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Access Intimacy in Media Accessibility: The Audio Description of *Where Memory Ends*

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Abstract

Using my documentary *Where Memory Ends* (2022) as a case study, this article tracks the journey from the standard audio description offered by the production company to the alternative approach I ended up using. An initial section on standard, compliance-based access currently implemented in Spain and the UK is followed by a discussion on alternative media access viewed from the wide lens of disability justice. This section draws on disability studies to explore the notion of disability that underpins standard and alternative media access. It focuses on the discrimination suffered by disabled people in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it follows the link between participation, representation and (alternative) media access. The second part of the article presents the notion of access intimacy as it applies to the alternative audio described version of *Where Memory Ends*, looking at how it can be built into media accessibility research, practice and training, not as an obligation, but as a socially and politically transformative form of human connection.

Key words: ableism, access intimacy, alternative media accessibility, disability justice, standard access.

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Introduction

In 2022, after 10 years of hard work, I finished my first feature-length documentary, *Where Memory Ends* (Romero-Fresco, 2022). The film paints a portrait of Hispanist Ian Gibson, official biographer of poet Federico García Lorca, painter Salvador Dalí and filmmaker Luis Buñuel, and a key figure in the struggle to keep Spain's recent historical memory alive. It is a journey to Las Hurdes, where Buñuel made his landmark film *Land Without Bread* (1933) and to Granada, where Ian is closer than ever to finding Lorca's remains. The film premiered at the London Spanish Film Festival in 2022, which was followed by screenings at the Seminci Festival in Spain and other venues. None of these screenings had accessible subtitles or audio description (AD). In February 2023, my colleague María José García Vizcaíno asked me to screen an AD version at Montclair State University (New Jersey), where she works. Surtsey Films, the producer and distributor of the film, suggested that we use an English translation of the Spanish AD version that they had commissioned to an access provider to fulfil contractual obligations with the main film funding body in Spain. I never knew about this Spanish AD, which was done as per the official Spanish guidelines in an objective style that was very far from what I had in mind for the film. Prompted by María José García Vizcaíno, I produced an alternative version in collaboration with audio describer Louise Fryer and a cast of voice talents. This is the version that we ended up showing at Montclair State University.

Using this case study as an example, this article tracks the journey from standard access, which may sometimes be treated as a transaction, to an alternative approach that foregrounds the notion of access intimacy and (re)considers how we relate to one another. Section 1 focuses on standard media access as applied in Spain and, more specifically, in the first AD externally produced for Where Memory Ends. It also discusses the new Ofcom guidelines in the UK, which open the door to creative and alternative forms of access. Section 2 draws on disability studies scholars such as Tanya Titchkosky, Georgina Kleege and Aimi Hamraie to explore the notion of disability that underpins alternative media access. Focusing on the discrimination suffered by disabled people in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic, it follows the link between participation, representation and (alternative) media access. Finally, sections 3–5 present the notion of access intimacy as it applies to the alternative AD version of Where Memory Ends and look at access not as an obligation but as a socially and politically transformative form of human connection.

1. Standard Access

The distance between the AD that I was offered and the one that I decided to produce illustrates the current gap, at least in Spain, between the film industry and the translation/access industry, in other words, how far Spain is from adopting an accessible filmmaking approach (Romero-Fresco, 2019). In the Spanish film industry, access is not normally regarded as a chance to reach new audiences or a creative opportunity but as an obligation. Since 2020, one of the requirements for films to be eligible for funding by the Ministry of Culture is to have officially- validated "special subtitling and audio description as per the current applicable standard" (BOE, 2020, p. 14). As confirmed by CREA, one of

the leading associations of film directors in Spain, filmmakers are not usually involved in, and often not even aware of, the production of the accessible versions of their films. It is typically the production or distribution companies that contact access service providers to ask them for subtitles and AD. Sadly, as confirmed by Ramiro Ledo, co-founder of Numax, one of the leading independent cinemas in Spain and a member of the EU-funded Europa Cinemas network, these accessible versions do not normally reach the cinemas. The legal obligation lies in the production of accessible versions, but it does not extend to cinema exhibition. As a result, and with the exception of special events (Aransbur, 2022), none of the 3,521 cinemas currently showing films in Spain screens versions with accessible subtitles or AD. Depending on the year, the average number of films made in Spain ranges from 225 to 325 (Orús, 2023), which means that hundreds of accessible versions are produced every year without ever reaching the (cinema) audience. This is a clear example of access as a box-ticking exercise (Hayden, 2021; Chamarette, 2021), a transaction devoid of human connection. It is access in the passive voice, as what matters is the action (producing accessibility), but not how (or even whether or not) it is received by the users.

Some of these accessible versions may, however, reach streaming platforms and TV channels, but only if they are officially validated by the CESyA (Centro Español del Subtitulado y la Audiodescripción), the official reference centre for audiovisual accessibility in Spain. The CESyA assesses accessible versions against the official Spanish standard for subtitling and AD (AENOR, 2012 and 2005, respectively) and its newly published parameters and metrics for quality assessment in audiovisual accessibility (CESyA, 2023). Media accessibility is defined here as "the condition that audiovisual media must fulfil to be comprehensible and usable for people with sensory disabilities" (CESyA, 2023, p. 11). These guidelines focus on facilitating comprehension and compensation (providing deaf and blind users with the information that they are missing) through objective and accurate descriptions, which, in this regard, is in line with international guidelines for both subtitling and AD (ITC, 2000; Snyder, 2010; Netflix, 2022). There is no mention of creativity and no reference to the artistic potential of access as it is applied to audiovisual works of art.

Media access is considered a solution to a problem, a technique whose result (typically subtitles, AD or sign language interpreting) is tacked on to an audiovisual work once it is finished. This functional view of access means that it can be implemented as procedural knowledge, and it can be measured, as shown by the formulas and criteria with which the CESyA (2023) assesses every accessible version that receives public funding in Spain (see Figures 1–4):

Figure 1

Formula to Assess Subtitling Quality

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{Total_{Subs}} Puntuación\ Sub_i}{Total_{Subs}} x\ 100 = calidad\%$$

Source: CESyA (2023, p. 42).

Figure 2

Formula to Assess AD Quality

$$CCA = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{Total_{ADs}} Puntuación\ AD_i}{Total_{ADs}} x\ 100 = calidad\%$$

Source: CESyA (2023, p. 71).

Figure 3

Potential Issues in Subtitling

Source: (CESyA 2023, p. 41).

Figure 4

Potential Issues in AD

Source: CESyA (2023, pp. 69-70).

Every single subtitle or audio described segment in a film is given a score based on whether or not they are found to have issues regarding dialogue, sound effects, music and songs in subtitling and script, delivery, translation and audio in AD. These issues are then assigned to four levels of severity.

To mention one example, conveying a subjective point of view in AD is scored as a serious error (non-conformity level 4), which may result in a low final score for the AD version of the film.

Indeed, the official subtitling and AD standards in Spain clarify that descriptions must be provided with a neutral tone and that subjective interpretation is not allowed (AENOR, 2005, 2012). This may be seen, again, as another form of access in the passive voice: what matters is the action (in this case, conveying the content that the users may be missing due to their disability according to a series of parameters), but not the agent, who must remain hidden. To some extent, this contributes to dehumanising access (which is no longer the relation between the person who makes the access and the one/s who receive/s it) and, more importantly, to present it as unquestionable. Viewers can ascribe the perceived merits or flaws of a film to filmmakers and to the creative team, who are responsible for their artistic choices. Access is, however, presented as a neutral, unauthored layer laid on top. It is "an unassailable truth" (Kleege, 2018, p. 101) invested with "the authority that speaks from out of nowhere" (Hayden, 2022), akin to the voice of god (Antrobus, 2019). This makes it conveniently unquestionable. After all, it is not easy to disagree with something when you don't know who you are disagreeing with.

Many authors from different areas, such as disability studies and translation studies, have criticised this emphasis on objectivity, considering it neither desirable nor possible (Thompson, 2018; Kleege, 2018; Fryer, 2018). A case in point is provided by the Spanish guidelines, which advise audio describers to "highlight the most salient visual aspects to be described, avoiding personal interpretations" (CESyA, 2023, p. 66). This places describers in an impossible situation, as identifying salient visual aspects necessarily requires making a (personal) judgment call. While there are different degrees of subjectivity, and it is only normal that users accustomed to neutral descriptions may not favour overly interpretative descriptions, recent research has shown a positive reception of subjective descriptions in film (Mazur & Chmiel, 2012; Ramos, 2016; Walczak & Fryer, 2017).

As will be discussed in the next section, this move towards what may be called alternative media access (Romero-Fresco & Dangerfield, 2022) has been driven chiefly by innovative access practices in the scenic arts, perhaps because there are often fewer regulatory requirements than in audiovisual access and because makers and users often share the same space, which foregrounds the relational dimension of access as a form of human connection. Alternative media access has also been promoted by a new emerging wave of disabled artists who not only integrate access from inception but also seek to provide an alternative to what they see as ableist mainstream access (Ginsburg & Ruby Rich, 2022).

Interestingly, this new take on access may be finding its way, if only partially, into some mainstream outlets. This is shown in the consultation initiated by Ofcom (the official communications regulator in the UK) in September 2023 to update its official guidelines. Many of the changes proposed by Ofcom are based on user research provided by the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers. One of the main conclusions of this study is that most disabled people use access not only for entertainment and relaxation but also to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation and to form

connections with others (RiDC, 2024, p. 16). This is relevant to the notions of alternative access and especially access intimacy developed below in this article. Furthermore, in its proposed new guidelines, Ofcom (2023, p. 5) argues that a requirement-heavy, one-size-fits-all approach is "no longer viable" and that in order to be future-proof and have an actual impact on society, guidelines must be flexible and account for different types of users and alternative approaches beyond traditional access practices. The new proposed guidelines state that access is "not only about the provision of information, but about ensuring audiences' enjoyment of the programme" (Ofcom, 2023, p. 45). Instead of considering access as a technique, the new guidelines view it as a potentially creative endeavour and encourage subtitlers to "use their creativity to capture the essence of sound effects" (Ofcom, 2023, p. 26). They also replace the reference to using an impersonal style in AD with an explicit encouragement for audio describers to consider different approaches, including subjective ones, taking account of audiences' preferences and programme genres (Ofcom, 2023, p. 28). For Ofcom, one of the keys to ensuring this forward-looking approach is to consider accessibility issues early in the content production process (accessible filmmaking), which may be done by "including content accessibility experts in productions" (Ofcom, 2023, p. 18).

The Spanish Film Academy is beginning to take steps in this direction in Spain. Following the organisation of two events in 2022 and 2023 on accessibility and diversity in film, the Academy asked me to set up a training course for access coordinators and a code of good access practice. The aim is to introduce a new professional figure in the Spanish film industry who can liaise between the creative team and the access/translation experts and consider access issues from inception. As promising as this may sound, it also poses a problem. As can be seen in the accessible filmmaking database compiled by the GALMA research group (Tendero et al., 2023), most filmmakers who consider access/translation from inception end up resorting to non-standard and often creative practices. Indeed, many of the Spanish filmmakers who attended the events on accessibility organised by the Academy have contacted me to help them produce creative subtitles or first-person ADs. They are creative professionals, so it follows that some of them may want to explore the creative possibilities of access beyond standard guidelines and produce accessible versions that suit the style and vision of their films. Yet, how will these accessible versions be screened if they need to be approved by the CESyA as per the official access guidelines? This means that Spain is not only producing hundreds of standard accessible film versions a year that are not screened in the cinema, as discussed above, but also some innovative and artistic accessible versions that may not be screened anywhere.

The drive to change this may come from abroad, from new guidelines such as the ones proposed by Ofcom and especially from the work of (critical) disability studies scholars (Tanya Titchkosky, Aimi Hamraie, Mia Mingus, Georgina Kleege, etc) and disabled artists (Christine Sun Kim, Carmen Papalia, Jenny Sealey, Alison O'Daniel, etc) who are pushing for new approaches and asking us to reconsider what we think about access and, more importantly, about disability.

2. Alternative Media Access and Disability Justice

Now that access has consolidated as a key issue in society and has made its way into national and international legislation, this may be an appropriate time to reflect on what this access looks like and the ideas underpinning it. Tanya Titchkosky (2011, p. 15) urges us to engage in a politics of wondering, which requires, firstly, a degree of pause that can allow for a "restless reflexive return to what has come before" so as to then consider other possible forms of access:

> Pausing allows us to face what is already said and done in the name of access, not in order to evaluate efficacy, but instead to uncover the sensibility and the meaning that lie there. (…) Proceeding with such theorizing is political in that it necessarily remakes the assumed clarity of what is already done and said into a place of questions where doubt can open on to new horizons of possibility. (Titchkosky, 2011, p. x).

The aim of this reflexive return is not to assess whether or not access works: standard access has been shown to work very well for many users in different contexts. The aim is rather to reflect on the notions, especially the notion of disability, that access is built on. In other words, "we need to perceive how we have already imagined who or what is in need of access" (Titchkosky, 2021). Along the same lines, although in relation to blindness and AD, Kleege (2018, p. 3) urges us to "scrutinize ideas about blindness that shape the image of the intended audience for these services". For her, blindness is usually thought of as something that "takes away from or even destroys identity" (Kleege, 2018, p. 9), which means that, in a world made largely by and for sighted people, the blind person is almost exclusively defined as someone who cannot see. This has an impact on access, which is usually made by sighted experts "from the perspective of someone looking at flawed eyes from the outside" (Kleege, 2018, p. 6). Here is where compensation and objectivity come into play. The task of the audio describer is to provide an accurate description of the images in a film (objectivity) to fill in the gaps caused by blindness (compensation) and to bring the blind users' comprehension as close as possible to that of the sighted audience. It thus follows that the ultimate goal of media access is to replicate the experience of the non-disabled viewer, even though this is both impossible (there is no one single non-disabled experience) and highly questionable (it denies the lived experience of disabled people and the different ways in which they can choose, or be able, to experience art). More importantly, behind this view of media access as compensation lurks the assumption, "Wouldn't you rather access the original?" (Branson, 2023, p. 189), which is akin to asking, "Wouldn't you rather be 'normal'?" (McRuer, 2006, p. 9)

In contrast, many of the disabled scholars and artists who are currently engaging with alternative and creative access practices remind us that, far from being seen as a deficit or lack of function, disability can find expression in art; that it can be made to matter as a space for creation where the relationships between disabled and non/disabled people are reconsidered and reimagined. For this to happen, though, it is important to move away from the idea of media access as a technique or a problem-solving issue tacked on at the end of the audiovisual creation process, with disabled people as passive and grateful recipients. This involves acknowledging that "access for all" may be valid as a policy rhetoric or an aspiration, but it is a path paved with failure (Ellcessor, 2016), as users have

different access needs and we cannot cater for them all at all times. Far from being a pessimistic view, access is repositioned here as a promise and a form of hope (Lazard, 2019) or, as put by Hamraie (2016, p. 267), "a long-term commitment to do better". It is a two-way process of trial and error that engages disabled and non-disabled people in conversation (Romero-Fresco & Dangerfield, 2022), willing to address the following three questions: Who is still excluded? Who gets to create and decide? Where is my position in all of this?

In other words, if we want to pause to consider how media access has been built and especially to imagine new possibilities, we may need to use a wide lens and look at the politics of media access as an act of resistance against the ableism that pervades our society. A fruitful theoretical framework to do this is disability justice, whose principles underpin a lot of the work that is currently being undertaken by many of the scholars and artists mentioned in this article.

Disability justice (Berne et al., 2018) is a social justice movement that examines disability and ableism as they relate to other forms of oppression and identity, such as race, class and gender. Ableism is "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as perfect and species-typical, and therefore essential and fully human" (Campbell, 2009, p. 5). It is a form of discrimination that casts disability as "a diminished state of being human" (Campbell, 2009) and that that cuts across society impacting on everyone, as it dictates what is normal and what is not, in other words, how bodies and minds should function against a mythical norm (an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability). As developed by the Disability Justice Collective in 2005, disability justice is based on ten principles, two of which, leadership by the most impacted and collective access, will be touched upon in this paper, as they are useful to make the connection between ableism in a wide sense and media accessibility.

A particularly painful case of ableism in contemporary society is the discrimination of disabled people during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK, as reported by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2021), six in ten of those killed by COVID-19 between 2 March and 14 July 2020 were disabled people, despite making up between 18%–22% of the UK population. In a report entitled "As if expendable", Amnesty International (2020) condemned the unlawful use of DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) forms for some people with learning disabilities during the pandemic, which prevented them from getting access to hospital care and treatment, causing their deaths. The UK government used the term "underlying health conditions" to explain why certain groups, including disabled people, could be expected to be hit harder by the pandemic or to be less prioritised in terms of health support. This has been described as "social murder" (Abasi, 2021) or as a form of eugenics, where "human worth is allocated and denied according to ableist notions of contribution" (Abrams & Abbot, 2020), that is, according to who is productive in a neoliberal sense and who is not.

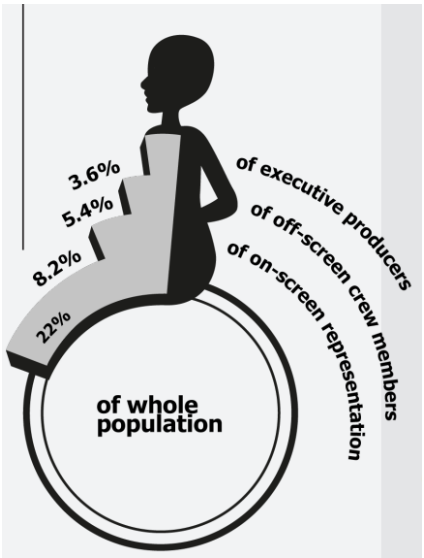
In response, in 2021, a group of disabled and non-disabled professionals working in the UK audiovisual industry set up Underlying Health Condition (UHC), a collective movement to fight ableism in the audiovisual sector. In their first report, they note that the deadly ableism at work

during the pandemic may be explained, amongst other reasons, by the so-called disability perception gap, that is, the distance between the reality of disabled people's lives and the public's understanding. The rationale is that non-disabled people are more likely to have prejudice and discrimination against disabled people if they are not familiar with their experiences and do not share spaces with them. The UHC report (2021) reminds us that the audiovisual industry has a duty to represent who we are as people and, since it has a great deal of influence on how we perceive society, it can increase the disability perception gap. Detecting and fighting ableism in the audiovisual industry is thus essential, and there seems to be a long way to go.

A useful way to look at this issue is to focus on participation, representation and access, that is, the role that disabled people play behind the camera, on-screen and as consumers of storytelling. When it comes to participation, as shown in Figure 5, the "leadership by the most impacted" promoted by disability justice is far from reality, as disabled people are significantly underrepresented in the audiovisual industry when it comes to off-screen roles such as executive producers or crew members. As highlighted by Ofcom (2023) in its latest report, this also applies to the media access industry, which is still largely made up of non-disabled professionals who provide access to films made by non-disabled directors for disabled audiences.

Figure 5

Percentage of Disabled People Working On- and Of-Screen as Compared to the Disabled Population in the UK



Source: UHC (2021, p. 4).

Representation is another area that is rife with ableism, both in the UK (see Figure 5) and in the US, where disabled people make up over 25% of the population and yet only 2.5% of characters were depicted with a disability over the past ten years (Smith et al., 2017). To make matters worse, only 0.5% of the characters with disabilities in the US have a speaking role (Woodburn & Kopić, 2016), not

to mention that, when they are important, they are often portrayed in stereotypical and harmful ways.

This brings us to media access. Its standard version can often have ableist elements (lack of participation of disabled people, primacy of the non-disabled experience, etc.), whereas, as noted in the UHC report (2021), when applied in an alternative form, it can actively resist ableism. A very similar approach is adopted by Documentary Filmmakers with Disabilities (FWD-Doc, 2021), who structure their "Toolkit for Inclusion & Accessibility" in film around the same three axes as the UHC report: participation, representation and access. In other words, looking at media access through a wide lens forces us to take our sight off the subtitles and AD for a moment and to consider how media access is connected to an overall struggle against ableism and against the fatal impact that it is having on society. This leads us back to the question of, "What kind of access can we use to fight this fight?"

Let us start from what it cannot be. It cannot be a conservative approach to access that aims to "include the disenfranchised in an existing world" (Giles, 2018). This is, for the American deafblind poet John Lee Clark (2021), what standard access often does with its insistence on objectivity and accuracy, which he considers as a commitment to the status quo, that is, describing the world exactly as it is, while leaving it untouched. For Caroline Lazard (2019), this approach is "access as accommodation" and adds: "We have to be grateful to join the party. Well, your party sucks". Lazard's remark resonates with Martin Luther King's words about racial integration ("We have fought hard and long for integration (…), but I've come to believe we're integrating into a burning house"), reminding us of the intersectionality that lies at the core of disability justice, where disability and ableism are unavoidably related to other forms of oppression, such as racism.

As noted by disability justice activist Mia Mingus (2018), getting a seat at someone else's table (that is, including the disenfranchised in an existing world) is not enough:

> I don't just want us to get a seat at someone else's table, I want us to be able to build something more magnificent than a table, together with our accomplices. I want us to be able to be understood and to be able to take part in principled struggle together—to be able to be human together. Not just placated or politely listened to.

To confront ableism, we need a radical approach to access. Mingus (2018) describes it as "liberatory access", that is, one that works actively to "transform the conditions that created that inaccessibility in the first place". Others, such as researcher Aimi Hamraie (2022), art critic Emily Watlington (2019) or artist Carmen Papalia (2019), refer to this approach as "radical access". This has been taken up by arts institutions and organisations all over the world. A good example is Melbourne Fringe (2022) in Australia, which has set up a ten-year social change project in partnership with Arts Access Victoria to introduce a "radical version of best practice accessibility for the independent arts sector" that moves beyond standard, compliance-based access to a model based on participation and leadership by disabled artists, non-discriminatory representation of disability and integrated and creative approaches to access in the arts.

The following two quotes show a more precise picture of what this approach to access entails and encapsulate many of the ideas discussed in this section. The first one is by Georgina Kleege (2018, p. 13), who applies this radical and liberatory notion of access as transformation to AD:

> The ultimate goal is not merely to explain visual art to blind people in the hope that this cultural access will compensate for the loss of sight. Rather, the hope is that blind people can bring a perspective that has not been articulated before. If we can abandon the notion that blindness can only diminish, damage or destroy identity, and adopt instead the idea that the experience of blindness, in all its varieties, can in fact shape and inform other facets of personality and personal history, we will move toward a more genuinely inclusive society. The integration of blind perceptions and experiences will change the foundational assumptions of the culture; change how the human condition is defined. And I believe this is the goal worth working toward.

The second quote is Mia Mingus' (2017a) extended description of liberatory access:

> 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. That access shifts from being silencing to freeing; from being isolating to connecting; from hidden and invisible to visible; from burdensome to valuable; from a resentful obligation to an opportunity; from shameful to powerful; from ridged to creative. It's the "good" kind of access, the moments when we are pleasantly surprised and feel seen. It is a way of doing access that transforms both our "today" and our "tomorrow." In this way, Liberatory access both resists against the world we don't want and actively builds the world we do want.

In her definition, Mingus touches upon what may be described as access as transformation, access in the active voice, which has the social and political potential to push back against ableism and to propose a new scenario, but she also covers the human dimension, the connecting side of access. Here lies the idea of access intimacy, around which the next sections of this article revolve.

3. Access Intimacy

Mingus (2017b) argues that there is an inherent intimacy to access: "When someone is helping me with access, I am vulnerable; I am interdependent with them, even if they don't realize it". If access is treated as a logistical interaction, rather than as human connection, it can result in forced intimacy, which Mingus describes as "the common, daily experience of disabled people being expected to share personal parts of ourselves to survive in an ableist world". In order to get the access they need, disabled people are often expected to open up and share very personal information with non-disabled people or even to consent to a certain degree of physical intimacy in the case of those who need physical help that requires touching their bodies. In contrast, if access is treated as a human interaction, the inherent vulnerability of access can be used as a transformative force through what Mingus calls access intimacy.

There is no clear-cut definition of access intimacy, perhaps because it is a feeling that can take different forms depending on the person. Mingus (2011) describes it as "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else "gets" your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level". Access intimacy is not about helping someone: "it is not charity or a humiliating trade for survival or an ego boost", which for Mingus threatens and kills access intimacy. Neither is it the action of providing access as a box-ticking exercise, with no consideration of how (or even whether or not) it is received by the person who needs it. Instead, access intimacy is about the connection that takes place between the person who tries to provide access and the person who receives it. This does not guarantee that access will work. For Mingus, access intimacy can sometimes look like "both of you trying to create access as hard as you can with no avail in an ableist world" or "someone just sitting and holding your hand while you both stare back at an inaccessible world". By bringing the terms "intimacy" and "access" together, Mingus addresses the two sides of the access spectrum. "Access" is the essential element for disabled people to navigate the obstacles posed by an ableist world; it is the logistics, the legislation, the infrastructure. "Intimacy" is the part that understands the vulnerability inherent to the person who needs access and honours it by tending to the human and the relational side of access (Titchkosky, 2011). Without intimacy, access can enable a disabled person to enter a space or to understand a film or a play, but possibly with an important part of them "never being able to be reached" (Mingus 2011). Without intimacy, "there is survival, but rarely true, whole connection" (Mingus 2011). .

Since the notion of access intimacy was introduced by Mingus in her blog "Leaving Evidence" in 2011, it has been taken up by scholars, artists and activists from different areas. It has resonated with the lived experience of numerous disabled people around the world. In his PhD thesis, Ashley Volion (2020) uses qualitative research based on constructivist grounded theory to analyse the experiences of access intimacy as related by 13 disabled bloggers. Access intimacy is viewed by most participants as the only form of intimacy that speaks to the emotions involved in getting one's access needs met. For them, during moments of access intimacy, disability was viewed as a natural part of the human experience instead of as a burden, which allowed them to be their authentic selves, to let their guard down and the other person in, to combat internalized stigma and to be vulnerable with one another by holding space and being in the moment. Holding space, a term that is mentioned repeatedly in the interviews with the participants, does not mean that the person who provides access and the person who receives it share the same experience. Instead, it means that they are in the moment together, trying to solve the access puzzle without the disabled person feeling judged or misunderstood. As poignantly put by Ashley (Volion, 2020, p. 63), one of the participants, "someone that can look through my window with me is someone that I can have access intimacy with", which contrasts starkly with Kleege's (2018, p. 6) words about how standard access for blind people is usually produced by sighted experts "from the perspective of someone looking at flawed eyes from the outside".

Even though there is a risk that the notion of access intimacy may sound too abstract (or even airy-fairy) and difficult to apply to media access, it is now being used by scholars, artists and users of media access. Kelly, a blind participant in Volion's study, explains that the neutral and objective

descriptions of art that she is sometimes exposed to provide her with information but often fail to connect with her at an emotional level (Volion, 2020, p. 79). She mentions a project in an art museum where she was paired with a sighted person who was in charge of describing a painting to her. The sighted person admitted that they did not always have the words to describe something, but, for Kelly, they managed to build a connection (access intimacy) by putting their thoughts and feelings into the descriptions, enabling Kelly to experience the painting through their perspective and adding the emotional side to access. Although access intimacy has been mostly mentioned in cases of one-to-one access provision or in the scenic arts, where artists and users often share the same space, there is no reason why it cannot be built, more generally, "into the different ways in which we do access" (Mingus, 2022), including access for films. My struggle to provide an alternative AD for *Where Memory Ends* may be a relevant example.

4. Access Intimacy in *Where Memory Ends*

When I received the AD version of the film commissioned by the distributor to an external company, I had mixed feelings. The audio describer, with whom I had no contact, had done a professional job, which would probably allow blind users to access the visuals and understand the story. Yet, it also felt somewhat like an intrusion, like a cold attachment to what otherwise was a labour of love on which most members of the crew had been working for several years. I felt that this version would allow blind users to survive (Mingus, 2011) but not to connect with the story at an emotional level. After discussing this with Louise Fryer, an audio describer specialised in alternative media access, we decided that it would make sense for me, as the director, to deliver the description and even to add extra information that could help the audience be part of the on-screen and off-screen journey we had been part of (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

[AD] We begin our car journey to Las Hurdes. I'm driving. Ian's next to me, navigating

Source: Romero-Fresco (2022).

The AD is thus a combination of description and director's commentary. In some cases, the commentary is brief (Figure 7):

Figure 7

[AD voice] That's the last we saw of Aurelia, as she walks along a narrow path on the cultivated hillside back towards the village.

Source: Romero-Fresco (2022).

In other cases, the commentary is just as long as the description, or they simply merge (Figure 8):

Figure 8

[AD voice] Once or twice a year, the mountain's surrounded by a sea of low clouds that make the monastery at the top look like it's suspended in mid-air. We were lucky to be there on just such a day. Ian recalls this, and his encounter in the monastery with Padre Ángel, as one of the most memorable moments of his life. And so do I.

Source: Romero-Fresco (2022).

Since this is a film about memory and about looking back, we decided to write the AD from the point of view of the present, in 2023, almost seven years after the shooting had finished. This allowed us to add information about some of the characters that we did not have at the time ("The wonderful Padre Ángel passed away in 2020, 5 years after we met him. May he rest in peace") and to create suspense in the cliff scene (Figure 9), where Ian risks life and limb to reach the rock that filmmaker Buñuel used to make his landmark film *Land without Bread* (1933):

Figure 9

[AD voice] By now, Ian's struggling to find a good hand hold. I never wanted him to climb that cliff, but he simply had to touch that rock. In hindsight, I should have stopped him.

Source: Romero-Fresco (2022).

The longest commentary is provided 51:34 minutes into the film, when we finish our journey to Las Hurdes and go back to Ian's flat in Madrid. As the screen fades to black, the audience is let into what was the biggest struggle to make the film:

> [AD voice] Fade to black – This is the end of the film. Or it was, in 2016, once I had finally edited the 50 hours of footage we had from our journey to Las Hurdes and the interview with Ian in his flat. But one day, when I was ready to send the film to postproduction, someone broke into my office at my university in London and stole my computer and the hard drives with the final cut. I lost the final cut and the backup copies. Everything except for the 50 hours of footage that the director of photography, Martina, had in Austria. It took me a few weeks to gather the strength to phone Ian and tell him I had to start editing all over again. He then told me he was going to travel to Granada to present the last version of his first book on the death of Lorca. He asked us to come with him so we could finish the film where it all started for him. After all, for Ian, all roads lead to Lorca.

Finally, we also used the combination of description and commentary in the credits, allowing what otherwise would be a cold list of names to become a warm acknowledgement of their contribution to the film:

> [AD voice] This film is a labour of love. I'd like to thank all the friends who've made it possible. First, Ian Gibson, of course, whose unwavering, lifelong dedication to recovering the recent memory of Spain is the inspiration for this film. Also on screen…

Needless to say, this AD (if translated into Spanish) could not be screened in Spain, as it does not meet the conditions set by the CESyA (2023). This is not a neutral, objective AD, and it does not aim to compensate for what blind users are missing by replicating the experience of the non-disabled viewer, a view of access (and disability) that is criticised by scholars such as Georgina Kleege (2018) and Tanya Titchkosky (2021). The insights into the making of the film that are now part of the commentary were only provided to sighted viewers of the first version of the film (the one that is not accessible) in the Q&As after the screening, when there was one. Sighted viewers received these insights as information and facts, whereas for blind users it is all part of the filmic experience as they share our journey. This was not planned beforehand. It just happened as the film evolved, which shows that there is no original version of the film (and thus no primacy of the original) but rather a series of iterations as the film reaches new audiences. During the postproduction stage, editor Xacio Baño suggested the film should be narrated by me. I resisted the idea, which I saw as a sign of excessive protagonism on my part and a distraction that would detract from what was really important: Ian's journey and his struggle to keep Spain's historical memory alive. It was only when I saw the viewers' interest in the making of the film during the Q&A sessions and when I heard the (external and detached) official AD track that I realised that my description/commentary could perhaps add to the overall sense of journey in the film. As it stands, and despite the many mistakes that I made along the way, which are down to my lack of skills and experience as a filmmaker[1], the film is now as close as it can be to what I was hoping to make. Accessibility (in its alternative, flexible and creative form) helped to transform the film into what it was meant to be in the first place. It follows that this AD version is the one that will be screened from now on for both sighted and blind audiences.

Screening your film to an audience is, at least to me, something that you simultaneously look forward to and fear. For some time (ten years in the case of *Where Memory Ends*), the film is an idea; at best, a work in progress. And it is a good one, or so you think: it is as good as your imagination allows it to be. Until, of course, you start making it and facing the constraints of reality and your limitations, which is when things start to go wrong. This flawed realisation of an apparently perfect idea is what you put out there for everyone to see and judge. The screening in New Jersey was all the more daunting, as it was the first time that I was going to screen the AD version to an audience largely made up of blind people, which made me feel particularly vulnerable (as the description/commentary is very personal) and insecure (I had no way to know if it was going to work for them). Fortunately, the Q&A after the screening turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had,

[1] The main issue is that I did not manage to adopt an accessible filmmaking approach throughout the very extended production process. Due to the lack of budget, I could not bring on board deaf or blind consultants and I was not able to persuade the producer to let me alter the length of certain scenes to make more room for the AD, which would have required going back to the lab for further colour correction.

both at an intellectual level (what I learnt making the film, what the audience learnt watching it) and, especially, at an emotional level. Somehow, my vulnerability as an inexperienced filmmaker was met with the vulnerability of the blind users who needed access. They held space for me as I exposed my limitations, and I would like to think that I held space for them by trying to "get" their access needs and provide them with as meaningful an experience of the film as possible. This allowed us (or so I felt) to connect without needing long explanations (about the film or their access needs). We were all there, in the moment, discussing how the film had made them feel. I would like to think this was an example of access intimacy, although this will need to be assessed with a reception study. For now, though, here are three comments that have stayed with me since the screening and that resonate with many of the ideas discussed in this paper:

> "I literally cannot imagine the film without the AD. It personalized the narrative, hearing a warm human who actually cared about the events and the story, and who was a part of the filmmaking rather than an outside voice actor or, worse, an AI bot".
>
> "The AD turned this film into a personal journey, and this alternative approach made me feel like I was part of the crew members following Ian."
>
> "So loved the film and descriptions, both felt so intimate and personal. You trusted more what was being said."

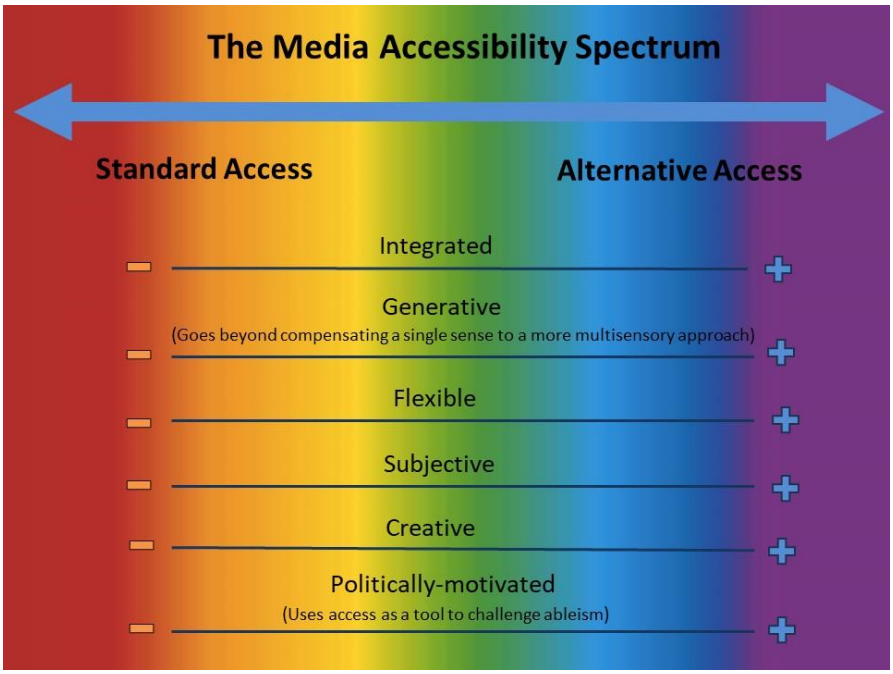
These comments, which, along with the rest of the feedback gathered, will be used to amend the AD of the film, are a reminder of the potential that (alternative) media access has to transform a film and turn it into a new original version. They also remind filmmakers of the need to get involved with access and to care about how their films reach different audiences. This may take the audience beyond media access as survival (understanding the film) and allow them to connect with the film at an emotional and even intimate level, which as Mingus says, honours the human dimension of access.

5. Building Access Intimacy Into Media Accessibility

As shown in Figure 10, media accessibility can be placed along a spectrum ranging from standard access to alternative forms of access, with their different characteristics:

Figure 10

Media Accessibility Spectrum



As with any other spectrum, these two poles include a multitude of options in between. Most of the work I have been involved in recently, both as a filmmaker and as a scholar, revolves around different forms of alternative access or access as transformation, but this approach may not necessarily suit every film, artist, access expert or viewer. Standard access plays a fundamental role as a basis, as an infrastructure that has been extremely beneficial for millions of users around the world. However, as discussed in this article, if we move too close to the left-hand side of the spectrum, we may lose sight of the human dimension and treat access as a transaction where what matters is the production of access, not how it is received; in other words, access in the passive voice. This turns access into a technique (separated from the artistic process and from the social and political context in which it exists), access experts into operators (likely to be replaced by automation) and users into customers. There is little room here to question whether "access for all" is possible or to address the ableism that determines who gets to make the art and the access and who is still excluded from it all.

Alternative access and access intimacy remind us that access is, first and foremost, about human connection. It may be easier to develop access intimacy in instances of one-to-one access provision and in the scenic arts, where artists and users often share the same space. But, as Mingus (2022) argues, there is no reason why it cannot also be built into standard, compliance-based access. The above-mentioned user research carried out by the RiDC for Ofcom (2023) shows that many disabled people use access to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness. Alternative access and especially access intimacy can go some way towards providing human and social connection. This can be done, for instance, by ensuring that official guidelines promote the integration of access from production, acknowledge the impossibility of providing access for all (encouraging, for instance, personalisation)

and, most importantly, address ableism by taking steps to ensure the participation of disabled people in leadership roles.

Access intimacy can also be built into media access training. Of all the classes that I taught at the University of Roehampton between 2008 and 2017, I have the fondest memories of those that were introduced by Trevor Franklyn, with whom I made *Joining the Dots* (2012), a film about blindness and AD. Trevor helped to put a face and a heart to what otherwise would have been a first introductory class covering facts and figures about AD and blindness. He created a space where the students could share their vulnerability and insecurities (about blindness, about how to talk to a blind person, about access…) and he could share his access needs. This moment (which I would like to think was akin to access intimacy) would have a lasting impression on the students, who would keep the human value of access in mind for the rest of the year. In those years when Trevor's participation was replaced by my introductory class on facts and figures about disability and access, my students were much more likely to end up being primarily concerned with software-related issues, seeing access as a technique rather than as a form of human connection. Let us thus bring the users into the classroom and promote disabled-led media access training, which is still painfully absent in our area.

Access intimacy can also be built into our research, starting from the way in which we write about it. Until now, I have written most of my publications in the passive voice, as has so far been the norm in media access literature. There is a place for this, just as there is for objective access presented as "the voice of God". However, there must also be a place for a more involved style where the researchers are brought into full view, with their vulnerabilities and biases. In my case, this means acknowledging the privileged position I occupy in society as a white, heterosexual, middle-class, non-disabled person who meets the notion of "normal" upon which ableism is developed and who writes these lines as an ally.

Building access intimacy into our research also means reviewing how we undertake our reception studies. Between 2010 and 2014, I coordinated a research project on the reception of subtitles for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers across Europe (Romero-Fresco, 2015). This allowed me to interview (and sometimes hold space for) dozens of users with hearing loss in the UK and Spain. Yet, most of what my colleagues and I included in the resulting book was figures: quantitative data about how the participants moved their eyes across the screen as they read the subtitles, the number of comprehension questions they got right or wrong, etc. Our priority was to report statistically significant data, which meant that knowing a little about many users was more important than knowing a lot about a few. Quantitative studies are, of course, necessary and have provided an empirical basis for guidelines that were once only informed by the view of a few experts. However, if we want to honour the relational side of access, it is important that we combine this with qualitative studies that allow for time to understand (to "get") users' access needs. It may not be statistically significant, but it will be meaningful, especially if we move into a scenario where disabled people are not only passive informers but also researchers.

Building access intimacy into media accessibility means creating spaces for human connection between artists and access experts (through accessible filmmaking) and, especially, between them and the users. As we learn more about artificial intelligence and its impact on media accessibility, Access Intimacy is the other AI, the one that honours the human dimension of access. Access intimacy reminds us that access is not an obligation or a transaction but a socially and politically transformative form of human connection that can create a space for disabled and non-disabled people to resist ableism and reimagine how we relate to one another. A space for sharing and caring.

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