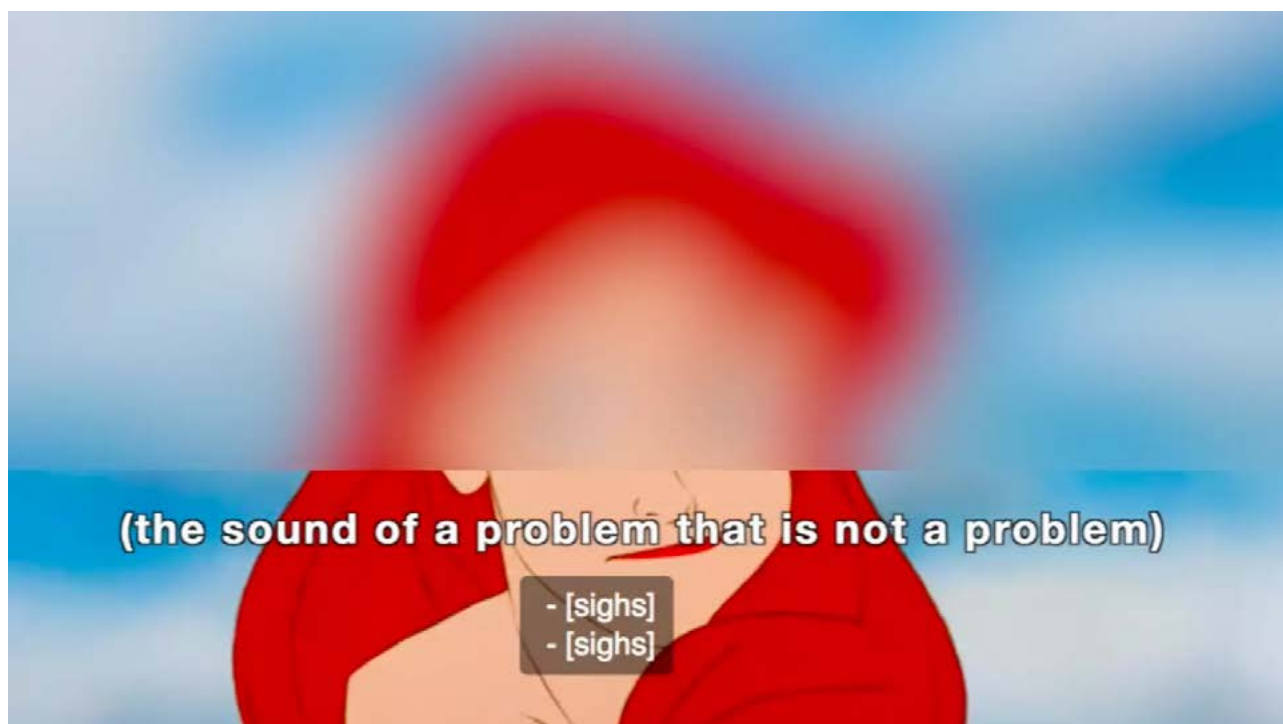


Fig. 2:
Still from *Close Readings*
(Christine Sun Kim, 2015)

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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Rethinking Inclusion in Children's Animation: The Cartoon Able Model in “Lampadino e Caramella nel MagiRegno degli Zampa”

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Contemporary debates have repositioned children's animation within broader cultural and pedagogical discourses, challenging its long-standing confinement to the domain of entertainment. This shift is closely linked to animation's expressive capacities beyond photographic realism and to its ability to mobilise universal codes and intuitive visual languages for the mediation of knowledge, values and social difference. Within this framework, the article examines the Cartoon Able model, developed by the Italian animation studio Animundi in collaboration with the publishing house Puntidivista for the production of *Lampadino e Caramella nel MagiRegno degli Zampa* (2020–), a series broadcasted by the Italian public service RAI. The analysis argues that the Cartoon Able model represents a singular experiment within the Italian animation landscape, explicitly conceived to formalise inclusion-and accessibility-oriented practices for children's content and to position them as potentially transferable. By deconstructing the model, the article investigates how inclusion is articulated not only through narrative and aesthetic strategies, but also across the production, institutional and regulatory frameworks underpinning Italian television animation. Methodologically, the study combines close textual and formal analysis with a production-oriented perspective, integrating approaches from animation studies, disability studies, media education and media industry studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, animation has undergone a significant epistemic and cultural reconfiguration, moving beyond its traditional association with entertainment and towards a recognised pedagogical and cultural function, capable of conveying values and addressing complex social issues, including diversity and disability (Rosa and Chellini 2025).

This transformation can be traced to two converging developments. First, advances in the sociology of childhood have challenged the notion of the child as a passive, in-the-making subject (Jeffress 2022), instead foregrounding children's



agency and their active role in processes of meaning-making and media interpretation. Second, the progressive segmentation of television provision and the expansion of thematic channels—together with increasing internationalisation—have encouraged broadcasters to differentiate their offerings through content that is not only commercially viable but also pedagogically and socially relevant. This latter aspect has been further reinforced in recent years by Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) policies promoted at the European level, initially through the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (2014/95/EU) and subsequently through the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (2022/2464/EU). These frameworks introduce mandatory non-financial reporting requirements for companies with more than 500 employees, requiring disclosure of impacts and initiatives related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, including the reduction of inequalities (SDG 10). This obligation also extends to broadcasters, becoming a central element in the development of guidelines and principles for best practices, both on-screen—concerning the representation of content—and off-screen, relating to the development of inclusive production cultures (EBU 2026).

Within the Italian landscape, a significant role is played by the public service broadcaster RAI, which, since 2018, has initiated a process of integrating these criteria, culminating in 2022 with the establishment of the RAI Sustainability-ESG Directorate (RAI 2022). In parallel, these policies have also been implemented within the RAI Kids Directorate, responsible for the thematic channels Rai Yoyo and Rai Gulp, targeting preschool (3–7 years) and school-age (8–12 years) audiences, respectively. In this context, content production has progressively shifted not only towards recreational purposes but also towards a clearly defined educational and formative mission, with particular attention to issues of accessibility, inclusion, and diversity (RAI 2020).

In light of this framework, the present article offers an analysis of what has been described as “the first inclusive and barrier-free cartoon” (my translation) (RAI Press Office 2020, 49), *Lampadino e Caramella nel MagiRegno degli Zampa* (2020–), and aimed at the preschool audience of Rai Yoyo. The case study is particularly significant for the development of the Cartoon Able model devised by Animundi, which entails, at the off-screen level, a rethinking of production logics, alongside the codification of on-screen principles for the representation and accessibility of animated content. The model promotes, on the one hand, awareness of inclusion among neurotypical children and, on the other, enables access to the series for children with sensory impairments.

The first section brings into dialogue the theoretical frameworks of media education and disability studies, focusing on the multisensory design codified within the Cartoon Able model for the accessible design of content. The second section, building on the same theoretical references, examines the narrative organisation of inclusion, highlighting both its innovative elements and the critical issues related to its reception. The third section relates scholarship in media industry studies to national reports on the Italian animation sector and to RAI’s ESG non-financial reporting, placing the formal innovations of the Cartoon Able

model in tension with the material and productive conditions of contemporary production. From this perspective, the model risks being framed as a case of inclusion-as-exception, lacking systemic diffusion and scalability, and therefore unable to sustain, in the medium to long term, the development of genuinely inclusive off-screen processes and practices. Finally, the fourth section situates the case study and the preceding analyses within the national and supranational regulatory framework, highlighting critical issues in the governance of accessibility and inclusion, which are often programmatic in nature and not fully translatable into concrete operational practices and implementations.

THE CARTOON ABLE MODEL AND THE MULTISENSORY DESIGN

The origins of the series can be traced back to the multi-version publishing project Cartoon Able, launched in 2015 by Puntidivista, an Italian publishing house specialising in inclusive content and in raising awareness among adults and children of different accessible communication codes. In collaboration with Animundi, Puntidivista subsequently adapted the *Lampadino e Caramella* stories into an audiovisual format, identifying television as "another tool capable of fostering inclusion" (my translation) (Perciavalle 2021, 35).

At the core of the Cartoon Able model lies a set of operational guidelines concerned with the design of accessible content. As Elizabeth Ellcessor (2016) observes, animation cannot be assumed to function automatically as an inclusive technique capable of universally representing diversity. Certain aesthetic, visual and dynamic solutions may, in fact, prove unsettling for neurodivergent young viewers, making it essential to consider technical, graphic, sonic, and linguistic dimensions in an integrated manner.

From a technical, visual, and auditory standpoint, the Cartoon Able model draws on theories of spatiotemporal processing deficits, according to which autistic children demonstrate "better performance in static and local analysis" (my translation) (Bianca, Cesana, and Molteni 2022, 61) than when confronted with excessively dynamic or rapid stimuli, which may lead to perceptual overload and hinder comprehension (Bianchi, Cesana, and Molteni 2022). In *Lampadino e Caramella*, these principles are reflected in a smooth animation style characterised by the absence of abrupt transitions, accelerated pacing or virtuosic movements. In response to the same deficit, from a graphic perspective the observation of the series reveals a consistent use of essential yet clearly defined shapes, clean lines, marked contours, and simplified backgrounds, combined with a restrained colour palette composed of pastel tones, natural colours, and softened cool shades. On the one hand, this design facilitates the processing of more static stimuli, enabling a focus on characters and key visual elements while reducing potentially misleading and superfluous details (Bianchi, Cesana and Molteni 2022). On the other hand, this approach also aligns with principles derived from neuroaesthetics, recalling studies on the modulatory role of co-

lour in children's emotional responses (Demiral 2020), here aimed at fostering a sense of calm and sustaining attention.

Comparable attention is devoted to sound design. Unlike many animated products marked by intense and frenetic rhythms (Krcmar, Bernard and Lin 2007), the series avoids audio-video asynchronies, overlapping voices or background noise, as well as sudden sharp sounds. The soundtrack is built around a single musical line—predictable and moderate in tempo—designed to support emotional expression and sensory engagement, addressing documented difficulties among individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in integrating auditory information in the presence of competing stimuli (Bianchi, Cesana, and Molteni 2022).

The Cartoon Able model also intervenes at the linguistic level, addressing difficulties associated with semantic deficits (Bianchi, Cesana, and Molteni 2022), which can complicate the comprehension of wordplay, sarcasm, irony and metaphor—devices often central to animated storytelling for their cognitive and imaginative value (Di Bari et al. 2022). Accordingly, the series favours over-explanatory and repetitive language, reducing implicit meanings wherever possible.

Although *Lampadino e Caramella* largely adheres to these guidelines, studies on accessible and neurodiversity-informed media suggest that some aspects of the representation of characters' emotional and cognitive states could be further enhanced. This informational layer, while present, is not always systematically conveyed through explicit verbalisation, contextual cues or marked uses of mimicry, prosody and gesture, which remain highly stylised and essential. While this does not undermine overall narrative intelligibility, it may nonetheless limit full accessibility for certain neurodivergent profiles, particularly those experiencing difficulties with "perspective taking" (Bianchi, Cesana, and Molteni 2022, 60).¹

NARRATIVE ACCESSIBILITY AND DIEGETIC INCLUSION

When considered in terms of narrative organisation and diegetic construction, the Cartoon Able model deliberately refrains from prescribing explicit guidelines, leaving a high degree of creative autonomy. While this openness enhances the model's potential transferability across different stories and production contexts, the present analysis, considered alongside existing studies on accessible storytelling, suggests that further conceptual development could provide additional support for creators and help prevent the inadvertent reproduction of stereotypical characters and representational tropes. *Lampadino e Caramella* nonetheless benefits from the established conventions of pre-school serial formats—short episodes, recurring settings and recognisable characters—which enhance acces-

¹ Perspective taking refers to the ability to understand and infer others' mental states, emotions and intentions. This capacity may be partially impaired in certain neurodivergent profiles, affecting the interpretation of implicit emotional and relational cues in audiovisual narratives (Bianchi, Cesana, and Molteni 2022).

sibility for children with sensory impairments by limiting narrative variability and reinforcing predictability (Bianchi, Cesana, and Molteni 2022).

Within this framework, disability functions as what Rosa and Chellini define as a “free motif” (2025, 173), namely a narrative element that is present but not central to plot progression. This narrative positioning is closely linked to the series’ overarching storyline, which does not revolve around disability as a thematic focus. *Lampadino e Caramella* follows the daily routine of the two protagonists who regularly meet at the Park of the Great Oak. By reciting a magical formula, they are telesported into the fantastical Kingdom of the Zampa, where they experience imaginative adventures alongside a group of characters, including Zampacorta. The narrative is thus structured around fantasy, play and discovery, rather than around disability-related issues or challenges. Instead of speaking explicitly *about* disability, the series seeks to educate viewers *towards a relationship* with disability (Jeffress 2022), normalising difference through everyday interaction.

Zampacorta, a secondary character whose shorter paw is neither emphasised nor problematised, exemplifies this approach: diversity is integrated into the fabric of the narrative without requiring explanation or justification, and the group is configured as a space of welcome and shared protagonism (Perciavalle 2021; Greenberg 2022).

Fig. 1:
Still from the series
Lampadino e Caramella
nel MagiRegno degli
Zampa (2020–). ©
Animundi S.r.l. All rights
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However, the series itself is not entirely immune to reproducing some of the problematic representational patterns long identified by media and disability studies. For this reason, the Cartoon Able model could benefit from the introduction of more explicit guidelines concerning diegetic construction and the narrative representation of disability, providing creators with a framework capable of preventing what scholarship has identified as stereotypical or problematic portrayals (Schianchi 2023). This is exemplified in the episode S01xE18, featuring Federica, a wheelchair-using

character, the narrative may occasionally evoke the well-documented supercrip trope.² Federica's victory in a running race—amplified by the group's use of superlative language—reproduces a rhetoric of “heroism despite disability” (my translation) (Guerini et al. 2022, 74), which risks obscuring material barriers and promoting a hyper-performative image of the disabled body (Rosa and Chellini 2025).

Beyond the visual and auditory adjustments designed primarily for autistic children, one of the most innovative features of the Cartoon Able model lies in its integration of accessibility devices—understood as systems, techniques and adaptations that enable media consumption by children with diverse sensory, cognitive and communicative needs (Ellcessor 2016). These include a narrating voice functioning as an audio guide for blind or visually impaired viewers, open subtitles for partially sighted children, and simultaneous translation into Italian Sign Language (LIS), performed by live-action actors embedded within comic-style frames for deaf audiences. Such solutions remain largely unprecedented in the field of animation, particularly with regard to their diegetic status. Drawing on Mara Mills and Johnatan Sterne's (2017, 16) notion of “dismediation,” these devices can be said to crip the medium from within, disrupting normative modes of mediation by reconfiguring accessibility tools as integral aesthetic and participatory elements of the narrative form. Accessibility tools traditionally conceived as external or auxiliary are reconfigured as aesthetic and participatory elements, incorporated into the narrative form itself and directly shaping the viewer's experience.

Fig. 2:
Still from the series
*Lampadino e Caramella
nel MagiRegno degli
Zampa* (2020–). ©
Animundi S.r.l. All rights
reserved.



² In disability studies, the term supercrip refers to a stereotypical narrative that portrays disabled people as heroic or extraordinary individuals for overcoming or transcending their disability through sheer willpower, exceptional talent or personal achievement (Schianchi 2023).

Nevertheless, as Ines Guerini et al. (2022, 77) observe, the series—"while a valid attempt at inclusive animation" (my translation)—could become even more accessible through the implementation of additional inclusive strategies. Specifically, the authors highlight the lack of integration of the non-signed narrator's voice in both subtitles and Italian Sign Language (LIS), as well as a LIS interpretation restricted solely to dialogues. However, this observation can be contextualized in light of the cinematic rule of "show, don't tell" (McKee 1997, 334). Since deaf children face no limitations in processing visual content, verbal or signed explication becomes redundant when the image is already self-explanatory. Furthermore, the analysis conducted here—limited to the first season of the series—raises several concerns regarding the effectiveness of the subtitles, which at times tend to overestimate the reading abilities of the preschool target audience. Up to the age of six, reading remains a slow and laborious process, strictly tied to the initial phases of decoding and syllabification. At the same time, the simultaneous presence of LIS windows, subtitles, and animation may risk generating cognitive and perceptual overload for children with ASD, thereby undermining part of the efforts directed toward the effectiveness of the previously mentioned multisensory design. Finally, a broader pedagogical consideration emerges: children do not automatically develop an understanding of diversity simply through exposure to animated representations (Sabila and Kurniawati 2020). In the absence of guided mediation—whether provided by adults, narrative characters or an explicitly didactic narrator—children tend to engage primarily with images, colours and movement, lacking the interpretive tools necessary to grasp underlying meanings (Di Bari et al. 2022). In *Lampadino e Caramella*, mediation appears to be assumed rather than actively constructed: the narrator describes events but does not offer an explicit interpretive framework for the accessibility devices or the models of disability representation at play. This limitation echoes longstanding concerns within media education and points to the need for further refinement of the Cartoon Able model through strategies aimed at enabling children to engage dialogically with images, expand their interpretive responses, and reconstruct narrative elements in a reflective manner (Perciavalle 2021).

OFF-SCREEN STRATEGIES AND PRODUCTION FRAMEWORKS

A further area for reflection in *Lampadino e Caramella* concerns the configuration of off-screen strategies—that is, the cultural, industrial, and institutional conditions that support and amplify the formal innovations introduced by the Cartoon Able model. As Ellcessor has argued, genuinely inclusive technologies and cultural products require an "implicit architecture of participation" (2016, 70): a system that does not merely generate accessibility at the textual level, but is sustained by coherent practices, policies and production models, contributing to the development of a broader form of "cultural accessibility" (2016, 157).

Within the production framework of the Cartoon Able model, the only inclusion-related elements explicitly highlighted by the RAI Press Office (2020; 2022b) concern, on the one hand, the involvement of a pool of experts—including teachers, educators, psychologists and medical professionals—and, on the other, the participation of several well-known figures from the entertainment industry in the dubbing process, none of whom identify as having disabilities. A partial exception is represented by the presence of Italian Sign Language (LIS) interpreters, members of the CREI (Social Cooperative for LIS Interpreting, Research, and Training) and themselves deaf. In addition, Animundi collaborates with other local partners that contribute to enhance the series' core values. Among these is Mir Integral Ecology, where women survivors of violence and other vulnerable individuals create costumes for LIS actors, combining social inclusion with environmental respect. Indeed, Animundi's clear commitment to establishing a solid scientific grounding for the Cartoon Able model, along with its deep value-driven approach, is evident throughout this process.

Nevertheless, when analyzed through the theoretical frameworks of disability studies applied to cultural and creative industries, the model may still risk appearing to reproduce forms of design and representation that engage with disability largely by proxy, thus configuring itself predominantly as "a work about disabled people" rather than with disabled people (Greenberg 2022, 70). Moreover, publicly available sources provide only limited information regarding the direct participation of neurodivergent practitioners in the material production of the series within Animundi, as well as the adoption of dedicated assistive technologies aimed at facilitating their integration within a participatory production culture.

The conditions that risk maintaining the Cartoon Able model within a form of disability by proxy are not, however, directly attributable to Animundi. Rather, they stem from the economic and contractual constraints inherent in television series production, as well as from the investments required for advanced technologies associated with "crip technoscience" (Alexander and Sterne 2024, 192). These factors must be situated within the broader context of the structural limitations affecting the economic sustainability of the Italian animation industry.

The reliance on temporary, project-based forms of employment, which are characteristic of animated series production, reflects one of the four structural conditions identified by Doris Eikhof and Chris Warhurst (2013) as potentially contributing to the persistence of discrimination, inequality, and exclusion within the cultural industries. Such a model reinforces occupational precarity and constitutes a structural barrier to the development of medium-and long-term careers for individuals belonging to under-represented groups (Ozimek 2020). The presence—albeit symbolically significant—of deaf professionals exclusively in roles related to LIS interpretation further introduces a risk of "ghettois[ing]" labour (Ozimek 2020, 20; Saha 2018). In this dynamic, disabled professionals are disproportionately assigned to disability-specific productions, limiting their professional mobility and contributing to the symbolic devaluation of such work in relation to mainstream content (Ozimek 2020).

From a technological perspective, despite the significant advances achieved in assistive technologies since the 1980s (Ellcessor 2016), animation technologies continue largely to embody a "preferred user" position, implicitly constructed as male, white, able-bodied, and English-speaking (Alexander and Sterne 2024). In a sector heavily dependent on advanced software and hardware infrastructures, the adoption of practices associated with crip technoscience requires the integration of assistive technologies capable of reconciling accessibility and usability throughout the entire production pipeline. However, although systematic monitoring data are lacking, the national sector has historically experienced a delay in technological and digital upgrading (ANICA–National Association of Film, Audiovisual and Digital Industries, and Cartoon Italia 2024) compared with other European contexts, partly due to the limited availability of investment incentives, thus making the consolidated presence of assistive technologies within studios implausible at present.

These constraints are further reflected in the structural economic uncertainty that continues to affect the Italian animation sector. The industry remains largely composed of small and medium-sized enterprises operating under project-based and resource-constrained conditions. In the field of animated serial production, sustainability is further undermined by a highly concentrated national market structure in which RAI effectively acts as the principal commissioner and distributor, while the limited resources available through its investment mechanisms are insufficient to sustain the sector as a whole (ANICA and Cartoon Italia 2024). Under these circumstances, the implementation of dedicated assistive technologies, the introduction of specialised professional roles, and the creation of more inclusive production environments may be perceived as additional financial burdens that many studios are currently unable to absorb (Ozimek 2020). Their adoption therefore requires not only individual commitment but also a stronger regulatory framework and targeted public support measures capable of reducing the economic risks associated with such investments.

As noted above, RAI Kids occupies a structurally pivotal position within the Italian animation industry, as the economic sustainability of projects depends to a large extent on access to its commissioning system. Such centrality inevitably has significant implications for the production orientations of animation companies. Under the direction of Luca Milano, RAI Kids has declared its commitment to promoting a more inclusive form of television (RAI Press Office 2022), grounded in the principles of diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility. From this perspective, these values may operate both as ethical and cultural orientations and as strategic resources through which production companies seek to strengthen their institutional legitimacy, enhance their visibility, and increase the economic attractiveness of their projects (RAI 2020).

The question that emerges, therefore, concerns the extent to which RAI Kids is able to leverage its position of economic centrality to support and guide its production partners towards more participatory production cultures and the adoption of practices and policies aligned with these objectives. The analysis

presented here suggests, however, that this governance role remains fragile. Firstly, the initiatives promoted within RAI's Sustainability-ESG Directorate appear to focus primarily on internal managerial governance and, in the case of RAI Kids, on the commissioning and promotion of content addressing diversity and inclusion, in line with the tenth Sustainable Development Goal concerning the reduction of inequalities. At present, however, no operational guidelines have been identified concerning textual design or production choices that would ensure the concrete implementation of these principles within production processes. Secondly, the RAI Public Service Contract 2023–2027 (RAI 2022) addresses inclusion primarily in terms of pluralism and accessibility, introducing obligations regarding programme subtitling (Art. 25, paragraph 1, letter h), without directly affecting content production practices. Moreover, these obligations are binding mainly for generalist channels, while remaining largely voluntary for thematic channels such as Rai Yoyo and Rai Gulp.

Against this background, the limited and uneven picture emerging from the 2025 RAI catalogue—corresponding to the final phase of Luca Milano's mandate over animated content managed by RAI Kids—is particularly revealing. Out of 372 available titles, only four series (approximately 1%) are explicitly identified as inclusive and, significantly, are also included in RAI's ESG non-financial reporting (RAI 2023): *Pablo* (Paper Owl Films, Kavaleer Productions, Ingenious Media, Cake Entertainment, 2017–2020), *Lampadino e Caramella, Il mondo di Leo* (BrandCross, RAI Kids, 2022–2024), and *The Sound Collector* (Eagle vs Bat, Enanimation, 2023).

From the perspective of technical accessibility, an analysis of the Rai Easy Web platform further shows that, among the 372 titles available in the catalogue, only 42 (11.3%) provide subtitles, 41 (11%) include audio description, and just 3 (0.8%) offer translation into Italian Sign Language (LIS). Taken together, these findings suggest that, although inclusion constitutes an important element of RAI Kids' institutional discourse, its capacity to translate these principles into an effective steering function capable of influencing production partners and industrial practices remains limited and deserves further investigation in future research.

DISABILITY, ANIMATION, AND REGULATION

A final key dimension, which opens up further reflection on the critical relationship between inclusion and disability awareness within the animation industries, concerns the role of the State as an active and responsive actor in shaping policies, guidelines and incentive structures related to accessibility and disability (Goggin and Newell 2003).

At a supranational level, protection against discrimination is articulated through a constellation of legal instruments and jurisprudential frameworks, including the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the European Social Charter and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. More targeted regulatory attention to disability emerges with the Equality Di-

rective 2000/78/EC of equal treatment in employment and occupation, which extends anti-discrimination safeguards to access to employment, working conditions, remuneration and vocational training. These measures form part of a broader normative trajectory reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of 2006, ratified by both the European Union and Italy in 2009. The CRPD played a decisive role in reframing disability beyond a purely medical or assistential paradigm, instead promoting a social model centred on the removal of barriers and on accessibility and inclusion as structural principles. A similar orientation underpins the European Accessibility Act, formalised through Directive (EU) 2019/882, which entered into force on 28 June 2025 for all Member States. The Act seeks to harmonise accessibility requirements for products and services within the European internal market. Despite their central role in establishing anti-discrimination principles and promoting equality, these supranational instruments remain insufficient in themselves to generate automatic or uniform operational transformations within cultural and media industries. They function primarily as value-driven and programmatic frameworks, defining general objectives while leaving unresolved questions concerning binding technical standards, production models and sector-specific mechanisms of implementation in complex fields such as the audiovisual industry. In the case of the European Accessibility Act, regulatory attention remains largely focused on technological and infrastructural domains—digital interfaces, applications and online services—without explicit reference to audiovisual content or to the professional inclusion of disabled people within creative industries. Their effectiveness is further mediated by national implementation, which binds Member States primarily to overarching goals while granting wide discretion in the selection of regulatory instruments and concrete enforcement practices.

At the national level, the ratification of the CRPD contributed—albeit belatedly—to the adoption of Law No. 69 of 21 May 2021, which formally recognised Italian Sign Language (LIS) and tactile Italian Sign Language (LISt). Nevertheless, as Carmela Bertone, Michela Franceschini and Beatrice Giuliano (2024) observe, this recognition remains ambiguous, insofar as LIS continues to be treated predominantly as an auxiliary support to spoken language rather than as a fully autonomous linguistic system. Further fragmentation of the regulatory framework emerges with Law No. 68 of 1999 on the right to work of persons with disabilities, which introduces the principle of “targeted placement” (my translation) (Art. 2), defined as a set of tools and supports aimed at facilitating employment consistent with individual abilities and competences. The application of this law is contingent upon companies exceeding specific size thresholds—one disabled worker for every fifteen employees—a condition that, in the Italian animation sector characterised by small and medium-sized enterprises, extensive reliance on freelance labour, and project-based contracts, effectively allows widespread circumvention of its obligations. In line with the principles articulated by the European Accessibility Act, Law No. 220 of 2016 on cinema and the audiovisual sector introduced accessibility as a criterion for the alloca-

tion of public funding to audiovisual works (Art. 12, para. 4, lett. a). However, as also noted by AUDECON (the Italian Observatory on Inclusion and Audiovisual Accessibility), in the absence of binding minimum quotas within implementing calls and of systematic monitoring mechanisms, this provision has had limited operational impact, remaining largely declarative in nature (Labarile 2025).

More specific obligations derive from the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), transposed into Italian law through the Consolidated Act on Audiovisual Media Services (Testo Unico dei Servizi di Media Audiovisivi, TUSMA; Legislative Decree No. 208 of 2021), which defines the remit of the public service broadcaster. At present, the only binding regulatory obligations concerning audiovisual accessibility apply exclusively to RAI in its capacity as a public service provider. Under TUSMA, RAI is required to ensure subtitling for at least 85% of generalist programming broadcast between 06:00 and 24:00—excluding advertising and service announcements—as well as for all daily editions of news programmes across the three generalist channels, guaranteeing at least one subtitled national news bulletin per day. No equivalent binding obligation applies to private broadcasters, nor is an analogous requirement imposed on children's programming. In this area, the public service broadcaster is merely required to "progressively extend subtitling and audio description to thematic channels, particularly those aimed at children," without the specification of quantitative targets, timelines or concrete implementation criteria (European Audiovisual Observatory 2023, 98). Accessibility for children's content thus remains framed as an aspirational objective rather than as an enforceable standard.

Lately, it is within this regulatory gap that Article 31 of TUSMA assumes particular relevance. Implementing Article 7 of the AVMSD, Article 31 introduces a framework aimed at progressively enhancing accessibility through co-regulatory mechanisms coordinated by the Italian Communications Authority (AGCOM), involving the broadcasters and organisations representing persons with disabilities. The implementation process has been notably protracted: the technical working group established in 2022 led to the adoption of the first operational guidelines only with Resolution No. 291/25/CONS of 18 December 2025. The guidelines introduce principles of progressivity, proportionality and non-discrimination, requiring the submission of three-year action plans incorporating annually increasing accessibility targets through subtitles, LIS- and audio description, with particular attention devoted to news programming, children's content and the accessibility of emergency information, alongside an annual monitoring system based on standardised reporting. Although these measures represent a step forward at the regulatory level, they remain largely confined to broadcasting obligations and do not directly address audiovisual production processes, creative workflows, labour conditions or the professional inclusion of disabled people within the animation industry. As Article 31 becomes formally operational from 1 January 2026, it is therefore uncertain whether its implementation will be sufficient to transform accessibility from a normative requirement into a structurally embedded industrial practice, or whether it will continue to depend on the voluntary alignment of the public service broadcaster and its production partners.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Lampadino e Caramella* testifies to the epistemic and cultural reconfiguration that has affected animated seriality over recent decades, becoming progressively less oriented exclusively towards entertainment and increasingly aimed at engaging with families through the introduction of complex social issues, in line with the educational and pedagogical mission of the public service broadcaster RAI and, in particular, the direction of RAI Kids. The series stands out as the first content promoted by the broadcaster as a barrier-free cartoon, contributing to the dissemination of themes of inclusion and accessibility while also addressing sensory disability, often overlooked in traditional representations of disability, which have predominantly focused on physical impairment (Perciavalle 2021).

The codification of the Cartoon Able model further contributes to problematising a central issue within disability studies: the need and urgency to rethink inclusion and accessibility not only at the on-screen level, but also within their original productive dimension. Particularly significant is the fact that the series does not explicitly thematise disability within the diegesis, but rather constructs a relationship with disability. For neurodivergent children, the multisensory design of the content enables the adoption of visual and sonic aesthetic solutions consistent with the principles of neuroaesthetics, reducing and slowing down stimuli in order to facilitate the processing of more static perceptual configurations. At the same time, the integration of accessibility devices within the narrative allows the work to be accessed by deaf, blind, and visually impaired children. However, this design may benefit from further refinements, and a number of considerations can be put forward in this regard. On the one hand, the simultaneous integration of accessibility devices may generate perceptual overload, potentially compromising the viewing experience for individuals with autism spectrum disorder; on the other hand, subtitles are often unsuitable for the reading abilities of preschool audiences and, like the LIS interpretation, do not include translation of the audio guide, being limited solely to dialogue. With regard to neurotypical children, the absence of a mediating figure capable of introducing them to the different codes of accessibility tends to presume an autonomous capacity for critical interpretation that has not yet been fully developed in children (Atkinson, Danielson and Rogers 2024), thereby limiting their ability to understand how such codes constitute a form of education towards accessibility and the pluralism of communication.

At the off-screen level, the Cartoon Able model still appears far from supporting the emergence of what has been described as a new configuration of "making practices"³ (Ozimek 2020, 39) within the Italian animation industry. To date, the model has not demonstrated genuine scalability, remaining instead a case

3 The term "making practices," as used by Ozimek (2020, 39), refers to production practices that emerge from situated professional experience and, when consolidated, contribute to reshaping the implicit norms and cultures of a given industry.

of inclusion-as-exception: a project widely celebrated and recognised through prestigious awards⁴ (RAI Press Office 2024), yet still anchored to a predominantly communicative and value-driven dimension. In this sense, it risks reproducing certain stereotypical dynamics associated with disability in creative labour, remaining confined to a project-based logic and failing to structurally impact the access of disabled professionals in the medium to long term, which would be necessary in order to overcome forms of representational delegation and promote genuinely inclusive production cultures. The implementation of transformative and empowering interventions nevertheless requires significant initial investment, particularly within a highly technology-intensive sector such as animation, which is difficult to reconcile with a national industrial context characterised by economic discontinuity, labour precarity, and regulatory uncertainty. Added to this is a regulatory framework concerning the reduction of inequalities that remains largely programmatic, limited to the articulation of general principles and lacking structured incentives, binding operational guidelines, and effective monitoring mechanisms.

Within this framework, considering the structural relationship between the animation industry and public service broadcasting, RAI could strengthen its governance role by moving beyond the tendency to confine ESG criteria to the sphere of internal managerial governance alone. The Cartoon Able model could be promoted by the broadcaster as an operational guideline for production partners, particularly with regard to the visual and narrative design of content. In order to address the model's off-screen limitations, RAI could also intervene through the definition of operational criteria, economic incentives, and external mentoring programmes, drawing upon and expanding the principles already outlined within its internal ESG policies (Eikhof and Warhurst 2012).

A different consideration, however, concerns accessibility codes. Given that digital television inherently provides a wide range of inclusive tools (Ellis 2019)—in the case of RAI, through the Rai Easy Web and Rai Play platforms—the implementation of accessibility codes appears more appropriately attributable to the distributive rather than the production level. From this perspective, the Cartoon Able model could serve as a useful reference to identify and systemize key communication solutions. Meanwhile, the broadcaster would be responsible for implementing them through customizable systems that do not necessarily imply mediation toward a sharing viewing model. This approach would make subtitles, LIS windows, and audio guides activable or selectable based on the needs of different audiences, including neurodivergent viewers. Such imple-

⁴ The series has received prestigious awards, including the UNICEF Award for Best Animated Series at *Cartoons on the Bay* in 2020 and, in 2022, the highest qualitative classification awarded by the Italian parents' association MOIGE for its suitability for family viewing and its positive educational content. Further acknowledgements include its nomination for the Diversity Media Award 2023 and its designation as "Ambassador of Civil Economy" at the 2024 National Festival of Civil Economy (FNEC), as well as its selection by the Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP), which adapted the series and translated it into American Sign Language (ASL)

mentation also appears necessary in light of the recent application of Article 31 of the TUSMA, which extends accessibility obligations to animated content as well. These perspectives would therefore enable the Cartoon Able model to become genuinely scalable, moving beyond its current configuration as primarily a design device and towards a transferable professional practice.

In conclusion, the European framework highlights how the definition of policies and guidelines concerning accessibility and the representation of diversity in the media remains at an early and evolving stage. Only in 2025, alongside the entry into force in Italy of Article 13 of the TUSMA, did the European Broadcasting Union (EBU 2026) issue specific recommendations concerning representation and inclusion in television programming. This suggests that *Lampadino e Caramella* should be understood less as a fully developed and deliberately replicable model than as a pioneering experience. At the same time, its limitations should be interpreted both as the result of a context still lacking consolidated regulatory and operational frameworks, and as conditions of possibility and reflection capable of opening the way for future implementations and developments.

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Access as Carceral Accessory: Documentary Ethics and Disability Justice¹

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This essay argues that documentary's longstanding investment in "access" has obscured the transactions with power that make access possible. Prompted by recent controversies surrounding films such as *Retrograde* (Matthew Heineman 2022) and *Jihad Rehab* (Meg Smaker 2022), I examine how access has come to function as an unquestioned virtue and a form of documentary capital. Tracing this logic through the history of carceral access in U.S. social-issue documentary, I revisit Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) and the landmark legal battle restricting its release. Rather than treating the film primarily as an exposé of state violence, I focus on the bureaucratic negotiations and legal obstacles structuring its production and circulation. I argue that *Commonwealth v. Wiseman* helped consolidate a neoliberal framework for documentary ethics preoccupied with liability and risk management, while transforming access into a form of property granted and regulated by the state. Documentary access emerges in this light not as a challenge to carceral power but as its accessory. I turn to disability justice for an abolitionist understanding of access, drawing on the movement for deinstitutionalization and psychiatric survivor activism. Through analyses of formerly incarcerated filmmaker Rahsaan Thomas's *Friendly Signs* (2023) and Jordan Lord's Documentary Participation Agreement (2024), I explore how access is relocated from privileged entry into sites of confinement to collective relations of interdependence and shared responsibility. These projects suggest how documentary might move beyond a compromised ethics of carceral access toward a liberatory politics oriented not merely toward exposing captivity but toward ending it.

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¹ This essay is excerpted from a coauthored book with Brett Story, *Why Look at Prisons* (under contract with Duke University Press), on documentary's constitutive role in making and unmaking carceral common sense. Some sections were coauthored and the entire essay strengthened by Brett's insights and interventions. Keisha Knight's feedback was essential in shaping the final draft. Jennifer Cui (Amherst College '28) provided editorial support. I am indebted to Thanh Tran for fact-checking, and to Rachel Nelson, Gina Dent, and other participants in the Visualizing Abolition symposium *Carceral Media Ecologies—And How to Break Them* at UC Santa Cruz in May 2026.



I was recently contacted by a colleague, the director of a privately funded research initiative on documentary and public policy. They were planning a symposium that would convene filmmakers, distributors, studio heads and other industry decision-makers to discuss harm-reduction in risky production scenarios. The prompt was a recent scandal involving an award-winning National Geographic documentary featuring an Afghan minesweeper who was reportedly murdered by the Taliban. Had the filmmaker violated the duty of care implied (if rarely enforced) by documentary ethics? Indeed, the documentary, *Retrograde* (Matthew Heineman 2022), had prominently featured the minesweeper's face in its on-the-ground chronicle of the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan. To capture the lead-up to the withdrawal, Heineman had embedded himself with the U.S. Army Green Berets, a position from which he also gained proximity to the Afghan minesweepers employed by the Green Berets as an advance guard to clear explosives—at great personal risk to themselves and their families. In 2023 one of these minesweepers, Omar Khan, was killed by the Taliban, allegedly after identifying footage from the film circulated on TikTok. When asked why no easy safeguards such as blurring faces were taken, Heineman and his team told the *Washington Post* that “both military public affairs officers and the Green Berets approved the final version of the film for release” (Roig-Franzia and Hodge-Sack 2024). National Geographic has since scrubbed the film from its platform. The film's corporate backers and distributors now face a wrongful death lawsuit.

Heineman has built his reputation on such proximity to danger. The degree to which this equates, for many, to excellence in craft is borne out by his Oscar-nominated breakout *Cartel Land* (2015), for which Heineman embedded with vigilante groups combating drug cartels on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Critic Vadim Rizov dissented from the breathless praise for the film's “unparalleled access” upon its Sundance launch (Flannery 2015), describing it as “an absolute mess of a film that raises the question: What happens when access doesn't equal insight?” (Rizov 2015).

The problem, though, is not simply that access fails to produce insight, but that documentary treats access *itself* as a self-evident virtue. This essay traverses a longer history of social-issue documentary, with a focus on carceral access in U.S. productions, to show how documentary ethics came to be organized around a misguided attachment to access. It also asks what happens when access serves the opposition function, as a smokescreen for state violence.

The *Retrograde* controversy was not an isolated incident. Similar dynamics structured the reception of *Jihad Rehab* (Meg Smaker, 2021; later opportunistically retitled *The Unredacted*), set in a controversial Saudi “rehabilitation center” for Islamic militants previously held without charge for years and decades as Guantanamo detainees. Again, critics fawned over the film's “intimate access,” deemed “a coup” by one Pulitzer-winning journalist (Wright, quoted in Powell 2022). A group of mostly Muslim women filmmakers had warned that Smaker's project reproduced Islamophobic narratives, but their critiques were largely ignored (Indiewire Staff 2022).

Once again, access had seduced the field; once again, hand-wringing over ethics followed exposure, with the obligatory postmortems on “duty of care” and the “limits of consent.” This pattern of crisis, apology, and rededication to reform has become endemic to the documentary field. Each cycle ends with a call for better ethical protocols and accountability practices—what my colleague envisioned as a symposium on “harm reduction” (also see Documentary Accountability Working Group 2022). But what these well-intentioned if reactive responses leave unexamined is the *logic of access* that gives rise to these crises in the first place.

Commonly understood as the filmmaker’s ability to secure a privileged place for the camera within guarded or cordoned spaces such as prisons, psychiatric facilities, or war zones, access prevails as documentary’s most coveted currency in a highly gatekept field with few rewards, many risks, and a lingering penchant for the voyeuristic gaze. In the currency of documentary value, access is gold. Boasts the filmmaker applying for funds, campaigning for awards: *I, and I alone, got the camera into a space you cannot otherwise see*. Yet this fetish for access routinely masks the negotiations with power that make such breaches possible.

Nowhere is the field’s bad romance with access more troubling than in prison documentaries, where the camera’s presence inside is assumed to be inherently good—a bulwark against the largest experiment in jailing human beings in recorded history. The share of Oscar-nominated documentaries in carceral settings has risen from near negligible levels in the early 2000s to nearly a third of nominees since 2021. These films are rewarded for bringing audiences inside a space otherwise reserved for those the state seeks to disappear—a privileged experience, given that most journalists, advocates and even loved ones are denied such access. But access to film inside, unless unsanctioned footage is smuggled out, always requires the cooperation of state officials whose interests lie in preserving the institution’s legitimacy. As Nicole Fleetwood (2020) reminds us, consent, like any other synonym for agency, is a fiction under carceral conditions. Any “collaboration” with prisons depends on maintaining good relations with wardens and funders rather than with incarcerated people, whose eligibility for parole, commutation, or other forms of relief is contingent on successful participation in “rehabilitative” programs (Fleetwood 2020, 160–62). Everything witnessed under such auspices therefore requires critical interrogation as a promotional image, especially when those on camera are governed by the same authorities who authorize the filming.

While carceral access functions today as shorthand for commercial viability and for a certain masculinist and ableist ideal of the fearless filmmaker, it also operates as a moral alibi: as proof of documentary’s presumed commitment to witnessing state violence and revealing hidden truths. To unpack its contradictions, I turn to a pivotal moment in the intersecting histories of documentary and deinstitutionalization. In 1967, a legal battle around Frederick Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies*, a landmark film shot inside the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Bridgewater, a notorious psychiatric prison, consolidated the compromised discourse of access that now defines the documentary field, even as an incipi-

ent movement of incarcerated people with disabilities was articulating a more radical alternative. But a naïve reading of the “evidence” Wiseman uncovered can only teach us so much. I therefore focus on the bureaucratic negotiations and legal obstacles—the access frictions—involved in producing and circulating Wiseman’s film, to illuminate what the *state* seeks when it grants carceral access. When state authorities realized that Wiseman’s film threatened their credibility, they turned his demand for accountability back onto the filmmaker. Wiseman found himself embroiled in a lawsuit that accused *him* of breaching the privacy rights of disabled prisoners, as if their incarceration weren’t based on the annihilation of privacy and consent.

The verdict in this lawsuit vindicated the fantasy of access that continues to arrest the documentary imagination: one that confuses proximity to danger for insight and upholds the ideal of the documentarian single-handedly “taking on” state or para-military power. It also helped to codify the legal structure for the neoliberal and litigious norms around accountability that the field perpetually and reactively parries: one that frames responsibility as individual, consent as contractual, films as investments, and subjects as liabilities.

Access, understood this way, is not a brave challenge to carceral power; it becomes its accessory. It may present the appearance of transparency and accountability, but it turns documentary into an accomplice of the very institutions it imagines itself exposing. To arrive at a more radical, abolitionist understanding of both access and accountability, the documentary field needs the insights of those most impacted by institutionalization, including incarcerated activists, psychiatric survivors, and disability justice organizers who have sought not to reform prisons but to abolish them altogether. The second half of this essay accordingly turns to the long fight to end carceral sanism by looking at two documentary projects that build on the legacies of disability justice.

THE RUSE OF PERMISSION AND THE PROMISE OF CARCERAL REFORM

In 1967, Frederick Wiseman premiered the first of his esteemed fly-on-the-wall portraits of American institutions. History has been kind to *Titicut Follies*, whose exposure of the dehumanizing treatment of psychiatric patients has been credited with helping to trigger their liberation from carceral facilities thinly disguised as asylums and psychiatric hospitals.

Excerpts from Roger Ebert’s stunned 1968 review capture why this early example of Direct Cinema’s unprecedented access to places hitherto hidden from view made for such gripping, if unsettling, viewing. Ebert wrote:

‘Titicut Follies’ is one of the most despairing documentaries I have ever seen; more immediate than fiction because these people are real; more savage than satire because it seems to be neutral... It appears that the inmates are deprived of clothing much of the time because that is cheaper and makes security easier... Few of us have the slightest idea of conditions in the nation’s mental prison-hospitals [...] and the film leaves us

with the impression that institutions like Bridgewater are causing mental illness, not curing it (Ebert 1968).

Titicut Follies was prophetic in more ways than one. Wiseman's revelation of the rampant human rights abuses at Bridgewater reads now as a harbinger of the global humanitarian turn in documentary that would, in subsequent decades, seek to give voice to the voiceless in war zones, red-light districts, refugee camps, and torture prisons. The state also responded to Wiseman with a legal challenge that shifted its responsibility to the filmmaker. This reframing of access as a matter of individual rather than institutional accountability at a crucial and ambivalent moment (evident in Ebert's assessment) has stuck—and it has shaped both a neoliberal trajectory for documentary and a collaborationist attitude toward the carceral state.

The institution Wiseman filmed, Bridgewater, has a long history of warehousing "undesirable" people. Frequently described as a "hospital for the criminally insane," Bridgewater was not always a hospital or psychiatric prison. It began its life in the 1850s as an almshouse and by 1866 it included a State Workhouse for "incorrigible juveniles" (usually the children of parents without the means to care for them) and people convicted of misdemeanors (Honig 2023, 3, 4). People who were unhoused, disabled, or mentally ill continued to be confined there after almshouses were abolished in 1872. Bridgewater's population ballooned in the early twentieth century, as courts sentenced "insane" men convicted of intoxication and other petty and serious crimes (Honig 2023, 3, 5). By the mid-1960s, when Wiseman began visiting, it had evolved into a sprawling medium-security prison housing men labeled "criminally insane," "alcoholics," "sexually dangerous," and "defective delinquent" (Anderson and Benson 1991, 10). This last category, legalized in 1911, referred to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who were deemed "likely to commit crimes" (Honig 2023, 3, 5). An astonishing 85% of the approximately 1,500-1,900 men confined there in the mid-1960s—some for as long as sixty years—had never been convicted of a crime (Anderson and Benson 1991, 10; Boston Globe 1963 and Gaughan obituary 1989 quoted in Honig 2023, 8).

This was not exceptional. It is often thought that U.S. confinement first topped global charts during the prison-building boom of the early 1970s. This number initially peaked in 1955, when 559,000 people were institutionalized in state-run psychiatric facilities ("mental hospitals" to use outmoded parlance), prior to the "first wave" of deinstitutionalization targeting people with mental illnesses. 1967, the year *Titicut Follies* premiered, marked another historic high for the number of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities institutionalized in the U.S., whose decarceration followed in a second wave (Ben-Moshe 2020, 40, 3).

Wiseman began visiting Bridgewater while teaching law at Boston University, bringing students to witness the institutions they would help populate as future prosecutors and judges (Rosenthal quoted in Winston 1993, 48). He eventually befriended Superintendent Charles Gaughan, an educator and reformer who had al-

ready spent years imploring the state legislature for sentencing reforms for non-violent offenders and the facility's transfer from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Mental Health (Honig 2023, 7–8). Wiseman has said he was naïvely motivated by the prospect of bringing about “improvements in the way in which inmates at M.C.I. [Massachusetts Correctional Institution], Bridgewater were treated” through public exposure (Anderson and Benson 1991, 156, 206).

Reform has long justified carceral access for journalists and media-makers, especially when blame can be assigned to elected officials wary of public ire. Filmmaker Geraldo Rivera is famously rumored to have broken into the Willowbrook hospital in Staten Island, where over 6,000 children deemed “mentally retarded” were held in conditions of horrible neglect, with a stolen key (Ben-Moshe 2020, 50). Prompted by whistleblower physicians, Rivera and his crew justified their trespass as an ethical breach in pursuit of a larger social purpose.

Unlike Rivera, Wiseman lobbied for permission to film inside Bridgewater. He ultimately persuaded Gaughan's supervisor, Commissioner John Gavin, with support from Elliot Richardson, Massachusetts' politically ambitious liberal-leaning lieutenant governor. It took nearly a year and a half for Wiseman to get this access, which was granted, shockingly, without written contracts. This was thirty years before the enactment of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)—the privacy law ostensibly protecting the personal health information of patients that now frequently shields carceral facilities from scrutiny over deaths in custody—and Wiseman's access was virtually unfettered (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Civil Rights, n.d.). Gaughan gave Wiseman carte blanche to film inside Bridgewater, barring only high-security prisoners and one unit that required written conditions (Anderson and Benson 1991, 21). It only later became apparent that this access was conditional on the film making a contained case for reform: an improvement of carceral conditions rather than a fundamental challenge to incarceration.

Wiseman relied largely on implicit or oral agreements—a practice that is unthinkable today and indeed, illegal under HIPAA. Of the sixty-two institutionalized men seen in the film, many with intellectual, developmental, or psychiatric disabilities, only a handful were deemed competent to sign releases (a document that protects the production company from liability). Wiseman and his crew had drafted a written release with a symbolic \$1 compensation but only twelve were collected; Gaughan later testified that he did not know what a release was. Prison staff made consent decisions for the others and even suggested some of the film's most infamous scenes, such as the group strip search, the force feeding, the burial, and the man singing while standing on his head (Winston 1988, 280; Anderson and Benson 1991, 22–24).

The state's response upon viewing the completed film was swift and unequivocal. Concerned that the film would damage the Commonwealth's reputation, Commissioner Gavin found a sympathetic ear in Richardson, since elected Attorney General of Massachusetts. Richardson reversed his earlier support and initiated legal proceedings to prohibit the film's public exhibition within the state on the basis that it violated the “inmates' right of privacy” (Commonwealth v.

Wiseman quoted in Anderson and Benson 1991, 54–56). Gavin would later testify that his approval had been contingent on “the usual precautions” of obscuring faces, obtaining legal releases from those competent to sign them, and supervised filming; Wiseman has acknowledged only the last of these conditions (Commonwealth v. Wiseman quoted in Anderson and Benson 1991, 17–18).

The ensuing trial helped to crystallize a neoliberal, legalistic approach to documentary access. The state alleged that Wiseman had violated the privacy rights of James C. Bulcock, a man with psychiatric disabilities who is shown nude with his genitals exposed (Anderson and Benson 1991, 89; Kahana 2008, 227). Wiseman’s defense invoked his First Amendment rights, arguing that the public interest of disclosing what took place in a public institution outweighed the right to privacy, which was not recognized under Massachusetts state law. His lawyers also argued, rightly, that informed consent is impossible under carceral confinement, and that disclosing the conditions of confinement was in the best interest of those incarcerated people who were deemed incompetent to give consent (Anderson and Benson 1991, 86, 94–95).

The Massachusetts Superior Court’s initial verdict in this landmark case, later modified by the Massachusetts Supreme Court to allow limited screenings for specialized audiences, upheld the ban on the film’s public exhibition in Massachusetts (Neihausen 2012). These restrictions were partially lifted in 1987, following the deaths of several of those pictured, and fully lifted only in 1991, when a Massachusetts Superior Court judge overturned the earlier ruling (Anderson and Benson 1991, 104–5; Honan 1991). The case set a rare precedent against press interests and catalyzed the legalization of the right to privacy, previously a matter of common-law tradition, in Massachusetts (Winston 1988, 281).

It is worth pausing here to note how the state cynically used the smokescreen of reform to evade accountability: in order to suppress the film’s depiction of state violence, the Commonwealth invoked the language of *disability rights*, specifically the right to privacy of people with psychiatric disabilities. As legal scholar Eden Osucha (2009) observes, the right to privacy, first articulated by a pair of Boston jurists in 1890, a mere quarter century after slavery was abolished, has white supremacist roots. Early privacy laws were designed to protect white interiority from the racially denigrating exposure and consumption reserved for Black bodies in scientific archives, state surveillance and mass culture (Osucha 2009, 78–80, 97). Black unfreedom, in other words, subtended the very legal concept of privacy. *Commonwealth v. Wiseman* built on this legacy by leveraging privacy rights to protect the state’s carceral investments.

The racist and ableist core of these investments survived the reforms that *Titicut Follies* helped facilitate at Bridgewater. In 1987, Bridgewater State Hospital (BSH) was split off from the two medium security prisons at M.C.I., Bridgewater. Still, a special working group’s recommendation that its governance be moved from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Mental Health (an argument that ultimately only gave credence to carceral regimes) was never implemented, and several lawsuits subsequently targeted the use of restraints on involuntarily committed patients with no criminal involvement. As of July 2022,

61% of the 233 people held at BSH were people of color, more than twice their share in the population. Today BSH remains Massachusetts' only carceral facility for system-involved people with psychiatric disabilities (Honig 2023, 3, 11, 14).

Commonwealth v. Wiseman marked a pivotal shift in the relationship between social documentary and the carceral state, much of it related to the neoliberal rationalities that were being inaugurated into all aspects of Western life. It heralded a litigious era in which documentary filmmakers increasingly faced "SLAPP suits" (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) designed to hamstring or chill political speech. The verdict, which established the legal right, in Massachusetts, *not* to appear in a film, also helped establish access as a form of private property that filmmakers could acquire, either through state permission or through the consent of those conferred rights by the state. Access has since become a bargaining chip that prisons administrators trade with filmmakers, and increasingly, also with incarcerated artists, in exchange for favorable representations that do not fundamentally challenge their existence.

From our present vantage, the case epitomizes the neoliberal framing of documentary ethics as legal and economic, that is, as a question of risk management rather than political struggle. In subsequent decades, production companies and distributors began to protect their investments by seeking liability insurance, commonly known as an Errors and Omissions policy, which is typically contingent upon procuring legally binding appearance releases.

This shift has enormous consequences. Today, a filmmaker like Matthew Heineman can claim his "access" to endangered military informants was both in the public interest and legally sound, so long as the military signs off. Meg Smaker can say her Arab interviewees "consented" to being interrogated about their relationship to terrorism, regardless of how little her negotiation of access with the authorizing authoritarian regime is made transparent. Perhaps more insidiously, filmmakers can gesture to vague ideas of "reform," now firmly wedded to the notion of documentary access, while in actuality such access functions as a virtue-signaling smokescreen.

What might this mean, then, for those of us invested in documentary as a means of opposing state violence? For one, it might mean acknowledging that carceral access is not inherently ethical or progressive. It is a site of abolitionist struggle in whose control the state is so ideologically and financially invested that it is not above purchasing the cooperation of those opposed to it. It is also one with which people who have been institutionalized for their psychiatric or cognitive disabilities are intimately familiar.

DISABILITY JUSTICE AND THE MOVEMENT FOR LIBERATORY ACCESS

In the mid-1960s, it was structurally impossible for incarcerated people with psychiatric disabilities to speak out against institutionalization. Consider Vladimir, a prisoner at Bridgewater diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. *Titicut*

Follies includes two separate scenes of Vladimir arguing in vain for his return from Bridgewater to the general prison population at Walpole. Vladimir repeatedly identifies the debilitating effects of the conditions at Bridgewater and the medication he is being given, stating: "You are ruining me." He is met with snickering dismissal and prescribed further sedation.



Exposés of psychiatric facilities have wrongly been identified as the source of empowerment for psychiatric patients like Vladimir. In actuality, the forces driving deinstitutionalization were complex, and had as much to do with neoliberal austerity measures as progressive activism. These media revelations, typically authored by nondisabled white men, stirred public outrage, but tended to target psychiatric facilities rather than the ideas and attitudes justifying carceral fixes for social crises. Disability scholar Liat Ben-Moshe calls this a "progress narrative": a story in which institutions were reformed or shuttered, while carceral sanist logics were simply transferred elsewhere, paving the way for new tools of chemical incarceration such as long-term care and psychopharmacology (Ben-Moshe 2014, 18).

But while Wiseman was filming at Bridgewater another movement was already in motion that sought not to improve carceral facilities but to abolish them. This more radical push for decarceration came from those directly impacted by these systems, working in coalitional struggles of those who identified as mad and disabled to create stable housing, free education and healthcare, accessible streets and amenities, and survivor-centered healing. Their fight for deinstitutionalization from the 1960s onward reveals a distinctively collectivist vision of

Fig. 1:
Vladimir is escorted
away by Bridgewater
staff. Screen capture
from *Titicut Follies* (dir.
Frederick Wiseman, 1967)

access predicated first on the *meeting of access needs*, or what disability justice activist Mia Mingus calls “liberatory access” (Mingus 2017). The documentary field has much to learn from this vision in both analysis and strategy.

One of the boldest articulations of this vision came from the Socialist Patients’ Collective (SPK), a self-managed mental patient organization in Heidelberg, Germany that challenged the largely physician-initiated antipsychiatry movement that sprung up across the US, UK, and Europe in the 1960s (Adler-Bolton and Vierkant 2022, 131). Formed in 1970 in response to the firing of a leftist doctor, SPK framed illness as a political condition produced by capitalism, and a source of revolutionary power that psychiatric treatment sought to neutralize. They gave material shape to their rallying cry, “Turn Illness into a Weapon,” by organizing hunger strikes, teach-ins, and experimental forms of mutual aid, where patients participated in group therapy instead of submitting to medical authority (SPK 1993).

SPK’s challenge to the medical establishment and the state did not go unanswered. The state branded SPK a terrorist threat to national security, and the organization became the target of a formidable smear campaign linking them to the Red Army Faction (RAF). Many members were arrested on trumped-up charges and imprisoned, and some were held for months and years under solitary conditions designed to destabilize their sanity. Others were forced underground. The organization was effectively crushed before it could fully realize its vision (Spandler 1992, 4–16; Adler-Bolton and Vierkant 2022, 163–67). Yet, in its brief existence, SPK exposed the way psychiatry operated as a tool of carceral control and offered a radical model of patient self-determination grounded in collective action and mutual aid.

The abolitionist commitments of the deinstitutionalization movement to collective liberation have since been taken up as the guiding principles of disability justice, a framework coined in 2005 by Sins Invalid, a Bay Area-based collective of disabled queer people of color (Lazard 2013). Disability justice activists have long resisted legal framings of access, as articulated in the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), as a commoditized individual benefit secured through special permission or arrangement with the state or its proxies. Access granted as a special permission, commonly called an “accommodation,” is designed not to change the underlying exclusionary structure but rather to ward off litigation. More often than not, they involve harms of their own (Dolmage 2017, 74; Price 2024, 71–2; Price 2021, 272). This is why disability justice activists and scholars have actively moved away from neoliberal and legal discourses of access grounded in individual permissions and rights, with their implied corollary of individual risks, in favor of collective and interdependent approaches that understand access as a relational process and shared responsibility.

In a blog post Mia Mingus describes what she calls “liberatory access,” or access aimed at transforming the conditions that produce debilitation through its denial. She elaborates:

Liberatory access calls upon us to create different values for accessibility

than we have historically had. It demands that the responsibility for access shifts from being an individual responsibility to a collective responsibility [...] from being isolating to connecting; from hidden and invisible to visible; from burdensome to valuable; from a resentful obligation to an opportunity (Mingus 2017).

Mingus's call for liberatory access is especially resonant in the context of the documentary marketplace, where the prospect of exposure or visibility is often traded with vulnerable people under the sign of access. Mingus astutely identifies that liberatory access hinges on an ideological reversal of this dynamic, requiring those "providing" access to recognize their own interdependence with those they regard as disposable.

In a telling reversal of the celebrations of "intimate access" referenced at the beginning of this essay, Mingus calls this "access intimacy." Her reference point for this term is the sense of closeness, safety, and trust experienced by people with disabilities when other people—including and even especially nondisabled people—anticipate and proactively work to meet their access needs. To bring this back to our present discussion, access intimacy requires the documentary field to see access not as something *acquired* from carceral facilities and *granted* to incarcerated people, but as something *owed* to a world differently organized.

FROM INTIMATE ACCESS TO ACCESS INTIMACY

To pose the question of what collective and liberatory access might look like in documentary, I turn to two projects grounded in disability justice by filmmakers with and without experiences of incarceration: Rahsaan Thomas's *Friendly Signs* (2023) and Jordan Lord's Documentary Participation Agreement (2024). In both projects, disability justice features as subject matter but, more crucially, as an alternative value system that informs the ethos and form of the filmmaking. Each practices access intimacy within a community while navigating, respectively, the double-binds of carceral access, and a litigious and austerity-driven funding and distribution landscape. If access intimacy is how Thomas attempts to subvert the isolating coercions of the prison system, then the idea of sharing ownership by "catching" rather than releasing one another from interdependence motivates Jordan Lord's film practice.

Should a film even be called a film when it is produced under conditions that deny its director and protagonist personhood and consent (Knight 2027, expected)? Rahsaan "New York" Thomas's short film *Friendly Signs* was written, directed, and produced with grant support from Sundance and the Marshall Project while the filmmaker was incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California (recently and expensively rebranded as San Quentin Rehabilitation Center), and released following Thomas's own release on parole. The film exemplifies in both narrative structure and in its conditions of production

how incarcerated people pursuing political education through art have to do so within the auspices of rehabilitative programs, and increasingly, through self-fashioning as media entrepreneurs—even as their labor and work product are “owned,” without compensation, by the prison and/or collaborating outside organizations (Chan 2023).

Thomas’s film documents the efforts of an incarcerated man named Tommy Wickerd to get approval to teach a sign language class at San Quentin in anticipation of the arrival of a cohort of eleven d/Deaf and hard of hearing men from the Corcoran Substance Abuse Treatment Facility and State Prison, following the violent deaths of several people with disabilities. Wickerd explains that Deaf signers who are incarcerated are especially vulnerable to violence because they cannot hear orders issued verbally and because of their linguistic isolation. We also learn that Wickerd learned to sign to communicate with his Deaf older brother Mike, and that Mike has not visited Wickerd in person for over a decade because of a traumatizing encounter with an abusive correctional officer.

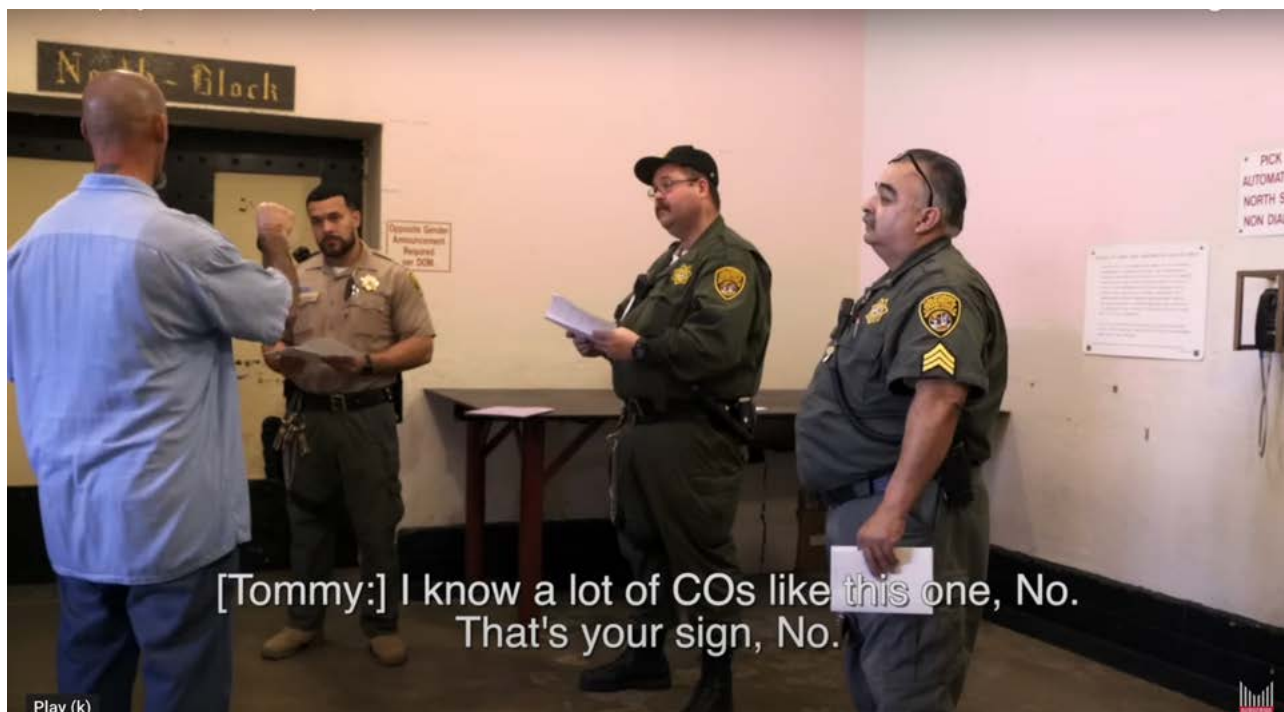
By connecting the structural vulnerability of Deaf and disabled people with the punitive ways in which prisons regulate intimacy and human touch, Thomas frames Wickerd’s anticipatory efforts at creating safety and community for Deaf comrades as an act of access intimacy. Indeed, as Lauren Berlant has argued, intimacy always “poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective” (Berlant 1998, 283). Linking access to intimacy thus opens up the radical promise of access relieved of its connotation to acquisition and more closely aligned to the idea of a collective trajectory. Toward the end of the film, Wickerd is shown signing with Mike for the first time in a decade using the video phone system installed by the prison to enable the Deaf/HoH population at the prison to communicate with their families. Thomas, in turn, has emulated Wickerd’s efforts at building access by using his film to campaign for Wickerd’s early release (Wickerd was eventually resentenced and released in 2025 for exceptional conduct).

That incarcerated people are even enabled to make films may come as a surprise to some. San Quentin has long been a testing ground for the California Model, which incentivizes incarcerated people to earn privileges and reduce their sentences through rehabilitative programming. Keisha Knight (2027, expected) argues, counterintuitively, that film and media programs inside prisons—with their attendant implications of agency and self-actualization—are a cover-up for the hyper-violence and disorder that organize all carceral workflows. This has historically been true of rehabilitative programming, which has served to both capture and dissipate revolutionary dissent. As Nicole Fleetwood has noted, many prisons turned to cultural and educational programs after the Attica Prison uprising of 1971 as a way to control and occupy growing prison populations. San Quentin was an early and enthusiastic adopter of this strategy (Fleetwood 2020, 163). Over the past two decades, the state has consolidated its relationship with Pollen Initiative, a nonprofit that now manages what were originally prisoner-initiated media projects, including *The San Quentin News* and the podcast *Uncuffed* (CDCR 2026). *Forward This* (founded 2021), the incar-

cerated film collective whose members crewed for Thomas (itself an outgrowth of the pioneering *First Watch* film collective founded in 2017), was recently subsumed under the mantle of the San Quentin Media Center, a flagship model that Pollen is now replicating at other facilities (Hicks 2022).

The contradictions of creating collective access under “rehabilitative” conditions where violating access restrictions can nonetheless result in death finds potent expression in the visual language of *Friendly Signs*. Thomas intersperses scenes of Wickerd’s access activism (presenting at a town hall; demonstrating manual signs; leading a volunteer ASL class for over twenty incarcerated men) with images of the decidedly *unfriendly* signs that isolate and restrict movement within the prison, such as: “RESTRICTED AREA”; “NOTICE: NO WARNING SHOTS FIRED IN THIS UNIT”; and “OUT OF BOUNDS MUST HAVE PASS.” These omnipresent access restrictions, screaming in all-caps, dominate the visual field in the only scene where Wickerd is shown interacting with armed correctional officers. The scene, which depicts Wickerd teaching the Correctional Officers (COs) the manual signs for “alarm” and “down,” and about Deaf communication styles, whose visual animation or “loudness” can be mistaken for aggression, is clearly designed to humanize the COs, who are shown to be responsive. But the angle of the scene, shot from the perspective of a surveillance camera, and the internal tension within the frame, telegraph the control prisons exert over access. We are reminded that the first audience for the film is, in fact, the prison; indeed, Thomas’s friendly relationship with San Quentin’s Public Information Officer may have contributed to his ability to retain ownership rights to his film after his release.

Fig. 2:
Tommy Wickerd teaches
San Quentin correctional
officers basic manual
signs. Screen capture
from *Friendly Signs* (dir.
Rahsaan Thomas, 2023)



Against a commodified vision of access based in artificial scarcity and individual exceptions, Jordan Lord’s “catch” agreement underwrites a different set of commitments to access understood as a shared resource, risk, and

responsibility. In a key scene from *Shared Resources* (2021), their feature documentary about war debilitation and the labor of familial caregiving, Lord asks their parents, both participants in the film, to sign a “catch” agreement. Lord has explained how this agreement, partly motivated by their war veteran father Albert’s discomfort at being shown in an infirm state after hospitalization (an image that Lord obscures) differs from the standard documentary appearance release:

Rather than releasing me from responsibility for how my film might negatively impact the participants’ lives or assigning the footage and stories of their lives as my property, this agreement would maintain the participants’ shared ownership over this footage, allow them the ongoing right to withdraw access to this material, and bind me to legal responsibility for any damage the film might do to their lives. This agreement sought to frame the act of documentary participation as a shared resource that cannot be ethically nor materially separated into my interest vs. that of the participant, my creative contribution vs. theirs (Lord 2024, 4–5).

Fig. 3:
Jordan Lord presents the
“catch” contract to their
parents. Screen capture
from *Shared Resources*
(dir. Jordan Lord, 2021)

By framing consent as an ongoing process rather than a single event, the catch agreement seeks proactively to prevent harm from occurring rather than preventing harm from being retroactively redressed. It also insists on the bonds of interdependence that tie the filmmaker to the participant rather than seeking to sever these bonds through the commodity form.



Albert worries that this agreement may get in the way of a distribution deal for Lord’s film (as noted earlier, it is very difficult to get distribution for a documentary without securing Errors and Omissions insurance, for which written

releases are a prerequisite). He refuses to sign.

Albert's refusal turns out to have been a prophecy regarding the difficulty of distributing a film committed to collective access. The year after its release Lord received an offer to distribute *Shared Resources* from a subscription-based streaming platform whose focus on experimental and arthouse cinema is enabled by a partnership with Amazon Prime Video. The deal ended up falling apart due to a policy change by Prime Video that precludes hosting or acquiring films with burned-in subtitles, which interfere with their business model for worldwide release (Rangan 2025, 122-23). This requirement disqualified Lord's film, which includes burned-in open captions and audio description that anticipate Albert's own future access needs (as explained in the film, he suffers from retinal damage from Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam war that could culminate in blindness) as well as the access needs of other disabled audiences.

Since completing *Shared Resources* (which has since found distribution through Video Data Bank and Lux) Lord has developed a new Documentary Participation Agreement, this time modifying the standard appearance release as a work-for-hire agreement. In addition to designating the film as the shared property of the filmmaker and participants, this document seeks also to account for and compensate the living labor of participating in the film. The contractual preference for the term "subject" over "participant" (itself a vague term) disavows this labor, as do the journalistic ethics that forbid some distributors and broadcasters to compensate "sources" (Lord 2024, 7). But documentary participation is also typically uncompensated because the promise of exposure or visibility is *itself* sold to documentary participants as a form of compensation.

Lord's new agreement seeks to recognize and compensate all of the ways in which the participant continues to live with the film, both those that are bounded, like participating in public screenings, as well as the incalculable experiences and recognitions that accompany the act of sharing one's life on film: fielding questions, reliving trauma, and in extreme cases such as that of Omar Khan in *Retrograde*, being punished or even killed for being seen (Roig-Franzia and Hodge-Sack 2024). This living, biopoliticized labor—what Lord calls "the labor of living with the labor of appearing in a film"—is what continues to generate surplus value around the film. Releasing one's rights to the engine of value makes the labor of participating in a documentary resemble other forms of work premised on a loss of autonomy (Lord 2024, 9).

No institution enforces this loss of autonomy more fully than the prison. In a recent interview, Thomas explains why he has adopted a practice resembling Lord's catch agreement. He describes arriving at this shift in consciousness after a falling-out with a nonincarcerated filmmaker "on an Oscar hunt" who denied Thomas permission to use his own footage from a film in which he participated:

That taught me these people can own your likeness 'cos you signed a release while under duress in prison trying to do good. And so now when I make films, I don't own your likeness. If you're in a film you own a copy of it. You can do whatever you want with it except sell it without me. Just

because you allowed me to use your likeness doesn't mean I own your image (Girish and Krute 2024).

Thomas and Lord may be working from different vantages toward horizons more aspirational than achievable, but they share an analysis of what happens when documentary access reproduces carceral structures of dispossession. A lot needs to change about the field—quite possibly everything—if their disability justice-informed approach to liberatory access is to be realized at a broader level. Ethics can only take us so far. A more fundamental transformation requires a reckoning with the forces that produce, and maintain, human captivity in the first place, and the inherent limitations of media satisfied with exposing captive people rather than freeing them.

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Secure, Convenient, Accessible, and Smart: a Dismediating Prehistory of Smart Domestic Media in the late 20th Century United States

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Prehistories of smart domestic technologies often center on the conveniences and futuristic visions of twentieth century homes, where technologies of home governance offered to increase security, ease, and control of domestic life. Often missing from these analyses are considerations of the representational and material roles of disability in the introduction and domestication of mundane domestic media. Looking to smoke detectors and garage door openers, this article posits that promotional discourses of security and convenience prioritized nondisabled perspectives even as the devices increased accessibility for many. The accessibility fostered by these technologies, which disabled people often used as platforms for further innovation, offers a compelling third trajectory for understanding the promises and limits of “smartness.”

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In the largely forgotten buddy comedy *How to Beat the High Cost of Living* (Robert Scheerer, 1980), financially struggling friends played by Jane Curtin, Susan Saint James, and Jessica Lange conspire to steal prize money from a shopping mall. The elaborate heist will begin when Curtin's character leaves her home. The plan immediately hits a snag. Curtin walks to her garage, gets in the car, and presses the button on a garage door opener. Her face and the opener point directly ahead, towards the garage door (as well as at the camera and viewer) (fig. 1). Nothing happens. She reaches outside the window and presses again, aiming directly at the receiver. She gets out of the car and points the opener at the receiver on the garage wall from only a few feet away. The door



does not move. She attempts to lift the garage door manually, to no avail, then pivots, walks back inside, and calls the power company.



Fig. 1:
Still from *How to Beat
the High Cost of Living*
(Robert Scheerer, 1980)

Her power has been shut off for nonpayment, reflecting the conceit of the film. Upon being told that she cannot pay until Monday morning, Curtin attempts to persuade the representative of the power company to restore power immediately. She lies, "This is an emergency—my mother, her kidney machine, which runs on electricity, which has kept her alive for seven years...". She then play-acts at responding to her mother: "Yes, mama... the man on the other end of the phone cares. You do care, don't you? You'll turn the power back on?" The power representative praises her—"Lady, that was beautiful. Really terrific... Great performance"—but recognizes the falsity and hangs up rather than restoring power. The scene concludes with an exterior shot of the home as the car bursts through the unopened garage door, allowing the farcical heist to progress.

This scene draws its humor from the failure of a mundane domestic technology and an attempt to fix the situation through an appeal to the rhetoric of emergency and debility. The logic of emergency demands that something extraordinary be done to prevent harm (Ellcessor 2022). The appeal to debility, evident in the fictional mother's presumed age and her use of a "kidney machine," attempts to motivate charitable action, drawing on longstanding framings of disability as a pitiable individual condition to be solved by benevolent others (Dolmage 2014). Through this, the inconvenience of the power outage is reframed as a matter of medical need, safety, and accessibility. While this reframing fails in the film, the scene is provocative in articulating the slippages between convenience, accessibility, and security in the domestic media of the late twentieth century. The garage door—like the electricity it relies on—registers as more or less necessary in the context of different people, capacities, and situations.

In this article, I pose security, convenience, and accessibility as relational and intersecting concepts that can illuminate the current and historical implementations of “smart” domestic media. Security, convenience, and accessibility emerge through varied intersections of material artifacts, cultural discourse, users’ bodies, minds, and affective states; what is convenient in one instance can be a necessary security or accessibility feature in another (Neves and Steinberg 2024; Alexander 2025; Ellcessor 2022). These concepts prismatically re-fract, illuminating different cultural meanings, presumed affordances, and assumptions about users and domestic life. They may also obscure one another, as some framings dominate or crowd out others. By considering these concepts in concert, we gain a fuller picture of the benefits, affordances, risks, limitations, and possibilities of domestic media.

To explore this conceptual intersection, I offer a dismediating cultural history of two mundane twentieth century media technologies of domestic control that presage our current “smart” technologies: smoke detectors and garage door openers. These mundane media devices have rarely been noted in prior analyses of domestic media, and are advertised predominantly in terms of security and convenience. I focus primarily on the decades in which these media technologies were domesticated, from roughly the 1960s to the early 1990s (Haddon 2011), and triangulate them through a consideration of (in)accessibility, demonstrating the centrality of dis/ability to the construction of domestic space, technology, and social relations in this time period and in visions of domestic smartness. This reading is facilitated by the fact that this time frame corresponds to the rise of the Independent Living Movement, the development of Universal Design principles, and advances in the civil rights of disabled Americans (Hamraie 2017; Williamson 2020). Disability history offers a provocative counterpoint to the well-established narratives of increasing neoliberal consumerism and technosolutionism in mainstream domestic media cultures, particularly as these trajectories overlapped. Domestic efficiency expert Lilian Gilbreth, for instance, is often cited as a leader in the postwar development of “smart” homes and kitchens. Gilbreth’s designs fostered a version of smartness as enacted through the material fit of bodies and technologies (Murray 2026). Less well known is that Gilbreth also worked explicitly to fit disabled bodies to technologies at the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (Williamson 2017). By considering disability in analyses of historical domestic media, we can find additional intersections and produce more nuanced accounts of how convenience, security, and access overlapped and conflicted in the construction of the hypermediated “smart” home.

Smoke detectors and garage door openers offer useful pathways to understanding the materiality of domestic media and their relationships to disability (or diminished capacity). Ultimately, I argue that these devices were promoted through discourses of security and convenience as achieved through literal and symbolic control of domestic space and relationships. These emphases overshadowed the role of such devices in creating accessible environments and served to distance these technologies from the threat of disability or diminished

capacity, even as the devices themselves fostered accessibility for many disabled households and increased access for people experiencing varied forms of debility or diminished capacity. Simultaneously, these technologies provided platforms for accessible innovation by disabled people, which offer an alternative trajectory for thinking about the rise of “smart” domestic media.

DOMESTIC MEDIA, MISFITS, AND METHODS

While scholars have considered the mediated production of the domestic sphere and its political economy, particularly through television and mass media, detailed attention to the appliances that furnished the twentieth-century home has been less common (Morley 1988; Spigel 1992, 2001a). James Hay, in his work on the intertwined relationships between domesticity and discourses of national defense and neoliberal risk management, argues that we must look to these “technologies of home-governance” to understand how notions of safety and security moved from the national stage to the privately managed home (2006, 354).

Technologies of home-governance have most often been studied in relation to so-called “smart homes” or “homes of the future,” in which increasingly technologized and networked devices offer to take over the work of domestic management with various degrees of automation (Spigel 2005; Woods 2021; Humphry and Chesher 2021). Many analyses of smart homes and related technologies emphasize convenience and safety: “smart life today has been built on measures of trust, helpfulness, comfort, safety, control” (Murray 2026, 12); smart homes promise “ease, convenience, and security” (Crawford 2025, 324). While these are certainly the promises made by promulgators of such media, convenience and safety (or security) are not universally shared concepts or experiences—they are constructed quite differently in relation to social differences. As David Neves and Marc Steinberg write, convenience often denotes “a luxury for some that is a requirement for others” (2024, 7). Domestic ideals are deeply racialized and classed, with the promises of technologically enabled security and futuristic smart homes only available to individuals and households with sufficient capital and privilege to buy into technologies that offer to extend and entrench aspirational ideas about the home, family, and daily life (Caluya 2014; Woods 2021; Murray 2026). Similarly, the logics of the smart home draw upon the gendered legacies of domestic convenience technologies, which promised leisure to the housewife without absolving her of domestic responsibilities (Spigel 2001b; Neves and Steinberg 2024). More contemporary smart home technologies retain gendered associations of femininity and domestic labor (Strengers and Kennedy 2020; Pink et al. 2022; Sadowski et al. 2024).

Despite such considerations of gender, race, and class, there has been little consideration of the relationship between smart domestic media and disability (or accessibility). Domesticity itself is often premised on an idealized body or family that fails to consider impairment or alternative arrangements of bodies in space, and design of domestic space and technologies thus prioritizes nor-

mate perspectives (Imrie 2010; Rembis 2017; Woods 2021). Smart homes and technologies similarly often presume and address nondisabled users.

The language of “fit” is helpful in constructing a nuanced approach to disability and domestic media. Sarah Murray describes “smartness” as “the smooth fitting of bodies, technologies, and everyday life” and offers a historicization of smartness in the late twentieth century through various “fits”—outfits, retrofits—that linked bodies to machines and routines (2026, 5). Murray, however, does not consider the “misfit,” a critical concept that locates disability experience and knowledge in the material mismatch of disabled bodies and their surroundings in a given place and time (Garland-Thomson 2011). The misfit offers an alternative relationship, an oppositional consciousness, and an emphasis on the material culture and embodied experiences that accompany rhetorical invocations of “smartness” (Garland-Thomson 2011, 597; Humphry and Chesher 2021, 1171). Experiences of the misfit are characterized by “friction,” which Neta Alexander opposes to “immersion,” between digital interfaces and varied bodies (2025); we might think of accessibility as an effort to reduce friction or create a new fit. Histories of accessible technologies reveal longstanding practices of crip technoscience in which disabled people have innovated to create access and foster their own convenience and security in an environment of otherwise inaccessible technologies (Lang 2000; Hamraie and Fritsch 2019; Alexander 2025). These innovations can be read as alternative prehistories to smart homes and devices, emerging not only from mainstream visions of domestic futurity but from innovations born of specific needs, positionalities, and activist interventions.

Thinking with the misfit enables a dismediation of “useful” domestic media of convenience and security, revealing moments in which these promises fail to consider disabled bodies and moments in which disabled people extend these values through creative innovations (Wasson and Acland 2011; Mills and Sterne 2017). Dismediation asks us to consider “disability as a constituting dimension of media, and media as a constituting dimension of disability”—even and perhaps especially when they appear not to (Mills and Sterne 2017, 366). This methodological approach extends beyond representational or rhetorical analyses to consider the material, experiential, and industrial structures through which disability informs, shapes, and transforms media technologies and cultures.

Thus, this article is a work of media and material history. Using tools from cultural studies and material culture studies, I look to advertisements, newspaper reporting, coverage in women’s magazines, reporting and advertisements in disability publications, letters to the editor and customer feedback, and industrial archives to understand how these technologies were promoted to and received by the American public (Grossberg 2010; Vannini 2009). These materials were found in archives including the Smithsonian Museum of American History, the Rubenstein Rare Books Archive at Duke University, the Vanderbilt University Television Archive, the Worcester Institute of Technology, the online archives of major news publications and women’s magazines, and print archives of several publications aimed at d/Deaf or disabled Americans. These representations illuminate the ideal users and use-cases of these media and work together to

construct the symbolic weight of these media as technologies of control that extend and entrench idealized forms of domesticity. I combine this representational analysis with analyses of material devices, instruction manuals, and reports of user experiences to construct a three-dimensional understanding of realities of smoke detectors and garage door openers as photo-smart technologies of domestic management. By taking the smoke detector off the ceiling and the garage door opener out of the car, we can consider the relationship between the symbolic weight these devices carried and their material frictions when considered in the context of disability and everyday life.

THE SMOKE DETECTOR

Smoke detectors are now-ubiquitous technologies of home governance, required safety devices that are increasingly integrated with digital domestic management platforms such as Nest or Google Home. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, they were heavily marketed consumer technologies that were part of a larger shift in the securitization of the home through mediation. The very packaging of a mid-1980s FamilyGard smoke detector reveals much about the device and its promotion and placement in domestic life. Beside extensive text describing the technology, this reverse side of the box shows an enlarged smoke detector floating above and behind a tableau of a man, woman, and girl positioned as if in a family photo and wearing coordinating red shirts. The lower half of the box features diagrams of a multi-story home and a mobile home, indicating how many detectors are needed and where they should be placed.

Smoke detectors entered a complicated cultural moment in which cigarette smoking was ubiquitous, kitchens were often poorly ventilated, and insurance companies were actively promoting fire insurance to suburban families (Hay 2006; Travelers' Insurance, "Burning House" 1964). Residential fires were substantially more common in the 1960s and 1970s than in subsequent decades (Eisenberg 2005). Even as the U.S. Fire Administration "strongly urge[d] the installation of detectors in homes that do not have them," legal mandates were slow and, in some cases, resisted because of either expense or inconvenience. One apartment dweller, being charged for a detector by his landlord, complained in a letter to the *New York Times* that he "must cease using the following conveniences in order to prevent false alarms: stove, oven, shower, fireplace, ceiling fan and fluorescent desk lamp" (Baron 1982, 22).

To overcome resistance and reach people in areas that did not yet require detectors, manufacturers advertised in magazines and on television. Nearly without exception, 1970s and 1980s smoke detector advertisements centered nuclear families and invoked masculine protection of women and children, reflecting a common pattern of novel and futuristic domestic media continuing to "traffic in regressive narratives about what home is, who should live within it, and what their roles are" (Woods 2024, 54). Captain Kelly smoke detectors were particularly overt, as in an advertisement that described a smoke detector as an "inexpensive way to protect your priceless family" alongside a photo of a man,

woman and child standing in the night staring at a burning house (Gillette 1976). Advertisements further literalized masculine and military protection through the inclusion of a “Captain Kelly” figure, a middle-aged white man wearing a military uniform and looking solemnly ahead. Over a decade later, the FamilyGard box retains these emphases: the rear of the box reads, in part, “Protect your loved ones” and promises that it “uses components that meet U.S. military standards.” Smoke detectors addressed their sales pitch to masculine household decision makers, invoking domestic and national security.

Magazine and newspaper articles that discussed smoke detectors regularly illustrated their installation by showing a man on a ladder installing the device while a woman and one or more children looked on from the floor (see fig. 2). These articles included instructions for installation, comparisons of different models, and advice regarding placement and maintenance. Protection was achieved through this physical installation, further positioning men as protectors not only through purchase but through self-reliant home improvement labor (Cobb and Storm 1978). Even when the placement of such articles in publications like *Women’s Day* or *Better Homes and Gardens* suggested a largely female readership, women and children were routinely presented as vulnerable groups to be protected by a male head of household.

Fires were understood to have differential risks; the FamilyGard box presented information from the National Fire Protection Agency indicating that children under five had a 250% increased risk of death from fire, while adults over 65 had double the average risk of death. This led to significant efforts to educate children, as in public service announcements featuring Daffy Duck talking about fire safety, but did not extend to representing disability, illness, or advanced age in advertisements or articles (Shriners 1990). The domesticity that smoke detectors secured was routinely portrayed in terms of a normative, white, nondisabled, heterosexual nuclear family.

These representations are troubled when considering the material frictions encountered when smoke detectors encountered other bodies and contexts. Smoke detectors were usually housed in white plastic cases, containing space for batteries, and standard detector features included speakers for the alarm, often sounding at over 80 decibels, a test button, and in many cases blinking lights that signaled the device was operational. The most evident frictions stemmed from placement and audio signaling. In terms of placement, detectors were to be installed either on ceilings or high on walls; after installation, routine forms of maintenance such as dusting the sensor, changing the battery, or pushing the

Fig. 2:
Illustration by Alice
Golden for *Women’s Day*
(Cobb and Storm 1978)



test button to ensure operation would also require one to have a way of reaching the elevated device. This placement would create friction for many disabled and elderly people; wheelchair users, people with diminished balance, chronically ill individuals, and others could likely neither install the device themselves nor be proactive in ensuring its continued operation.

A pair of bookended television commercials produced by First Alert offer a rare implicit acknowledgement of and attempt to redress this misfit (*NBC Nightly News* 1988). In the first commercial, a mustached man is seated in a leather recliner; he looks out at the audience, warns of the danger of nonworking detectors, and says “to make sure your family is safe,” pointing at the camera, “go test your smoke detector right now. I’ll be back.” Other commercials follow, enabling viewers to forget the first over the course of two or three minutes, before the man reappears. He gently accuses the viewer—“you didn’t test your smoke detector because it was too inconvenient, right?” He then demonstrates a novel feature of the First Alert detector “with light test”; rather than pressing the button, it can be tested by shining a flashlight at a sensor. This overcomes the friction of placement, building in an accessibility feature that benefits many people. By presenting it as a matter of convenience, a more consumer- and non-disabled-friendly framing, the device was promoted to a mainstream audience without invoking debility directly.

The second obvious friction with respect to disability was the reliance of smoke detectors on audio alarms and warning beeps that signal need for new batteries. These needs were at times addressed through claims of interoperability; Statitrol sold a higher-end model that “accommodates to use of external bells, lights, phone dialers, etc.” (Statitrol Corporation 1972, 5). This means it could, in principle, be linked to other, more accessible or preferred forms of signaling. More direct responses to this misfit can be seen in publications such as the *American Annals of the Deaf*, where readers were presumed to be in the market for alternative versions of this technology. In the back pages of a 1978 issue, an advertisement for the Nationwide Flashing Signals System offers to connect a smoke detector to a lamp or other light inside the home, relaying the signal to convert the alarm to a visual signal, or to exterior horns to alert neighbors (Nationwide 1978).

Beyond efforts to make smoke detectors accessible, these technologies often became foundational to disabled people’s efforts to enhance their own access, convenience, and security by using these as platforms for further “smart” innovation. A catalog from Mid-Audio, a company dedicated to producing “alerting, amplifying, and convenience devices for the hearing impaired” included not only accessible smoke detectors but a wide range of products that modified, integrated, or extended the features of these devices (1983). Strobe lights with audio sensors could be set up to relay not only the sounds of a smoke detector or other alarm, but telephones, children’s cries, or other sonic notifications, and integrated systems were promoted as enabling users to “feel secure” (Mid Audio Inc 1983, 20). Other innovations included haptic signaling, as in a tactile communicator that used radio paging to convert audio signals into vibrations

that could be felt via portable receivers (Cohen 1982). Through efforts to access the security provided by smoke detectors, many features of domestic life were made more accessible in a process that often facilitated an extension of domestic control (or smartness) beyond what was typical in non-disabled households.

THE GARAGE DOOR OPENER

Automated garage door openers were not novel technologies by the late twentieth century, with some early versions on the market as early as the 1920s. However, they proliferated from the 1950s onward, catering to rising rates of home (and garage) ownership in the car-oriented suburbs. The Genie product line from Alliance Manufacturing Company, launched in 1954, was by far the most visible, market-leading version. A garage door opener consists of several parts: a transmitter that, via press of a button, uses a specific frequency to communicate with the receiver installed within the garage, which is itself connected to the opening mechanism. Roughly the size of the palm of a hand, transmitters were designed to be mounted on a car's dashboard or clipped to a visor, turning the car into a medium of home access by allowing remote control of the door.

Garage door openers were frequently marketed through a combination of claims about security and convenience (or luxury). Print advertisements for Genie devices offered to close the garage "when you're safely inside" (fig. 3) or promised "an extra touch of safety in the palm of your hand!" (J. Walter Thompson Company 1979). *The New York Times* described the technologies as "an important safety feature, especially for people who arrive home alone at night" (Gladstone 1981). Coverage of later television advertisements indicated that Genie addressed an audience of men and women 25-54 but "skewed more towards women who are concerned about their safety" (Fox 1989). Garage door openers thus promised to allow people—particularly physically or socially vulnerable people—to enter the safety of the home prior to exiting their car.

Beyond these safety benefits, the garage door opener offered important affordances to people who might lack the strength to physically open their garage, or who might be particularly at

Fig. 3:
Magazine advertisement
for the Genie garage
door opener. J. Walter
Thompson Company
1978. Duke University
Rubenstein Rare Book &
Manuscript Library, Duke
University, Durham, NC.

**Genie opens the door
turns on the light
lets you drive right in!**

Genie
automatic garage door opener system by Alliance

Genie opens the door at a touch of the button! And when you're safely inside, Genie closes the door and turns off the light. Only Genie has CRYPTAR® II Digital Controls, with 3000 codes

available. And SEQUENSOR®, the computer-controlled brain that handles 22 functions with error-free precision and solid-state reliability. Isn't it time you owned a Genie?

ALLIANCE Manufacturing Co., Inc., Alliance, Ohio 44601
A Division of American Machine & Foundry Company
Makers of the famous Antenna Rotor®, Alliance Terra-Rotor®, "TV's Better Color Getter"
Genie®, Alliance, Cryptar® and Sequensor® are registered trademarks of The Alliance Manufacturing Company, Inc.

© 1978 The Alliance Mfg. Co.

Fig. 4:
Still from a 1970s
"Genie Remote Control
Garage Door Opener TV
Commercial," produced
by Periscope Films

risk or experiencing physical difficulties or pain when exiting or entering the car repeatedly. A 1970s television commercial illustrated this challenge through paired vignettes (see Figure 6). A young woman drives home with her child as the snow falls heavily around them: without an opener, she exits the car in high heels and struggles to lift the cord attached the garage door; with an opener, she presses the button and smoothly drives into the waiting garage (*Genie Remote Control Garage Door Opener TV Commercial* 1970s). While not depicting debility explicitly, this commercial presented the garage door opener as a solution to diminished capacity, whether caused by weather, attire, age, gender, or a combination of such factors.



Garage door openers offered "convenience, safety, and performance you can count on," a sales pitch reminiscent of many high-end consumer electronics perceived as luxuries (J. Walter Thompson Company 1979). But convenience and luxury were also, often, used against the garage door opener. Humor commentator Andy Rooney installed his first garage door opener and wondered "whether it's a genuine convenience that's worth the money" (1986: B15). He described the agony of opening a garage door in the rain and the ease of the push button but also stated that one reason for his purchase was "laziness" (Rooney 1986: B15). Over time, as the U.S. became increasingly focused on the issue of obesity, garage door openers were regularly decried as an example of frivolous effort-reducing technologies that were "making our waistlines wider" (Mullen 1997).

These critiques of convenience may sound familiar; things that are useful and accessible for disabled people are often dismissed as frivolous, overly expensive, or evidence of laziness, as in the case of precut fruit at the grocery, disposable straws, or escalators (Mauldin 2022). These critiques stem from a limited, normalizing perspective in which all people might be expected to undertake all routine tasks in the same way and with the same degree of ease. Taking a dismediating perspective on the garage door opener during its period of domestication demonstrates that the discourse of safety was potentially more prominent because the backlash to convenience was so evident.

But convenience through “the touch of a button” (J. Walter Thompson Company 1978), also facilitated physically undemanding control-at-a-distance that increased accessibility and allowed the garage door opener to serve as a platform for further accessible innovation (Plotnick 2018). Buttons enable control of our environments without physical exertion; such control is not just convenient but necessary for people for whom the direct manipulation of household media and artifacts is difficult or impossible. Thus, the garage door opener served as a platform for further home control in the name of accessibility. Writing for the *Rehabilitation Gazette*, polio survivor Robert Hitz described how he modified his home to enable him to live alone. Concerned about the possibility of falling while alone, he and friends developed a

rotating beam signal light mounted on the front of my house and actuated by a Genie garage door opener switch which I carry with me, and the signal receiver and a transformer, mounted on the front wall of the upstairs bedroom. One touch of the button in my pocket will turn on the red light and start the beam rotating to attract attention (Hitz 1980, 20).

The garage door opener thus not only enabled control of entrances but was repurposed as a platform for further security and accessibility through repurposing. This is a use of what Arseli Dokumaçi calls “activist affordances,” “through which disabled people *enact* and *bring into being* the worlds that are not already available to them, the worlds they need and wish to dwell in” (2023, 5). Disabled people’s repurposing of domestic media in pursuit of greater and more personalized automation is the very promise of “smart” domesticity.

CONCLUSION

This article has looked at two technologies of home-governance—the smoke detector and the garage door opener—in order to demonstrate the relevance of disability, aging, and other forms of debility and vulnerability to the promotion and operation of these media. Disability informs their symbolic efforts to protect vulnerable individuals, their promises to enhance ease or convenience, and their material affordances and limitations. Disability’s misfit with these devices further illuminates opportunities for innovation that enhanced technological control and enabled independent living—an alternative prehistory to today’s smart home devices.

The relational and overlapping nature of security, convenience, and accessibility has meant that the logics of convenience and security have, at many points in these histories, disguised or overshadowed how domestic media might extend accessibility or restrict disability access. This, in turn, has obstructed the history of disability-led innovation as an alternative prehistory of smart homes and domestic media. Rearticulating these connections is important in ensuring that understandings of smartness and domestic mediation do not continue to center only privileged, idealized users, bodies, and domestic arrangements. Furthermore, it is a necessary corrective; when physical, digital, or datafied affordances are understood primarily as matters of convenience or preference, there is a tendency to overlook or actively erase legacies of accessible innovation, disability activism, and disability rights and communities (Hamraie 2016; Ellcessor 2015). Convenience and accessibility—and security—may overlap but cannot be allowed to collapse.

Looking at the domestication of smoke detectors and garage door openers through a dismediating lens can further inform our understanding of contemporary smart homes, networked devices, and technologies of domestic security and household management. These media were among the first to subject the home to constant surveillance and remote control of entrances; these features have since become normalized and extended into larger technological systems of home-governance via voice controlled or AI systems that purport to handle the security and comfort of the home on behalf of the residents. Their emphases on convenience and security can be read through overlapping logics of accessibility; these devices, intentionally or not, had the effect of making independent living more accessible for many disabled people and formed the basis of many further innovations in accessible domestic technologies, pointing towards an alternative genealogy of smartness. Thus, as we consider contemporary instantiations of home security and convenience, we might ask again how and where disability shapes the possibilities and limits of these media in their meanings and operations. Some may produce surprising benefits while others reinforce regressive or ableist understandings of domesticity—some may do all these things at once.

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Text, Technology, *Time Bent*: Crippling Access with Jay Afrisando and Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner

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This essay focuses on the crip aesthetics of *Time Bent, Folded, Exhausted* (henceforth *Time Bent*), a co-authored work of literature/sound art by Jay Afrisando and Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner. In this collaborative, multimedia project, the two neurodivergent artists stage a dialogic process of thinking and writing focusing on their experience of temporality, especially as it relates to their artistic practice. As crip time becomes creative fodder, perception is rendered multisensory and multimodal. Textual and staging choices invite audience members to immerse themselves in neurodivergent temporalities and to question ableist expectations around time, work, and social interactions. The piece also reimagines the relationship between access, time, and space through its innovative use of technology, both in the time of composition and that of the performance. I argue in this essay that the intertwining of the textual, the technological, and the performative in *Time Bent* demonstrates that access is not so much a logistical matter as a relational one. The performance shifts attention from accessibility features to the more relational—and thus, temporal—conception of “access intimacy” rooted in disability justice.

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INTRODUCTION

This essay focuses on *Time Bent, Folded, Exhausted* (henceforth *Time Bent*), a co-authored work of literature/sound art by the multimedia artist Jay Afrisando and the writer Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner. I had the pleasure of attending a performance of *Time Bent* in June 2025 at the daadgalerie in Berlin, Germany.¹

¹ Jay Afrisando was a 2024-25 Music and Sound Fellow of the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) Artists-in-Berlin program. The daadgalerie is the central hub and exhibition space of the arts residency program.



Structured as a dialogue spanning multiple times and spaces, the piece is, at heart, a warm, intimate conversation between two friends facing similar professional and personal challenges.² Their conversation touches upon their wide-ranging interests, social interactions, and work rhythms, as well as the ways in which they cope with the ableist conditions under which they labor. Google docs, Powerpoint, projection, audio recording, playback over multi-channel speakers—all of this and more was put to work in making visible (and audible) Jay and Simoné's collaborative thinking and compositional process. I argue in this essay that the intertwining of the textual, the technological, and the performative in *Time Bent* demonstrates that access is not really a logistical matter, but a relational one. All elements of the performance were rendered in written and audio form, and the organizers were very attentive to disparate seating and sensory needs. The overall effect, though, was to shift attention from such accessibility features to a more relational—and thus, temporal—conception of “access intimacy” rooted in disability justice. *Time Bent* articulates the relationship between access, time, and space. It also unsettles and thoroughly reimagines that relationship through its innovative use of technology, both in the time of composition and that of the performance.

While the analysis that follows dwells on one powerful piece, I would be remiss to present *Time Bent* as an isolated intervention. The last fifteen years has seen a veritable explosion of disability art, enough to make disability theorist Tobin Siebers' pronouncement “disability is now and will be in the future an aesthetic value in itself” feel palpably true (2010, 139). Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (2024) note that “[i]n disability arts, form and content are deeply intertwined as the materialities of access are increasingly incorporated into both creative production and audience consumption” (155; see also Cachia 2023). The sudden, if uneven and short-lived, mainstreaming of accessibility concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted considerable artistic and activist work around “the aesthetics of access” (Ginsburg and Rich 2022; Ginsburg and Rapp 2024; Watlington 2025). Captioning, for instance, has become an abiding concern in the New Disability Media movement, so much so that it has been the focus of several exhibitions (Mills and Alexander 2022, 39).³ I discuss Jay and Simoné's transformation of captions and other access features in *Time Bent* at length below. Here, I want to note that the emphasis on access brings technology to the fore, making it impossible to think disability and media apart from each other. In other words, disability arts demands that we think in terms of “dismedia,” a framework that recognizes “disability as a constituting dimension of media, and

² In the rest of this essay, I refer to the artists by their first names rather than their surnames, in keeping with the personal tone and dialogic form of *Time Bent*. Tense is trickier matter here (appropriately so): I have tried to use present tense when referring to the script of *Time Bent*, and past tense when discussing aspects of the performance.

³ In their introduction to the *Film Quarterly* dossier cited above, Faye Ginsburg and B. Ruby Rich describe New Disability Media “as a movement in which disabled filmmakers are at the forefront of the repositioning of figurations of disability, acting as both creators and subjects while deploying new aesthetic strategies” (2022).

media as a constituting dimension of disability" (Mills and Sterne 2017, 366). It is with this lesson from Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne in mind that I turn to consider the relationship between text and technology in *Time Bent*.

SCRIPT, SCREEN, AND SOUND

One of the most notable aspects of *Time Bent* was the importance accorded to the screen and script, and to the connections of these elements to sound, in the performance space. At the front of the room was a large screen, onto which was projected the text that Jay and Simoné read aloud. The size of the screen and the fact that it occupied the middle of the audience's visual field meant that my gaze was more often fixed on the screen—and the textual and visual form of the Jay's and Simoné's words—than on the artists themselves. I was reading along with the artists, as I was listening to them. In other words, in *Time Bent*, the entire screen became the space of access. The text on screen was akin to linguistic access features such as subtitles or captions. But whereas those access features usually sit at the bottom of the screen and are often optional settings that have to be turned on by the viewer, the *Time Bent* script was front and center throughout the performance. The text commanded my attention, turned me into a viewer-reader not just a listener. Each time I noticed that my eyes were fixated on the screen, I turned my gaze back to Jay and Simoné. Initially seated at a table beside the screen, they moved positions several times over the course of the reading. The spatial arrangement of the room and the two artists' bodily movements thus prompted a shuttling of my gaze between the screen and the artists' bodies.

In the middle of the Powerpoint slides projected on the screen was the conversation being read aloud by the two artists, with their respective lines rendered in a different color. Black represented Simoné's words, and blue Jay's parts. On either side of this primary block of text were color-coded boxes representing each artist's "silent" response to their friend's words. A lime green box with black text [in smaller font and enclosed in square brackets] held Jay's thoughts; a similar lavender one Simoné's. Thus, it was not just the bottom of the screen—the space usually reserved for access features like subtitles and captions—that was transformed in *Time Bent*, so too were the right and left margins of the screen. The not-so-marginal marginalia were linked to the central text by color. Words in the primary conversation that inspired the "silent" thoughts were highlighted in the same color as the boxes off to the side (fig. 1). I place the term "silent" in quotation marks because that text in the margins was, in fact, also audible. Two speakers at the front of the room were designated for the live voices—i.e., the words that occupied the middle of the screen and that the artists read aloud. Speakers at the back of the room played the artists' intermittent thoughts in response to their collaborator's words—i.e., the words in the margins. Recorded in advance and played back at the scene of the performance (using a clicker), these margin comments sounded not so minor, after all. They

now occupied the same aural space as the live voices issuing from the speakers at the front of the room.

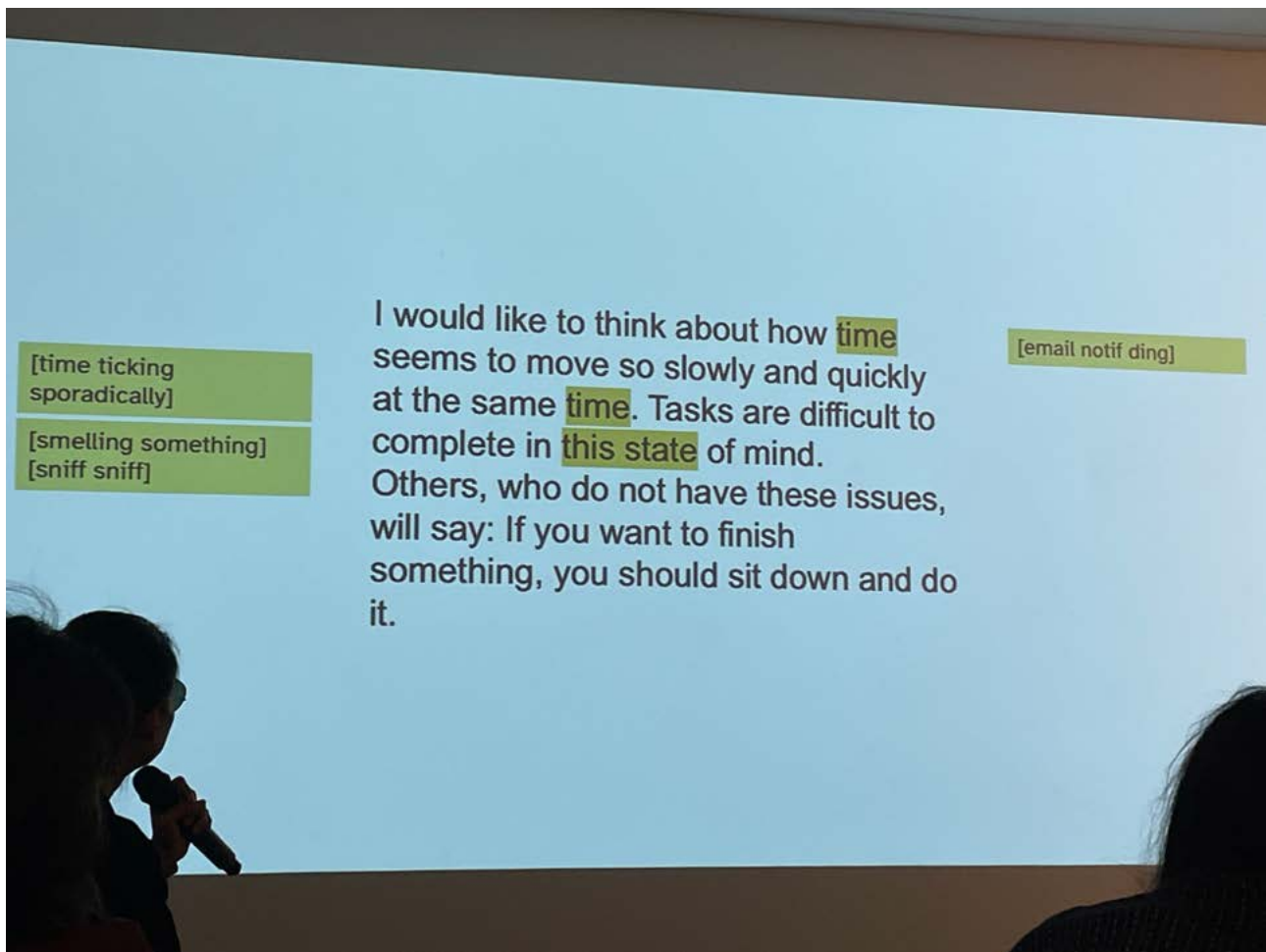


Fig. 1:
Time Bent, Folded, Exhausted (Jay Afrisando and Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner, 2025).
Performance held at the daadgalerie in Berlin.
Photograph taken by the author and shared with the artists' permission.

Multiplicity of form is an important accessibility principle. Access features are typically conceptualized in terms of redundancy: information is rendered in multiple formats to allow people with different needs to access that material. *Time Bent* activated that redundancy. Since the audience could see/read and hear all of the text, the line between spoken and unspoken words was erased: everything was audible and textual at once. The multimodal nature of the performance turned audience members into viewers-readers-listeners. It also invited us to consider the constantly shifting relationships between various voices, each of which was articulated across at least two domains (live performance, recording, and text on screen). Notice, too, how the piece flipped the order of aural and visual content. Rather than turning pre-recorded sounds into text (as captions do), *Time Bent* turned pre-written text into sound. In describing his relationship to captions, the deaf writer and stand-up comedian Andrew Fisher notes that for him, "oral language represents written language" (2021). That is, the textual form of words on screen *precedes* their sonic form. In flipping the conventional relationship between the written and the spoken word, Fisher challenges the idea that captions are assistive tools, helpful but not integral to the piece. In their very belatedness, access features position those who use

them as outside the presumptive norm. Carrying this lesson over into *Time Bent*, we notice that the text on screen in this performance is not “an alternative of speech [so much as] something that adds to and enhances the overall experience” (Fisher 2021). Another way to say this is that neither the textualizing of sound nor the sonification of the text in *Time Bent* were instrumentalist access features; sound, image, and text were all core creative elements of the performance.

CAPTIONING CREATIVELY

Let us consider again the not-so-silent margins of *Time Bent*. In those margins, the “comments” function of word processing programs such as Word and Google Docs was turned into a prominent access feature. That which is usually unheard or pushed to the margins (or only visible as an “optional” feature) was now as present in the performance space as the words that Jay and Simoné were reading aloud. By making audible and visible what was ostensibly silent and tangential, *Time Bent* reminded us that behind any interaction lies a trove of private thoughts, assumptions, and responses. The margins did not collapse the distance between private and public discourse; they connected the two even as they maintained a difference in form (signaling, in turn, differences in time, place, and subjectivity between the co-authors). Over the course of the performance, the captions in the margins began to include sensory details specific to each artist’s time-space and their personal experiences. Consider fig. 1, which depicts three green text boxes marking Jay’s experience: [time ticking sporadically], [smelling something] [sniff sniff], and [email notif ding]. Notice the movement between the literal and the metaphorical, between the real and the imaginary in these captions. We read and hear the sound of an email notification and we are invited to imagine the sound of “time ticking sporadically.” There is also a delightful blurring of the subject here: is it time doing the sniffing as it ticks sporadically? Notice, too, the synaesthetic gesture. What is the sound of smelling? [sniff sniff]. Notice the contraction and the translation from word [is notif a word?] to sound [ding], and vice versa. In these and numerous other ways, *Time Bent* uses familiar conventions of captions—colored text, square brackets, decentered positioning—but turns them into something else entirely.

Jay and Simoné’s approach to “activating captions” dovetails with playful textual experiments undertaken by Christine Sun Kim, Carolyn Lazard, Jordan Lord, Constantina Zavitsanos, and others in the New Disability Arts movement (Mills and Alexander 2022; Watlington 2019; Kim and Tome). Through their films and video art, these artists demonstrate that access features (such as audio descriptions, captions, and subtitles) are neither objective nor complete renditions of the information in the visual and/or audio tracks. They might better be understood as spaces of ekphrasis and translation, spaces of creativity that can do as much artistic, conceptual, and critical work as other elements of a piece. At first glance, it appears that the margins of *Time Bent* give the audience

a certain kind of “intimacy access,” a window into Jay’s and Simoné’s private thoughts and experiences. But I want to propose that they do something even more powerful. In mobilizing this particular technological feature—a tool for providing feedback or commentary, particularly in co-written documents—*Time Bent* transforms our understanding of access altogether. It crips access by enacting a conceptual move from the technical, logistical domain of accessibility to the interpersonal, relational domain of “access intimacy.”⁴

ACCESS AS RELATIONAL PROCESS

For Mia Mingus (2011), who coined the term “access intimacy” in a blogpost, this is a kind of intimacy one experiences when someone intuitively grasps one’s access needs. It is a felt quality that is distinct from familial, emotional, political, sexual, or any other kind of intimacy. There is a quotidian quality, a present-ness, to this kind of connection, for the person is “willing to be with me in the never-ending and ever-changing daily obstacle course that is navigating an inaccessible world” (Mingus 2017). In other words, access intimacy may be present even when complete accessibility remains out of reach. It may be enjoyed with friends or strangers, with disabled and non-disabled people alike. Developing the concept in a blog and lecture years later, Mingus (2017) notes:

Access intimacy at once recognizes and understands the relational and human quality of access, while simultaneously deepening the relationships involved. It moves the work of access out of the realm of only logistics and into the realm of relationships and understanding disabled people as humans, not burdens. Disabled people’s liberation cannot be boiled down to logistics.

Indeed, disability justice cannot be achieved through technical fixes. It demands a rethinking and re-formulation of relationships, new ways of connecting and being with one another. Practicing access intimacy, Mingus argues, deepens relationships.

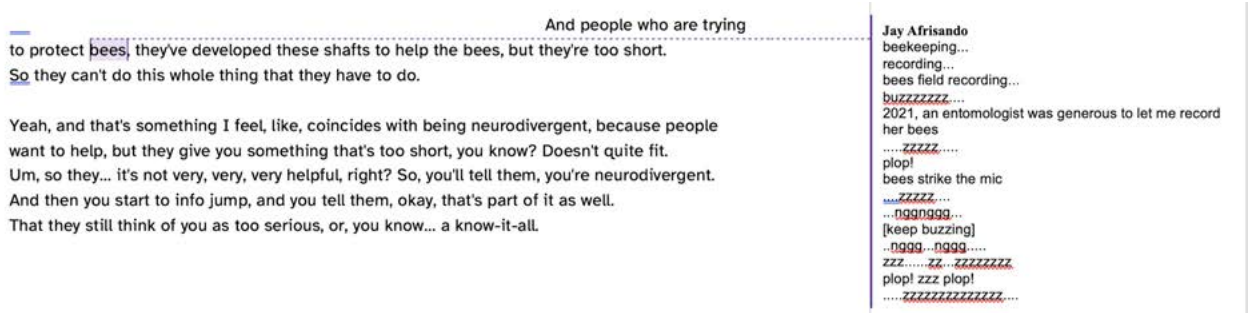
Jay and Simoné enact access intimacy by foregrounding relationships and process throughout *Time Bent*. Relationality is materialized in the very form of the piece. For one, *Time Bent* is an epistolary performance, composed and staged as a dialogue between two fellow artists. As I began working on this essay, Jay and Simoné very graciously shared their script with me. The title of that Google doc, “Neurodivergent Musings,” is itself a sign of how generous, unstructured, and exploratory their writing process was. In preparation for the public reading, they transferred their co-authored “musings” into a Powerpoint slide deck, and lightly revised them. The script includes process notes about how their written work would appear on screen, some of which were retained for the final edit/performance. For example, in one margin note which appeared

⁴ Here, I follow Pooja Rangan (2025) who charts a similar move from “intimacy access” to “access intimacy” in Jordan Lord’s documentary *Shared Resources*.

in the performance, Jay wonders if one of Simoné's lines ("The world is tumbling, tumbling, tumbling all around us") could be the title of their reading. They do not pursue this suggestion, but "tumbling" still worms its way into the primary conversation a bit later. Jay is obviously still thinking about his co-author's words, when he observes that "we're becoming tumblers." Thus, in more ways than one, *Time Bent* blurs the boundaries between artistic product and process.

Time Bent is at once a conversation about the routine ableism that Jay and Simoné face, and an embodied experiment in creating a space more welcoming and accommodating of neurodivergence. While both artists identify as neurodivergent, their experiences and needs are by no means the same. So, they ask questions of each other and learn about the particularities of their lives. Curiosity is the foundation upon which both access intimacy and critique are built. Early in the piece, Simoné asks Jay to "describe [his] surroundings for [her] (what you see, what you imagine)." Jay speaks of a yellow canola field in the distance and the green fields that flank it. He remarks on the wind caressing him and the bumblebees that flit about. From there, the conversation moves quickly to the sexual life of wild bees and on to a broader discussion about access. Figure 2 is an excerpt from the script for *Time Bent*, with Simoné's comments on bees and Jay's "silent" thoughts in the margins. Notice the chatty, informal tone of the conversation. Notice Simoné's critique of well-intentioned attempts to help neurodivergent people, how those failed attempts at providing access exacerbate the sense of being a "misfit" (Garland-Thomson 2011, 591). Notice how the neurotypical misunderstand Simoné's communicative practices as a character flaw ("too serious," "a know-it-all"). Notice how this potent critique of access blossoms out of Simoné's curiosity about Jay's immediate surroundings. This kind of move, from granular details about a time and place to more general social commentary, happens often in *Time Bent*. Notice, too, how the bees keep buzzing in the margins, flying, plopping into the structures around them. Through this ostensibly "scattered" dialogue, Jay and Simoné (and the bees!) illustrate just how "info jump[ing]" and "info dumping" works, how meaningful and helpful it can be, and how one might attend to and learn from it.

Fig. 2:
Excerpt from the script
for *Time Bent, Folded,
Exhausted* (Jay Afrisando
and Simoné Goldschmidt-
Lechner, 2025).
Screenshot taken by the
author and shared with
the artists' permission.



One of things I found moving about Jay and Simoné's conversation is the way they respond to whatever their other person offers, even if it seems unrelated to the preceding comments. They work gently and collaboratively, placing no (apparent) temporal or other restrictions on how and when they respond to each other's comments. They follow each other down rabbit-holes and linger at

times in moments of confusion. They are patient with each other, comfortable with being lost, with *not* understanding what the other person says. At times, they just let each other be. Ellipses, blank spaces, and long silences mark the passage of time, both on the page/screen and during the performance. Thus, Jay and Simoné perform for the audience not just their complex, multi-track mode of thinking, but also ways of responding to each other, ways of demonstrating support and solidarity.

My emphasis on script, screen, and sound in the foregoing discussion must not be taken to mean that the artists' physical presence at the daadgalerie that evening was immaterial. If, as I am arguing, *Time Bent* is about crippling notions of time, space, and access, then it follows that the piece is crucially concerned with embodiment and the materiality of experience. In the ways they occupied and moved through the performance space, Jay and Simoné articulated the notion of relationality (and the specific relationships) at the heart of the work. As noted earlier, they began the reading seated at a table at the front of the room, to the right of the screen. Mics in hand, they read their respective lines off their laptops. Their eyes traveled between their devices, their fellow artist, the audience, and the screen. They also moved around over the course of the hour, switching to more comfortable seats and turning away from the audience entirely at times to face the screen. As promised in the accessibility notes in the event announcement, there were chairs, stools, and bean bags in the gallery space, and Jay and Simoné occasionally opted to use some of those seats located at the front of the room. Far from being distracting, these spatial re-arrangements and re-directions were a reminder of the constant negotiation involved in all creative collaborations, not least in one concerned with ableist expectations around time, work, and social interactions.

I have argued in this section that while Jay and Simoné use a variety of technological tools to compose and present their work, the focus remains on the multiple temporalities and the responsive nature of their interlocution. In *Time Bent*—in bending time—Jay and Simoné practice access intimacy. The emphasis here is on building and deepening relationships, on reaching for access through that relational work, and not on the specific technical and logistical elements of accessibility. Both "practice" and "process" are temporal constructs, unfoldings in/over time. Thus, the reorientation of access that *Time Bent* effects is crucially connected to the crippling of time that I discuss in the following section.

CRIPPING TIME

As the title *Time Bent, Folded, Exhausted* suggests, Jay and Simoné crip time over the course of their conversation. I follow disability theorists like Alison Kafer, Carrie Sandahl, and Robert McRuer here in my use of crippling as a verb in relation to temporality.⁵ As McRuer explains "*cripping* entails radically revi-

5 In a substantial endnote of her article "After Crip, Crip Afters," Alison Kafer

sioning, from committed anti-ableist positions, the taken-for-granted systems in which we are located" (McRuer 2018, 22). To crip time is to expose all the ways in which normative ideas about time can be debilitating. It is also an attempt at imagining and inhabiting time differently. The deft use of technology and space described above does not just reorient our understanding of access; it materializes crip time. And it does in a way that creatively echoes Alison Kafer: "Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (2013, 27). In Jay and Simoné's hands, it is not the individual who must get bent out of shape because of temporal demands. Instead, time must yield to the needs of the individual. The onus shifts away from artists' bodyminds and onto time itself.

Recall that while Jay and Simoné drafted the script and responded to each other's words in the same virtual location (i.e., in the same Google doc), their compositional process was not synchronous or linear. The freewheeling quality of their conversation and the time stamps of the margin comments (which span a little over six months) also make apparent that each artist was in a different time and place—both literally and metaphorically—as they worked on *Time Bent*.

Further, the sensory information in the margins offer reminders of the gap between the time of composition and that of performance. Equally, however, those margin comments are signs of simultaneity and co-presence. They forge connections across temporal and spatial differences—and they do so without erasing the differences between Jay's and Simoné's distinct identities and experiences of the world. Time is bent, folded into itself in the very form of the piece. Time is also shaped, moved, and transformed when Jay speculates about "liveline" as an alternative to "deadline."

"Liveline." I've been considering the concept of "deadline." What about "liveline"? It's where something can be done in flexible times. It's where that "thing" is designed for multiple urgencies. Doesn't mean that we can't have the latest time for a "thing"—of course we should!—but we all should design an environment that non-brute-forcefully allows our different timelines to meet at the end.⁶

The move from death to life in Jay's neologism "liveline" underscores the violence of ableist temporal demands. His concept emphasizes the need to honor different timelines and urgencies. It reminds us that we can, in fact, "design" an alternative world in which people can *live* and work in the ways that best suit their particular bodyminds and situations.⁷ He specifies that this is not a call to get rid of due dates ("latest time") altogether. Nor is it a simple demand for

explains how "[t]he grammar of crip has long been central to its theorizing" (2013, 426). Kafer's article was published alongside several other important pieces in a special issue on "Crip Temporalities," edited by Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman (2021).

6 This text was rendered in blue in the script as well as on screen, and spoken aloud by Jay.

7 The emphasis on designing and building alternatives calls to mind Aimie Hamraie's Critical Design Lab and their book *Building Access* (2017).

"slow time" or "more time." The latter is how accommodations mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) are typically understood in the U.S. context. (X or Y student should receive a time and a half on exams, my institution's disability services office tells me). Instead, what Jay articulates is the need for flexibility, Margaret Price and Alison Kafer caution against reducing crip time to slow time, more time, or even flex time (Price 2024, Kafer 2013). Following Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman, we might explore how "[r]ather than only calling for this kind of relief from capitalist temporality, we also wan[t] to explore the freedoms offered by the positive experiences of crip life and crip temporality, such as exultance, solidarity, grace, the simple rhythm of the breath" (Samuels and Freeman 2021, 249). Jay and Simoné do just this. They show us how to design with, and envision a world of, temporal creativity. *Time Bent* responds to Alison Kafer's challenge to imagine "temporalities that unfold beyond, away from, askance of productivity, capacity, self-sufficiency, independence, achievement" (Kafer 2020, 421). Exhausted by such neoliberal and individualist understandings of time, I think of *Time Bent* as an origami exercise.⁸ The metaphor brings to mind the care and creativity of disabled communities, and the ingenious, multi-dimensional, interlocked [interdependent] spaces and networks they craft in support of each other. What then might we create by bending, folding time? Might folding time in ever more careful, intricate ways "exhaust" conventional, capitalist notions of time? And to whom and to what ends is this creative endeavor directed? What new relationships and arrangements might it engender?

ACCESS FOR THE NEUROTYPICAL—OR WHO NEEDS ACCESS?

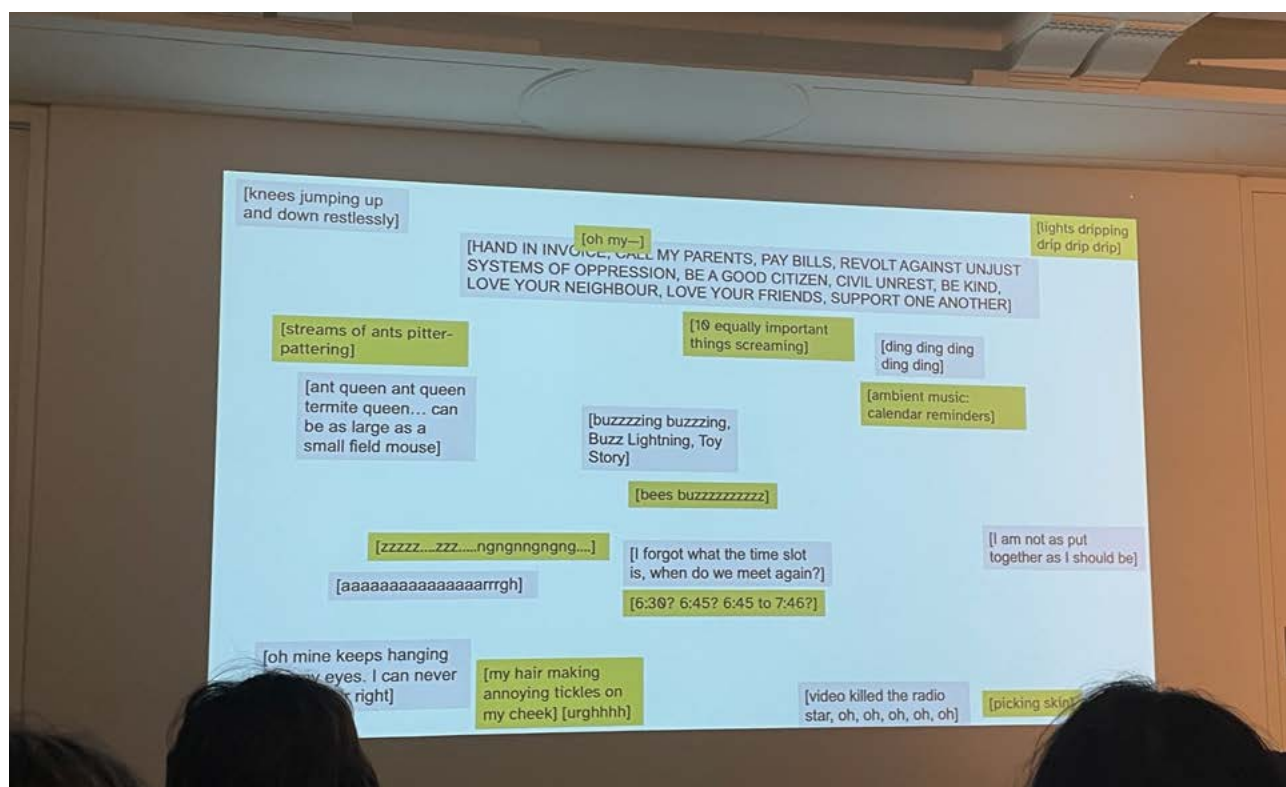
Time Bent was conceived not simply as a creative way to "give voice" to non-normative experiences of time, but to "imagine a world where neurodivergence is the norm, in which neurodivergence does not only artistically influence and shape what they make, but their art shapes their neurodivergence."⁹ Thus, disability and creativity are twinned from the start. Keenly attuned to a wide range of accessibility needs, Jay and Simoné designed the performance (and the space) not just for those who identify as neurodivergent "but also for neurotypical individuals who are interested in experiencing other forms of perception." This wording from the English translation of the German announcement listed on the DAAD website explicitly disentangles access from disability, and casts it as a universal need and desire. Note also the risk that Jay and Simoné take on in framing their experiences as "other." As they staged their process of

⁸ Thank you to Franzi Schweiger, Kyoko Omori, and Spencer Chen for helping me develop this point.

⁹ This wording is from the (embedded) English translation of the German announcement listed on the DAAD website.

Remarkably, the *Time Bent* performance managed to mobilize both difference and a lack of difference (between neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent people) at once. It did not tend toward sameness nor did it lapse into self-othering. Instead, it kept plurality, multiplicity in play at all times. Consider how each artist's voice was multiple in form: there was the live voice (spoken aloud), the recorded voice (which rendered audible each author's thoughts), and the textual voice (words visible on screen). Thus, the performance did not just give voice to the two neurodivergent individuals; it doubled and tripled each of the voices. By the end, it was impossible to tell whose voice was encapsulated in the text boxes popping up in quick succession (fig. 3). The recorded voices also tumbled one after and atop the other. Initially distinguished by sound and color, each "I" blurred into the next and into itself. The result was a collective "we" as varied and complex and overlapping as the full spectrum of neurodiversity (Srinivasan 2026).

Fig. 3:
*Time Bent, Folded,
Exhausted* (Jay Afrisando
and Simoné Goldschmidt-
Lechner, 2025).
Performance held at the
daadgalerie in Berlin.
Photograph taken by the
author and shared with
the artists' permission.



At the Berlin reading, there was a palpable shift in the room over the course of the evening. During the question-and-answer period, neurodivergent and neurotypical audience members alike expressed relief at having their “distracted” habits validated. More than one self-identified non-disabled person expressed surprise at the overlaps between their experience and that of the artists. Distractions, doomscrolling, and missed deadlines united everyone. No matter our relationship to disability, those present suddenly had permission to pursue tangential thoughts and to not berate ourselves for being inefficient, unproductive, or inadequate. We were suddenly free to give ourselves and each other grace when we did not follow socially normative modes of thinking and working. Thus, time was bent—maybe even bent out of shape—but no one in the room needed to themselves feel “bent, folded, [or] exhausted.”

What I found most thrilling about *Time Bent* was how it leveraged technological tools—both on the page and in the performance space—to cast neurodivergence and access as useful and *pleasurable* to think with. Technology was crucial at every stage of the process, from writing to revision to staging. It was not simply a means to provide a select group of people access to that which others (presumably) do not need. Rather, it was the very redundancy of access features, the fact that the words were rendered in at least two forms (aural and visual), and the meandering, generous nature of the conversation that accounted for the frisson of that performance. In another lovely example of thinking and writing together, Neta Alexander and Jonathan Sterne observe: “disability opens up the imagination” (2024, 194). Indeed, it does—and never more so and more powerfully than it did that evening at the daadgalerie.

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Relational Infrastructures of Inclusive Cinema in Indonesia

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Accessibility has gained increasing visibility within Indonesia's film culture through initiatives developed by film festivals and community-based organisers. While disability rights discourse has long focused on education, employment, and public services, cultural accessibility, particularly in cinema, has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This article examines how three Indonesian film festivals—Minikino Film Week (MFW) in Bali, 100% Manusia Film Festival in Jakarta, and Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (JAFF) in Yogyakarta—develop inclusive cinema practices within distinct institutional and infrastructural conditions. Drawing on interviews with festival organisers, volunteers, *bisik* (whispering) buddies, and blind audience members, as well as participant observation and programme materials, the study argues that accessibility in these contexts operates as a "relational infrastructure" rather than a standardised technical solution. Inclusive screenings emerge through collaborations among organisers, disability communities, commercial exhibitors, and volunteers, requiring continual negotiation across institutional contexts. Often temporary and event-based, these initiatives nonetheless reshape cinematic publics by recalibrating who is anticipated within festival space. By foregrounding accessibility as an evolving, collaborative arrangement shaped by linguistic diversity, economic constraint, and institutional scale, the article demonstrates how inclusive cinema in Indonesia is built incrementally through relational practice.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is simultaneously an aesthetic form, a social institution, and a mode of public encounter. However, access to that encounter has never been evenly distributed. Recent disability scholarship from the Global South has emphasised the importance of understanding accessibility through locally situated social and cultural practices rather than universalised models developed elsewhere (Brocco 2024). While national mapping studies have documented the uneven integration of disability within Indonesia's arts sector (Thohari et al. 2017), they reveal little about how accessibility is negotiated within the

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everyday practices of film exhibition. Similarly, scholarship on disability in Indonesian cinema has largely focused on representation and audience interpretation within film texts (Kurnia 2017), leaving comparatively little attention to the infrastructures through which disabled audiences access cinema as a social and cultural practice.

Rather than asking whether access is present or absent, this article examines how access is produced through institutions, environments, technologies, and everyday practices, framing cinema not only as a cultural text but also as a social space whose conditions of participation are continually negotiated. It turns to three Indonesian film festivals—Minikino Film Week (henceforth MFW), 100% Manusia Film Festival, and Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival (henceforth JAFF)—which make these negotiations legible. Each festival represents a distinct approach to accessibility: community-based experimentation (MFW), care-oriented participation (100% Manusia), and institutionally scaled inclusion through commercial partnership (JAFF).

This article contributes to cinema studies by shifting attention from film texts to infrastructures through which cinema becomes encounterable. Initiatives such as *bisik* (live whispering for blind spectators), audio description, volunteer briefings, venue adjustments, and post-screening discussions produce provisional arrangements of space, labour, technology, and community partnership. These arrangements, or what I call “relational infrastructures,” are rehearsed and improvised, dependent on volunteer endurance, institutional will, architectural limitations, and audience reciprocity.

Throughout this article, the term “relational infrastructures” is used to describe the temporary arrangements through which accessibility is produced in practice. Unlike infrastructure understood as fixed architecture or technical provision, relational infrastructures are assembled through relationships among organisers, volunteers, disability communities, venue operators, technologies, and audiences. They are sustained through coordination, negotiation, and care rather than permanence, making them adaptable to different institutional contexts while also dependent on continued collaboration and therefore vulnerable to interruption or breakdown. Here, cinematic encounter refers not simply to the act of viewing a film, but to the social and material conditions through which people come into relation with films, institutions, technologies, and one another. Accessibility, in this sense, reshapes not only what audiences experience on screen but also how cinema is encountered as a shared cultural practice. The three festivals examined here do not implement a single model of accessibility. Rather, each assembles a different relational infrastructure, shaped by its institutional history, partnerships, resources, and understanding of inclusive cinema.

As Pooja Rangan (2025) cautions, institutional gestures of responsiveness can perform accountability without redistributing structural power. The festivals examined here do not merely add accessibility features onto preexisting structures; they negotiate how space, programming, and participation are organised. Volunteers whisper, audiences adjust expectations of silence and proximity, and organisers balance inclusion against venue limitations. Accessibility emerges through

these negotiations. It is infrastructural, not because it is permanent, but because it reorganises the conditions under which cinematic experience becomes possible, while reshaping that experience. At stake, then, is not simply whether accessibility initiatives exist, but how they reconfigure the cinematic encounter.

Who becomes imaginable as part of cinema's public, and under what negotiated terms? What forms of affective, logistical, and pedagogical labour sustain these efforts, and what remains precarious? By situating accessibility as "relational infrastructure," this article argues that inclusive cinema in Indonesian festival contexts reshapes not only spectatorship but also the social relations through which cinema is shared and valued. The question it seeks to answer, therefore, is not whether these festivals succeed in making cinema accessible in any definitive sense, but how access is enacted, by whom, with what resources, and with what consequences for the audiences whose participation depends upon it. In this article, cinema is understood not simply as a film text but as a social encounter, one in which access, participation, and spectatorship are continually negotiated through institutional arrangements and interpersonal relations.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study is grounded in long-term engagement with Indonesia's independent film festival circuit, combining targeted semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted during festival activities in 2025. Over the course of this fieldwork, I gathered data from six key interlocutors: three festival organisers—Edo Wulia (Minikino), Rain Cuaca and Meninaputri Wismurti (100% Manusia), Ajish Dibyo (JAFF)—and three audience members, including blind cinema-goers Sukma Ayyanti and Juwita Rahmawati, alongside the latter's whispering companion, Hasti Saktiningsih.

My relationship with MFW dates back to 2009, when one of my short films was selected for its Monthly Screening & Discussion program. Since then, I have regularly attended and screened work at MFW. This extended involvement has afforded sustained, if informal, participant observation across multiple festival editions. Building on this long-term engagement, I conducted a semi-structured interview with Festival Director Edo Wulia in November 2025, focusing on the historical development of the festival's accessibility initiatives.

A similar familiarity informs my engagement with 100% Manusia, where I screened short films in 2022 and 2024. In 2025, I closely observed the festival's 100% Cinergi program and its whispering cinema initiative. I documented volunteer coordination, audience circulation, spatial arrangements, and the execution of *bisik* during screenings. Following the event, my subsequent joint session with Cuaca and Wismurti, both co-founders of the festival, addressed the institutional motivations behind the inclusive program, its logistical organisation, and the challenges encountered in practice.

My engagement with JAFF differs in duration and scope. Although 2025 marked my first direct attendance at JAFF, the festival itself was already

familiar to me through my longstanding engagement with Indonesia's film festival circuit. Entering its twentieth year, JAFF has established itself as a leading platform for Asian cinema in Indonesia, founded in collaboration with the Network for the Promotion of Asia Pacific Cinema (NETPAC). Since I was unable to attend its inclusive screening due to restricted ticket allocation, my analysis of JAFF's accessibility initiatives draws primarily on a semi-structured interview with Executive Director Ajish Dibyo, alongside observations made during the broader festival. Although this limits my ability to analyse the inclusive screening directly, the interview nevertheless provided valuable insights into JAFF's accessibility planning, institutional priorities, and decision-making processes.

In addition to interviews with organisers, to balance these institutional perspectives, the remaining sessions targeted audience experiences via "purposive snowball sampling," in which I identified and recruited participants through referrals from existing participants. Conversations with Sukma Aryyanti, a blind resident of Denpasar whom I first met during MFW in 2024, captured the reality of navigating festival infrastructures. Similarly, Juwita Rahmawati, a blind activist, and Hasti Saktiningsih, who frequently serves as Rahmawati's whispering companion, offered perspectives on both accessibility measures and the interpersonal negotiations that sustain them, including questions of timing, trust, fatigue, and how to balance assistance and intrusion.

Across these six interviews (three organisers and three audience participants), I was less interested in declarative claims of inclusion than in thick descriptions of adjustment, coordination, or breakdowns in communication. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in Bahasa Indonesia. All participants were informed of the scope and purpose of this study and agreed to be cited by name in relation to their professional roles. Interview transcripts are not publicly archived to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. However, they may be made available by the author upon reasonable academic request for non-commercial research purposes, subject to ethical considerations. Publicly available festival documents and media materials cited throughout the article remain accessible through the sources listed in the references. I then thematically analysed observations gathered during festival activities alongside the interview materials, paying particular attention to how accessibility was organised, implemented, and experienced in practice.

My engagement with these festivals is not that of an external observer. As a filmmaker, festival participant, and film educator, I have been involved in Indonesia's independent film ecosystem for more than a decade. This proximity provided access to organisers, audiences, and institutional histories that may not be available through short-term fieldwork alone. At the same time, it shapes the perspective from which this study is written. Rather than treating accessibility as a policy problem to be evaluated from a distance, I approach it as a question emerging from ongoing participation in festival cultures and from an interest in how cinematic publics are assembled, negotiated, and transformed through practices of accessibility.

This methodological approach aligns with the article's conceptual framing of accessibility as relational infrastructure. Rather than treating access as a stable attribute of venues or programs, the study traces how it is assembled through negotiations among organisers, volunteers, venue operators, and audiences. By situating the interviews alongside long-term engagement with these festivals and observations of how accessibility was organised in practice, while acknowledging uneven access to certain screening events, I approach inclusive cinema as an evolving and contingent arrangement.

100% MANUSIA AND THE RELATIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF ACCESS

100% Manusia approaches accessibility through an explicitly care-oriented framework operating across curatorial, logistical, and community networks. While both organisers describe accessibility as central to the festival, Meninaputri Wismurti frames it as part of a broader political commitment to marginalised publics, whereas Rain Cuaca focuses more on the practical and linguistic conditions under which access is implemented. In particular, Cuaca emphasises how accessibility and pragmatic issues of language preference shape curatorial decisions: "That is because input comes from our visually impaired friends, too. [...] So, most of the comfortable language is Indonesian. Not everyone can speak English. That is why we have been trying to find films in Indonesian." She also notes efforts to provide closed captions for deaf students, while acknowledging structural limits: "When we talk about disabilities and access, there may also be other groups who require special access. Nevertheless, for now, we will definitely be screening this way."¹

Whereas Cuaca emphasises the practical implementation of accessibility, Wismurti traces Cinergi back to the earlier *Q! Film Festival* (2002–2017), once described as Asia's largest LGBT film festival by number of films shown (Maimunah 2008). She explains that the programme was carried over from the earlier festival and became one of 100% Manusia's core programmes, requiring close coordination between curatorial work and community partnerships. While Wismurti oversees film selection, screening rights, and filmmaker relations, Cuaca coordinates with disability communities to organise the festival's accessibility initiatives. Accessibility is therefore embedded not within a single programme but across different forms of institutional labour. Wismurti similarly frames accessibility as extending beyond Cinergi itself. Rather than limiting access to sensory accommodation, she describes the festival's broader commitment to marginalised publics through trigger warnings, moderated discussions, post-screening conversations, and opportunities for audiences to seek support if particular films evoke difficult emotional responses. In her words, 100% Ma-

1 Where not otherwise specified, quotes from interviews are translated by me.

nusia “always prioritise[s] the human audience,” treating these practices as integral to cinematic access rather than supplementary services.

Access, in this articulation, includes affective safety and dialogic space in addition to sensory mediation. The festival's fringe programming extends this orientation beyond the screening room. Initiatives such as *A Walk to Understand* and *100% Heart to Heart* are designed as public-facing encounters that invite festival-goers, disabled and non-disabled alike, to engage in dialogue, reflection, and shared learning. The *100% DIY* similarly offers workshops for festival attendees. In 2025, for example, it included a session titled *Sign Language 101*, an introductory workshop on basic sign language that invited non-disabled participants to learn skills supporting more inclusive communication. Rather than targeting disability communities alone, these sessions extend disability knowledge to the festival's broader public. In this way, accessibility is framed not only as accommodation for disabled audiences but also as an educational practice. However, these initiatives remain unevenly distributed geographically. As Wismurti explains, the festival's ability to extend these activities beyond Jakarta depends almost entirely on volunteer availability and local partnerships. As she puts it, “It depends on volunteer availability and partners' willingness.” Consequently, the geographical reach of these initiatives remains contingent rather than institutionalised. This understanding of accessibility resonates with disability justice scholarship, which understands access as an ongoing practice sustained through interdependence and relationships rather than technical provision alone (Piepzn-Samarasinha 2018).

This reliance on unpaid labour means that Cinergi's spatial and temporal sustainability depends heavily on volunteer whisperers. The *Bisik Buddy Workshop* module, *How to Be a Blind Cinema Companion Whisperer*, outlines protocols for interaction, navigation, and spatial description. Volunteers are instructed to describe seating arrangements, stairs, retractable chairs, and environmental features before and during screenings. These instructions reveal that accessibility begins before the film itself. Volunteers are trained not only to mediate the screen but also to mediate movement through space, transforming stairs, seating arrangements, and circulation routes into sites of accessibility work.

Training, however, does not guarantee reliable participation. As Cuaca explains: “Sometimes 50 or 60 people registered. [...] During the briefing, maybe 40 came. Then 20 showed up.” This unpredictable attrition forces on-site improvisation: “Finally, one person whispered to two audience members. [...] Sometimes, if a volunteer could do it, they suddenly became a whisperer too. The important thing is that everyone can watch the film.” Access is therefore not seamless or fully institutionalised. The declaration that “the important thing is that everyone can watch the film” signals how relational infrastructures constrain commitment. Cinergi operates through volunteer coordination, trust, and willingness to adapt; none of which are guaranteed or pre-established.

Through 100% Cinergi, 100% Manusia demonstrates an approach to inclusive cinema while also revealing the fragility of such arrangements. Accessibility

depends on volunteers, partner institutions, venue availability, and fluctuating capacity. In foregrounding this labour, Cinergi makes visible the social conditions under which cinema becomes accessible and the infrastructural limits that continue to shape that possibility.



Fig. 1:
A Bisik Buddy pin
identifying volunteers who
support whisper-based
accessibility initiatives at
the 100% Manusia Film
Festival in Jakarta

ACCESS AS CIRCULATION, LITERACY, AND SITUATED PRACTICE AT *MINIKINO FILM WEEK*

Unlike 100% Manusia, which organises accessibility primarily through a single annual festival, Minikino is a year-round film organisation founded in 2002. Its activities include the Monthly Screening & Discussion programme, Open December, and, since 2015, the annual MFW. Many of the accessibility practices discussed below originated in Minikino's year-round activities before becoming part of MFW.

MFW approaches inclusion as a curatorial concern rather than a supplementary service, enhancing accessibility through the circulation of short films across linguistic, geographic, and social differences. Disability access unfolds along a continuum of accessibility practices: subtitling non-Indonesian-language films, organising outreach screenings in *banjar* spaces across Bali, and curating family-oriented programs that introduce short films to audiences who may not otherwise encounter festival cinema.

As Wulia explains, "the idea of inclusivity emerged when I thought that short films should be accessible to everyone. [...] Minikino's long journey has been about learning how to provide more, more, more access." A key infrastructure

shift occurred with the adoption of subtitles between 2008 and 2009, which has been consistently implemented since 2013. Conceived not solely as accommodation for Deaf audiences, they were equally necessary for viewers unfamiliar with English or with other languages commonly used in festival circulation. Linguistic accessibility thus preceded disability-specific initiatives and situated access within a broader ecology of translation. Since then, disability-focused programming has developed incrementally and multiple collaborations established a foundation for recurring inclusive initiatives. In 2016, during the second year of MFW, Wulia reflected that children's films with minimal dialogue and greater reliance on visual storytelling might be more accessible to Deaf audiences. A special screening was organised in collaboration with Sushrusa Deaf School in Denpasar. This initiative drew upon earlier relationships established through a 2006 documentary workshop with the Deaf (*Kolok*) community in Bengkala, Buleleng, Bali.²

After learning about *bisik* practices in Jakarta, Minikino organised volunteer whisperers, and "whispering cinema" was added to its programming through an off-festival screening in 2019, following visually impaired attendees' interest in participating. However, the festival organisers later re-evaluated this practice. As Wulia notes, "we learned that this whispering cinema was not really a good fit for what Minikino was doing. [...] It had high social value, but the cinematic experience was missing." The atmosphere grew crowded, and each whisperer interpreted independently, producing what the festival organisers regard as a fractured and incoherent cinematic experience.

In response, MFW simultaneously introduced audio description (AD) and subtitles for the d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH) in 2020. Over time, they were separated in response to feedback from non-disabled viewers who felt overwhelmed by the information density. As Wulia emphasises, "[w]e do not want it to be an exclusive program, just for people with disabilities. Inclusiveness should also reach people without disabilities. Allowing them to watch together." Inclusion, here, was measured not only by accommodation but also by the presence of an integrated audience. Minikino's model, indeed, depends on consultation. Blind and Deaf participants are involved in planning stages, offering feedback that reshapes descriptive strategies. "Sometimes there is quite surprising feedback. For example, from the blind group, we were told not to drive the emotions. Just read the script flatly, like reading the news. Let the audience decide whether the film is sad or happy." Rather than codifying a standardised module, the festival operates through project-based collaboration, recognising that AD is

² Bengkala is known for its longstanding Deaf (*Kolok*) community, where many residents communicate using *Kata Kolok*, an Indigenous sign language. Before MFW was established, Minikino collaborated with the community through a documentary workshop and screened *Kolok* (Bayu Sakti Wijaya, Dewa Made Merta Suardana, and I. B. Putu Suwenda, 2006), a short documentary portraying the everyday lives of Deaf residents in Bengkala. Although this collaboration was not originally conceived as an accessibility initiative, it established relationships that later informed Minikino's inclusive programming.

"very closely tied to language structure" and inseparable from cultural context. An AD track produced in Bali with blind collaborators "will likely differ" from one produced in Jakarta. International guidelines may inform practice, but they require adaptation to Indonesia's linguistic diversity and uneven infrastructure. Rather than standardising audio description, Minikino treats accessibility as culturally situated, echoing Brocco's (2024) call to understand disability through locally grounded practices rather than universal models.

Challenges surrounding SDH and sign language further underscore the cultural specificity of access. Wulia observes that many Deaf audiences prefer sign language to written text, as reading requires a distinct cognitive translation process. Experiments embedding sign language videos on-screen were well received but proved financially unsustainable. Similarly, live dubbing experiments for children's programs were discontinued due to technical and cost constraints. The Kino Media Foundation subsidises AD and SDH production, yet external sponsorship remains limited.

Material conditions also delimit inclusion. The absence of wheelchair ramps in many partner venues demonstrates that accessibility remains unevenly distributed across the spaces where festival culture unfolds. While Minikino "wants to continue expanding the term 'inclusive'," it remains oriented toward preserving the cinematic experience. "Of course, the social experience ultimately has an impact, but it is not the focus." Here, Minikino diverges from care-centered models, prioritising aesthetic integrity as the central commitment that determines access practices.

Fig. 2:
Inclusive screening
for Deaf audiences at
Minikino Film Week



CURATED INCLUSION WITHIN COMMERCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AT *JOGJA-NETPAC ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL*

JAFF is a major Asian film platform in terms of scale and visibility. Its institutional reach extends beyond public screenings to encompass industry activities such as JAFF Market, bridging film, art, industry, and tourism. Its model demonstrates a pragmatic and commercially oriented approach to accessibility, which is not yet embedded across the entire festival, but is staged as a highly visible event shaped by strategic partnerships, popular film selection, and managed capacity.

According to its director Ajish Dibyo, plans for inclusive screening began in JAFF's fifteenth year (2020) but were delayed by COVID-19 restrictions. In 2022, screenings resumed at reduced capacity, and interest has increased steadily since. Addressing the restricted attendance of the inclusive session, Dibyo explains: "If you lost at the ticket war, it was because we did not open it to the full audience. It was only a certain percentage: for partners or colleagues who also wanted to experience watching with friends with disabilities." As Dibyo explained, attendance at the inclusive screening was intentionally limited to accommodate disability partners and participants using inclusive viewing formats. Rather than dispersing accessibility across multiple sessions, JAFF concentrates its resources within a single annual screening that is carefully organised both spatially and programmatically. In 2025, this session accommodated approximately 130 audience members with disabilities. As Dibyo noted, "[r]ather than opening more than one screening and risking a lack of interest, that would be a shame."

Partnership is central to this model: in 2025, the commercial cinema chain Cinema XXI provided venue support and sponsored the inclusive screening. Empire XXI also installed a temporary wheelchair ramp. Dibyo framed this not as a permanent redesign but as evidence that accessibility can be temporarily negotiated within commercial exhibition spaces through cooperation between organisers and venue operators. The temporary ramp made visible how inclusion depends not only on film selection but also on the physical design of exhibition environments.

Curatorial decisions further shape accessibility by orienting film selection toward familiarity and narrative clarity. According to Dybio, indeed, films should be suitable for all ages, audience-oriented, easy to follow, and positive in tone; qualities that also facilitate whisper-based mediation: "Usually, we choose films that are quite popular so that our inclusive friends can also experience the current or past hype." In 2025, not by chance, JAFF selected the Indonesian-language animated film *Jumbo* (Ryan Adriandhy, 2025), which became a major commercial success. Film selection is therefore guided not only by artistic or commercial considerations but also by anticipated accessibility. Closed captions are provided for Deaf audiences, while the Jogja Disability Art network supports

outreach, volunteer preparation, and pre-festival whisperer workshops. Rather than embedding accessibility throughout the festival, JAFF assembles a relational infrastructure through temporary partnerships with commercial exhibitors, disability organisations, and volunteer networks.

Dibyو nevertheless views the emergence of inclusive programmes across Indonesian festivals as encouraging while acknowledging their present limitations: "It seems like festivals are developing into an inclusive celebration. [...] However, in terms of percentage, we still have not been able to provide enough." Looking ahead, he imagines a festival where disabled audiences have multiple screening options on the same day and can choose what they want to watch: "the experience of a film marathon or choosing the films they want, because now we are the ones who choose."

Fig. 3:
JAFF Market exhibition
hall at the Jogja-NETPAC
Asian Film Festival 2025



AUDIENCE EXPERIENCES

If the previous sections examined how festivals organise inclusive screenings, this section turns to the experiences of audience members who encounter those initiatives in practice. Across three semi-structured interviews, what emerged was less a single account of "access" than a layered understanding of how cinematic participation is negotiated through memory, economic conditions, linguistic background, and relationships with others.

Sukma Aryyanti, a blind massage therapist and counselor at Love Inside Suicide Awareness (L.I.S.A.) in Denpasar, first encountered inclusive screenings

through her involvement in MFW. When I met her in 2024 and 2025, often while she was providing massage services at the festival, she recalled an initial reluctance toward film itself. "Actually, I did not really like watching films at first, maybe because I was desperate. So, why watch films? I could not see them anyway." Her hesitation reflected uncertainty about what it meant to engage with a medium historically organised around vision. Her orientation shifted when Edo Wulia introduced her to audio description (AD) and demonstrated how narrative flow could be followed through verbal mediation. The first invitation to watch with AD became memorable because it unsettled her prior assumptions. "It was the first time I could really follow the storyline of a film like this, because usually films are full of movement like that, right? So, for the first time, I could really understand."

Since then, Aryyanti has experimented with AI-powered AD features on YouTube, yet she prefers human-voiced descriptions, especially when scripts are developed in consultation with other blind audiences. Automated accessibility may offer functional independence, but collective viewing with human mediators produces a different affective texture shaped by responsiveness and companionship. Aryyanti's account also echoes Kleege's (2018) argument that blindness does not preclude aesthetic engagement but reconfigures the conditions through which visual culture is experienced. Here, audio description does not substitute for cinema; it enables participation in its narrative and social dimensions. Aryyanti's participation in MFW also extended beyond spectatorship. Visually impaired individuals were invited to provide services during the festival, including body massage and coffee sales. "I have a disability, but I am still involved in major events like the Minikino film festival. That is truly a source of great pride for me."

More broadly, Aryyanti's experience suggests that accessibility is not reducible to the provision of a technical aid. Rather, the value of audio description lies in the social processes through which it is produced, shared, and experienced collectively. The collaborative scripting of AD with blind audiences, together with the collective setting of festival screenings, transforms accessibility into a relational practice rather than a purely technological solution. In this sense, participation emerges not from individual independence but from interdependence, echoing disability justice approaches that understand access as something continually negotiated through relationships rather than delivered as a finished service (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Aryyanti's experience therefore illustrates the relational infrastructure described throughout this article: access is assembled through collaboration among organisers, blind participants, and mediating technologies rather than provided by technology alone.

Juwita Rahmawati, a blind activist who previously worked on the impact campaign for *Sejauh Kumelangkah* (*How Far I'll Go*, Ucu Agustin 2019), has had a related yet distinct trajectory. Having been sighted once, she described herself as a film lover long before becoming totally blind. The transition reshaped, but did not extinguish, her cinephilia. "But because my English was not that good, once I became totally blind, I stopped watching foreign films. So, I finally

switched to Indonesian films." The limitation here was both linguistic and sensory; without AD, subtitled foreign-language films become inaccessible. Before attending organised whisper screenings, Rahmawati relied on her older sister as an informal whispering companion. However, her sister, immersed in her own viewing, would explain scenes belatedly, after laughter had subsided or plot turns had passed. "So, it was actually late." Rahmawati's own narrative comprehension lagged behind collective reaction, leading her at times to ask her sister to watch first and recount the film afterward, thus transforming cinema into deferred storytelling rather than a shared collective experience.

This context shaped her evaluation of whisper cinema initiatives such as those organised by 100% Manusia. "Any effort made by anyone to create a more inclusive filmmaking environment is actually quite good for me. It should be appreciated." Her response was pragmatic: while she can watch films independently on her phone using accessibility features, she values the social dimension of whisper screenings. "The purpose of this whisper cinema is not only to entertain the blind... but another aspect is that when non-blind people meet blind people, they can interact." Furthermore, although platforms such as Netflix offer AD on their content, subscription costs remain prohibitive for many blind Indonesians, whose employment opportunities are often limited. Whisper screenings, by contrast, are typically free and include modest hospitality. "They go, and then maybe there is a bonus, like snacks or meeting people. That is really fun for them." Rahmawati's account also complicates assumptions that accessibility is primarily about removing barriers to information. Her emphasis on conversation, shared attendance, and informal hospitality suggests that festivals function not only as sites of film consumption but also as spaces of social belonging. Access, in this context, involves participation in a temporary public assembled around cinema, where the opportunity to meet others can be as significant as the screening itself.

Hasti Saktiningsih, Rahmawati's friend and frequent whispering companion, offers insight into how film genres affect the labour of access providers. "Romance is the easiest. If it is a comedy, and we have not seen it before, it is hard to explain because we are already laughing." The whisperer has to practice divided attention, balancing personal enjoyment with descriptive responsibility. Before screenings, Saktiningsih typically asks her blind friends what they prefer: the atmosphere, gestures, translations of English dialogue, or specific visual cues. "Mostly they want the atmosphere... There are scenes without dialogue, so that is the best I can explain." She also pointed to logistical fragility. Volunteers sometimes fail to appear; whisperers and audience members may be mismatched. "It is confusing... because it is not certain that the person whispering will come, or that the person being whispered to will come." Inclusion thus remains contingent and unpredictable, which can be discouraging for first-time participants.

Taken together, these accounts resist any linear narrative of technological progress or institutional goodwill. Rather than presenting accessibility as the outcome of better technologies alone, the interviews demonstrate how access

is continually assembled through relationships among organisers, volunteers, disabled participants, companions, and digital tools. Accessibility appears instead as a relational infrastructure composed of human mediators, economic conditions, volunteer networks, technologies, and affective commitments. These infrastructures are sustained through practices of care: accompanying, describing, waiting, coordinating, translating, and adjusting to others' needs in real time. Such practices remain contingent rather than guaranteed, depending on the availability of volunteers, financial resources, and institutional support. What emerges beyond the mere availability of AD or whisper systems, indeed, are the social arrangements through which inclusion is sustained, negotiated, and sometimes strained. The audience experiences presented here reinforce the article's broader argument that inclusive cinema is not defined solely by accessible technologies or policies, but by the relational labour that makes the cinematic encounter possible.

CONCLUSION: RELATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES OF INCLUSION

Across MFW, 100% Manusia, and JAFF, inclusive cinema does not consolidate into a single transferable model, but rather takes shape through distinct configurations of scale, partnership, and constraint. Minikino emphasises translation and community consultation; 100% Manusia foregrounds encounter through whisper cinema; whereas JAFF focuses on accessibility through high-visibility commercial programmes. These diverse approaches generate varied audience experiences that reveal how institutional arrangements are continually received, negotiated, and reworked in practice. Indeed, a consistent pattern across interviews and observations indicates that accessibility remains largely negotiated rather than permanently embedded, given that temporary ramps, volunteer-coordinated whisper systems, limited inclusive screenings, and outreach through disability networks collectively suggest access that depends on extemporaneous coordination instead of structural redesign. In this sense, inclusion emerges as an event-based rather than a systemic reality; it is activated for specific screenings and withdrawn afterward. These three models demonstrate that accessibility is assembled differently depending on institutional histories, organisational capacities, funding structures, and relationships with disability communities. Rather than competing approaches, they illustrate multiple ways of organising access under different material conditions.

At the same time, this temporality does not necessarily imply superficiality, as participants describe pride in contributing to the festival's labour, relief at following the narrative progression without delay, and pleasure in sharing the same temporal experience as other spectators. These cases also complicate technological solutionism: while AI-enabled audio description expands access to independent viewing, it does not replace the desire for shared spectatorship.

Human-voiced description carries tonal and relational nuance that automated systems cannot replicate. Similarly, although streaming platforms may widen access to sensory content, high subscription costs and precarious employment limit who benefits, thereby rendering digital accessibility inherently uneven.

In alignment with disability justice scholarship, accessibility is not reducible to a checklist of accommodations but is understood as an ongoing practice of organising social relations. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018, 92) describes this as “collective care:” building organisations that accommodate interdependence, changing needs, and mutual support as part of everyday practice rather than exceptional provision. The whisper systems described here reflect this very ethos: relational, imperfect, and sustained through mutual commitment rather than institutional permanence. However, while they exemplify adaptability and solidarity, they simultaneously rely on fragile commitments such as attendance, coordination, and accountability, meaning that when volunteers fail to appear, inclusion becomes entirely contingent. Across these contexts, inclusion emerges as a collaborative cultural practice assembled through partnerships: creating temporary ecosystems of access that, although aspirational and uneven, are persistently reworked.

Ultimately, this study suggests that inclusive cinema across Indonesian film festivals is best understood as a set of situated practices rather than a fixed institutional arrangement. It unfolds through whisper-based screenings, curated inclusive programmes, negotiated partnerships with commercial exhibitors, and community consultation, through which disabled participants act not only as spectators but also as cultural workers. Inclusion here is neither an abstract principle nor a finished infrastructure, but a set of adjustments through which access is continually assembled and maintained. Across these different strategies, the festivals nevertheless share forms of care work that align with calls from Global South disability scholarship to understand accessibility through situated social and cultural practices rather than universalised models (Brocco 2024).

Taken together, the three festivals demonstrate complementary rather than competing configurations of relational infrastructure. Whereas 100% Manusia assembles accessibility through care-centered collaboration and volunteer interdependence, Minikino emphasises iterative experimentation, translation, and community consultation, while JAFF mobilises institutional partnerships within commercial exhibition contexts. Access is therefore assembled differently across each festival, without positioning any one model as more complete than another.

Thinking in terms of relational infrastructures shifts attention away from accessibility as a fixed attribute of venues or technologies and toward the social arrangements through which inclusion is produced, maintained, and continually renegotiated. Rather than treating access as a stable feature of exhibition, this perspective foregrounds the relationships among organisers, volunteers, disability communities, venue operators, technologies, and audiences that make inclusive cinema possible. It is these relationships, rather than any single acces-

sibility measure, that shape how inclusive cinema takes form in contemporary Indonesian festival culture. Because accessibility extends beyond spectatorship itself, organisers, volunteers, filmmakers, moderators, and community partners all participate in creating the conditions that enable access. Inclusive cinema, then, is not only about enabling attendance but also about rethinking how cinematic publics are organised, who can participate in them, and how those forms of participation are sustained over time.

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This study is based on qualitative interviews and publicly available festival materials. Interview transcripts are not publicly archived to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality but may be made available by the author upon reasonable academic request for non-commercial research purposes, subject to ethical considerations. Publicly available materials used in the analysis are cited in the reference list.

The author was solely responsible for the study's conception, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and final approval of the manuscript. Digital tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI), TurboScribe.ai, and Grammarly, were used to support drafting, interview transcription, and language editing. These tools did not determine the article's analytical claims or conclusions. Responsibility for the article's content remains with the author.

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Erotic Artifacts: Matter, Drive, Pulsation. Film Encounters Between Flesh and Celluloid in Paolo Gioli and Peter Tscherkassky's Experimental Films

Andrea Ferraiuolo, Independent researcher



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This essay examines the intersection between sexuality and the cinematic avant-garde, focusing on the encounter between flesh and celluloid in selected erotic works by two major found footage filmmakers, Paolo Gioli and Peter Tscherkassky. It aims to place their practices in dialogue—highlighting both convergences and divergences—and to situate them within a broader scholarly framework in order to emphasize their significance and influence on experimental cinema, as well as on erotic and pornographic film.

Gioli's archaeological approach extends to early optical devices such as the pinhole camera; yet his erotic cinema, largely composed of appropriated pornographic footage, is characterized by an intense pulsational energy. In a similar vein, Tscherkassky's work reactivates surrealist motifs and visual strategies through an "archaeological" reworking of film material, transforming celluloid into an organic, tactile medium.

These films present themselves as flesh and, in their abstraction, merge with the organic as well. They make the viewer perceive the materiality of the filmic support as equally erotic as the flesh they depict. The two artists also share the central role of the technical apparatus in their practice, conceived as a matter charged with drive and pulsation.

Theoretical and artistic developments that stemmed from the encounter between filmic and human body are already widely known. This almost *organic* interactions are addressed by theorists and artists alike, starting from those who, in the 1920s, thought that if cinema, intended as a "technical organ", has the capability to "propose itself as a prosthetic extension of the eye" thanks to the camera, and to "interact with spatio-temporal coordinates of perception" because of editing (Pinotti and Somaini 2012, XXVIII),¹ then human body too may

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transform into a machine, according to a metamorphosis which will remain a conceptual topos for the most part of the century. Therefore, flesh and celluloid merge to the point of overlapping, almost becoming indistinguishable from one another. But before arriving to this procreative union, a more generic interest in the technique has to necessarily step in, namely for the technique related to the organic body. In this sense, the theories of *photogénie*, developed in the early 1920s by French filmmakers and film theorists Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein, are of central importance. For both thinkers, *photogénie* refers to the distinctive capacity of the cine-photographic apparatus to reveal and capture the beauty of reality (Pescatore, 1992). While the emergence of cine-photographic technologies intensifies the desire to see, thereby fostering a fascination with reality and the natural movement of things (Vichi, 2006), Epstein's approach, in particular, shifts the focus towards the subjective power of the cinematic apparatus itself. It is precisely through the encounter between the camera and reality that new forms of vision emerge and the "irrational" is revealed.² Reflections on *photogénie* and on the relationship between the camera and the represented object thus immediately become intertwined with the broader theoretical debates on cinema developed within the avant-garde. "The practical prerequisites of an absolute filmic art are excellence of materials and highly developed apparatus" (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 44): Bauhaus painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy's sentence testifies the almost ideological interest for cinematographic technique, hence for filmic matter, for what has been defined by Walter Benjamin as "Apparatur", the plural for *Apparat* (apparatus) (Pinotti and Somaini 2012), the technical apparatus of the modernity in its whole, increasingly more complex and pervasive, capable to deeply condition the sensible perception (Somaini 2013). An apparatus which cinema is part of, as are photography, the radio, the telephone, the new printing media, etc. Still, according to the Hungarian artist and theorist, "to the *technical apparatus' extension* necessarily corresponds an *extension of the senses*" (Somaini 2013, 124). Moholy-Nagy uses the term *Apparatur* to talk about technical apparatuses as a perceptive one, suggesting "a predisposition to the encounter between the technical and the organic". From here descend several experimentations, using the *Apparat* as an

² The elaboration of the concept of *photogénie*, particularly in Epstein's work, gradually evolves and transforms until the aftermath of the Second World War. The more recent reflections on the subject are also of particular interest for this research: "Reconnaissons que le cinématographe est effectivement une école d'irrationalisme, de romantisme et qu'il manifeste ainsi, à nouveau, des caractères démoniaques. Ceux-ci, d'ailleurs, procèdent directement du démonisme primordial de la photogénie du mouvement. Dans la vie de l'âme, la raison, par le moyen de ses règles fixes, cherche à imposer un certain ordre, une certaine mesure, une relative stabilité au flux et au reflux perpétuels qui agitent le domaine affectif, aux fortes marées et aux furieuses tempêtes qui bouleversent sans cesse le monde des instincts. S'il n'y a pas à la prétendre immuable, la raison, néanmoins, constitue nettement le facteur mental le moins mobile. Ainsi, la loi de photogénie laissait déjà prévoir que toute interprétation rationnelle du monde se prêterait moins à la représentation cinématographique que toute conception intuitive, sentimentale" (Epstein 1947, 23).

organism and the organism an *Apparat*. One may think of Dadaist and surrealist cinema, whose interpreters, like Man Ray and Fernand Léger, are amongst the first to develop this relationship in films such as *L'Étoile de mer* (Man Ray, 1928) and *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924). From Man Ray's first film, *Le Retour à la raison* (1923), artists seek ways to explore and investigate the material properties of film, shifting attention towards film as a "surface" rather than as a "window" (Knowles, 2020). The challenge to perception constitutes, to a large extent, the driving force behind avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, rooted in the modernist desire—shared across many other artistic practices—to develop anti-realist and non-linear forms of representation. But in this organic merging between film and body appears also a drive, which is a sign of life or specifically an erotic sign, where the mechanical fusion of flesh and celluloid can function as a seductive element, both as a psychoanalytic interpretation of the relationship man-machine, and as a reflection about matter, about filmic material support and its "vitality". This horizon of meaning, especially in the second half of 20th century, inspires several filmmakers, whose films—with an almost archeological taste—frequently recall, consciously or not, the "primitive" imagery's pantheon and the Dadaist-surrealist one. For this very reason, certain films are marked by a profound sense of mortality, by a regressive character in the Freudian sense, insofar as they propel the work back towards an already surpassed stage of development. The films analysed here, in their most formalistic aspects, do not evoke themselves as *Apparatur*, nor they annihilate themselves in favor of the flesh they depict; rather, they offer themselves as flesh, and within their abstraction they *also* become intertwined with the organic. Their authors regard the materiality of the filmic medium as equally erotic to what is brought on "stage"; they share a distinctive and "necessary" engagement with film stock, the frequent use of archive material, the editing conceived as *collage*. Above all, they attribute a central role to the technical apparatus, which in their work emerges as a matter charged with drive and pulsation.

The work of an artist such as Paolo Gioli is ontologically linked to the *Apparatur*, namely the photographic and cinematographic ones. In fact, Gioli has been working from the beginning on several supports, including the pictorial one, starting in 1960 when he began attending the Scuola Libera del Nudo at the Venetian Accademia di Belle Arti. It's not until a stay in New York at the end of the Sixties that he discovers experimental cinema, thanks especially to Michael Snow and the New American Cinema (Licciardello and Toffetti 2009). He also gets close to the New York School style of contemporary painting, getting in contact with gallerists Leo Castelli and Martha Jackson.³ Finally, upon returning to Rome in 1970, he

3 To underscore the affinity between Gioli and the American context, it is worth briefly considering another artist who, while Gioli is in New York, produces what becomes one of her most celebrated works: Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1964–67). Shot on a 16 mm Bolex camera, *Fuses* depicts an intimate sexual encounter between the filmmaker and her then partner, the composer James Tenney, with only the camera and their cat, Kitch, present—without a camera operator or any other crew. Schneemann experiments with the body of the film itself: the film stock is burned, bleached, and scratched, thereby

becomes associated with the Cooperativa Cinema Indipendente (CCI), gravitating around the Filmstudio, although he begins his first cinematic experiments as early as 1969 (*Tracce di tracce, Commutazioni con mutazione*), where the action's development is entirely entrusted to the camera itself, as if it were his own "small laboratory":⁴ as a matter of fact, "Gioli's eye refuses the optic's presence, nor it accepts the shutter's one, imposing instead the eyelid's flick as the only legitimate rhythm of images' acquisition" (Volpato 2009). Gioli is, however, anything but a conventional filmmaker. Rather, he is above all a technician and an inventor, much closer to figures such as Alberto Grifi or Piero Bargellini. The particular attention that the Venetian artist devotes to technique and, in a certain sense, to a form of artisanal craftsmanship—bound together by a recurring stylistic motif that characterises the filmmaker's productive autonomy⁵ (black and white, 16 mm film, found footage, attention to physic-chemical processes, and so forth)—becomes even more pronounced when the work emits its distinctive analogue pulsation, which ultimately constitutes the expression of a drive: an energetic force originating in the film stock itself. If by "drive" we mean the motor, the driving force working at a "core level", hence the central state of excitement that act as a response to a stimulus, with "pulsation" we may mean, then, the actual motoric response.⁶ For filmmaker and theorist Érik Bullot, the drive in Gioli's cinema takes place in the relationship between desire and eros on one hand, and between trauma and accident on the other, "putting together sexual and thanatotic drives" (Bullot 2012, 80). Even though the drive-pulsation looms over in Gioli's whole artistic corpus, it is specifically in few films that erotism through pornographic image get depicted, and "disfigured" (Bullot 2012). In these films, though, the necessarily perceivable presence of the camera itself—as seen in his other films too—acts as a way to continuously *disturb* the pornographic image, as by "an intense parasite".⁷ In fact, sabotaging the image's transparency through the fusion with the film, hence through the pulsation produced by the filming of a television screen, through mirroring effects, trough collage and exogenous images' contamination, and so on, is a recurring theme in Gioli's work.

In the film *Quando la pellicola è calda* (1974) many of these elements can be found: Gioli gathers some pornographic films' shots, severed by vertically cut-

enhancing its materiality—which, at the profilmic level, corresponds to the flesh of the bodies—and intensifying the dynamism of the scenes. The film's rhythm follows that of the sexual act, at times hesitating and at others suddenly accelerating through brief zooms or through the lines and stains inscribed on the film strip. Schneemann's work constitutes one of the earliest feminist representations of explicit sexuality (see Blaetz 2007).

⁴ See Paolo Gioli's essay *Scritti per un rettangolo bianco* in Vampa (2005).

⁵ Exclusively faithful to his only friend and producer Paolo Vampa.

⁶ In fact, according to Freud drive's essence dwells in the "push". This push wants to eliminate a state of tension interiorly produced by excitement. Instead, the motoric action that follows this first push—called in this paper "pulsation" in relation to Gioli's work—is mediated by the Ego, that somehow adapts the drive to the context (see Sigmund Freud, *Metapsicologia*, 1915, in Freud [1978]).

⁷ See Gioli's film *Immagini disturbate da un intenso parassita* (1970).

ting the film at the center of the frame as to obtain his characteristic mirroring effect. The resulting abstraction is such that we often perceive exclusively the bodies' penetrative movement, whose figurativeness gets diluted while increasing their resemblance to mechanical elements. What seems to interest Gioli is the preservation of this interplay of secrecy with the bodies he employs; at a time when the sexual body is undergoing processes of emancipation, these films appear to mobilise the subversive potential associated with the body's concealment,⁸ through a form of eroticism rooted in transgression. Gioli also engages with bodies in their figurative dimension, exploring the geometric forms they produce: for instance, through mirroring, reflecting an ejaculating penis so that it appears to "penetrate" itself through its own doubled image, or generating veritable orgiastic knots of flesh. It's specifically through this playfulness with the mirroring effect that one can recognize, as noted by experimental filmmaker Michel Bouhours (1995) the surrealist erotic imagery—as seen, for instance, in some widely known Man Ray's photographs as *Demain* (1924). It wouldn't be wrong, actually, to pursue the questions behind the true nature of the mirroring effect, at least in this specifically sexual dimension. Even without the intention to exhaust the topic—as it is too extensive for this paper and intersects several cultural fields—it is nonetheless interesting to at least mention what has been suggested by artist and theorist Keith Sanborn about the mirrored images of Gioli's cinema as a representation – conscious or not – of the Freudian *unheimlich* (uncanny) (Sanborn, 2009). What was "secretive, hidden, and has instead resurfaced"⁹ presents itself not on the other side of the screen, nor in a double, but in the phantasmatic tangles of flesh created in this mirror. Symmetry is, then, the cornerstone of the uncanny, as it was in the surrealist films *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930) and *Orphée* (1950) by Jean Cocteau, where the characters use the mirror as a portal to an unknown world. The mirror, though, might be also seen as a metaphor, in the sometimes particularly ironic and conceptual associations translated in the montage by the overlaying effects, rather frequent in surrealist cinema—it may suffice to mention some classics such as *Entr'acte* by René Clair (1924), *La Coquille et le clergyman* by Germaine Dulac (1928), and *Un Chien andalou* by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (1929). Yet the symbolic potential of the mirror also relates to the dual nature of the drive: desire may thus achieve fulfilment through castration, in line with Bataille's conception of eroticism as "assenting to life even in death" (Bataille 1957, 11). In *Quando la pellicola è calda*, the mirroring of the overlaying is limited to a few moments, amongst which the most significative is the one that let us see the wide-open mouth of a woman that, once mirrored, creates a crater to which Gioli superimposes a vagina—we mostly see some hands and open legs—hence constructing a *vagina dentata*, further confirmation of the filmmaker's obsession for Freud.¹⁰

⁸ Consider, for instance, Jean Baudrillard's reflections on this theme in Baudrillard (1997 [1979] and 2011 [1983]).

⁹ According to the definition of "*unheimlich*" given by Schelling (1990 [1846]), 474).

¹⁰ Freud associates the ancient Latin locution to the male castration complex: "It's

If in *Quando la pellicola è calda* the totemic and uncanny visualizations related to a perceivable sexuality are mainly developed thanks to a mirroring effect, in *Farfallio* (1993) Gioli focuses more on the overlaying and flickering technique.¹¹ In fact, for almost the entirety of the film the filmmaker superimposes butterflies and moths' macros to some hardcore pornographic shots. Once again, the pornographic image gets sabotaged, though this time not in its figurativeness, instead in its persistency, hence in its concreteness. One could start by noticing the double entendre on the Italian term "farfallio"—which resembles in first place the intense flickering of a butterfly's wings—associated to the "kinetic flickering" of the homonymous optical phenomenon, i.e. the light intermittence, usually undesired, that causes a disturbing effect on visual perception. The flickering, then, slipping in the overlaying with the pornographic images emits that organic pulsation that has already been recognized as a steady presence in Gioli's work, and that here finds itself as one of the most original metaphors of cinematographic apparatus' mechanical drive in action. As in the 1974 film, *Farfallio* also establishes a machine-nature binary relation, beginning at the linguistic level: in *Quando la pellicola è calda*, the reference is not only to pornography, to the *hot* dimension of bodies, but also to the heat of the film stock in motion within the projector. The difference is that, in the 1993 film, there is also a close connection between nature and sexuality, one that remains inseparably linked to the cinematic apparatus. The photographs of butterflies and moths, in fact, reanimated to imitate the movement of their small coloured wings, frequently overlap with or alternate rapidly against images of vulvas, in close-ups of penetration or masturbation. Moreover, as Bullot emphasises, this connection becomes even more intriguing due to the relationship established between "animation" and "animal". Animal (*animalis*) is, in fact, that which is animated, and also in this case the word allows for a double reading, referring both to the pornographic image and to the cinematic apparatus. Indeed, while the photographs come to life and are reanimated through montage, the pornographic footage—already "animated"—also acquires a renewed existence through editing, as it is given a new meaning. It is in this reanimated pulsation that the erotic drive of Gioli's film takes form. Bullot adds: "If one carefully watches *Farfallio*, it's evident how the film's curve doesn't rise as a dramatic or rhythmic progression of which the orgasm would be the acme or the liberation. It shows, instead, the drive as in progress, as a tension for excitement, labored by a thanatotic drive capable to know new pushes or reanimations" (2012, 15). Indeed, Gio-

probable that no male human being has been spared by the fear of eviration deriving from the view of the female genitals" (Sigmund Freud, *Fetischismus*, 1927 in Freud 2013, 494).

11 Here too, the influence of international cinema becomes evident, as the structural film movement—primarily developed in the United States, Britain, and Austria—constitutes a fertile ground for the flicker technique, particularly through the works of Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, Peter Gidal, and Malcolm Le Grice. The latter two also emerge as some of the movement's principal theorists, alongside Paul Adams Sitney (cfr. Le Grice 2001; Gidal 1989).

li's film moves thanks to a propulsion, a push directed towards the butterflies' "dead" images, while the pornographic ones know a new life only in the funereal flicking of the former's wings. It is simultaneously a mechanical and organic energy that, emerging from a zero point—the condition of stasis—sets the libido into motion; yet, precisely because this zero point remains clearly identifiable, the presence of a death drive becomes apparent alongside that of a life drive.¹²

Interlinea (2008), realized twenty-five after *Farfallio*, is instead different on many levels, as Gioli uses a colorized pornographic movie, and the pulsation and the flicking technique present themselves in an image "outside of the frame" (Di Marino, 2013), "as if the projectionist were to forget to adjust the projector's window, inverting the upper and lower parts of the image" (Bulot 2012, 82). The "interlinea" (frameline) referred to in the title is the black line separating the frames on the film; in this film it "is situated as a dark plastic shape that struggles at the center of the screen",¹³ interfering once again with the pornographic image, now at the margins of the frame. What needs to be pointed out in *Interlinea* is the relationship established during the view between spectator and film, as recognizable in the already discussed films: i.e. the exposing of the film's material essence. Obviously, this process is not limited to let down, for a few minutes, the cinematographic illusion of an apparently-moving tridimensional image (Walley, 2020) that lets emerge the true structure of the film itself, but it is instead directed to deconstruct and fracturing the pornographic image, as if it were a kind of self-imposed censorship. This fragmentation, far from being for its own sake, becomes optimal to let the carnal and filmic drive emerge through the framelines' pulsations, thanks to the confused frames' own pulsations.

This exposing of the film, this treason against the deontological secrets of the editing's supposed invisibility, is a topic that interests Gioli also in the production of *Quando i corpi si toccano* (2012). In this work, the filmmaker formally exacerbates the previous films' experimentations. Returning to black and white film and renouncing to the camera once again¹⁴, the pornographic material and the film finally merge in a kinetic vortex that brings them almost to copulate, as if their bodies touch each other. This mixed copulation hence produces the flickering, here maybe in its most restless and furious form. The pulsation may be so emphasized precisely because there is no separation between frames, as in *Tracce di tracce* (1969), inspired in its turn by Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963),

¹² With regard to the relationship between "pulsation" and "animation", one may also refer to one of Gioli's most renowned works, *Quando l'occhio trema* (1989). Here, the animated pulsation of the eye renders its absence visible through contrast, thereby revealing the uncanny. Cfr. Barison 2025.

¹³ Paolo Gioli, *Interlinea*, 2008: <http://www.paologiolli.it/film33.php?page=film&id=33> (accessed on Jan. 26, 2026).

¹⁴ Di Marino perfectly explains the procedure and the immediate effect: "On a small chassis, used by the artist to develop his films, is wrapped a virgin strip of 16mm film, on which get superimposed some segments of a pornographic work in 35mm: during the projection, the images' shredding gets exasperated, flowing in tatters and getting interrupted by frames with the film perforation or with the lateral magnetic band on which the soundtrack is transcribed" (Di Marino 2012, 111).

where the continuous perceived flux is the solution of the merging between celluloid and organism.

At this point, it can be argued that Gioli's cinema is not merely a cinema of technique or hybridisation, of reanimation or drive and pulsation, but more broadly a cinema of perception.¹⁵ The so-called "flicker film" is situated within the field of perceptual cinema. According to Malcolm Le Grice, Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* (1926) provides one of the earliest direct examples of perceptual cinema; alongside it, many other works of the avant-garde reveal an increasing tendency towards the exploration of a cinema capable of acting primarily on a psycho-physical level rather than on a psycho-interpretive one (Le Grice, 2001). The earliest films to experiment with flicker—that is, to alternate different frames through repetition and speed—include Dwinell Grant's *Color Sequence* (1943) and, above all, Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960). However, the first film to construct flicker according to an essentially mathematical principle is Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966). Throughout the work, Conrad plays with the pulsation of only two types of frames, one white and one black, at times alternating every single frame in order to produce states of trance, hallucination, and perceptual involvement. Thus, between the 1940s and the 1960s, an interest emerges—perhaps and above all thanks to the practices of structural cinema—in the most elementary mechanisms of the cinematic apparatus and in the optical perception of variations and pulsations of image and sound.

Another filmmaker who, like Gioli, is influenced by structuralism, by the exploration of psycho-physical processes, and by the culture of eroticism and pornography is Kubelka's compatriot, filmmaker and critic Peter Tscherkassky. In Austria, as in the United States, it is not until the 1940s and 1950s that we start to see the first works and authors in the cinematographic avant-garde. More precisely, according to Tscherkassky, the "story" begins in the summer of 1955, in a café based in Linz, where a young Peter Kubelka convinces his friend Rudolf Malik to produce his first film, *Mosaik im Vertrauen* (Kubelka, 1955).¹⁶ For a cinematic milieu that, still marked by the trauma of war, struggles to establish itself in Europe, the works of artists such as Kubelka, Kurt Kren, Valie Export, Peter Weibel, Ernst Schmidt Jr., and the entire Wiener Aktionismus group become indispensable. These practices are shaped by the brilliant and relatively recent artistic heritage of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and later of the Austrian Republic: Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, Karl Kraus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, as

15 "The rapid appearance of a vertical episode obtained by mystifying a twenty-fourth of a second and made to emerge in order to achieve a time that I call resolute animated time. The appearance of this rapid time, the emergence of a different speed used as a counterfield that I define as reflected animated time, leads me to consider that what follows—that is, the two animated times—comes to disrupt our cherished traditional gaze, offering in exchange the vision of one of the dozens of electrical perceptions hidden within the silent nature of our invaded nervous creations" (Gioli in Vampa 2005, 4).

16 See Tscherkassky 2012.

well as, of course, thinkers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Sigmund Freud. The curator and filmmaker Alexander Horwath situates Tscherkassky's work—alongside that of other members of the third generation of Austrian avant-garde filmmakers, including Lisl Ponger, Dietmar Brehm, and Martin Arnold—as inevitably shaped by the crisis that affected avant-garde cinema in the 1970s, a crisis brought about both by structuralism itself and by the rise of video (Cahill, 2008). To discuss Peter Tscherkassky is therefore also to engage with the history of the Austrian avant-garde, even in its broadest sense. Since his first film (*Aderlaß*, 1981), the Viennese filmmaker latches on the previous Austrian tradition, passing through more structuralist forms and demonstrating a certain interest for the erotic theme—*Erotique* (1982), *Urlaubsfilm* (1983), *Tabula Rasa* (1987-89)—finally arriving to the found footage technique and switching from the Super8 format to the 16mm and even to 35mm. In *Urlaubsfilm*, the voyeuristic image throbs like an excited heart under pressure; the Super8 format *accesses* to a young woman's private moments, barely seeing her breasts, thighs and feet. If in *Tabula Rasa*, instead, the pulsation appears maybe under a more scientific and intellectual light rather than under an erotic one, in *Parallel Space: Inter-View* (1992) it becomes a terribly harsh flickering while shooting screens, family photographs, bare bodies. The images assault each other in a "physics of the gaze" and of "memory", as announced by the director himself with some signs at the beginning of the film. The materialism, the apparatus' presence is perceivable only thanks to the flickering, which gives life even to the most fixed of images: Tscherkassky, in an effort to touch his own memory, fractures the real space, and what he finally perceives is the presence of a psychoanalytic dimension where private and public, childhood and adulthood, sexuality and taboo coexists. Moreover, as in Gioli's work, the Austrian filmmaker's practice is also grounded in a principle of image reanimation—Tscherkassky himself considers some of his films to be works of animation—through which the material itself becomes the film's protagonist: the structure, the body (Wells, 2008). This matter—the film stock as well as archival images—is animated by a surplus absent from inert matter. For Tscherkassky, as for Gioli, immersing "the sight in the flesh implies wanting to grasp what nourishes the becoming of life." (Barison 2025, 5). The work of the Austrian filmmaker in which eroticism is perhaps most explicitly articulated—both at the level of the images and of the underlying intentions—is *The Exquisite Corpus* (2015). The film is an "exquisite corpse" of advertising spots and other movies—erotic thrillers, comedies, Italian soft-core pornography, Danish and French pornography, all shot between 1960s and 1980s—built as a long oneiric journey, starting with the boat trip of a naked man and a naked woman, who come across the bare body of another woman lying on a beachside. From there, the image solarizes and we abruptly enter into a different dimension. The incipit is similar to that of another Tscherkassky's film, shot fourteen years before, that also engages with the erotic theme: *Dream Work* (2001)—the third work in the 35 mm CinemaScope trilogy, preceded by *L'Arrivée* (1999) and *Outer Space* (1999)—where a woman (Barbara Hershey, in *The Entity*, Sidney J. Furie, 1981) enters a house, takes off her shoes, gets

asleep and starts dreaming. About *Dream Work*, which explicitly pays homage to Man Ray's Dadaist-surrealist cinema, Gabriele Jutz writes:

What the filmmaker was interested in was not so much the representation of a dream content as such, but to offer the cinematic equivalent of the "mechanics of the dream,"—condensation and displacement—as described by Freud. Tscherkassky reinterprets the two main operations of the dream-work as technical-mechanical processes. "Displacement" denotes the physical transfer of the found footage material into a new context. "Condensation," however, is the result of the manual procedure of contact printing multiple layers of filmstrips.¹⁷

Jutz's comment is fitting (almost) perfectly for *The Exquisite Corpus* too. The two films are also united by the use of objects impressed directly on the film—like the Man Ray "rayographs"—that "not only reveal a very specific way of shaping and sculpting analog film, they also create an organic atmosphere into which photographic, namely iconic signs (which also constantly switch between a constructed cultural interior and nature scenes) are embedded" (Tscherkassky 2026). If in both films there is, as suggested by Jutz, a shift, a *slip* of found footage from its original dimension to another created by their "new editor" (Tscherkassky), as if the real were to magically find itself in the dream—though *The Exquisite Corpus* begins already immersed in an oneiric mood—then the pulsion, here purely Freudian, must act as its matrix. In *The Exquisite Corpus*, also formed by pornographic material, Eros' sexual drive has to stand against the continuous filmic interruptions, in a not-achieved desire, as if it were Thanatos' destructive action. Therefore, the film's pulsations seek a balance of their own, that would not solve itself if not in the furious struggle of the drives. Or better, if not in celluloid's "beauty"'s exaltation. It is, in fact, the film stock itself that is laid bare: for the Austrian filmmaker, the aim is to redirect the voyeuristic gaze away from the human body and towards the film strip and its material fascination.¹⁸ More broadly, Tscherkassky argues that an interest in rupture runs throughout his entire body of work from the very beginning, and that it is through fracture and collapse that the film strip is revealed, allowing something else to become visible. Ultimately, therefore, it is only the film itself that emerges victorious from these internal struggles: the film as an apparatus, a tool capable of shaping the viewer's sensory perception and of being experienced as an organic tissue. Nevertheless, for Tscherkassky, the *cadavre exquis* is the

17 As for Gioli's case, I report here a more technical description of Tscherkassky's work: "Specifically, Tscherkassky's contact printing method proceeds as follows: the original material, film strips of about one meter in length (around 50 frames), are arranged on an equally long strip of unexposed 35mm-stock and then exposed. The light source is either a photo enlarger, whose light cone captures about 18 frames at once, or a laser pointer, which allows for re-copying small details from the original film using the tiny red beam emitted by the pointer" (Jutz 2014, 321-322).

18 In these films (*Erotique*, *Tabula Rasa*, *Urlaubsfilm*, *Dream Work*, *The Exquisite Corpus*), the woman's body finds itself being a metaphor of the enchantment of analog cinema itself, of the radiance of a support made of translucent images (Alcoz and Tscherkassky, 2018).

film strip itself: a body capable of generating a powerful erotic charge, yet one whose expiration date is already inscribed within it.

The materiality discussed here brings together vitality and the funerary: the film strip, reanimated by the drive, oscillates between surrendering to its own inanimate substance and complying with the artistic intentions of those who manipulate it. From their fascination with the techniques of early cinema to their engagement with surrealism, Paolo Gioli and Peter Tscherkassky recover what cinema has, over time, expelled or allowed to disappear. Yet this impulse, which could be defined as archaeological, is neither pure nostalgia nor a critique of progress; rather, it stems from the desire to handle and directly shape the artwork, to perceive its tactility before it reaches the spectator. In this sense, the need to "put one's hands on it" (Foglia 2025) activates an erotic, almost fetishist interest in filmic matter, ultimately enabling a relationship with the flesh of bodies.

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Neta Alexander

Interface Frictions: How Digital Debility Reshapes Our Bodies

Durham: Duke University Press, 2025, pp. 232

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Griffith Wynne Williams coined the term “highway hypnosis” in 1963 and hypothesized that trance-like states were triggered while driving, because of the combination of monotonous roads, repetitive scenery, and the patterned cadence of lights and reflections. Highway hypnosis is a deadly problem, born from the collision of embodied expertise and the rhythm of infrastructural sameness. It also echoes a current discourse about technology that blends the politics of attention, fatigue, and the entrapment of human consciousness in the “machine zone” of monotonous behaviour (Schüll 2019, 421–36). This catches us at a time when concerns about technology have shifted from the annoyance of distraction to the dangers of enrapture. The solutions to highway hypnosis are found in disrupting the flow of monotonous activity through the strategic deployment of *friction*. This is the same refrain heard when critics of the ease of technology (for some people) recommend increased encumbrance between people and their devices. The journalist Kathryn Jezer-Morton calls such interventions “friction-maxxing” and states that we bear a “responsibility of keeping friction intact as part of our families’ lives” (2026).

In need of guidance and empirical weight to understand our moment, Neta Alexander’s book, *Interface Frictions*, arrives to account for the many lives of friction where the corporeal rubs

against the technological. The book is an ingenious contribution to the fields of media studies, disability studies, and science and technology studies—and a crystalline example of the ways those fields have grown together. Alexander’s serrated analysis documents the messy, often debilitating, and culturally bewildering politics of interface design, violence, and appropriation. Where the popular discourse may emphasize a simplistic economy of *friction versus convenience*, Alexander offers the weft and warp of the manufactured frictions that erupt between technologies and their real-life users.

Interface Frictions is built around four empirical chapters, each investigating a spectatorial position and a corresponding design feature and frictional dynamic. Chapters about the experience of buffering, speed watching, binge-watching, and soporific media chronicle the development and response to the design of the refresh, the introduction of variable playback speed on video platforms, non-consensual autoplay, and the night mode features of contemporary screen technologies. These, in turn, illuminate the physical and psychological frictions of perpetual anxiety, eye strain, emotional triggers, and fatigue.

To give a sense of the nuance and abundance of *Interface Frictions*, consider simply the chapter on buffering and the refresh. Alexander writes, “Refresh answers a difficult question: Why is

the internet so boring?" (28). That is, despite its promises of infinite knowledge, unpredictable connection, and surprising and potentially even enlivening encounter, the web offers, instead, a pit of infinite disappointment. For most of us, the act of "refreshing" is our simplest means of trying to rectify this.

Alexander again, "one can spend an entire day online, clicking the mouse or the keyboard or moving one's thumb across a glass screen, expecting something meaningful to happen, and still be confronted with a stupefying sense of tedium" (28). It's this readily recognisable fact that motivates the book's descent into a world of buffering, arrow-spinning, progress-barring, beach-balling, swiping, clicking, and F5ing, and the bodily, debilitating, and affectively stultifying world of the refresh, to confirm an assertion echoed by Wendy Chun: "Repetition breeds expertise, even as it breeds boredom" (Chun 2016, 1).

If Alexander's first question is "Why is the internet so boring?," the second, unstated one, is: Why is the internet so frustrating? Frustrating things are often interesting things. But the internet succeeds in being both tedious and annoying. The dreamed-for resolution of this fact—the static that erupts at the interface of frustration and boredom—is the simple drag of thumb down screen, the gentle *pop* to signal a request to the API, and the more than likely result: nothing new. This is a scandal. Alexander's acuity for describing sensuous life, the variegation of interface experience, and the acidity of technology use, serves us a precise lexicon for registering this scandal and documenting its indignities.

For instance, she writes not just of the refresh but of its many subgenres: when she writes of "frustration-motivated refreshing" (27) she writes of the desire, through the refresh, to restore temporal continuity to the web, to overcome buffering, to repair the torn seams of digital experience. "Boredom-motivated refreshing," (27) on the other hand, pings the server—an echo in an empty tunnel—asking for fresh data, something more interesting, or something more dev-

astating. A desire for novelty to break the rhythm of the highway.

But there are less obvious forms of the refresh, like those that ask you to refresh to prove your humanity to a system that expects bots and AI imposters. The refresh, the worn gesture of humanity, can stand in for sentience. Or there's the "refresh-as-a-hack," (27) where savvy users can use refreshing, or try to use it, to secure merchandise, tickets, or medical appointments in digital queues. Regardless of its genre though, refresh is a portal on the other side of which is a hoped-for change of state. Refresh is a form of repair—where repair is the feel-good dream of the possibility of renewal.

Rebecca Schneider (2020) writes about the idea of "Slough Media" as the dynamic relationship between the ephemeral and the enduring. The refresh is just such a slough, activated by the gestures of clicking, pulling, and swiping. These gestures are significant: not only do they activate a desire about the future (to make it more interesting, to repair latency, to assert humanity, or to reap the suffering of others), they contribute to the debilitating effects of repetitive gestures. Gesture's essential iterativity simultaneously cites and opens out toward the feeling that "something's coming" (Schneider 2020, 28). This idea of *something's coming* is, of course, the incantation uttered by the refresh.

The persistent disappointment, and frustration, and anger of the refresh and the enervating drain of latency, are just some of the frictions in *Interface Frictions*. Alexander's understanding of friction is consistently layered, and multifaceted and not reducible to a single analytical critique. But it merits dwelling on the discussion of latency. It is latency, after all, that often produces the desire for the refresh, as a means to quicken the buffer.

Alexander's analysis of latency, the buffer, and the refresh recalls Vivian Sobchack's (1990) work on early digital video. We come to understand how the constraints of the network, the database, and the format accrue and are

experienced by people in sensuous, aesthetic, and bodily registers. "The interface, however, is where those various compounding latencies become visible for the end user, who is then faced with frustration, anger, and, in some cases, the anxiety and fear of missing one's chance to receive a potentially life-saving vaccine" (Alexander 2025, 26).

I return to Alexander's analysis of latency because it's a remarkable piece of research and cross-sectional analysis. In one passage she transitions from a history of user expectations about latency and the duration of "a moment" from the ping of radar technology to the responsiveness of vaccine booking websites. In the middle of this history is a diagonal analysis of latency as it relates to viruses themselves, and in particular HIV, and the sense of latency as that which is "dormant or undeveloped" (34). This incubation time is the source of unreckonable anxiety. All of this is to say: latency is a temporal misfit that is re-jiggered by the refresh.

When Rosemary Garland-Thomson (2011) writes of the misfit, she writes of "*fitting* and *misfitting*" as denoting an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction" (592). She writes of shapes and substances, of a "square peg in a round hole" (593). These are thoroughly spatial metaphors. When Alexander writes of the frictions of the refresh and its subgenres, she's revealing the temporal character of misalignment; she is documenting the rankling prickles of temporal aesthetics and sensuous frustration.

Alexander's reading of real, lived, debility and "consensual impairment" (10) is generous and complex, but the book also resolves into a larger contribution by laying out a theory of the digital interface attuned to the "somatic temporalities of waiting, compression endurance, and drowsiness" (151). We are reminded throughout that friction is what gives us purchase, it marks the traction between body and the world. But too much friction, and we drag, we scrape, we chafe. Not enough friction, we slide, we slip, we

fall. Friction then is not a value judgment, but a marker of the calibration of bodies and their environments.

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Jonathan Sterne

Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment

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This review honours the memory of Jonathan Sterne, whose passing we learned of just as we began to conceive and develop this special issue on *Crip Media Aesthetics and Infrastructures*. Sterne was an exceptional scholar whose foundational interventions in the study of media, sound, and disability have left a profound and enduring imprint on an entire generation of researchers. Given our shared investment in the epistemologies and cultures of listening, his work assumed a singular importance for us—so much so that this issue would arguably not have existed had Sterne's writing not enabled the very conditions of our own intellectual encounter.

There is an undeniable and cruel irony in a scholar and teacher of sonic media being diagnosed with thyroid cancer and a paralysed vocal cord. Yet, Sterne notably transformed his own impaired body into an epistemological instrument. This is perhaps most vividly exemplified by the Dork-o-phone—the wearable voice amplifier he used in seminars and public lectures—through which a medical necessity became a provocative rethinking of academic infrastructures. "I might also say that disability studies prepared me to become disabled when cancer ate my right recurrent laryngeal nerve and TKIs later attacked my body" (Sterne 2025), he writes in one of his latest writings. Although one might assume that *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology*

of Impairment (2021) emerges from Sterne's experience as an oncological patient, traces of his concern with disability, and with the ways disability shapes media histories and imaginaries, can already be discerned throughout much of his earlier work, including those that did not explicitly engage with disability. Indeed, his bodily practice of amplification both personalizes and exemplifies a longer intellectual project: tracing how listening technologies are bound up with medical regimes and social norms.

In his incisive exploration of the cultural history of sound reproduction, *The Audible Past* (2003), Sterne notes that "deafness was at [its] very beginning" (41). What, for Friedrich Kittler (1999 [1986]), was an erudite excavation in media archaeology and technological determinism becomes, in Sterne's hands, a finely grained critique of the ableist assumptions and protocols underpinning modern audiometry and its entanglement with the invention of sound-reproduction machines. Although devices such as the phonograph, the telephone, and early hearing aids fundamentally transformed modern life and communication, Sterne argues that they emerged directly from anthropometric investigations into, and normalising efforts directed at, disabled and non-compliant bodies—specifically, the physiology of the ear. In this way, he exposes the erasure of disability from mainstream his-

toriographies of media and acoustics, drawing attention to a profound historical amnesia: the work of scientists and inventors such as Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Cros, Francis Galton, and Hermann von Helmholtz did not merely serve deaf people; rather, it drew extensively upon disabled lives and bodies in the development of the very infrastructures—and the profits—of communication capitalism. “Instead of eradicating the cultural status associated with deafness,” they “actually fetishized it” (41). Thus, Sterne exposes the reverse side of a medical listening practice that deployed acoustic technology to establish institutional authority over the passive, objectified body. His early engagement with the medical sciences is particularly evident in his studies of the invention of the stethoscope and mediated auscultation, where he articulated the emergence of an “audile technique:” a mode of listening that separated sound from its source and transformed the patient’s internal physiology into an acoustic text to be decoded and measured. Likewise, in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (2012), Sterne traces how this algorithmic format of lossy audio compression was shaped by twentieth-century psychoacoustics and by the collection of data on imperfect hearing—that is, on the limits and intrinsic vulnerability of the human body.

Following this line of thought—strongly informed by a deconstructive impulse—he and Mara Mills (2017) formulate a distinct “dismediation theory,” comprising three proposals and six tactics that reject the techno-optimism underlying the concept of media as prostheses. In what reads like a cutting-edge manifesto, they argue that media and disability have been “mutually constitutive” (365) since their inception, thereby repositioning disability as a foundational and generative dimension of technological history rather than a deficit to be fixed or rehabilitated. With this move, they decisively contribute to legitimizing disability media studies and defining its epistemological premises, a trajectory that finds its completion in *Diminished Faculties*,

which highlights this coextensiveness while laying the groundwork for a new, seminal approach.

Sterne’s work on sonic media paves the way for his inquiry into what ocularcentric modern epistemology has systematically marginalized or treated as a secondary effect: namely, auditory perception. By interrogating sound and listening, he questions the conditions of (im)possibility of experience and knowledge, and challenges conventional notions of sensory impairment: not merely as deficit, but as a complex techno-cultural condition that, in certain situations, can also be framed as “normal impairment” (117). This sets the scene for an “impairment phenomenology” that he formulates as a distinct variant of political phenomenology, deeply informed by the politicized analysis of experience rooted in feminist, queer, and decolonial perspectives. In his account, impairment phenomenology investigates lived experience from the assumption of an unstable sense of self, addressing “how to exist in a changed body and how to negotiate that change” (12). It operates as a conduit from positionality toward “orientation” in “speech, hearing, and embodied apperception” (12–14), transforming awareness of one’s own voice in both physical and metaphorical cultural meanings. Through this lens, Sterne critically dismantles what he terms the “ideology of vocal ability,” the normative, ableist assumption that equates a clean, unimpaired voice with agency, political presence, and full personhood (78–81). By dissociating vocal performance from inner subjectivity, he conceives impairment as a “quality of experience” (32) and, significantly, as “itself also a media concept” emerging from the complex “interaction between ears and media,” “technologies,” and “environments” (126).

Diminished Faculties also abounds in creative, unconventional modes of research presentation. A striking example is the chapter “In Search of New Vocalities,” which is conceived as an imaginary, reverberant exhibition space: a virtual gallery organized into distinct rooms—Mouth, Larynx, Signals, and Volute—where readers/visitors

can “confront objects and works that imagine voices as [they] existed outside the bodies, as physical forces in the world that can be visualized” (80). Moreover, what confirms Sterne as an original and visionary scholar is his capacity to “listen forward” and to coin evocative neologisms that synthesize complex systems of thought. To address normative hearing damage, for example, he introduces the concept of “audile scarification,” which serves “as a framework for thinking about culturally produced auditory impairments” (119). This concept reframes acoustic “discomforts” and “torments” as social problems—collective consequences of the high-volume environments characteristic of industrialized societies. Such media environments normalize and demand a standardized “threshold of pain” that operates as a “cultural and political threshold” (118).

The book concludes with a practical guide to impairment theory. Illustrated by Darsha Hewitt, this final section poses questions at once simple and incisive: What is an impairment? What is a theory? How do we use impairment theory? If an impairment is “a productive distortion of an ability [...] real or imagined” (194)—both physical and culturally constructed—and a theory is a “portable idea” (196)—aimed at reconsidering naturalized objects through new lenses—then impairment theory functions as a flexible political toolkit. It can be deployed beyond and against social prescriptions and institutional protocols, reclaiming positionality and orientation as deeply specific, contextualized sites of both resistance and agency.

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Across Total Running Time: A Dispatch

Josephine Sales

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Through Securus Technologies—the second-largest prison telecommunications company in the United States, whose name derives from the Latin *securus* (“without care”)—a fifteen-minute telephone call is the maximum permitted duration for communication between an incarcerated person and the free world. A pre-recorded telephone operator dominates the call, enforcing its tone and interrupting with constant reminders that the line is surveilled, while steadily counting down the remaining time. In 2015, Securus recorded over 70 million phone calls made within prisons across 37 states over a two-and-a-half-year period (Smith and Lee 2015). In 2021, it entered into a partnership with Amelia, a self-described “advanced” conversational AI and digital workforce company. The collaboration was promoted as a way to better serve incarcerated individuals through digital, real-time service support. This partnership extends the lifecycle of these recordings beyond their immediate function as communication between loved ones, as well as between incarcerated people and their legal counsel—calls that are legally protected as confidential. Framed as a service enhancement, the partnership transformed the collection of recorded conversations into training data for automated systems, adding a new layer of value extraction to a communication system that already profits from charging inflated rates. Each

fifteen-minute call generates revenue through multiple channels at the same time, functioning simultaneously as a conversation, a monitored record, training data, and a commercial commodity (O'Donnell 2025).

I was made to interface with Securus by way of an inside-outside reading group that began within a state penitentiary during the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd uprisings, when the entanglement of illness, confinement, racialized violence, and state power became acutely visible. Through a sustained relationship of mutual care and study with a person serving life without parole¹ who was seeking compassionate release, I came to understand this condition as “death-by-incarceration:” the indefinite postponement of release that turns life into suspended time. Because direct contact was not possible, our exchange unfolded through mediated forms—telephone calls, letters, shared clippings, images, and books—all of which were subject to monitoring. Letters traveled to a third state where they were scanned, printed, and delivered as duplicates, and contact remained exceedingly limited. While we prepared a presentation together for an art and law conference at UCLA, the total running time of the fifteen-minute call made visible how duration itself becomes a site of extraction and value production.

¹ David Dawud Lee was a writer, mentor, organizer, activist, and friend. He died by incarceration in February 2024 after spending thirty-six years under a life without parole (LWOP) sentence. He lived with sarcoidosis. Despite repeated denials of parole, he was scheduled for a clemency review hearing the day after his death. The installation is dedicated to Lee's work to end life without parole sentences—what he described as death by incarceration.



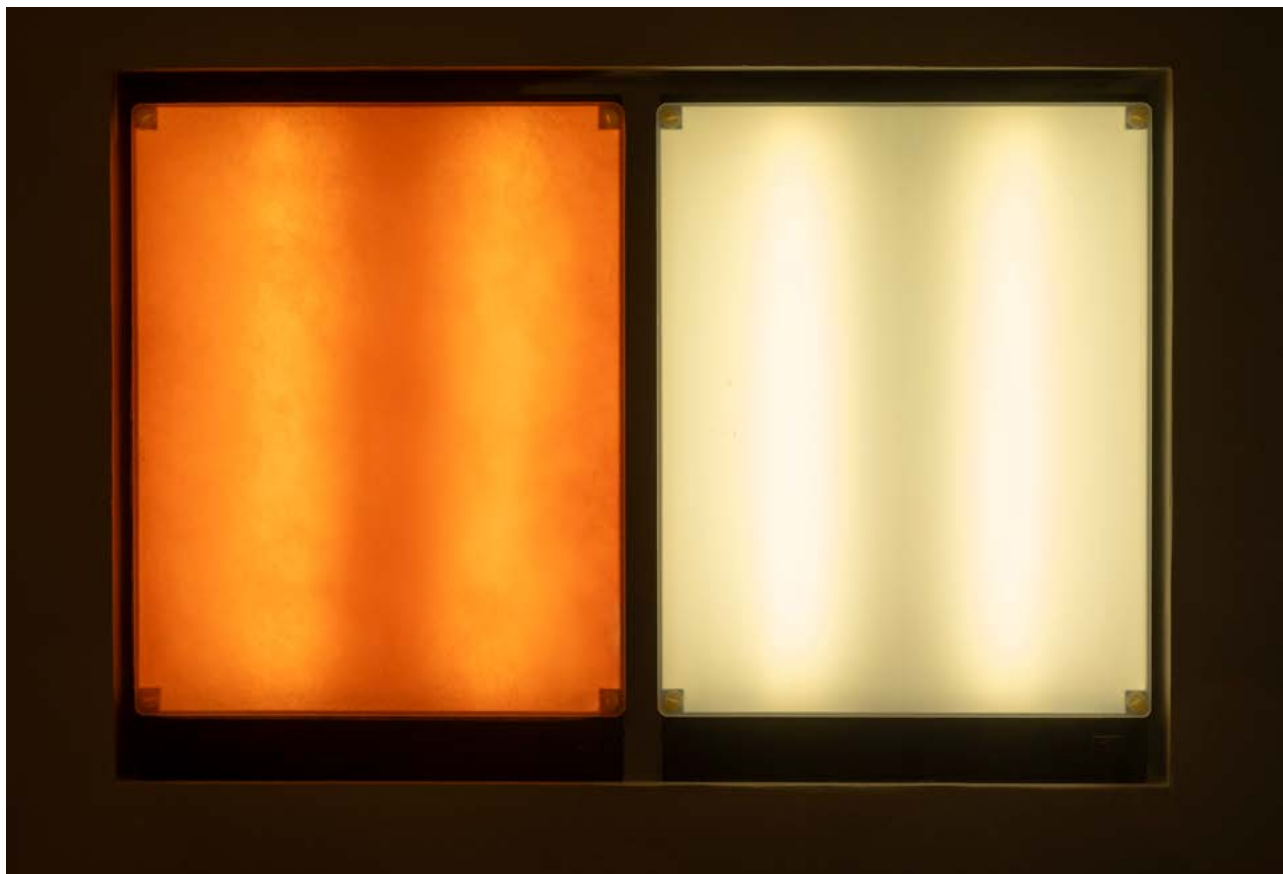


Fig. 1: Josephine Sales, image of *Day for Night*, part of the installation *Total Running Time* (2023/2026).

Total Running Time is an installation that examines time as an infrastructure, exploring how delay and duration shape experiences of disability and debility. Across four works—*Rescue*, *Pulses*, *Day for Night*, and *Total Running Time Site*—the installation experiments with clocks, architectural interventions, projected light, sonic vibrations and distribution.

*Rescue*² presents the word “SECURE” as a life-sized plaster wall relief. In its first two iterations, the same letters were arranged first as “RESCUE” and later as “SECURE.” What does disability reveal about time when security, too, is continually rearranged and crisis is no longer understood as an exceptional event, but as ongoing?

*Pulses*³ is a sonic composition built from recordings of the prison telecommunications operator. Vibrating through transducers em-

bedded within the gallery walls, it permeates a three-walled corner of the gallery, layering surveillance announcements, dial tones, mechanical ventilation, vocal elocution exercises repeating “perfect,” a sine wave, an a cappella rendition of the song *Unchained Melody*, and the Securus’s digital chatbot Amelia, repeatedly failing to define “care.” Periodic reminders that the telephone line is being surveilled punctuate the composition while counting down the remaining call duration.

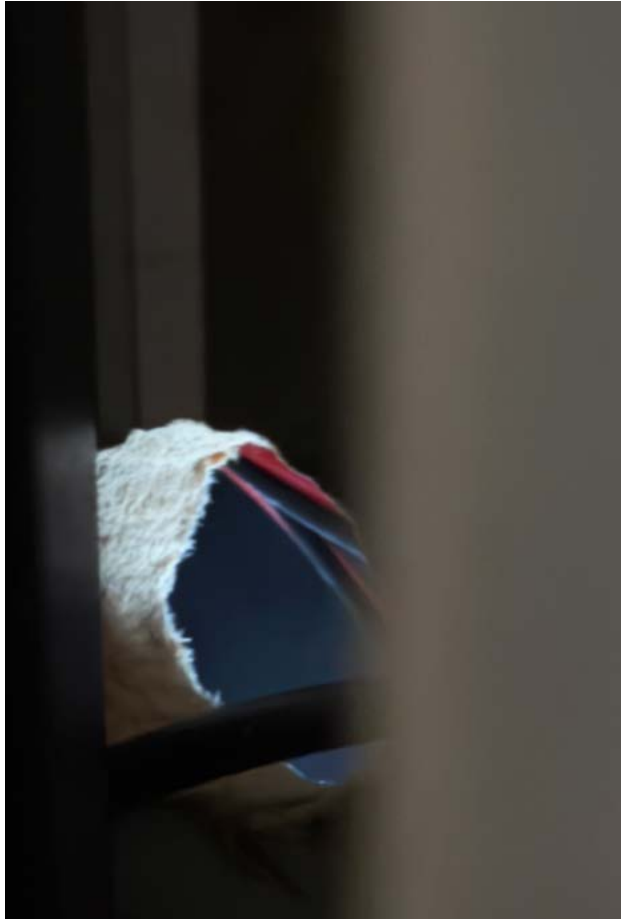
Centered within the vibrations of the sonic wall, *Day for Night*⁴ is a time-based light installation displayed within a recessed niche. Through an artificial window prepared with 5,000 K circadian optic light panels—typically used to simulate daylight—and polyester filters, it produces a perpetual day. Programmed on security timers, one panel

2 *Rescue*, 2023/2026. Plaster wall relief, MDF, paint (variable) 152 cm × variable length.

3 *Pulses*, 2023. Digital audio, surface and tactile transducers. Total running time: 15 minutes.

4 *Day for Night*, 2023. Two 5000 K circadian optic light panels, security timers, polyester film filters; 43 × 66 cm.

runs continuously while the other activates once each hour, creating simultaneous experiences of uninterrupted and intermittent duration. Between these competing temporalities, distinctions between day and night, work and rest, never fully settle. Yet, behind their artificial glow, an aperture remains—a small opening to the outside.



Total Running Time Site,⁵ the fourth work in the installation, is an experiment in distribution. The exhibiting institution temporarily hosts a URL within its own domain, making digital iterations of the works available beyond the exhibition while remaining bound to a fixed duration.

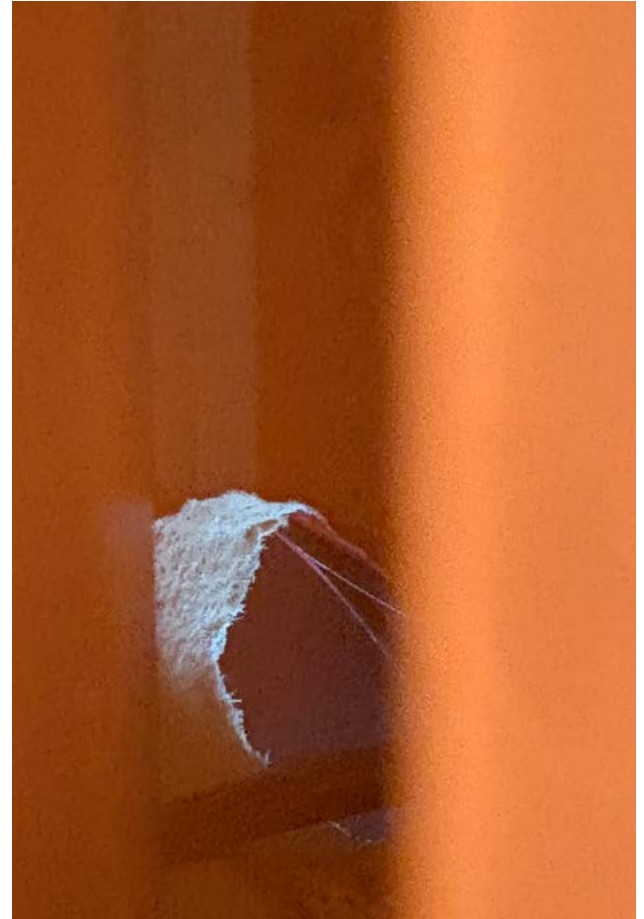


Fig. 2-3: Josephine Sales, detail views of *Day for Night*, showing wiring emerging from a conduit between the light panels and the exterior-facing window. Part of the installation *Total Running Time* (2023/2026).

Infrastructure is often understood in spatial terms, as the systems and institutions that sustain everyday life: roads, bridges, railways, power grids, dams, pipelines, schools, hospitals, prisons, archives, cemeteries, and logistics. They organize movement, distribute resources and connect people, goods and information across space. What begins to surface through the prison telephone call, however, is another dimension of infrastructure: a temporal structure that or-

ganizes access, communication, and duration. It structures the running of time, determining who waits, who moves, whose future is deferred and whose time can be monetized.

Political theorist and historian Timothy Mitchell argues that infrastructure derives its power from its capacity to defer the future. It is an apparatus that captures time, stretching processes so that value, legitimacy, and dependency accumulate through delay. As these arrangements become

5 *Total Running Time Site*, 2023. Time limited digital work <https://trt.beallcenter.uci.edu>.

embedded in the everyday, they come to appear as conditions of life rather than economic strategies (Mitchell 2020; see also Vishmidt 2021). What kinds of endurance do these temporal infrastructures demand? Within disabled communities and disability studies, the concept of “crip time” has challenged the assumption that time unfolds through a single, normative chronology. Alison Kafer describes it as a way of experiencing time that is flexible, relational, and resistant to the demands of productivity and linear progress (Kafer 2013).

Total Running Time as an installation presents temporal experience not as an individual attribute but as a structural condition: a way of living time under systems that distribute access unevenly and often render survival dependent on accommodation, care, or institutional control. In particular, it resonates with Jasbir Puar’s notion of “debility”—which names the slow wearing down of bodies and populations through incarceration, colonial violence, environmental harm, and austerity (Russell 2001; Puar 2017). Puar’s account of “prognosis time” similarly frames time as a horizon organized by uncertainty, shortened futures, and the anticipation of loss—a temporal condition that permeates the installation. Through this lens, crip time refers not just to flexibility or slowness, but to a state of dependency and endurance within systems that profit from delay and allow no space for mourning.

Disabled people take on a form of economic life channeled through institutions that transform dependency, care, treatment, and maintenance into sites of accumulation. Lives that are neither fully abandoned nor fully incorporated into productive labour are sustained through carceral cells and hospital beds, life-without-parole sen-

tences, pharmaceutical dependencies produced through long-term treatment, assistive technologies, MedTech (Ní Fheorais 2026, 17), care institutions, and administrative systems. Because these arrangements organize life through duration, “labour time” becomes legible here as a durational regime. As Marta Russell argues, disabled people excluded from wage labor continue to serve capitalist accumulation through other means; institutionalization becomes a “corporate solution to disablement,” (Russell 2019, 5) made profitable through public financing and the steady circulation of revenue. It follows that duration is not neutral: it is managed, priced, and extracted; yet temporal infrastructures organize more than extraction. What they make perceptible are not only systems of extraction but also the fragile relations that continue to emerge within them.

Writing from within what he calls “parallel time,” Palestinian political prisoner, Walid Daqqa⁶ describes how ordinary objects—a lighter, a packet of cigarettes, a small opening in a wall—become charged with memory and anticipation. They attach the present to a future in which such things may once again become ordinary. Parallel time is a temporal condition produced through captivity in which the future can no longer be inhabited in ordinary ways. He shows how such regimes reorganize not only the future but attention itself. A hole in the cell door becomes a site of study, speculation, and relation. Cracks become apertures for what leaks through them: sound, memory, longing, and the possibility of elsewhere.

Who would understand that dialogue replete with fervor, with emotion, with interruption and description as if it were a conversation on the topic of heaven and its door and not on the cell and

⁶ “Walid Daqqa (July 18, 1961–April 7, 2024) was a Palestinian philosopher, political theorist, author, and armed resistance fighter who was imprisoned for thirty-eight years, the longest serving Palestinian prisoner in Israeli jails. From prison, he wrote a number of books including, *The Tale of the Secrets of Oil*, *Fusion of Consciousness*, and *A Parallel Time*. Daqqa died in prison, succumbing to a rare form of bone cancer which was exacerbated by medical negligence and torture of the Israeli Prison Service. He has not been given a proper burial as his body continues to be retained by the Security Cabinet of Israel at the time of this publication.” (Eldin Hussein in Daqqa 2025).

its holes? [...] We are a part of history, and history—as it is well known—is a condition and an action in the past. Except us: we are a past continuous and neverending. We address you all from it presently, so that it does not become your future (Daqqa 2025, 5).

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PROJECTS
& ABSTRACTS



Film Festivals and Sustainability Communication

The Contribution of Web and Social Media Analysis

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The challenge of sustainability and “greenness” requires adopting a holistic perspective—one capable of interpreting phenomena and guiding processes from environmental, economic, and social points of view.

In this context, culture—as a resource of identity, a tool for negotiation, and a vehicle for diplomacy—represents a fundamental instrument to be employed. At the same time, achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda can serve as a key driver of growth for cultural and creative enterprises, particularly those in the film sector.

When referring to film enterprises here, we are mainly speaking about film festivals—entities that present specific challenges of analysis, starting with the lack of a universally accepted definition of what constitutes a festival. Furthermore, given that film festival research is a relatively new field (emerging in the early 1990s), the literature remains fragmented and incomplete, with various subfields but little cohesion. The intersection of two crucial areas for this study—film festivals and environmental sustainability—is particularly underexplored. Discussions about greenness in the context of festivals are often limited to organization-

al aspects of the events, which, while important, overlook a complementary dimension: the meaning behind sustainability-related communication practices.

For these reasons, the festival as an object of study is of particular interest in this work. It seeks to answer the following questions: What is the current state of the film industry in terms of sustainability? How are actors, spaces, narratives, values, and technologies related to environmental sustainability reflected in European film festivals? In what ways do festivals, as formal and informal spaces of exchange, contribute to the creation of transcultural communities characterised by existing and future sustainability practices? Moreover, how can web and social media analysis contribute to digitally integrating reflections on the interconnectedness between film festivals and sustainability (not only environmental)?

Given this complex research question, the project proposes three general objectives: first, to examine the current state of the film industry in terms of sustainability and sustainability communication management; secondly, to develop monitoring and evaluation tools aimed at, on one

¹ Ph.D. thesis supervised by Professor Alice Cati (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan).

hand, assessing the effectiveness of communication actions by film enterprises; and on the other, improving them by establishing self-assessment tools that promote full awareness of the sustainability culture; in the end, to contribute to the development of a new generation of professionals and audiences in the film industry who are fully aware of “green” issues.

The methodological framework adopted will be a multi-phase process based on the analysis of the communication strategies of festivals, a subsequent socio-ethnographic investigation of selected case studies, and web and social media research.

Initially, the project involved a systematization of Italian and English literature, focusing on academic articles, scientific texts, and key reports in this field, drawn from the following databases: Web of Science; JSTOR; ProQuest Arts & Humanities; Scopus, FIAF; Sage; Opac Unicatt; WorldCat Utrecht University. A wide range of results emerged, leading to a selection process that narrowed the material down to 165 contributions, forming two literature review frameworks focused on the project’s two major themes. Following the selection of primary sources, a mapping of the current state of film festivals in Italy and across Europe was conducted, with particular reference to the Netherlands—a country of interest due to its known challenges in connecting local cinema with the concept of environmental sustainability.

The creation of a festival database—proposed here for the first time—aimed to reconstruct the network of currently active film festivals in the two countries, based on criteria such as geographic location, event mission, characteristic film genre, and the size of the festival. A total of 80 film festivals were mapped in the Netherlands, still active as of 2025, compared to 172 in Italy during the monitoring period of 2023–2025.

From this broad corpus, two semantic maps were created to identify a sub-sample of European festivals to focus on, working along two directions: on the one hand, explicitly green-themed

festivals (e.g., CinemAmbiente in Turin) were deliberately excluded; on the other, attention was placed on a smaller group of festivals (45 in Italy, 20 in the Netherlands) whose missions referenced sustainable festival policies, with particular emphasis on small-to-medium-sized festivals—those in continuous growth.

Based on the well-known distinction between “business-oriented” and “audience-oriented” festivals (Peranson 2008), the project focused on the latter—festivals geared toward their audiences and thus generally developing—rather than A-list festivals (e.g., the Venice Biennale), which are business-focused and already well established globally.

This selection process ultimately led to the identification of two case studies most aligned with the research question: the Lago Film Fest (Riviera del Lago, Treviso, Italy) and the Leiden International Film Festival (Leiden, South Holland, Netherlands), both promoters of independent cinema.

In addition to the literature review and case study analysis, it was deemed appropriate to integrate a research methodology centred on social listening (Galli 2018)—a valuable tool for marketing professionals and research institutes to understand online discourse around specific topics and to formulate strategic actions.

In this study, the methodology was provided by Blogmeter, a Milan-based research institute and project partner. Its Social Suite platform includes several components designed to listen to online discussions through sentiment analysis and to assess the influence of influencers and opinion leaders across sectors. This tool enabled a deeper exploration of digital discourse surrounding the European cinematic landscape. More specifically, it allowed for the collection of public opinions regarding the two case studies, with the ultimate goal of enriching the understanding of the relationship between film festivals and sustainability communication—complementing data already gathered through qualitative investigations (structured interviews and life stories) conducted on-site at the two festivals in 2024.

Space, discourse, practice: these are the keywords used to explore the dimension of film events, viewing the festival event as a network of social discourses, spaces, actors, practices, and rituals related to environmental sustainability.

Based on these considerations, the research aimed to reconstruct a new kind of ecological practice, offering an alternative perspective to the typical managerial focus of festivals on environmental matters (such as recycling, green transportation, energy saving, etc.). Instead, it seeks to highlight a deeper level: the meaning of ecological practice for festival audiences, as interpreted through the communication strategies employed by the management teams of European film festivals.

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The Historical Enterprise

Stories and Memories of Industrial Labor in Fvg: A Protocol for Audiovisual and Multimedia Practice

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Situated at the intersection of film and media studies, storytelling, and digital humanities, and financed by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*, PNRR) as part of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme, this thesis examines and analyses the north-eastern Italian region of Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) as a living archive and heritage of labour, creativity, and social and industrial transformation. It departs from a starting question that guided the project throughout the research: can the story of a territory and its community be told through its industrial heritage and the audiovisual memory of work, and if so, how might this be achieved through contemporary tools of preservation, storytelling, multimedia, and digital engagement? To address it, the project designs, implements, and evaluates what it terms a protocol of intervention *on* the audiovisual and *through* the multimedia, a key dual formulation that captures its core ambition to act both upon archival materials, through mapping, recovery, digitization, and cataloguing, and through multimedia practices that reinterpret and return those materials to their original community as well as to future research with-

in contemporary modes of narration, exhibition, and digital access.

The research concentrates on the industrial development of the FVG region within the broader Italian context, from the early twentieth century to the post-war decades. Emanuele Felice's account of Italian economic growth has been a key starting point for the understanding of the country's industrial heritage. Three economical historical phases structure the first steps of research: the emergence of early capitalist production and mechanization (1901–1915), the crisis and reconversion of industry between the two wars (1918–1939), and the post-war reconstruction and expansion (1944–1973), during which the FVG region actually consolidated its industrial identity and the country entered what Felice calls its "economic miracle." Across the provinces of Udine, Pordenone, Gorizia, and Trieste, the project seeks a key goal: to reactivate its past, returning industrial heritage to the communities that generated it and reframing the audiovisual archive as a dynamic and living system of relation between people, materials and histories, instead of functioning as a static archival repository.

¹ Ph.D supervised by professor Mariapia Comand (University of Udine). Date of discussion: May 19, 2026.

The first contribution of this project is infra-structural. Through extensive fieldwork across public institutions, private foundations, company archives, as well as local holdings, the project managed to assemble and catalogue a corpus of 516 audiovisual items dispersed across 22 archives, producing the first systematic mapping of materials connected to the industrial memory of FVG, which the project called the *Mappa del Lavoro*, or Map of Labour. This was a key aspect of the research, because no comparable survey on industrial heritage existed before at the national or regional level. The mapped materials span 8mm and Super8 amateur films, 16mm and 35mm industrial productions, television documentaries, promotional reels, and audiovisual interviews, collected across corporate, institutional, trade-union, broadcast, and family contexts and across sectors from metallurgy and chemicals to food, textiles, as well as wood industries. These materials reach from the Fascist period through the boom to the neoliberal restructuring of the late twentieth century, as a matter of fact testifying to the multiplicity of voices and technical forms through which industry was recorded and imagined, proving the richness of the region's industrial heritage.

These heterogeneous materials were read and analysed as dispositifs that actively and willingly construct visibility. The analysis draws on "useful" and industrial cinema, on Acland and Wason's, and Hediger and Vonderau's accounts of the productivity of media, together with Elsaesser's attention to commissioning, occasion, and addressee (Auftrag, Anlass, Adressat) as the circumstances that shape industrial film. It frames the corpus through what Česálková and Dotto term "work-motivated films," which offer both a representation of and a social guidance to the working world and anchor public conceptions of labour to particular senses of place. This allows distinct typologies of sponsored, corporate, amateur films to be analysed together without flattening their production contexts and their meaning, foregrounding the strategies through which

labour was rendered intelligible, desirable, and a matter of belonging for the communities.

From a methodological point of view, the thesis crosses historical and archival research, ethnographic and oral-history fieldwork, and digital humanities practices of geomapping, data visualization, and digital storytelling, integrating perspectives from production studies as well as memory studies. Driving the whole is an ethics of care, which couldn't be ignored: drawing on the codes of ICOM, the Museums Association, and the Peabody Museum, the project articulates six principles of ethical stewardship: responsibility, transparency, repatriation, cultural sensitivity, collaboration, and shared authority, and tests them against the absence of any Italian national framework for the treatment of audio and visual sources, both from the Ministry of Culture and from archives across the Italian territory. Theories of brand heritage and storytelling further inform the creation of new audiovisual materials, ensuring that each enterprise is treated as a precise historically layered subject shaped by continuity, memory, heritage, and collective experience.

Two case studies anchor the inquiry. The Chiozza starch factory, founded at Perteole in 1865 by the chemist Luigi Chiozza, a figure connected to Pasteur and to European scientific networks, exemplifies the recovery of intangible industrial heritage: from the postwar and economical miracle years, through nineteen new interviews with former workers and key political figures from those years, two conducted in the Friulano language, alongside twelve donated audiotapes of recordings from the 1980s and 1990s. Here the collective trauma of the factory's closure emerges, read through Sturken and the notion of ontological security as a process by which a community refounds itself through memory. The Danieli private archive, by contrast, offers the rare case of a self-taught industrial entrepreneur who was also both amateur filmmaker and archivist; its 111 items, catalogued for the first time according to the European EN 15907 and EN

15744 standards, reveal the embedded relationship between industrial heritage and the various technologies of its visual recording.

Restitution is the project's concluding movement and one of its most tangible outcomes. The documentary *La memoria del riso*, directed by Federico Ercoli and first presented at Palazzo Economo in Trieste, transforms the Chiozza testimonies into a public narrative form, converting what Aleida Assmann calls storage memory into functional memory. A forthcoming site-specific exhibition within the restored factory extends this work into space, staging four thematic rooms that, through Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, Lefebvre's social production of space, and Bennett's exhibitionary complex, turn the industrial site itself into an arena where community, history, and identity converge.

The thesis thus offers both a substantive account of one region's filmed industrial past and a transferable contribution, which is the second most tangible outcome of the project: a replicable protocol for the identification of heritage, mapping of sources, selection of case studies, preservation and creation of materials, and its restitution, designed for application well beyond FVG, to comparable industrial legacies of other regions, and, potentially, elsewhere. In treating the industrial enterprise as a producer of audiovisual history rather than merely its subject, the project repositions audiovisual memory and industrial heritage as a living resource for historical research, education, and community engagement, and the archive as a space of dialogue.

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L'improvisation à l'ère des outils numériques

Intensification du régime et requalification de ses catégories dans le cinéma d'Abdellatif Kechiche

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Chez Abdellatif Kechiche, le film ne se fabrique pas comme on exécute un plan. Le scénario existe, souvent très précisément écrit, mais le plateau n'a pas vocation à le mettre en œuvre: il a vocation à l'éprouver. Le texte y est confronté au vivant, c'est-à-dire au jeu des comédiens, à leur appropriation, à ce qui peut émerger d'eux lorsqu'on les met en situation de pouvoir habiter une scène plutôt que de la rendre. Ce que cherche Kechiche est moins une exécution exacte qu'une présence corporelle, une manifestation du personnage à travers des micro-variations de jeu, des inflexions de voix, des états de corps. Son cinéma fait place à l'ambiance, à la densité sensorielle de l'instant, à tout ce qui circule en marge de l'action principale. Cette ouverture appelle des conditions techniques particulières: un appareillage qui se met au service du comédien plutôt que l'inverse, un dispositif souple, mobile, capable de capter l'invention à mesure qu'elle s'opère.

Or ce trait inscrit son cinéma dans la filiation des pratiques et des formes improvisées historiques. Toutefois, sa pratique s'en distingue en

cela qu'elle met en œuvre ces principes dans un autre régime matériel. Son cinéma a abandonné les supports analogiques pour un dispositif entièrement numérique dont il exploite, avec une intensité rare, plusieurs propriétés techniques caractéristiques: durées d'enregistrement étendues, baisse du coût marginal de la prise, légèreté des appareils, dispositifs multica-méra, visualisation immédiate des rushes, montage non linéaire, versionnage des prises et des séquences. La "durée numérique"—ces prises longues et répétées qui donnent lieu à une accumulation considérable de matière—constitue le pilier de son approche exploratoire et l'organe principal d'une attitude de recherche maintenue à toutes les étapes de la fabrication.

Or ces deux faits, mis côte à côte, ne vont pas de soi. D'un côté, l'inscription manifeste de Kechiche dans l'histoire des pratiques improvisées; de l'autre, un régime technique qui paraît contredire cette inscription, puisque les outils numériques renforcent généralement les puissances de contrôle. Comment alors penser une pratique qui mobilise les ressources d'un contrôle accru pour

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porter à une intensité inédite des principes traditionnellement associés à l'ouverture, à l'imprévisible, à l'invention dans l'instant ? Cette tension est d'autant plus difficile à dénouer que Kechiche lui-même résiste à l'étiquette d'improvisateur. Interrogé sur la part d'improvisation dans ses films, il en rappelle aussitôt la dimension écrite, dirigée, hiérarchisée. Ses collaborateurs vont dans le même sens, soulignant que tout, chez lui, est très précisément cadré, même quand cela n'en a pas l'air à l'écran. Avant même de pouvoir interroger l'effet des outils numériques sur la pratique kechichienne, il faut donc résoudre une difficulté préalable: la catégorie d'improvisation ne lui est nullement attribuable d'emblée.

Reste alors à savoir si l'improvisation, à l'ère des outils numériques, relève encore d'une simple variation interne d'un régime déjà constitué, ou si l'intensification de ses principes oblige à en requalifier plus profondément le fonctionnement. La lecture défendue est continuiste, mais nuancée. Kechiche s'inscrit bien dans le régime improvisé historique, dont il réactive les principes fondamentaux: sa pratique réactive avec une netteté particulière la tension constitutive des pratiques improvisées, dans laquelle la spontanéité ne peut advenir sans contrôle—l'écriture la plus structurée pouvant constituer le cadre même de l'ouverture la plus large, la direction la plus serrée pouvant fonctionner comme la condition de possibilité de la spontanéité, et l'autorité auctoriale la plus centrale pouvant se déployer à travers la pluralisation des apports collectifs plutôt qu'à leur encontre. Loin de relâcher cette tension, les outils numériques l'intensifient. Ils ne font pas pencher le geste créatif d'un côté ou de l'autre, mais reconfigurent leur rapport: le surcroît de maîtrise technique permet précisément au cinéaste de maintenir plus longtemps, et plus largement, l'ouverture du processus.

Cette intensification se traduit par un déplacement caractéristique du contrôle vers l'amont des conditions d'émergence—préparation du corps, disponibilité matérielle du plateau, prolongement des prises—et vers l'aval de la fixa-

tion—montage non linéaire, multiplication des versions, ajournement de la décision finale. Ainsi, le tournage devient un espace d'exploration heuristique élargi, tandis que la postproduction un espace de recherche où la forme continue de se chercher entre exploration ouverte et fixation différée. Le contrôle ne se relâche donc pas: il change de fonction, rendant possible une ouverture accrue de la recherche.

Cette intensification n'est cependant pas sans effets sur les catégories par lesquelles l'improvisation se laisse traditionnellement penser—l'accident, la décision et l'invention. L'accident cesse d'être seulement l'irruption d'un dehors imprévisible pour devenir une possibilité dont les conditions de survenue peuvent être méthodiquement entretenues ouvertes—la sérendipité devient un principe organisé d'exploration. La décision, elle, cesse d'être un acte ponctuel et souverain de clôture pour se redistribuer comme opération progressive de décantation, étalée entre plusieurs seuils du processus. Tandis que l'invention, elle-même, quitte le statut d'événement local pour désigner un mode de fabrication continue où la forme se reconfigure à même la matière. Au-delà d'un certain seuil, l'augmentation quantitative des outils numériques cesse d'être seulement additive et commence à produire des effets qualitatifs sur les catégories. L'improvisation tend alors à ne plus se définir prioritairement comme surgissement situé au sein d'un processus par ailleurs stabilisé, mais comme le maintien d'un milieu de formation suffisamment ouvert et réversible pour que la forme puisse continuer de croître, de se redistribuer, de se recomposer. À l'horizon de la pratique kechichienne se dessine ainsi la possibilité d'un autre régime de fabrication—organique plutôt qu'événementiel—dans lequel le film ne s'exécute plus selon un enchaînement d'étapes nettement séparées mais émerge d'un travail continu de croissance.

L'enjeu de la thèse déborde finalement le seul cas étudié. Les tensions qu'exacerbe la pratique de Kechiche—entre planification et ouverture, décision et ajournement, captation et recompo-

sition, tournage et montage—touchent en réalité à des transformations qui concernent l'ensemble des régimes contemporains de création cinématographique, qu'ils se reconnaissent ou non comme improvisés. La pratique kechichienne fonctionne en ce sens comme un cas-limite révélateur: elle suggère, à travers son exacerbation propre, que la flexibilité des outils numériques ne fait pas seulement gagner en liberté certaines pratiques particulières, mais favorise plus généralement un déplacement du cinéma vers des processus de fabrication plus réversibles et plus circulaires, où la forme demeure plus longtemps ouverte à sa propre reconfiguration. C'est cette hypothèse plus large qui donne à l'étude des films de Kechiche sa pleine portée théorique: sous cet angle, le recours aux outils numériques tendrait à favoriser, pour toute création cinématographique, un régime de fabrication plus organique, dans lequel l'œuvre procéderait moins de l'application linéaire d'un projet préalable que d'une élaboration au contact d'une matière mieux maintenue disponible.

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Jordan Lord is a filmmaker, writer, and artist whose work addresses the relationships between historical and emotional debts; framing and support; access, disability, and documentary. Their films have been shown at festivals and venues including New York Film Festival, MoMA Doc Fortnight, Walker Art Center, Union Docs, CIFF, and Dokufest. They have presented solo exhibitions at Piper Keys, Artists Space, Squeaky Wheel, and LUX. They are an Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at Colorado College.

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Thomas Rapenne est docteur en études cinématographiques sous la codirection d'André Gaudreault, à l'Université de Montréal, et de Simon Daniellou, à l'Université Rennes 2. Ses recherches doctorales interrogent la pratique des techniques cinématographiques numériques chez le cinéaste franco-tunisien Abdellatif Kechiche et, à travers ce cas d'étude, les manières dont les outils numériques contemporains prolongent et reconfigurent les pratiques de l'improvisation au cinéma. Sa thèse est réalisée dans le cadre du partenariat international TECHNÈS sur les techniques et les technologies du cinéma. Il est également chargé de cours à l'Université de Montréal et auxiliaire de recherche au sein du Laboratoire CinéMédias de l'Université de Montréal.

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JOSEPHINE SALES

Proceeding somewhere between rehearsal and emergency, Josephine Sales works across moving image, sculpture, and performance. Recent projects use sound, light, frequencies, projection, and pre-existing forms to follow entry, exit, delay, and refusal within systems built to accumulate value through the organization of time. Sales is based in New York City.

PAVITRA SUNDAR

Pavitra Sundar is Professor of Literature and Director of Cinema and Media Studies at Hamilton College, where she teaches courses on film, literature, and sound with a focus on South Asia. Her monograph *Listening with a Feminist Ear* (University of Michigan Press, 2023) was long-listed for the Kraszna-Krausz Moving Image Book Award and won honorable mention for the MLA Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for South Asian Studies. She also co-edited *Thinking with an Accent* (University of California Press, 2023), winner of the ACLA René Wellek Prize for Best Edited Collection.