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A Trembling Camera: Crip Media Aesthetics and Care

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the relationship between audiovisual representation, digital infrastructure, and the ethics of care through the lens of *crip media aesthetics*. Engaging with media archaeology, philosophy of technology, and disability studies, it explores the concept of ‘technologies of fragility’ as an approach in which technical imperfection and sensory difference function as generative modes of knowing. Within this framework, the article combines theoretical reflection with a close reading of the documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (2020), examining how the ‘trembling camera’ and the aesthetics of the glitch embody a politics of maintenance. In doing so, the study establishes the *crip point of view* as a necessary epistemological horizon, one that redefines the inherent incompleteness of mediation as the essential condition for a responsive and sustainable existence.

Keywords: Crip media aesthetics - Digital media - Disability studies - Film studies

1. Technologies of Fragility

The dialogue between aesthetics and its clinical application constitutes a persistent and generative undercurrent in the history of media, establishing a foundational link between representation and the active shaping of human perception. From antiquity to the contemporary digital landscape, the forms of mediation that sustain culture operate as vital instruments of intervention - sophisticated technologies of the self that act directly upon the psyche, the senses, and the biological body. Within this long-term perspective, media function as therapeutic structures; they intervene in the relational field between the organism and its environment with profound and often transformative consequences¹. This therapeutic quality resides in the capacity of the medium to act as a bridge, re-coordinating the subject's internal state with the external world through rhythmic, visual, and tactile stimuli. Contemporary scholarship frames this dynamic as "access aesthetics", a prefigurative politics where the very form of the medium negotiates the conditions of embodied existence².

A primary example of this foundational role appears in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where writing is identified through the affirmative concept of the *pharmakon*. As a substance, the *pharmakon* possesses a dual potency: it functions as a technical prosthesis for memory that simultaneously expands and redefines the limits of the biological mind. In this framework, mediation acts as a force that re-organises human cognitive capacities, offering a restorative extension to the inherent vulnerability of thought. Aristotle's theory of tragedy further develops this affirmative potential through the mechanism of catharsis. Here, the aesthetic experience operates as a disciplined technique for the regulation of affect; by engaging with pity and fear within the controlled setting of the drama, the spectator achieves a state of emotional and cognitive balance. Tragedy thus functions as a clinical apparatus, a site where the intensity of human emotion is channelled toward a stable, normative state. This integration of aesthetics, embodiment, and care remains equally evident in the ritual practices of the Greco-Roman and early Christian eras³. The incubation dreams within the sanctuaries of Asclepius cured through a synergy of vision and narrative, where the patient's immersion in a symbolic environment facilitated biological recovery. Similarly, apotropaic images functioned as protective shields, their formal properties serving as material interventions for the safety of the viewer. The Corybantic dances utilized rhythm and disorientation to produce collective healing, proving that the deliberate disruption of the senses can lead to a more profound somatic reorganization. In each of these instances, the early Christian icon included, form is inseparable from vital function. These sacred objects operated as active mediators of divine presence, acting as material forces that recalibrated the believer's sensory and spiritual life. Image, rhythm, and sound thus emerged as the earliest *technologies of fragility* - tools specifically attuned to the body's capacities and its inherent need for structural support. These practices anticipate Georges Canguilhem's concept of biological normativity, where the organ-

ism asserts its health by establishing new norms through its technical extension⁴. The advent of Modernity introduced a significant epistemic reconfiguration that redefined the purpose of aesthetic experience. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* established the aesthetic as a disinterested and autonomous realm, theoretically detached from immediate material or moral efficacy. This philosophical shift assigned the humanities the task of interpretation while reserving the field of intervention for medicine, creating a conceptual divide between meaning and action. Yet, beneath this rhetoric of neutrality, media continued to act upon life with immense power. From the printed word to the cinematic frame and contemporary code, every apparatus remains a site of transformative potential, continuing the ancient legacy of the *pharmakon* under the guise of disinterested art. It is within this historical continuity that crip media aesthetics establishes its theoretical ground, situating disability not as a marginal topic but as a central methodology for understanding media history⁵. Recent scholarship in disability media histories reveals that from the flickering mechanical pulse of early cinema to the algorithmic streams of the digital present, disability resides embedded in the very fabric of mediation⁶.

Every technological advancement carries with it an implicit taxonomy of rhythms and senses. These infrastructures define which sensory modes are normative, often striving for an ideal of "perfect communication" that envisions the total removal of noise, delay, and interference. Such "crip genealogies" demonstrate that the history of technology is fundamentally a history of bodies navigating and reshaping the constraints of their environment⁷. However, precisely where mediation becomes visible through its own instabilities, its true relational potential surfaces. The stutter of a digital signal, the scratch on a film reel, or the productive silence between words disclose the fragility that underlies every human connection. To study media through these instabilities is to acknowledge that every act of mediation is marked by dependence. Machines survive through constant human attention, just as perception depends upon a continuous process of adjustment and recalibration. In this light, the history of media reveals itself as an archaeology of maintenance - a persistent practice of repair where the fragility of the medium serves as the essential site of relation and care. By embracing this "trembling" quality of the apparatus, *crip media aesthetics* identifies fragility as the very condition that makes connection possible, thereby revealing how "crip times" necessitate a reconfiguration of temporal norms "crip times" necessitate a resistance to the normative temporalities of production in favour of a more sustainable, interdependent existence⁸.

Crip media aesthetics provides a lens through which this continuity can be illuminated. It does not treat disability as theme or metaphor but as method: a way of reading perception through its limits. Each flicker, vibration, or moment of opacity functions as a trace of the body within the machine, which does not merely represent fragility, but performs it, embodying the instability that sustains relation. What was once the

pursuit of mastery has become the art of sustaining fragility. The history of media, reread from a *crip* perspective, is thus the history of an ethics: an unbroken lineage of gestures that keep connection alive precisely by acknowledging its precarity⁹.

From the earliest experiments in moving images to the algorithmic promises of artificial intelligence, disability has been woven into the story of audiovisual media. Each technological leap has carried with it a hidden taxonomy of bodies and senses: those considered efficient, coherent, and healthy, and those marked as too slow, too unstable, too imperfect for the machine's rhythm. The fantasy of perfect mediation, free of noise or delay, has long depended on excluding fragility, almost presupposing the removal of interference. Within such a system, disability is treated as a malfunction: an error to be corrected rather than a form of knowledge.

Yet it is precisely within these so-called errors that mediation discloses itself. When a machine falters, the texture of relation becomes visible. The scratch on a film reel, the glitch in a video stream, or the silence that interrupts a recording remind us that media are fragile prostheses rather than transparent channels. In recent years, this awareness has evolved into a broader understanding of media as inherently crip: unstable, interdependent, and sustained by care within a new disability media paradigm, according to which slowness, delay, and distortion no longer signify failure but reveal how mediation feels.

Seen from this perspective, a *crip* reading of media history uncovers continuities of improvisation and dependency that cut across technological epochs¹⁰. Every device, from the magic lantern to the smartphone, is assistive. Each one extends the body but also exposes its limits. Mediation heals and harms simultaneously, operating in the space between support and disturbance¹¹. This fragility, far from being a flaw, is what allows media to act upon life. When images tremble, they solicit empathy; when systems break, they call for maintenance. Crip media aesthetics sharpens this intuition, framing the disabled point of view not as a metaphor or theme, but as a method for grasping how perception itself is structured.

2. Dismediations and misfits

The framework of *crip media aesthetics* establishes a rigorous epistemological horizon by situating media as active agents of vital intervention. Within this paradigm, media operate through Gilbert Simondon's concept of *couplage* - a structural and synergistic coupling between the technical individual and the human individual that constitutes their mutual individuation¹². Rather than observing the medium as an external addition to the body, the *couplage* identifies a relational field where the technical object and the biological organism evolve together. Aesthetic practices thus function as instruments of recalibration, reorganising perception into a new technical and sensory order that acknowledges the body's inherent variability as a source of formal invention.

This perspective identifies difference as the very substrate of perception. Mediation proceeds through interruptions, distortions, and delays which act as Bachelardian ‘epistemological ruptures’¹³, as forms of *dismediation*¹⁴ which constructively disclose the material conditions of connection: when a digital stream glitches or a sound stutters, the medium becomes a site of material disclosure. As the scientific mind progresses by breaking with immediate experience, the *crip* aesthetic rupture breaks with the illusion of seamless communication to reveal the mechanical and biological dependencies of the signal. Each media event, from the film cut to the static burst, constitutes a clinical encounter that re-coordinates the body and the world through the inventive potential of the error. The fragility of the apparatus is thus the enabling condition for a heightened awareness of the act of perceiving.

The *crip* ethos reclaims the ancient *pharmakon*, treating representation as a space where the wound is rendered visible and inhabitable. In this framework, care is a creative disturbance that prompts the imagination to align the senses through a productive excess. The notion of the *misfit* further reinforces this affirmative stance: it prioritises the choreography of friction, transforming the tension between body and environment into a generative site of expression¹⁵. By sustaining this tension, the body assists it to evolve into a new mode of technical existence, where the resistance to a rigid environment becomes its primary method, turning the “stutter” of the misfit into a rhythmic innovation.

This tendency finds concrete expression in contemporary film and documentary, where neurodivergent and disabled productions foreground alternative modes of temporality and embodiment. In Naomi Kawase’s *Radiance* (2017), the practice of audio description for the visually impaired is not a supplementary service but a primary aesthetic force that reshapes the filmic image into a shared sensory even¹⁶. Similarly, Alison O’Daniel’s *The Tuba Thieves* utilises d/Deaf experiences of sound and silence to restructure the narrative, allowing the gaps in the acoustic signal to dictate the rhythm of the visual edit¹⁷. These works extend the legacy of avant-garde practitioners like Stan Brakhage, whose direct manipulation of the film strip, scratching and painting the emulsion, acted as a material *dismediation* that forced the eye to negotiate the physical fragility of the medium. By foregrounding these “misfit” aesthetics, cinema moves beyond a medicalized concept of disability, presenting the sensory “lack” as an opening for a more complex, multi-layered engagement with reality¹⁸.

From a Simondonian perspective, in the hands of the *misfit* creator, the machine is not a tool for imitation but a partner in a process of mutual repair and maintenance. In digital culture, these dynamics extend to the infrastructure itself through crip time and digital debility¹⁹. Vulnerability establishes a requirement for constant care within networks and servers, shifting the focus from linear progress to an archaeology of maintenance. The slowing of networks, the crashing of servers, and the decay of data reveal that technology, like the living organism, exists in a state of perpetual

fragility. Repair replaces the myth of optimization; attention replaces the drive for efficiency. By situating the misfit at the centre of the technical *couplage*, disability serves as the primary teacher of method, revealing the fragility of the signal as the essential site where human and machine life are mutually negotiated. The *crip* horizon, therefore, is not a subfield of disability studies, but a fundamental reconfiguration of how we understand the co-dependence of bodies, senses, and the machines that sustain them.

3. Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution

The documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (2020) constitutes the empirical anchor for a crip media aesthetics analytical framework, offering a significant instance where the history of activism and the philosophy of care converge through the materiality of the filmmaking process²⁰. The constitution of a crip point of view converts the material conditions of disability into a “trembling camera” perspective: such affirmative disclosure of the Simondonian *couplage* articulates between the technical apparatus and the human individual that constitutes their mutual individuation. Within the movie, inconsistencies act as traces of embodiment, a tactile and unstable aesthetic where frames drift and focus trembles position the spectator inside an experience of perception that is contingent and radically interdependent.

From its opening moments, *Crip Camp* performs a Bachelardian epistemological rupture with dominant representational frameworks. The footage, originally shot by the People’s Video Theater, is tactile and unstable. Frames drift; focus trembles; sound lags behind image. Rather than conceal these inconsistencies, the filmmakers preserve them as traces of embodiment. The documentary thereby refuses the illusion of objective vision, positioning both camera and spectator inside the experience of perception as contingent, situated, and interdependent. This refusal of mastery defines the *crip gaze*: a perspective that does not look *at* disability but *through* it, transforming imperfection into epistemic method.

The camp itself functioned as a microcosm of liberation precisely because it was a space structured by interdependence rather than autonomy. The film mirrors that ecology of care through its audiovisual composition. Shots linger too long; voices overlap; the frame often cuts off parts of faces or bodies. The viewer is drawn into a rhythm of perception marked by delay, hesitation, and adaptation, the temporal logic of *crip time*. This temporality demands that spectators reorient their own attention, slowing down to inhabit a mode of awareness grounded in vulnerability.

One of the film’s most striking sequences shows a group of campers discussing their experiences of exclusion from mainstream schools. The camera remains static, positioned at eye level, allowing conversations to unfold without intervention. In this apparent stillness, the image vibrates with subtle motion: a shifting body, a nod, a tremor of laughter. The frame’s stability is deceptive - it is constantly negotiating movement,

listening, and waiting. These micro-adjustments reveal the ethics of the *crip point of view* as a constant recalibration between self and other, between image and viewer.

Later scenes, depicting the 1977 sit-in at the San Francisco federal building, extend this aesthetic of dependence into the political sphere. Activists are shown eating together, assisting with medication, sharing exhaustion. The camera records these acts of maintenance with the same attention it gives to speeches or demonstrations. Politics becomes indistinguishable from care. The film's sonic design deepens this sense of shared embodiment. Breathing, background chatter, and environmental noises are left intact. Silence, when it occurs, is full of texture. The absence of music in key sequences invites the ear to attend to the granular rhythm of life. The auditory field thus becomes an index of proximity: to listen is already to care.

In this perspective, *Crip Camp* seems to perform care through its very making process - editing choices, pacing, and framing. The montage, which alternates between archival footage and contemporary interviews, does not seek seamless continuity. Instead, it exposes the sutures of time. Memory, like the body, is shown as discontinuous yet coherent through rhythm. The cut becomes a gesture of reassembly: a visible scar that holds fragments together without erasing their difference.

This formal sensitivity aligns *Crip Camp* with a documentary form in which the cinematic dispositive becomes a site of rehabilitation for the viewer as much as for the subject²¹, translating the represented events into collective experience. The camp's community, revived through archival footage, functions as an affective infrastructure - a shared archive of gestures and sounds that persists across decades,

The final scenes condense this beneficial process into a visual metaphor. Former campers gather to watch the old footage projected outdoors. The light from the screen illuminates their faces, merging past and present in a single luminous field. Spectators become subjects, subjects become spectators. The documentary, like the camp, becomes circular: a feedback loop of recognition. The projection's flicker repeats the flicker of early cinema, reminding us that the medium's fragility has always been its power to heal.

Outside the film itself, this process continues through its digital circulation. Released globally on a streaming platform, *Crip Camp* reached audiences far beyond the disability community. Online discussions, virtual screenings, and educational programs transformed it into what some have called a "distributed classroom" of disability culture²². In educational settings, the film has been used to challenge the medical model of disability and to cultivate empathy through sensory engagement rather than moral persuasion. Such uses extend the film's therapeutic effect beyond representation, transforming it into an infrastructure of care within the digital public sphere.

Ultimately, *Crip Camp* demonstrates that the *crip point of view* is not merely a cinematic style but an epistemology of care. Such film models how media can make vulnerability visible without aestheticizing it, how representation can heal by revealing rather than concealing fracture.

4. Digital debility and the *crip* point of view

The digital environment has absorbed and amplified the logic of mediation that defined earlier media. Every platform, device, and interface now function as a prosthesis of attention, extending sensory capacities while reconfiguring the rhythms of perception. Yet in this economy of hyperconnection, vulnerability has not disappeared; it has become infrastructural. The online ecosystem depends on constant maintenance - updates, patches, repairs - that mirror the care once reserved for bodies. Within this context, *crip digital media* does not merely represent disability; it reveals the disability of mediation itself. Each error message, delay, or crash performs a small confession of dependence, exposing the fragility that sustains digital life.

Seen from a *crip* perspective, technology's imperfections become opportunities for attunement. What streaming culture frames as inconvenience—the buffering, the out-of-sync subtitles, the slow load—is also the moment when the user becomes aware of relation. The digital glitch reproduces, on a global scale, the perceptual ethics that *Crip Camp* enacts within the documentary frame. To inhabit broken media is to participate in a collective exercise of care. The act of waiting for a page to load or for captions to align becomes a micro-ritual of empathy: the recognition that communication, like the body, cannot be perfected.

This shift carries epistemological consequences. The classical “medical” gaze, structured by distance and control, finds itself displaced by a *crip gaze* grounded in proximity and interdependence. The *crip point of view* privileges partiality, slowness, and hesitation as epistemic virtues. It transforms perception into care and care into a form of cognition.

Digital platforms have also become laboratories for this transformation. Online disability communities curate and circulate what might be called beneficial infrastructures: caption archives, accessibility hacks, tutorials on adaptive design, virtual support networks. These spaces operate as distributed clinics, yet without hierarchy or closure. Healing here is not an outcome but a process of sharing. The digital “crip commons” demonstrates that *therapeia* can emerge from relational exchange rather than professional authority. The aesthetics of these practices - repetition, remix, asynchronous participation - translates the fragility of bodies into the rhythm of collective attention.

In conclusion, the *crip point of view* offers a model for this reorientation. From the trembling reel of early cinema to the glitching stream of digital culture, the same principle persists: mediation heals by exposing its fragility. In this fragility resides a quiet form of wisdom. To look through a *crip* lens is to acknowledge that every image, every interface, every body is incomplete, and that this incompleteness is what keeps the world responsive.

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