

Audio Description and Homoeroticism in the Miniseries *Fellow Travelers*

 Iván Villanueva-Jordán 

Peruvian University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

This study analyzes the audio description (AD) of sexual sequences in the television series *Fellow Travelers*. A central premise of the study is that contemporary telefiction draws from pornographic aesthetics to explore aspects of queer subjectivity and sexuality that earlier television narratives often neglected. To address this complexity, the study aims to complement the traditional narrative approach in AD with two additional approaches: the reflective and affect approaches. While the narrative approach highlights story progression, its limitations in conveying sexual intimacy led to exploring the reflective approach, which draws on gay porn studies to emphasize the symbolic dimensions of queer intimacy. Additionally, the affect approach, informed by Deleuzian film theory (Deleuze, 1986; 2009), considers how close-ups evoke emotional responses. Through a dual analysis—descriptive and prospective—this study proposes strategies to capture affective and symbolic elements, which can expand the potential of AD to address both narrative and subjective dimensions of contemporary queer telefiction.

Key words: audio description, taboo, sexuality, porn, affect.

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Introduction

Contemporary audiovisual representations of sexual and gender diversity converge in streaming platforms—primarily from the Global North—that produce telefiction for global audiences. As a result, LGBTQ+ content tends to address common themes—such as eroticism, HIV, health, race, and ethnicity—in similar ways, suggesting the emergence of shared ideological frameworks despite content variety (Griffin, 2024). This convergence is not only thematic but also rooted in economic and production models, which have led to an aesthetic regime where cinematic elements have gradually influenced the television medium, giving rise to a telecinematic visual culture or cinematic television (Restivo, 2019). In this context of “quality TV,” the eroticized body becomes central, reflecting how being perceived as desirable has gained cultural importance. This shift toward “making sex public” can be traced to mid-20th-century U.S. cinema, where the female body symbolized liberation and queer desire (Young, 2018). In contemporary media, the display of nudity in erotic contexts has shaped the formal characteristics of televisual shots, drawing from the conventions of a genre as controversial as pornography (Waldrep, 2021). With these shifts in global television aesthetics, Waldrep (2021, p. 173) argues that U.S. productions have ultimately dismantled the taboo surrounding the nude male body, including that of men of color.

In audiovisual translation, especially in accessibility for blind and partially sighted audiences, representing sex and sexual acts poses challenges for audio description (AD). Fryer (2016) classifies sex under censorship in her practical guide, noting the tension between making media accessible and restricting certain content. In this context, sex becomes a taboo, reflected in linguistic choices such as the absence of specific terms or limited vocabulary to describe on-screen actions (Sanderson, 2011). Sanz-Moreno has extensively studied the AD of sex scenes, examining censorship, self-censorship (2017), and taboo (2018b) through translation techniques that reveal how language renders the visual. Her work draws on cognitive concepts such as “mental image” (2017, p. 46) and “mental construct” (2020, p. 304) to explore how users process AD and compares linguistic and visual representation through the lens of equivalence. Sanz-Moreno shows that AD strategies vary depending on the type of sexual content—heterosexual/homosexual sex (2018a), relationships (2020), lesbian sex (2018c), or male–male sex (2017)—and that users prefer precise language to understand sexual scenes, reinforcing the need for AD to inform rather than omit.

Omitting sexual content in AD often reflects personal discomfort or implicit bias about what blind audiences should access (Reid, 2021). This lack of engagement limits storytelling and points to broader accessibility issues, where sexuality is downplayed or censored. It stems from the assumption that blind audiences neither need nor engage with sexual content, or that sex is inherently visual (Reid, 2021). Such essentialist views have been challenged by critical disability studies, which interrogate the systems that define who qualifies as a sexual subject based on ability, morality, appearance, age, race, and gender conformity (Liddiard, 2020). Crip theory, in particular, critiques how “compulsory able-bodiedness” has subordinated both disability and homosexuality, presenting a false sense of choice within a restrictive system (McRuer, 2006). In this context, accessibility must be questioned: is what claims to be accessible truly inclusive when it comes to

sexuality? Critical disability studies call attention to how the body and its representations shape who is seen as capable of experiencing pleasure. Moreover, it questions whether sexuality is inherently tied to visual aesthetics or if the dominance of visibility in erotic representation has erased alternative ways of conveying desire, particularly for non-normative bodies.

In this paper, I present a case study examining the representation of sexual diversity in the telecinematic aesthetics of streaming productions, focusing on the AD of homoeroticism—particularly graphic depictions of sex between men. The case study is *Fellow Travelers* (Bomer et al., 2023), a historical miniseries based on Thomas Mallon's novel (2007). The series follows the decades-long relationship between Hawkins Fuller (played Matt Bomer), a State Department official, and Tim Laughlin (played by Jonathan Bailey), an idealistic young man, as they navigate love and secrecy amid McCarthy-era persecution and the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. *Fellow Travelers* premiered on Paramount+ and Showtime in October 2023 and aired through December 2023. Television critics (Lawson, 2023; Shunyata, 2023) have praised the series, describing the representation of the sexual scenes as “jaw-droppingly graphic and crucial to the plot” (Lee, 2023, para. 2). As such, *Fellow Travelers* aligns with Waldrep's (2021) concept of “the space of sex” in contemporary television, where the eroticized body plays a central role in narrative development.

I aim to contribute to the study of AD of sex by offering a different perspective on taboo—one that not only acknowledges its restrictive nature but also explores the possibilities it offers. These possibilities are rooted in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913/2001), where prohibition is seen as fluid, shifting between objects and substitute actions. Butler (1997) builds on this, showing how restriction, law, and disciplinary power shape the (queer) subject “through the attachment to prohibition (in obedience to it, but also eroticizing it)” (p. 103), particularly when the taboo involves homosexual desire. Bataille (1986) similarly suggests that eroticism responds to taboo, serving as a cultural way to move beyond the biological or purely reproductive basis of sex and the prohibitions surrounding obscenity or violence. Eroticism, in this sense, creates meanings that foster a connection between bodies—a transgression aimed at achieving a fleeting continuity between them. Thus, taboo is not merely a prohibition but also an entry point for reflecting on (homo)eroticism.

2. From Narrative to Affect to Erotic Actions

In film and television AD, the narrative is a central concept rooted in structuralist theories of how stories progress through systematic components (Fryer, 2016, p. 8; Vercauteren, 2022, p. 79). This narrative approach shapes various AD models, helping to structure scripts through cause-and-effect logic or linear sequences of action. It also informs decisions about what to describe and how to convey it to blind and partially sighted audiences. The model most closely tied to accessibility is “audio narration,” which aims to recreate a film's “narrative impact” (Kruger, 2010). As an analytical tool, narratology has been used to identify the narrative function of image components—such as characters' bodies (Benecke, 2014), gestures (Mazur, 2014), or spatio-temporal settings (Vercauteren & Remael, 2014). Since audiovisual translation has traditionally treated film as text (Chaume, 2004; Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2021), AD has followed a similar textualizing approach, aligning with

narratology (Vercauteren, 2014). However, the notion of the film as “text” is only one of several metaphors linking literary and linguistic models to audiovisual media (Bateman & Wildfeuer, 2017). This matters when on-screen actions—though not advancing the plot—still carry representational weight. Sex scenes, for example, are often self-contained, focused on a few characters, and may become visually repetitive when leading to penetrative acts. Yet sex can also be implied, using close-ups, caresses, lighting, fades to black, or slow pans to convey intimacy. Contemporary queer television continues to rely on both softcore and explicit sex to develop relationships and represent desire.

While the narrative approach has been effective for AD, it may fall short in conveying the complexity of scenes involving sexual intimacy. To address this, I propose an affect-based approach grounded in Deleuzian film theory. In his *Cinema* books (1986; 1989), Deleuze examines how film, as both medium and technology, reshapes our understanding of movement and time, diverging from phenomenological and textual analyses (Deleuze, 2009, p. 115). Movement-image is central to his theory—which, at the risk of oversimplifying, can be understood as how cinema organizes objects and establishes relationships among them within a duration (Deleuze, 2009, pp. 113–118). One key type is the affection-image, typically conveyed through close-ups. These close-ups may focus on actual faces, but Deleuze’s notion of the face extends beyond physical features to include micromovements, color variations, and shifts in light. These elements form an intensive series—one that fluctuates in intensity—producing both a quality (affect) and an idea (emotion). In Deleuze’s terms, affect is a pre-conscious intensity that exists before subjective interpretation, which functions as a force that moves through bodies and spaces. Emotion, by contrast, is an individualized psychological experience shaped by personal and social meaning (Deleuze, 2009, p. 331).

A third approach, which I will call the “reflective approach,” draws from gay porn studies. In contemporary telecinematic productions, sex representations are not simply pornography. These shows (or films) establish a gaze or a point of view from aside, allowing spectators to observe without adopting a perspective that reveals all there is to see (Žižek, 1992). Unlike pornography, where the viewer’s gaze aligns with the camera to expose every detail, these narratives avoid what Escoffier (2021) calls “the last frontier” of softcore sex: “penetration... the defining characteristic of hardcore is insertion—oral, vaginal, or anal” (p. 22). Here, sex is shaped by thematic and aesthetic choices that influence *mise-en-scène*—from the tones and architecture of spaces to the movement and framing of bodies (Waldrep, 2021). Beyond formal aspects, these representations hold symbolic significance for queer audiences. This concern traces back to the 1980s debates on pornography’s role in gender and sexual equality and the responses from gay critics like Dyer (2002) and Waugh (1995). While neither sees pornography as a solution to inequality, both emphasize the importance of access to sexual imagery. Such representations help shape how sexuality, pleasure, and eroticism are understood, practiced, and imagined. In this way, they offer a symbolic framework for building subjectivity and political awareness. As Parsemain (2019) suggests, they function as a kind of televisual pedagogy, rooted in pleasure and entertainment that fosters access to sexual knowledge and the development of erotic expression.

3. Research Design and Analysis

Fellow Travelers is a representative example of a contemporary telecinematic series for two main reasons: its high production value and its integration of sex into the narrative. As noted in the introduction, high production values are reflected in its visuals, casting, and creative team, placing it alongside series like *It's a Sin* (Channel 4, Max), *Pose* (FX), *Euphoria* (HBO), and *Monster* (Netflix). Its approach to sex scenes also follows a broader trend in queer media, where intimacy drives character development and storytelling. These conventions make the series well-suited for analytical generalization, offering insights into broader patterns that can be compared with existing theories and applied to similar cases. However, since the show centers on male homosexuality, its findings may not extend to other forms of gender and sexual diversity.

This qualitative study used a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach, aligned with what Saldanha and O'Brien (2013, p. 65) define as "significance" in text selection—where units of analysis are chosen for their relevance to the research objectives. In this case, the selected scenes depict characters displaying affection or intimacy. Across the eight episodes, 45 sequences were identified and categorized into two groups: explicit and implicit intimate sequences. Explicit sequences show sexual acts such as oral or anal sex. In contrast, implicit ones involve gestures of affection (e.g., kissing, caressing, nudity in bed) with the sexual act implied by the scene's context.

As shown in Table 1, 15 sequences were explicit. These were examined through a two-phase coding process. The first phase used descriptive coding to identify and define the sexual acts portrayed. The second phase applied thematic coding to group these into broader categories, reflected in the "Sexual conducts" column of Table 1. The descriptive coding also informs the shot-by-shot breakdown in the next sections (examples 4 and 5).

Table 1

Sexual Sequences in Fellow Travelers

Sequence/ Episode	Duration	Characters Involved	Sexual Conducts	Space/Setting
(1) Ep.1	2 min 4 sec	Hawk and unknown	Looking/exchanging looks, kissing, anal sex, nudity	Public/restroom Private/hotel room
(2) Ep. 1	6 min 10 sec	Hawk and Tim	Kissing, dominance, anal sex, nudity	Private/Tim's room
(3) Ep. 1	3 min 36 sec	Hawk and Tim	Kissing, anal sex, caresses, nudity	Private/Tim's room
(4) Ep. 1	4 min 36 sec	Hawk and Tim	Kissing, dominance, oral sex	Private/Hawk's apartment
(5) Ep. 2	2 min 44	Hawk and Tim	Oral sex, partial nudity	Private/Hawk's apartment

Sequence/ Episode	Duration	Characters Involved	Sexual Conducts	Space/Setting
(6) Ep. 3	3 min 30 sec	Hawk and Tim	Kissing, dominance, anal sex	Private/hotel room
(7) Ep. 4	3 min 34 sec	Hawk and Tim	Kissing, caresses, oral sex	Private/Hawk's apartment
(8) Ep. 4	1 min 20 sec	Hawk and unknown	Looking/exchanging looks, dominance, anal sex	Public/back room (bar in San Francisco)
(9) Ep. 4	2 min 15 sec	Hawk, Tim, unknowns	Kissing, anal sex, oral sex	Private/work office
(10) Ep. 4	30 sec	Hawk and unknown; Marcus and Frankie	Anal sex, oral sex	Public/restroom Private/Frankie's apartment
(11) Ep. 5	20 sec	Leonard and unknown	Looking/exchanging looks, oral sex	Public/restroom
(12) Ep. 7	15 sec	Hawk and unknown	Oral sex	Private/Hawk's house (Fire Island)
(13) Ep. 7	49 sec	Unknowns	Oral sex, anal sex	Public/Woods (Fire Island)
(14) Ep. 7	3 min	Hawk, Tim, and unknown	Anal sex, kissing	Private/Hawk's house (Fire Island)
(15) Ep. 8	5 min 36 sec	Hawk and Tim	Kissing, anal sex	Private/Hawk's wife's house

The information in Table 1 supports the analyses in the following sections, especially regarding the sexual acts and spaces depicted. Some scenes are brief—under one minute (e.g., sequences 10, 11, 12, and 13)—while others last over five minutes (e.g., sequences 2 and 15). Shorter scenes tend to capture the moment of intercourse, often within a montage or rapid cut. In contrast, longer sequences include buildup and contextual actions. As shown in the table, all episodes except episode 6 include explicit sex scenes, suggesting that sex plays a central role in *Fellow Travelers*. Additionally, the presence of 30 other intimate, non-sexual scenes underscores that sex is one way—but not the only way—the series conveys homoeroticism.

Drawing on the three approaches outlined earlier—narrative, reflective, and affective—I conducted a two-stage analysis of *Fellow Travelers'* audio descriptions. The first stage involved descriptive coding to identify how the ADs refer to scenes and their elements, assessing whether they follow a narrative model or go beyond it. These results are presented in the first part of Section 4. The second stage compares the ADs with the corresponding visual sequences to identify omitted elements that could be included using reflective and affective strategies (Sections 4.1 and 4.2). This prospective analysis examines how ADs might be enhanced by addressing emotional tone, spatial dynamics, and the symbolic significance of sexual representation. While this article focuses on six selected examples, the full analysis covered all fifteen explicit sequences. These six are not statistically

representative but were chosen based on rigorous qualitative criteria to offer insightful illustrations of the broader patterns.

4. “And they have sex”

The ADs of the intimate relationship between Hawkins Fuller and Tim Laughlin, the main characters of the miniseries, are complex, if not contradictory, regarding sexual conduct—specific concepts and terms are used, yet sex is handled in general terms. It remains unclear whether the descriptions contribute to the portrayal of growing intimacy and escalating sexual advances across scenes or if they treat specific actions as isolated moments. From a narrative approach, where actions and characters are always assessed teleologically—driving toward an end or resolution—how, then, can sex function as an articulating element within these actions? The following examples can help clarify this relationship and uncover what lies behind the apparent contradiction.

These examples (1 to 3) are excerpts from the sequences, focusing specifically on actions leading up to and including the “sexual act” (whose definition will be discussed in the following paragraphs). The descriptions focus on identifying key narrative elements, such as spatial setting, gestures, facial expressions, appearance, posture, and movement actions. These described components of the scenes align with the inductive strategies for creating the target text within the narrative approach, which involves using specific scene details to help (audiences) construct a broader story (Vercauteren, 2022, p. 84). Additionally, describing specific actions, particularly through verbs, is often highly precise (e.g., “grab,” “spank,” “wince,” “lick,” “bite”). Departing from this focus on actions, a few statements stand out for describing micro-features, such as “The walls are covered in floral wallpaper” (example 1, line 8) and “Slivers of bright light stream into the room...” (example 3, line 4). As these details appear more as exceptions than part of an integrated approach to describing narrative actions, their placement is salient and may even feel disruptive.

The descriptions do address themes tied to queer culture, with specific contexts and representations also emerging. For instance, references to public but peripheral spaces, such as a public bathroom, align with the subcultural practice of cruising—anonymously or casual encounters in public or semi-public spaces that rely on non-verbal cues to signal interest and consent. This is reflected in the perceptual action of “a young man regards him” (example 1, line 2) (Levine, 1998). Dominance actions present in each example evoke the representations of early gay porn literature in America as well as 1970s portrayals of homoeroticism in film (Escoffier, 2021; Ruszczycky, 2021). While these references may seem obscure to general (non-queer) audiences, their prominence in the scenes reflects intentional creative choices by the production team. Along these lines, Ron Nyswaner, creator and showrunner of *Fellow Travelers*, emphasized the role of sex in shaping character depth and reflecting the shifting dynamics of sexuality within the historical contexts explored in the show (Vaillancourt, 2023).

Example 1. Sexual Sequence 1, Episode 1 (0:07:11)

- | | | |
|----|--|-------------------------------|
| 1 | [Scene 1] Hawk walks into the building, a public bathroom. | movement, spatial setting |
| 2 | [...] A young man regards him with his mouth open. [...] | perception, facial expression |
| 3 | Hawk slowly approaches him as he takes off his cap. [...] | movement |
| 4 | The young man who wears a leather jacket slams Hawk | dominance |
| 5 | against the stall. [...] Hawk kisses the man aggressively | kissing, dominance |
| 6 | grabbing his face with his hand. | |
| | | |
| 7 | [Scene 2] In a dimly lit bedroom, Hawk and the man have | spatial setting, sex |
| 8 | sex. The walls are covered with floral wallpaper. Hawk holds | spatial setting |
| 9 | the man's short blonde hair with his fist and spans him | dominance |
| 10 | violently. | |
| 11 | He closes his eyes with pleasure. Hawk winces and hits him | facial expression, sensation |
| 12 | again, then pushes his partner down on the maid bed. | dominance |

Example 2. Sexual Sequence 6, Episode 3 (0:34:35)

- | | | |
|----|--|---------------------------------|
| 1 | [...] Tim scrambles to loosen his tie. Hawk grabs it and rips it | undressing |
| 2 | off. Next, he quickly unbuttons his white shirt and removes | undressing |
| 3 | it, then takes his white undershirt off. He stands staring at | perception |
| 4 | Hawk in white briefs and glasses. [...] Tim stares intently | perception, undressing |
| 5 | into Hawk's eyes as he takes off his underwear, then holds | perception, undressing |
| 6 | them up and tosses them aside. Hawk steps forward. [...] | movement |
| 7 | Hawk ties Tim's tie around his wrists, standing close to him | dominance, perception |
| 8 | with a stony gaze. [...] Hawk slowly pushes Tim towards the | dominance |
| 9 | bed, then pushes him down onto his back. | dominance |
| | | |
| 10 | He pulls him closer by his feet, then climbs on top of him, | movement |
| 11 | Tim's feet resting on his shoulders. [...] Hawk licks his hand, | posture, licking |
| 12 | then unzips his pants. Tim stares up at him. [...] Hawk kisses | undressing, perception, kissing |
| 13 | Tim with an open mouth. | |

Example 3. Sexual Sequence 15, Episode 8 (0:26:00)

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------|
| 1 | Tim grabs the back of Hawk's neck and kisses him hard, | kissing, movement |
| 2 | pushing him back against the other side of the doorframe. | movement |
| 3 | They stumble towards the mattress. Then Tim pushes Hawk | movement, dominance |
| 4 | down onto it forcefully. Slivers of bright light stream into | movement, spatial setting |
| 5 | the room past thick curtains. | |

- | | | |
|----|--|-----------------|
| 6 | Hawk and Tim have sex on the thin mattress. Hawk reaches | sex |
| 7 | behind him to hold Tim's leg. Tim reaches forward and | sex |
| 8 | wraps his arm around Hawk's chest, pulling his upper body | posture |
| 9 | towards his own. | |
| | | |
| 10 | Hawk turns his head slightly to face Tim's. Tim bites down | posture, biting |
| 11 | on Hawk's shoulder hard, then releases. He adjusts his | |
| 12 | glasses, still holding Hawk's body close to him. | posture |

The statements “Hawk and the man have sex” (example 1, line 7) and “Hawk and Tim have sex...” (example 3, line 6) stand out as abrupt and self-contained, especially compared to the more detailed descriptions that precede them. In these cases, “to have sex” is presented as self-evident, requiring no elaboration, and bypassing the imaginative or sensory dimensions of pleasure. In example 2 (lines 10–12), sex is not named but implied, as in the description of Hawk climbing on top of Tim, licking his hand, and unzipping his pants. This suggests a balancing act between expressiveness and restraint—mirroring how drama avoids crossing into the pornographic. In *Fellow Travelers*, the sex scenes explore a range of representations—of pleasure, energy, orgasm, and desire—central to modern constructions of homosexuality (Foucault, 1978). Yet, the visual abundance of these scenes contrasts with the verbal minimalism of the AD. This linguistic reserve can reproduce the secrecy historically surrounding queer sexual content (Tinkcom, 2002), even as such content is now more openly represented.

Structurally, these AD statements rely on simple, paratactic sentences with minimal cohesion, often describing only one action per clause. This reflects the tendency to treat each visual moment as a discrete frame. Complex sentences—those that express a sequence or flow of action—are rare. As Fryer (2016) and Vercauteren (2012, 2014) note, new AD statements generally follow visible changes in the image. However, this approach overlooks the medium-specific nature of film: moving images are not just sequential stills but temporal constructions that shape how we perceive action and emotion (Deleuze, 1986, pp. 5–7). Treating film as a series of fixed moments limits the ability to convey the fluidity and rhythm of cinematic sex. However, I mention this as an acknowledgement of the main features of AD—brevity, economy, and concreteness (Fryer, 2016, pp. 60, 70)—not as a critique of its epistemology. My point is that while some voices advocate for going beyond strictly sequential descriptive (or “objective”) statements, these perspectives remain supplementary rather than central to current AD practices.

4.1. Affect

While it is true that not everything can be conveyed within the gaps between lines of dialogue, most of the intimate scenes in *Fellow Travelers* are either silent or accompanied by moans, breathing, and gasps—vocalizations that sometimes align with the visual content and at other times function as “semi sync.” Additionally, a common editing choice in the AD of this series is to lower the volume of

the original soundtrack when characters are audibly expressing pleasure. This choice, however, does not fully consider how the soundtrack contributes to the scenes' erotic stylization; these sounds, or "pornoperformative" vocalizations (Cante & Restivo, 2004), are integral to the intimate atmosphere. Nevertheless, the sound design of these scenes, along with their extended duration (see Table 1), provides the opportunity for alternative (not necessarily more detailed) descriptions of the characters' intimate or sexual behaviors, or at least the flexibility to structure descriptions that align with the moving images. A key consideration for these alternative descriptions is the role of the close-up—not as a cinematographic term to be explicitly included in the description, but as a visual resource that conveys emotion and heightens sensory engagement.

A comparison of the AD and the shot-by-shot breakdown in example 4 reveals significant content differences. The initial segments (1a and 1b) will be discussed later, with particular attention to the warm color tones in the shot. However, segments 2b through 5c symptomatically feature close-ups. In the AD, segment 3a references only one close-up (the hands), while the scene itself contains three notable close-ups: Tim's face, Hawk's and Tim's hands (3b), and Tim moaning with his mouth open (3c). These shifts do not mark a new scene with changes in location or characters; instead, they capture subtle but observable (micro)actions, such as shifts in expression or tension in the hands. Additionally, in segment 5a, the AD focuses solely on Tim's gaze ("wide eyes"). Yet, this moment of admiration or cognition occurs as Hawk also stares intently at Tim while positioned on top of him (5b and 5c).

Example 4. Sexual Sequence 3, Episode 1 (0:26:54)

Audio Description	Shot by Shot Description
(1a) Hawk stands there in a brown hat, holding a radio. He holds it up and steps inside. Tim takes it with a smile.	(1b) The lighting features warm, almost orange tones. Hawk stands there... [ellipsis reflects continuity, possibly matching the official AD]
(2a) The radio sits on the wooden dresser as Hawk and Tim have sex.	(2b) The radio appears in a <u>close-up</u> before the camera pans to reveal Hawk on top of Tim, penetrating him. While the focus remains on the radio in the foreground, the bodies are visible in full extension, though blurred. Hawk's movements are steady and slightly aggressive.
(3a) Tim grabs the wooden bedpost. Then Hawk puts his hand on top of his partner's.	(3b) A <u>close-up</u> follows, capturing Tim's expression—a mix of pain and pleasure. Hawk, positioned on top, watches Tim's face while maintaining his movements steady. The focus shifts to their hands in the foreground (another <u>close-up</u>), while their bodies remain in motion in the background. (3c) [Omitted shot description] Another <u>close-up</u> focuses on Tim's open mouth as he moans.

(4a) Orange light fills the room, reflecting off Hawk's muscular body.

(4b) A close-up of Hawk's lower back and waist, seen in profile, emphasizes his muscular form. The orange lighting casts shadows that define his body. The movement of Hawk's body slows down due to the editing, making his motions appear more rhythmic.

(5a) Tim looks up at him with wide eyes.

(5b) A close-up shows both Hawk's and Tim's faces, with Hawk on top.

(5c) [Omitted shot description] Another close-up shows Tim's open mouth as he moans while Hawk, still on top, maintains his movements and keeps his gaze fixed on Tim.

In segment 2a, the AD centers on the radio in the foreground, implying a relationship between this inanimate object sitting on a table and the intimate moment as Hawk and Tim engage in sex. This choice could be interpreted as reflecting Hawk's gift to Tim, symbolically enriching Tim's rented and austere room with a touch of entertainment. However, the composition of the frame itself is not fully conveyed; while the close-up is on the radio, the true focal point lies in the background, where "the camera pans to reveal Hawk on top of Tim." The image is blurred, yet their bodies remain fully visible, lying on the bed. The interplay of light and shadow evokes what Deleuze associates with affect in images. For Deleuze (2009, pp. 285–287), this contrast between visible and hidden elements, rooted in expressionist cinema, mirrors a tension between the spiritual and the organic, the inanimate and the dynamic. Thus, the softened contours of the two male bodies in the background emphasize their movement and make them, though blurred and positioned behind the radio, as much a focal point as the object in the foreground.

In the previous section, certain statements addressed the spatial setting but felt somewhat out of place, given how they were integrated with action descriptions (example 1, line 8). In example 4, segment 4a, the narrator notes the orange tones in the scene and connects them to Hawk's body—a relevant detail, as it highlights elements that are aesthetically rather than narratively linked. However, these orange tones are present from the beginning of the sequence and are not noted in earlier descriptions; segment 1a, for instance, focuses solely on Hawk entering the room with the radio. Regarding time constraints, the AD occurs within a scene that lasts nearly 15 seconds, offering a sufficient opportunity to reference the setting. The orange hue serves as a visual contrast to the cooler tones of public spaces, such as government offices or streets, where the characters must conceal their attraction. Most scenes depicting Tim and Hawk's intimate and sexual connection occur in private settings, where the saturated warm tones create the impression of an orange filter.

The Deleuzian concept of the affect-image and the affective approach proposed here help highlight details omitted from the AD but evident in the shot-by-shot breakdowns. While these elements are analyzed individually, they work together within each shot and across the montage to create a continuous circulation of affect—one that extends beyond a scene-by-scene narrative. From a multimodal perspective, sustained gazes and intense stares between characters form vectors that guide the viewer's attention and reveal underlying emotions or desires. These micromovements, combined with other semiotic cues, help convey meaning at the level of individual shots (Kress &

van Leeuwen, 2006). For instance, in segments 4a and 4b, Hawk's lower body is intentionally focalized through motion and highlighted by warm lighting. Subtle muscular movements become visible through light and shadow, emphasizing rhythm and bodily motion. As Deleuze notes, affect-images operate relationally—not simply as a succession of frames, but as a unified whole (Deleuze, 1986, p. 198). While the AD does not need to name insertive sex explicitly, it overlooks key visual cues that suggest penetration as part of the sexual and homoerotic representation.

4.2. Reflexivity

In his essay "Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Pornography," Dyer (1994) describes the final sequence of the 1985 gay porn film *Inch by Inch* (Sterling, 1985):

A subway draws up at a station; a man (...) enters a carriage of which the only other occupant is another man (...); after some eye contact, they have sex, that is, (...) 'suck, fuck, rim, titplay'". (Dyer, 1994, p. 50)

Dyer argues that while some pornographic films use classical cinematic conventions to create realism—organizing narrative space, for example—they also push these conventions to their limits by explicitly showing what "to have sex" entails. This way, pornography stretches cinematic rules to achieve what Williams (1999, p. 48) refers to as "maximum visibility" —the intent to show "too much" by emphasizing specific frames, movements, and body parts in explicit detail. *Fellow Travelers* does not go that far but instead employs cinematographic techniques and conventions to approximate the explicitness of pornography without fully crossing into it. This creates a nuanced tension, making the portrayal of sex in the series particularly salient.

In some sexual sequences of *Fellow Travelers*, the AD is nearly exhaustive, capturing specific actions and visual elements. For instance, in example 5, segment 3a describes much of the on-screen activity, while the shot-by-shot breakdown (3b) adds context on how the characters' bodies are framed—a point further discussed below. However, other descriptions omit important details. In segments 4a and 4b, for example, only the initial shot of Tim sucking Hawk's toe is mentioned, with no reference to the escalating intensity or explicitness of the scene. Although each frame is structured through a shot/reverse shot technique, this progression is not conveyed. These omissions likely relate to the nature of the obscene and the integration of porn aesthetics into mainstream media, in this case, a streaming series. Here, "obscene" does not imply moral judgment but refers to "sexually explicit acts that once seemed unspeakable and were thus kept off-scene" (Williams, 2004, p. 4). The lack of detail in this segment is less surprising when compared to segment 5b, which contains the most explicitly obscene shots, yet the AD remains similarly restrained. While example 5 appears in the first episode, its omissions reflect a consistent pattern across the miniseries, shaping how sexual sequences are described.

Example 5. Sexual Sequence 4, Episode 1 (0:37:37)

Dialogues and Audio Description	Shot by Shot Description
(1a) [AD] Tim slowly slides down Hawk's body, giving him a seductive look.	(1b) [Mid-shot of Hawk and Tim] They lock eyes as Tim moves down Hawk's body, stopping at his waist and attempting to remove Hawk's boxer shorts.
(2a) Hawk: Not yet.	(2b) Slight high-angle shot from behind Hawk's head
(3a) [AD] Hawk pushes Tim away so that he leans on his elbows. Hawk puts his foot on Tim's chest. [...] Tim slowly sits up and removes one of his socks, holding his calf tightly in his hand. [...]	(3b) [Wide two-shot, framing Hawk's fully naked body and Tim's upper body] They continue to gaze at each other. [AD...]
(4a) Hawk: Yeah, open up, yeah. [AD] Tim begins sucking Hawk's toe.	(4b) [Shot/reverse shots] [Slight high angle shot, with the camera behind Hawk's head] Tim puts one of Hawk's toes in his mouth. [Mid shot of Hawk looking down at Tim] Tim has his mouth wide open, sucking Hawk's toes.
(5a) Hawk: Now show me what my boy really wants.	(5b) [Omitted shot description] Tim sits up, bringing his face close to Hawk's groin and rubbing it against Hawk's bulge. He opens his mouth, attempting to grasp Hawk's penis through the fabric of the boxers, hands searching for the waistband. [The camera pans to a close-up of Hawk's face]. Hawks keeps his gaze steady and intense.

The omissions in segment 5b suggest a broader difficulty in narrating actions deemed obscene, particularly when there are no fixed expressions for describing highly explicit acts. Notably, the phrase “oral sex” is used in a scene from episode 2 (see Table 1), even though the act is not explicitly shown—highlighting an inconsistency. This implies that the reluctance to name body parts or sexual acts may stem from how obscenity is handled when it dominates the screen. While *Fellow Travelers* uses cinematography to challenge sexual taboos, language seems less equipped to do so. The absence of specific descriptors may reflect uncertainty, (self-)censorship, or limitations in the lexicon available to describe queer sex. Culturally, some discourses remain restricted to maintain social norms around “acceptable” sexuality (Derrida, 1967/2001). These constraints likely reflect not a lack of professional skill, but a deeper cultural discomfort with representing sexuality explicitly. Regarding time constraints, segment 5a is described only during the first 2 seconds of a 10-second span, which could have allowed for a more detailed narration—especially when compared to segment 3a, where the AD extends across a full 10 seconds for a similar amount of content.

In another sequence (example 6), a line of dialogue provides context for what is about to unfold on screen, marking a turning point in the characters' sexual dynamics. In the final sexual sequence of the season finale, when Hawk tells Tim, “I want you to fuck me,” it shifts their established sexual roles. Until this moment, Hawk's position as the top or insertive partner had been reinforced through

masculine-coded markers such as his larger, muscular physique, strength, and aggressiveness—traits that, within the subcultural framework of gay sexuality, align with dominance—while Tim had consistently taken the receptive role. However, previous ADs do not explicitly convey this dynamic. Although they describe body postures and movements, they do not indicate who the active or insertive partner is.

This scene finally positions Tim as the top, yet it frames him as more affectionate and caring while penetrating Hawk. These two phases of penetrative gay sex align with what Tollini (2021) describes as the binary model in gay pornography, where gendered assumptions and markers of masculinity and femininity are mapped onto the insertive/receptive roles. This binary model has gendered implications but also reflects broader sociocultural values surrounding gay sex. For instance, experiences of anal intercourse are strongly shaped by embodied perceptions of power (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018). The final sexual sequence in *Fellow Travelers* suggests not only a form of surrender on Hawk's part but also an act of trust—framing sexual penetration as both vulnerability and a sign of love. Without access to the visual markers that redefine Hawk and Tim's sexual dynamic, blind and visually impaired audiences may miss this crucial moment of character development and narrative complexity.

Example 6. Sexual Sequence 15, Episode 8 (0:26:00)

Dialogues and Audio Description

Hawk: I want you to fuck me.

Tim grabs the back of Hawk's neck and kisses him hard, pushing him back against the other side of the doorframe. They stumble towards the mattress, then Tim pushes Hawk down onto it forcefully. Slivers of bright light stream into the room past thick curtains. Hawk and Tim have sex on the thin mattress. Hawk reaches behind him to hold Tim's leg. Tim reaches forward and wraps his arm around Hawk's chest, pulling his upper body towards his own. [...]

The concept of reflexivity suggests that shows like *Fellow Travelers*, which include near-explicit sex scenes, employ cinematographic techniques to approach but not fully cross into pornography. This careful use of framing, composition, camera work, and attention to the actors' bodies serves to distill elements of pornography into aesthetic choices. Dyer (1994) uses the term self-reflexivity to describe how film can both depict and consciously reveal its own construction—"texts that have wanted to draw attention to themselves as porn, that is, as constructed presentations of sex" (p. 54). Here, however, reflexivity also encompasses the way on-screen sexual acts can evoke a broader eroticism, specifically homoeroticism. This implies that techniques once reserved for depicting the "obscene" now serve to navigate the boundaries of the sex/homosexuality taboo. For AD, acknowledging these techniques does not mean incorporating film terminology when describing these scenes (as discussed earlier) but rather focusing on the specific elements that construct the sexual representation.

In analyzing the intimate and sexual sequences in *Fellow Travelers*, the construction of homoeroticism can be explored through categories such as corporality, sexual positionalities, specific sex positions, and expressions of pleasure.

- **Corporality:** This category encompasses the physical characteristics of the actors, such as body size or apparent age. In intimate scenes, a two-shot often frames both characters side by side, highlighting their physical differences or similarities—one may appear more muscular, taller, or thinner than the other. These bodily contrasts establish a visual relationship between the characters, conveying physical dynamics that are not verbalized but visually implied.
- **Sexual roles:** This category describes the roles characters assume in penetrative sex, specifically as the insertive or receptive partner. Characters may maintain a single role or alternate between roles, and this can hold narrative significance within the historical, cultural, or social context of the story. Sexual roles can contribute to character development, signifying shifts in intimacy, power dynamics, or relational depth in the storyline.
- **Sex positions:** This category considers the specific bodily arrangements and physical proximities that characters adopt during intimate interactions, including their approach to touch and caress. Often, these positions draw from familiar cultural repertoires of sexual intimacy, serving as visual cues that can shape the portrayal of pleasure and closeness between the partners. For example, certain positions may allow for more eye contact, creating a sense of intimacy, while others might emphasize the physicality of the encounter, conveying a focus on pleasure.
- **Pleasure:** This category refers to how characters express and respond to each other's actions, conveying enjoyment or excitement in a manner that can be perceived as a shared experience. Pleasure is often represented as a mutual exchange, where each partner offers something of themselves—physical or emotional—in an act that strengthens their bond. This dynamic of pleasure as a “gift” can evoke feelings of vulnerability and connection, reflecting the emotional depth in the scene.

These categories have been previously used to examine the representations of gay masculinities in contemporary streaming shows (author). Additional relevant categories, such as health, can be considered when exploring how televisual representations also convey socially responsible messages, especially regarding sexual conduct and prevention. For example, describing characters using condoms or engaging in preventive measures against sexually transmitted infections reflects responsible behavior and functions as health communication within the shows, aiming to influence audience attitudes toward sex. This represents a final aspect of reflexivity, where entertainment assumes a pedagogical role, and telefiction becomes a critical medium for queer pedagogies (Parsemain, 2019).

5. Concluding Remarks: What's Taboo Got to do With This?

A first response is: quite a lot. Throughout the analysis, and as a non-native English speaker, I considered whether the words “penetration” or “to penetrate” carry a specific taboo, as they are notably absent in the ADs of *Fellow Travelers*. As discussed in the introduction, drawing from Freudian and Bataillan perspectives, taboo does not function purely as a prohibition. Instead, it serves as part of society’s way of establishing structure—such as an economic system based on the nuclear family, labor, and reproduction—by placing a “no” on certain behaviors (like homosexuality or non-reproductive sexual acts). Taboos are not always rational or equitable and may perpetuate restrictions against certain groups while preserving the privileges of others. Thus, a taboo is not only a barrier to certain behaviors but also a force that shapes individuals who comply with these restrictions, reinforcing the “real” nature of the prohibition even though it is based on representation, repetition, and other performative processes.

Fellow Travelers is not a subversive work that seeks to dismantle heteronormative representation or radically reimagine how diverse sexuality appears on screen. It aligns with prevailing conventions in LGBTQ+ series, where sexuality enriches character depth. It also reflects the influence of porn aesthetics within mainstream streaming content. However, *Fellow Travelers* does engage with taboos related to sex and homosexuality, transgressing them without entirely overturning them. It presents “all-male moving images” that clearly depict men having sex in various ways. While explicit shots are avoided, elements like sexual positions, body aesthetics, and expressions of intermale desire and pleasure are integral to the portrayal, subtly indicating penetrative sexual acts. These scenes do not necessarily drive the narrative forward; instead, they deepen the representation of the interpersonal bond—romantic, sometimes melodramatic, and in some sense sadomasochistic—between the two main characters. In this context, the narrative approach in AD proves limiting for representing sex between men; the affect and reflexivity approaches serve as complementary perspectives.

The comparisons between the ADs and shot-by-shot breakdowns in this analysis were meant as constructive assessments rather than critiques of professionals’ work. From an academic standpoint, I acknowledge these ADs as real since they are published and widely accessible on streaming platforms. This study aimed to open alternative approaches to AD, drawing on insights from affect theory and porn studies. While these perspectives have been explored to some extent within the broader field of audiovisual translation (AVT), particularly in the context of its recent queer turn, they remain underutilized within accessibility. By applying these frameworks to the AD of intimate scenes, accessibility can continue to give feedback to AVT—from a specialized focus on intimate representations to broader discussions on translating gender and sexuality.

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