Porn for the blind: Accessibility to pornography for visually impaired and blind users

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Abstract

This article addresses the overlooked issue of accessibility in pornography for the blind and visually impaired, emphasizing the technical challenges involved. Focusing on audio descriptions as a key element, the paper explores the struggle of conveying emotional and sensory aspects in a purely aural context. Existing platforms are analyzed, revealing the lack of universal standards and quality control for audio-described porn, and the complexity in creating a coherent broadcast in absence of guidelines. The paper suggests a shift from traditional technical perspectives and recommends user testing with the visually impaired community for feedback. Logistical challenges, including finding willing performers and supporters, are acknowledged. The methodology involves analytical studies, aiming to uncover discrepancies in audio standards and proposing optimization strategies. This scholarly pursuit posits collaborative endeavors as a catalyst for augmenting inclusivity, equality, and sexual well-being for the visually impaired individuals within the pornography milieu.

1. What does accessibility mean when it comes to pornography?

Although it is evident that, aside from the academic debate, a growing decentralization from traditional adult industry products is registrabile in today’s production and distribution of pornography, the discourse around diversity and porn focuses for a long time now on adoption as a performer in the industry of individuals with disabilities or impairments, on the risk of stigmas in their sexualized representation and on the impact this has on the fetishization of vulnerabilities (Chappell and de Beer, 2019).

This article intends to shift the focus to the recipient of pornography, and specifically to the blind and visually impaired audience. Through this investigation, the author intends to open a discussion about the relationship between sexuality, representation of sensuality, and the medium of audio1, untethered from the most classic of marriage (or gregarious relationship) to film and video.

To such an academic curiosity, someone might move the classic question: why should blind people even watch a film? Especially a porn, given that the genre is even more rooted in the visual domain than non-porn cinema.

1 There are also formats that experiment with haptic adult content. One example of that is Murphy (2021). This article does not address that field.
As if that were not enough, sound in porn films is usually very neglected, most likely because it is supposed to be consumed in solitude and often discreetly. Most videos in online pornography begin with a loud sound logo, to remind viewers to turn down the volume of their devices and save themselves an embarrassment. This is even the setting for many trivial gags. As much as in the case of dubbing, which often causes hilarity or becomes distracting to most spectators (Galbraith, 2017). After all, we should not forget that in the first forty-plus years of porn film history, Stag films were silent despite the fact that, from a certain point forward, synchronized sound was achieved (Russell, 2014). Perhaps this was a muteness emerging from the secrecy and illegality of Stag films’ production and distribution since porn, as Tim Dean reminds us, “tends to be semisecret, unofficial, and stigmatized” (Dean, 2014: 1).

Behind the unwillingness of overcoming techno-practical limits at a certain moment in time, are cultural needs and personal discoveries that remain in the realm of the sensible and the unformalized. Or perhaps it is because, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out: «What is seen of the screen is so manifestly shown” (Mulvey, 1975: 3). Cinematic pornography (as cinema in a wide sense) has the goal or function to “satisfy a primal desire for the pleasure of the gaze, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect” (Ibid: 6). Whereas instead sound takes us into the world of the unknown. To listen always requires a relationship with and the acceptance of an innumerable number of subjects swarming, all in the process of becoming.

So, what are we talking about when we talk about accessibility in porn for people with no sight? Or rather, how can the idea of access to porn for people with visual impairments inform, shift or enhance the debate about accessibility in general?

Answering this question requires activating a rhetorical strategy that unfolds in the form of multiple other questions that radiate out and then coagulate into an exercise of technical imagination and critique. At this point it is important to clarify that this article seeks to steer away from the studies about what the effects of exposure to pornography consumption are, what the roles of pornography are in our society, and how important it is to ensure its access to a wide range of people. Rather, the epicentric questions are: can an audio production be a vehicle for all the functions that porn covers? Which role do speech and orality have in all of this, assuming they have one? There is usually such little talk in porn. What kind of performative skills are required for the format? What should professionals who intend to carry out activities in this area be up against?

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2 Voice dubbing takes on a completely different meaning in the case of hentai and eroge, where vocal performativity is the attractor of a large part of eroticism and often becomes the surrogate for the fulfillment of a paraphilic desire. The Japanese term “hentai” (変態) which can mean as much “abnormality” or “perversion” as it does “metamorphosis”, has been widely adopted in Western discussions of anime and manga genres. It is a genre of manga and anime characterized by explicit sexual themes and imagery. It often involves exaggerated and fantastical scenarios. Eroge is a genre of Japanese video games that feature erotic content. Players typically interact with characters and progress through a narrative, often with the goal of developing romantic relationships. See Galbraith (2017).

3 Stag films are early forms of pornographic movies, typically produced without sound and circulated clandestinely, especially in the mid-20th century. They were often shown at “stag parties” or gatherings of men.
Starting from this core, and looking at the answers that technology and telecommunications have given to cinema (after all, most porn is consumed in the digital form of video) one might wonder at first: what role does audio description play?

This is where the case study of Porn for the Blind comes in.

2. Voice donors for porn

Porn for the Blind is a wording that first appeared in 2007 as the name of a non-profit organization created and promoted by digital artist Melanie Hoff, and filmmaker and photographer Horatio Baltz. It was held between 2007 and 2009.

Despite the website is long dismissed, one can find the complete body of audio descriptions submitted at the time at web.archive.org. The archive consists in a list of 167 downloadable audio clips. Of these, some are teenage pranks (mostly boys shouting profanities) or silent out-takes accidentally uploaded. The majority, on the other hand, are the voluntary contributions from a small group of voice donors who lend themselves in producing an audio description of mostly short pornographic clips.

Programmatic instructions provided by the platform (which not all audio files adhere to correctly) indicate:

Now you can help Porn for the Blind in its mission to produce audio descriptions of all the world’s pornographic website preview videos. Just use the form on the right, load up a preview clip, and follow along with the script:

Porn for the Blind presents [website name].
This is a [clip length] preview clip located at [full URL including "HTTP colon slash slash"].
[brief description of the webpage]
OK, we’re starting the clip.
[description of the clip using only proper anatomical language: male, female, penis, vagina, breasts, etc.]
This has been a Porn for the Blind presentation of [website name]. This was a [clip length] preview clip located at [full URL including "HTTP colon slash slash"].
Porn for the Blind is a nonprofit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

By listening, we immediately realize that this editorial curtain call in itself takes a long time and already produces a semantic paradox, which has nothing erotic about it. On the contrary, it has an administrative or bureaucratic flavor which is somewhat oxymoronic of the « radical ephemerality and amenability to destruction of pornography” (Dean, 2014: 88). To amplify this sensory mismatch, some narrators begin by describing the production logo and even the layout of the page, almost as if this rigor is necessary to produce the excitement in the user.

Anyone who has browsed an adult website knows about the proliferation of pop-ups, and the fact that temporally the appearance of the logo in a video coincides with the transition into the claustrophobic trap of banner advertisements, which confirms to be ubiquitous and somehow inseparable from the whole experience of consuming adult contents per se. Sexual

4 pornfortheblind.org
5 web.archive.org/web/20120508131220/http://pornfortheblind.org

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content warning is sometimes announced. After which we finally proceed to the description of the intercourse. The accuracy of the description varies consistently depending on the observation skills and sensibility of the voice donor.

As we can see from the editorial standards, there is no instruction on the quality of the recording or the type of delivery. The redundancy of some voice donors suggests that a proportion of the contributors either became aware of additional details through direct contact with the platform, or adhered to a pattern emerging from a praxis informed by listening to already submitted audio or other, more traditional audio descriptions.

However, since this is not a player-integrated service, a technical question emerges: almost all audio descriptions are devoid of the original audio. What I mean is that there is no original track in the audio description file. The audio description is neither overlaid nor superimposed on the original video. This suggests that the way the project curators envisioned it being enjoyed is playing it along the video, so as to enhance the experience with the original diegetic sounds of the source. Since there is no cue or clapperboard that makes synch possible, we can subsume that such a use is simply not possible, and therefore the audio description itself loses all its intrinsic value.

Even if there had been the technical implementation to make the description adhere to the source (granted that we have established that this is not possible) all of these elements of negligence would make the original file to which the audio refers (with such rigor, by the way) absolutely useless for the intended purpose.

What’s more, hidden behind the gratuitousness of these descriptions, is the fact that almost all of the content is of very poor audio quality. The voices lack of depth and definition, and are often distorted and corrupted by background noises (both signal and ambient noises) which sometimes add elements of meaning. In some cases you can even hear friends in the background laughing at the one of who tries to fulfill the description. It has something humorous about it.

Although in a chapter of her book titled The Literal and the Hyperbolic, Susanna Paasonen offers a number of interpretations by theorists and filmmakers about the possible contact between humor and porn as a way to “challenge attempts at uncovering hidden levels of meaning and set its hyperbolic and excessive imageries in a new light” (Paasonen, 2011: 137), it is difficult to see the intent of the project Porn for the Blind as provocative and/or anti-pornographic.

Rather the whole operation produces a veneer of ableism that hides behind the idea of an accessibility service. In a brilliant essay, British independent porn producer Vex Ashley affirms that “porn performers embody and expand this, fulfilling these roles not only for their scene partners but also for the hypothetical viewer simultaneously. Everyone involved in production is working together to create something that best satisfies the imagined audience” (Ashley, 2016: 188). Porn for the Blind is a voluntary project. There is no training required for voice donors. No quality control of content. No curatorship beyond the small non-prescriptive text attached above. Within this space of supposed generosity the mesh of meaning widens to produce a vagueness that does not befit in no way a service meant to create access, whether it occurs with irreverent intent or guilty naivete.

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*Nina K. Martin (2006: 193) argues that, in contemporary porn, penis is no laughing matter and humor disturbs and disrupts its fantasy scenarios.*
3. Does Pornhub care?

As we explore the intricate landscape of audio description for video porn content, the investigation widens with the inclusion of a contrasting case study. While Porn for the Blind delved into the intricacies of an independent voluntary project, the subsequent examination focuses on Pornhub’s foray into the realm of audio description for adult content. Despite differing origins and methodologies, both case studies converge on common issues and challenges inherent to this specialized form of content accessibility. By juxtaposing these two distinct perspectives, I aim to elucidate the shared complexities and nuances that underpin the practice of audio description within the context of adult contents.

On June 15, 2016, Pornhub announced the public launch of its Described Video category, which features audio descriptions geared toward the visually impaired. The campaign is proudly championed by the philanthropic division Pornhub Cares, and debuts with an inaugural collection of fifty enhanced-audio videos stems from the site’s top viewed straight, female-friendly, gay, bi and transsexual videos, and features voice over done by both professional voice actors as well as Pornhub Aria, Pornhub’s social media personality.

The trail that remains at the time this article is written can be found in the website’s help center, in the Accessibility section, where Aria herself states that the Pornhub Community:

strives to offer the best user experience possible, and that includes endeavoring to make the site more accessible to a diverse global community of users. That is why we have dedicated content collections tailored for both our audio-impaired and visually-impaired community of users.

From this section you can follow two links to the collection of videos under the Closed Captions and Audio Descriptions category. Neither of the two services can be added to videos with an option, likewise many other streaming services allow. I am referring to a setting embed into the video player that would allow such features to be integrated if desired. Rather, there is a separate list of videos with special content. These contents turn out to be uploaded by the same company that had provided the source video originally. For some of the videos, analytics remain the same compared to the version without audio description; while for others,
stats such like year of upload, number of views, and liking gradients change between the audio-described version and the one without, showing inconsistency. Currently, the videos that provide audio description are forty-two\(^{11}\), most of which were uploaded between seven and six years ago. The vast majority of them are dubbed by the same female voice. Five of the forty-two videos are ASMRs\(^{12}\) uploaded by amateur hosts. The last one is a podcast with a static image. These six pieces of content do not appear to be part of the Described Video project but rather simply placed in the same category. Although it is clear the platform has editorial standards regarding the nature of the information and the type of narration the audio-description must have, everything to do with audio-design and the mix between diegetic sounds and voice-overs is very inconsistent from video to video. I believe that this might not be a concern if the strategy was to find a specific space and blend for the voice-over in its coexistence with location sounds, but it does not take a particularly trained ear in sound engineering to understand that this is not the case\(^{13}\).

In some videos there is heavy compression of the location sounds during the voice-over interventions; in others this even covers the original voice of the performers, either diegetic or performer’s voice-over narrating the thoughts and fantasies from within, creating some confusion and certainly poor intelligibility of the verbal contents.

Looking deeply into the compartment Pornhub Cares, it appears that projects related to accessibility for blind and visually impaired people have moved forward with regard to audio descriptions (in October 2017, the site launched a display optimized version for this user community, feature enlarged text, customized color contrasts and keyboard shortcuts, but no other audio described contents were released ever since).

Search engines offer more materials in the form of redundant news magazine articles talking about Porn for the Blind\(^{14}\) than actually accessible content, glibly shifting the focus to the simple question of whether this was an unscrupulous commercial operation or a worthy social initiative.

In February 2020 Slate online magazine journalist Marina Martinelli gives an interview with the author of the scripts for thirty-five of the audio descriptions featured in the Described

\(^{11}\) Some testimonies from blind users who used the platform related to the second (and last from what I record) upload in November 2016, testify there were just under 70 videos, including the Kim Kardashian/Ray J sex tape. The fact that this content is no longer there makes me think that some content has been deleted. The platform has delited many of its contents in 2020 in the wake of a scandal. The source is Sarah Rense article *How Do Blind People Watch Porn?* published via online magazine Esquire on January 17, 2017.

\(^{12}\) ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) refers to a tingling sensation that typically begins on the scalp and moves down the back of the neck and upper spine. It’s often triggered by specific auditory stimuli, such as whispering, tapping, or soft sounds. It has garnered significant attention on platforms like YouTube, where creators produce videos specifically designed to induce ASMR in viewers.

\(^{13}\) In Netflix Sound Mix Specifications & Best Practices page, section 2.6, very precise specifics are provided about the loudness that the audio description should have. Although there are no references about the loudness relationship this should have with the original audio itself. Specifications are sufficient to produce consistent files that adhere a standard, and that can be automated according to different broadcast protocols.

\(^{14}\) Pornhub also named the Described Video category “Porn for the Blind” in their advertising campaign.
Video category, Kathryn Simpson\textsuperscript{15}. From this exchange shines through a focus on the type of narrative device best suited for this purpose that begins with the very choice of subject who was asked to do the work (a researcher oriented to pornography in the LGBTQIA+ and “for women” categories). There are references to the guidelines that Pornhub provided with respect to language, that should have been casual, sexy, and unscientific. Although audio description is an oral storytelling practice that has a long history, much of which is closely intersected with technology, imagining such a service in the field of pornography requires a well-oiled and very specific iteration between writing, performing the voice, and aesthetics of sound engineering and telecommunications. Porn for the Blind, as a project carried out by a leader company, could perhaps have fostered the development of new standards in an as-yet unexplored sex-tech field, and this possibility has instead been underestimated.

In an email exchange on Porn for the Blind reported by Canadian magazine Vice, Joel Snyder\textsuperscript{16}, expresses himself in a completely favorable manner with respect to the project, arguing that «there’s no good reason why a person with a physical disability must also be culturally disabled». This account offers a broader understanding of this inclusive device that gives a glimpse into the cultural impact that accessing or not a mass phenomenon such as porn can have. This perspective is largely confirmed by the choice of content submitted to the service by the platform. In their whole, represent a sampling of all highly influential porn with several million views each.

Now a question arises. Much research reports the fact that pornography plays an increasing role in the sex education of young people. And this is also true in people with visual impairments (Wild et.al, 2014). The idea that access to sighted porn by means of audio description is an added value for the cultural integration of the blind can lapse into moralism and ableism. Why should the blind and visually impaired community not claim a cultural dimension in which the unseen has cultural value in itself? The desire for access to content oriented toward the self-satisfaction of erotic urges should not be subjected to the rhetoric of cultural belonging.

As Heather Butler brings to light in the essay A Lesbian with Long Fingers, referring to the pioneering lesbian pornography movement of the 1970s:

\begin{quote}
Dyke porn is exactly what lesbian porn should have been, but could not be. [...] Dyke porn differentiates itself from its heterosexual and gay male counterparts in its staunch declaration and performance of safe sex. These characteristics remain constitutive of dyke porn up to the present day (Butler, 2004: 182).
\end{quote}

So audio description for pornography should be able to go its own separate way from audio description of non-pornographic content.

4. **Listening perspective**

Observing these media content as finished products tells us something about the sociotechnical alliance needful to satisfy a primordial desire. Something that is unimaginative.

\textsuperscript{15} https://slate.com/culture/2020/02/pornhub-audio-description-interview-accessibility.html

\textsuperscript{16} President, Audio Description Associates, and Senior Consultant of Audio Description Project, American Council of the Blind.
We should not forget that although these fantasies exist before the object and persist after its consumption, they are shaped, diverted, molded, and adapted during their interaction with the artifact itself.

The author believes there is a deeper inquiry to be made about the symbolic order that comes into play when an audio description intervenes in a space of meaning as specific as that of pornography. Beyond any of the feedback gathered from the users reported by the magazines:

Pornographic scenarios are depicted from a particular perspective—either that of an outside observer (in videos, represented by a cameraman or a camera placed on a stand) or of one person (as in point-of-view shots)—or from a mixture of numerous perspectives. These points of view are crucial in terms of the modality of porn and the affective dynamics that it involves (Paasonen, 2011: 176).

In pornography, the use of sound perspective is definitely different from non-porn films, where location sounds, extradiegetic and sound effects have to follow a certain hierarchy in the way they are allocated according to visual perspective. Generally speaking in a film voices are always in the foreground (Chion, 1999: 5-6), even when the shot is subjective or, in most cases, speaking characters are off-screen. A total perspective is preferred for the environmental sounds.

These are all strategies that contribute to the fortification of continuity, which is crucial to let the technological apparatus fade into the audience experience and feed the suspension of disbelief. In the alliance between sound, image, and perspective that occurs in standard broadcasting protocols, the space occupied by audio description is very precise. The voice providing the audio description is sitting in a worldless space, devoid of any reflection or resonance, as it is deliberately and strongly abstracted from the scenarios depicted in the film.

In most cinematic porn, attention and care to sound is lacking from a technical perspective and completely absent from a dramaturgical one. As far as third-person directed porn is concerned, bodies are customarily presented as fragments. Close-up and zooming-in are the two main directing techniques and each position is narrated closely and in stillness. As a consequence, editing in the porn industry usually boils down to a sequence of wide and narrow shots leading up to the scene where the male performer reaches orgasm. The scene immediately following the orgasm is one of the few where multiple camera movements are recorded, with gentle shifts from the genital compartment to faces kissing and smiling (sometimes even in plan séquence and with the music coming in).

When it comes to Gonzo, Hamedori and Reality Porn the disconnection between sound and image does not occur. Here, the constant overlap between gaze and listening perspective

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17 When talking about lack I am mainly referring to broadcast standards and the standardization of loudness controls for optimizing the browsing experience. Often on adult websites the audio is not heard or is heard too loudly, and one often has to adjust the volume when switching between videos.

18 Definition: Gonzo is a style of pornographic filmmaking characterized by its raw, unscripted, and often amateurish approach. It typically involves the filmmaker or performer interacting directly with the camera. The term “gonzo” originates from journalism but has been adapted to describe a style of adult filmmaking, notably popularized by directors like John Stagliano.

19 Hamedori (ハメ撮り) is a Japanese term referring to a genre of pornography where the camera is held by one of the participants, providing a first-person perspective. Hamedori were produced since
is not problematic, and continuity is inherent in the subjective shooting technique, especially in the almost total absence of editing. As Bridges (2010: 38-39)\(^{20}\) points out, subjective filming is used to minimize the distance between the male performer and the user. So that a role exchange or rather overlap can take place (Woida, 2009)\(^{21}\). The simulacrum does not address a scopophilic desire any longer, but rather a gamified one. The audience plays the role of the performer. The audience embodies the performer.

Since the meta-narrative element in these subgenres is to simulate amateurism, a different semantic layer occurs. As in mockumentaries, the artifice through which fictitious and scripted events are presented as if they were spontaneous is reinforced by the simulation of an amateur shoot and the abolition of an external voyeur which is the camera. The narrative device consists in presenting the operator as being immersed in the sexual situation that is filming. This, pretty often, is amplified by the use of poor devices for the recording and can affect the video quality not only in terms of shooting accuracy (the operator is holding the camera) but also regarding resolution, frame rate and aspect ratio. The aim is to produce a rêverie. It should feel like watching a video of the past shot by oneself. A rapprochement, then. Sound, raw and chaotic, conveys a galvanization in the performers and a general sense of precariousness in the direction that can produce excitement in the viewer. The voice and oral sounds of the operator have a specific quality given by the off-axis coloration of the microphone on camera that is topical. The voice of the demiurge is coming off-frame. It is the gate between the world inside the video and the fantasy position of the viewer. The operator is a psychopomp. The absence of face and the presence of the male performer who embody the POV solely in the form of a penis, separate of his identity, amplifies this sense of distance that might help the illusion of overlap.

Once, talking with a young blind girl about audio description, this abstract quality on the voice emerged as a distracting element that prevented her from fully enjoying the service. She would have preferred that it was the voice of one of the characters that guided her imagination rigorously where sound alone did not allow access to the information necessary for total understanding. Thus adding a layer of meaning to the characters’ narration. It is not the author’s intention to question the protocols of audio description for film in this article, but certainly to consider the specificity of the presence of a voice located in an abstract, external space in a context such as porn. A context, moreover, in which a protocol has not yet been born (or perhaps has born and failed), where a space for negotiation of meaning still exists. Quoting critic and curator Emily Watlington: “Without wanting to undermine the regulations that hold people accountable, designing for disability should resist norms and standards that make assumptions and ignore the diversity of embodiments” (Cira and Watlington, 2019). As Georgina Kleege articulates in her essay Audio Description Described, despite ensuring a certain level of consistency and professionalism, codified guidelines may not necessarily produce issues about what blind people can understand and should know about visual phenomena (Kleege, 2017: 98).

the early 1980s. Company Matsuo (カンパニー松尾) is an eminent producer in this field who helped make this genre popular. See Schönherr J. (2006)

\(^{20}\) This convention of “faceless penises”, combined with the abundant use of POV shots, aims at effacing the distance between the male performer and the viewer. In an explicit act of focalization, the recipient is offered the possibility of occupying the point of view and fantasy position of the male performer.

\(^{21}\) Chloe Woida (2009: n.p.) argues that mainstream online porn seems “as if made for someone else […] and hence possible sexual arousal is haunted by a sense of distance”.

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The domain of adult contents is not exempt from this critique, certainly with its own specificities. Semantic elements, including the positioning of the voice source, its proxemics highlighted through mixing with location sounds, alongside the language, register (Kleege, 2017: 102), and deliberate selection of specific vocal timbres (which can serve as expressions of posture and identity, often shrouded in mystery due to the very nature of acousmatic sound), can play a significant role in shaping the experience of consuming pornographic content through audio description.

5. **Aural artifact specificity**

To add a layer of meaning to porn, as an audio description is, one must realize the space of intimacy and imagination in which the sound is located. Even before thinking about textual content and, consequently, voices, it is crucial to dwell on the medium of audio recording tout court (and not just as a result of mutilating an audiovisual) and what *microphonic listening* means.

After all, we are talking about a transduction, from a phenomenal world made of innumerable sounds – whose arena of influence surrounds us – to a frontal representation. This sound portrait is the result of a choice dictated by the perspective of sound capture and equipment used. The political value inherent in creating this sensory reversal in the domain of the audible within a gaze-dominated medium is even greater and should never be underestimated.

Net of this consideration, one of the questions posed at the outset flips: how can the idea of access porn for people with visual impairments inform, shift, or enhance the debate about *PORN* in general? If all formats of porn are rooted in sexual pleasure derived from looking at another person’s sexual activities and organs (Freud, 1905) and the process of objectification of sexual stimulation happens through sight (Mulvey, 1975: 4), the idea of sexual contents that bypass sight can open access to a vast palette of possibilities that do not commodify the object but rather produce an environment in which it is the subject that is stimulated sensorially and actively, without Peeping Toms or surrogates.

Let’s take a step back and reason about the auditory experience in which we find ourselves when we have a sexual intercourse. The author is inviting the receivers of this paper to immerse themselves in an imagined or remembered space, directing their attention to its auditory qualities. My request doesn’t involve activating a supposed “mind’s ear” (paraphrasing Kleege) nor blinding ourselves, if we have sight. Instead, it’s about considering specific features of the auditory experience, enabling us to activate the attentional resources needed to design a concept and deconstruct a format that we likely take for granted, or accept as it has been presented to us.

While the experiences recalled may vary greatly from one another, they are likely to share certain common features for those endowed with hearing, when it comes to the sound. This is a space whose proxemics fluctuate from moments of great closeness to moments when ears are primarily a tool for positioning oneself, for understanding surfaces, for taking in the presence or absence of others.

Regarding intimacy, an acoustic quality of materials is disclosed in a singular way when having sex. While involved in physical actions, the head and ears are often very close to fabrics and surfaces, in a non-symmetrical manner (let’s face it, you are not always in the most
comfortable positions at those times). The absorption and reflection properties of materials manifest themselves differently the greater the adjacency. Even voices are more profound and intimate, however much they keep being immersed in a concrete space. Often the ears are plugged by this proximity, and the sense of hearing is stretched toward an internal space.

Furthermore, for many people, love is made at night, and it coincides with inhabiting a dark or twilight space. This is where hearing becomes ear-tactile. I am referring to a faculty similar to the kind of hearing extension one uses to feel to the engine of a vehicle with the soles of one’s feet and palms, or when searching with one’s fingertips for the resonance of a ring dropped in the sink drain. To listen to the viscosity. This is a very immediate somatic experiences for everyone, although in sighted people it often comes after the image.

Now let’s focus for a moment longer and think of the sound in a theater or auditorium in the terse moments before a symphony begins. We can imagine a dense but scattered murmur, last halos of instruments tuning up; now a thunderous but polite applause, and finally, before the attack of the first movement, a soft but richly harmonic rumbling that sits in our chests and fills them to our throats. Is it the sound of the stage? Is it the sound of human presence pouring into a temple of listening? Or the electrical compartment of the facility?

This is microphone listening. In the memory of symphonic music, space is so tied to its recorded form that it is almost impossible to immerse oneself there with the imagination without inhabiting a dimension of techno-phenomenal hybridization.

Frequency response of the omnidirectional microphone, the expanded listening point of the stereophonic recording, become our point of audition, widening the distance between our ears. It yields a gulliverization (Durand, 1963: 207). In its inherent fluidity, the medium of sound and its phonographic representation open the horizon to a small transformation. The user is no longer in front of the screen, dissociated and detached, but becomes an amplified ear, a body vaporized in a concrete space, separated only for an instant from its physical persistence.

6. Future prospects

There are many ways in which we can consider potential reforms in the provision of access features for blind or visually impaired pornography users. We could consider making changes industry-wide. We could consider enabling users to edit or modify more of their current content. Or we could consider creating new, separate content. An industry-wide transition to universally designed, accessible erotic material is an unrealistic prospect given the difficulties already faced by non-pornographic media in this arena. I argue that permitting modified mainstream porn is more likely to marginalize visually impaired people than to empower them, but that the creation of purposefully accessible audio-porn material has substantive potential to enhance blind and visually impaired people’s sexual health and quality of life. Pornography, for many people, is not considered a political issue. However, political barriers to accessing certain types of content can become a major issue that impacts upon the

22 This is a definition that the author proposes. There are references to the term Audio-haptics applied to cinema. See Iannotta (2017).

23 An omnidirectional microphone’s response is a polar pattern that allows ideally to capture sounds within a perfect sphere in three dimensions.

24 Stereophonic sound is a type of sound capture and reproduction that uses multiple independent audio channels.
entitlement to civil rights and social inclusion. The social model of disability takes the view that disability is caused by the way society is organized, rather than by a person’s impairment or difference (Lawson and Beckett, 2021 p.363). Barriers to participation, and not impairments, are the focus.

By stating that it is the right of all to express sexuality in a way that satisfies one’s needs, this paper argues that porn is the option for the visually impaired who have managed to pull away from the assumption that it is impossible to satisfy one’s private desires for adult contents. This would suggest an emerging market for pornographic content. Quoting Kleege (2017: 99):

Thus, my goal here is not merely to critique the current practices of audio description but also to speculate on how it might expand beyond a segregated accommodation to create a more inclusive culture.

As a person active in the field of artistic research, my interest is to keep this debate open through participatory artistic practices, in order to shift the focus from the subject creator to the receivers of the work or artistic apparatus. In the active part of my field research, I have already begun a dialogue with blind pornography users, performers who are blind or visually impaired, artists and performers active in the field of pornography. My operational interest is to develop a choral compositional methodology that is designed to be accessible by non-sighted users, users with low-vision, users with obstructed vision, despite the fact that my artistic practice as music composer and radio artist does not focus on accessibility nor on disability by statute. I hope that this research represents a small step toward disarming a protocol, and that it can contribute to the body of efforts geared toward informing a conscious creation of accessible contents.

Keywords
porn studies, disability studies, media studies, sound, accessibility

References


