

# THE AMBIVALENT VISION: THE “CRIP” INVENTION OF “BLIND VISION” IN *BLIND MASSAGE*

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#### **Acknowledgements**

This paper is adapted from my master's thesis at the London School of Economics and Political Science. I offer my thanks to Dr Jacob Breslow for his supervision and feedback during my writing of the original thesis. I thank Dr Patrick Thomsen for his support and advice during the publication. I also appreciate the two anonymous reviewers who offered valuable comments to help refine this paper. Lastly, I dedicate this paper with love to my father, Jianhui Wang, who passed away in 2019.

Paper Submitted: 4th November 2022

Accepted for Publication: 10th July 2023

Published Online: 3rd November 2023

## Abstract

*Blind Massage*, a film directed by Lou Ye (2014), depicts disability and sexuality through stories of blind masseurs. It employs “blind vision”, a novel form of cinematography that depicts blindness, assisting the film in unfolding the subjective experience of the blind masseurs in both sexual and non-sexual scenes.

With the invention of blind vision, *Blind Massage* introduced a non-normative cinematic experience that decentres vision, while cinema had previously been perceived as an intrinsically visual-centred art form. This paper, therefore, asks: How does the ambivalent representation of vision contribute to the cinematic representation of disabled sexuality? Does it reinvent or reinforce the normative understanding of disabled sexuality?

As a response, the paper argues that the invention of blind vision destabilises the ableist foundation of cinema that centres on visual experience as the source of pleasure. It mainly grounds the argumentation on criticism of Mulvey’s (1975) gaze theory, which discusses visual pleasure and narrative cinema with the psychoanalytic gaze notion. The notion of blind vision will be elaborated on, not only in cinematography but also as a cultural implication that touches on disability studies and sexuality studies. Methodologically, this paper will, use crip theory, feminist film theories, and psychoanalysis to understand the representation of disabled sexuality in *Blind Massage*.

The paper will be structured as follows. It will first review previous academic discussions on disabled sexuality in cinema. Then, it will elaborate on the invention of blind vision through scene and cinematography analyses and consider how *Blind Massage* echoes with a Mulveyian gaze theory in terms of marking the gaze as a normative power. Finally, I argue that blind vision could be regarded as an approach to reverse such power and release the potential resistance towards normativity in cinema, with a Lacanian revisit and reworking of the Mulveyian gaze theory.

**Keywords:** Blind vision, visual pleasure, gaze theory, disabled sexuality, normative power

“Finally, he returned to the blind cinema, sitting on those old seats, listening to those old films. The seats roll over and over, as if the tide has drowned the sky.”

*Blind Cinema* (Zhou, 2004)

I once listened to a song performed by Zhou Yunpeng, a Chinese musician with a visual impairment. It narrates the story of a blind boy who became obsessed with art while listening to films in a blind cinema since childhood. As the boy grew up, he travelled across the country to perform his music. Still, he was disappointed by the sexual relationship with a girl he encountered and eventually returned to the cinema in despair. The last few lines, as quoted, touched me deeply. The obscure metaphor of “tide drowning the sky” indicates a surreal world with synaesthesia, where auditory experiences form visual sensations. However, how do we comprehend it? Does the metaphor of the tide symbolise the inevitable frustration of blindness or a novel sensational experience that reverses the celebration of vision as a normative?

With these queries in mind, I walked into a blind massage centre, the kind of facility that you can identify in every Chinese city. The government officially promoted the blind massage industry in the 1960s to “support and protect disabled people in employment” (Liu, 2015). Nowadays, it remains a significant site for government-supported special education (China Disabled Persons Federation, 2022a; Deng et al., 2001). In 2021 alone, over 20,000 people received education and training as blind masseurs (China Disabled Persons Federation, 2022b). The masseur I met that day was an old acquaintance of my late father, who died of leukaemia. Before he was diagnosed, the massage centre was where he sought to release bodily pain, which we only knew later was one of the leukaemia’s symptoms. I closed my eyes as the massage began. My exhausted body was relieved by the blind masseur’s gentle

touch. The touch reminded the able-bodied that bodily conditions do not determine the capability of care. In other words, in the blind massage centre, the able-bodied are the ones who know less about their bodies. The two different experiences pose ambivalence. While Zhou’s song euphemises frustration within the blind community, the touch conveyed by the blind masseurs, on the other hand, is full of comfort and vitality.

*Blind Massage* (Lou, 2014), a film directed by Lou Ye and adapted from Bi Feiyu’s novel of the same name, represents a similar ambivalence. It depicts the blind masseurs’ struggles and desires within sexual relationships in a blind massage centre named Sha Zongqi. Likewise, blindness is sometimes recognised as a barrier to intimacy, pleasure, and sex in the film.

*Blind Massage* is famous for its avant-garde experiment in cinematography. Often recognised as one representative of China’s sixth generation of filmmakers<sup>1</sup>, Lou Ye prefers to explore the potentiality of the camera to invent novel cinematic experiences and representations of subjectivity and feelings. Specifically, *Blind Massage* is recognised as his boldest experiment in film language. He hybridised normal lens, tilt-shift lens, and Lensbaby to invent a strange, uncomfortable visual experience, coined “blind vision”, representing the subjectivity of people with visual impairments (Han, 2020).

This paper, therefore, asks: How does the ambivalent representation of “vision” contribute to the cinematic representation of disabled sexuality? Does it reinvent or reinforce the normative understanding of disabled sexuality?

I mainly argue that the cinema has been adopting ocularcentrism (Grosz, 1990, p. 19) as suppression of disabled sexuality. At the same time, *Blind Massage* reworks cinematic visual experiences with the invention of blind vision which subversively

<sup>1</sup> Sixth generation often refers to the Chinese filmmakers active in the 1990s, who diverged from mainstream film and political ideology, turning to minority groups and avant-garde film language, especially the representation of subjectivity, anxiety, and sex (Wang, 2018).

challenges cinematic able-bodiedness. This paper examines some film scenes in *Blind Massage* that represent the blind masseurs’ frustration in intimate and sexual relationships. By tackling how ableist norms constitute the barrier of disabled sexuality, I find that *vision* has been marked as the material condition that shapes the power relation between “the blind” and “the sighted”. I compare this observation to Mulvey’s (1975) gaze theory to elaborate on how pleasure is theorised as ableist, and especially sighted. Feminist film theories built on Mulveyian gaze theory overlook and reinforce such ocular-centrism through its theoretical construction. With a revisit to Lacanian psychoanalysis, I provide an amendment to feminist film theories that renders the inclusivity of disabled bodies. I suggest that, in this film, the dismantling of ocularcentrism or the decentring of vision is coined in the juxtaposition of blindness and cinematic visuality. In this way, the cinematography of *Blind Massage* actively disturbs the ocular-centric structure of pleasure in cinema. Furthermore, clarifying the conflation of vision and gaze in ocularcentrism may justify a non-normative cinematic pleasure that orients towards the potentiality of resistance.

### Studying Lou Ye and *Blind Massage*

Previous studies on *Blind Massage* primarily centre on the film’s cinematographic innovation and representation of disabilities. One thread of studies includes the film’s representation of blindness as an aesthetic renovation (Chen, 2015; Shi, 2019). Referencing the film’s cinematographer, Zeng Jian, the unconventional filming technique that shapes a gloomy and dangling visual experience has been concluded as the notion of blind vision representing the visually impaired people’s subjectivity (Chen, 2015). Another account of studies comprehends the film as a representation of people with visual impairment in China and a rallying cry for the mainstream society’s inclusion of them (Guo, 2019; Jiang, 2020). Nevertheless, this interpretation fails to consider people with visual impairment as active agents but a marginalised group that requires salvation from the able-bodied.

Chris Berry (2020), taking a step further, focuses on the film’s exploration of sense and sensuality and includes sexual desire as an important motif. He argues that, rather than mimicking the experience of blindness, *Blind Massage* adopts an “anti-mimic strategy” to offer an embodied comprehension (Berry, 2020, p. 153). Berry mainly adopts the auteur theory, interpreting the cinematic representation of blind masseurs as evidence of Lou Ye’s artistic work patterns. Unfortunately, although Berry’s analysis is incisive in tackling embodiment, I argue that the auteur theory can be problematic, regarding the auteur as the only decisive factor for film production, overlooking the film’s independent significance.

From another perspective, Ke Ma’s (2015) study sheds light on how the film represents beauty. Ma’s study is inspiring in revealing how disability and sexuality entangle in constructing women’s beauty as a normative, sighted conception. It makes up for the previous studies’ neglect of the power relation embedded in the representation of disabled sexuality in *Blind Massage*.

### Projecting Disabled Sexuality in Cinema

It is not novel for film reviewers and audiences nowadays to encounter the representation of disability and disabled bodies in cinema. However, representation does not necessarily entail inclusion. According to Mitchell and Snyder (2000, p. 19), it sometimes leads to an over-exhibition of the disabled characters’ effort to overcome the hardships generated by their bodily capacity. Being comprehended as a barrier, disability, when represented in cinema, often functions as a celebration of normalcy (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). Such analysis stems from disability studies’ fruits on how disability is a socially constructed concept.

Before the 70s, the most famous account for disability was the medical model, which recognises disability as a medically determined material condition that needs to be cured or overcome. Disabled activists in the 70s challenged this notion

by pointing out that social norms may actively shape how we comprehend disability (Shakespeare et al., 1996). For example, a disability, when viewed as a medical condition, is neutral, but viewing disability as a “terrible unending tragedy” (Kafer, 2013, p. 2) results from a cultural construction.

Crip theory takes things a step further and argues that disability as a category is constructed via society’s particular highlight on able-bodiedness. “Able-bodiedness”, according to McRuer (2013), explains that society is organised around the demand of bodily capacity, and therefore, those who fail to meet such demands are excluded. In other words, it is this exclusion itself that constitutes disability as a barrier. Moreover, enforcing able-bodiedness makes a future with a disability unimaginable (Kafer, 2013). As a result, only when the disability has been cured can disabled people be included as part of the normative society (Kim, 2017, p. 5). Such an enforcement of ableism rationalises the suppression towards the nonnormative bodies and furthers the regulation. Therefore, to crip theory, a disability can no longer be comprehended as a material condition but intrinsically and inevitably embedded in the chaotic discourse production process.

The representation of disabled sexuality is often limited or overlooked (McRuer, 2006; Siebers, 2012; Mollow, 2012; Kim, 2017). According to Tom Shakespeare (1996) and Anne Finger (1992), from the disability movement to the academy, sexuality has been neglected from the so-called “serious” discussion. Furthermore, people with disabilities are often excluded from normative sex subjects. They are either recognised as “incapable of or uninterested in sex” or “sexual excess” who are unable to control their sexual desire (McRuer, 2006; Mollow, 2012). Furthermore, Kim (2017) argues that disabled people are often assumed to be “virgins” who have never experienced sexual pleasure. Therefore, a need to “cure their virginity” is recognised as necessary. Such exclusion of disabled people from sexual subjects indicates bodily capacity as a prerequisite for pleasurable sexual relationships.

In cinema, the representation of disabled bodies does not always aim for inclusion but constitutes another reinforcement of able-bodiedness. According to Chivers and Markotic (2010, p. 1), disabled bodies are not represented as “agential”. By flagging their agency, they intend to disclose that cinema often fails to empathise with disabled people’s lived experiences but marks disability as a “metaphor for emotional or spiritual deficiency” (Chivers & Markotic, 2010, p. 1) and serves for the validation of the able-bodied audience’s admission of compulsory able-bodiedness.

Although such insight successfully tackles that cinematic representation is not immune to the criticism of compulsory able-bodiedness and its exclusion of disabled sexuality, it does not consider how filming, as a specific art form, complicates the crystallisation of uneven social structure. Still, there is a need to ask: From what aspects does cinema reinforce compulsory able-bodiedness?

### **Able-Bodiedness and Disabled Sexuality in Cinema**

*Blind Massage* depicts the story of love, sex, and anxiety between a group of blind masseurs at Sha Zongqi Massage Centre. Xiao Ma, whose eyesight was deprived due to an accident at age nine, lived in pain after learning his blindness could never be cured and decided to work as a blind masseur. When he met his colleague’s fiancée, Xiao Kong, he experienced a fierce but painful love and desire that could not be fulfilled. A similar experience also haunted Sha Fuming, the owner of the massage centre. When the sighted customers talked about the beauty of Du Hong, a female masseur in the centre, he fell into a hopeless pursuit of the notion of “beauty”, which he and Du believed to be fundamentally visual. Ultimately, every character experienced disappointment in intimate and sexual relationships to different extents, and Sha Zongqi Massage Centre had to embrace its fate of finality. Only Xiao Ma, who left the centre with a sex worker he met,

recovered some of his eyesight in a fight and continued his journey of pursuing love and intimacy.

The opening sequence of *Blind Message* is extremely devastating and bloody. The narrator's voice calmly states Xiao Ma's story of losing his eyesight in a car accident at nine. The first shot gives a close-up of a spinning wheel, indicating the presence of an unfortunate accident. Zooming out, the wheel is revealed to be a part of the toy held in Xiao Ma's hand. Xiao Ma lies unconsciously in the arms of a man, surrounded by the police and several bystanders. The scene is obscure and dim as if the accident happened at night. The narrator says, "*From then on, it was as though he was in an endless night, surrounded by the scent of shadows.*" The next shot is a big close-up of young Xiao Ma's eyes, then ears. With a sudden blur, the child's face transforms into a grown-up. The narrator states that Xiao Ma has been hoping for recovery during his growth. The grown-up Xiao Ma, wearing a hospital gown, overhears that his blindness can never be cured and that the doctors should not keep the truth from him anymore. Knowing about being deceived the whole time, he wanders in the hospital's hallway and runs into an acquaintance who asks if he would like a meal. He accepts and walks away, holding a bowl of food. The focus keeps deviating from his face, and the camera constantly shakes. The surrounding suddenly darkens, but the lighting exclusively concentrates on Xiao Ma. As soon as the whole scene restores light, Xiao Ma cuts his throat with a piece of broken bowl - his blood splashes on the hallway wall. Xiao Ma falls onto the ground, and the deep cut on his right neck is blood-red.

Why did Lou Ye start the film with such a bloody, violent, and hopeless sequence? One possible interpretation is to imply a vital motif that disability is often perceived as a "terrible unending tragedy" (Kafer, 2013, p. 2). Therefore, the future with a disability should be undoubtedly unwanted. A lie has sustained Xiao Ma's hope for life, and his later suicide attempt implies despair for the future, deriving from the revealed truth that his blindness is incurable. Here, "no future" does not indicate that Xiao Ma cannot sustain a living but only suggests that the

future with a disability is unimaginable and undesired for him. For Kafer (2013), "no future for the crip" implies a society that celebrates bodily capacity and excludes those who fail to meet the bodily requirement.

In the first debut of Sha Fuming, the owner of the Sha Zongqi blind massage centre, he is dating a woman in her parents' presence. This is a classic Chinese matchmaking scene. Although Sha appears charming with wit and humour, and the woman appreciates his personality, their relationship depends on the parents' decision. The woman's mother interrupts their conversation and forbids her daughter to date a man with visual impairment. The date ends in extreme frustration for Sha.

Similarly, another couple, Dr Wang and Xiao Kong, came to the blind massage centre to escape Xiao Kong's parents' disapproval of their relationship, hoping to start a new life together. As Khorman (1999) points out, in the heterosexual and patriarchal system, the marriage exclusion of people with disabilities in the Chinese context tends to view these men's "incompetence" in labour and making social connections as a sign that they are improper for marriage. By viewing a man's bodily capacity as the prerequisite for marriage, as Khorman (1999) further argues, such a stereotype actively influences the sexual subjectivity of men with disabilities. For instance, it is assumed that men with a disability are never able to date able-bodied women. As Khorman's interviewee illustrates, even if they are in a relationship with able-bodied women, there will be contemptuous voices mocking the woman's "lame choice". In other words, a disability has been normatively understood as a barrier to intimate and sexual relationships, excluding the subjects with disabilities as non-normative and undesired.

Such an interpretation of blindness as a disability is embedded in the pre-assumption that materiality is structured as the basis of cultural meanings. However, according to crip theory, the authority of materiality is untenable and should be queried. In the case of *Blind Message*, I will question how the very bodily condition of blindness is perceived and, most importantly, are

fundamentally intertwined in formulating the sexual subjectivity of the blind. Specifically, in the next section, I will elaborate on how cinema has been catering to such a reinforcement. I suggest that, according to Mulvey's (1975) gaze theory, cinema's explicit highlighting of a visual capability should be considered a form of suppression. The ability to gaze embodies the possession of power. It implies a dangerous proposition that the very art form of cinema has constantly been internalising an able-bodied position. However, can such reinforcements be reversible?

### **"To-Be-Looked-At-Ness" and Gaze Theory**

"The blind and the sighted are not equal. It is simple. The blind are in the light, while the sighted hide in the shadows. This is why the blind and the sighted keep to themselves. In the minds of the blind, the sighted are an entirely different species. A dominant animal...

An animal with eyes... An all-seeing creature, possessed of an almost spiritual significance. Their attitude to the sighted is like that of the sighted to the gods: Respective, but kept at a distance."

*Blind Massage* (Lou, 2014)

The tension between the sighted and the blind is stated by the narrator. The ability to see does not only signify the difference in bodily capacity but also shapes "the sighted" and "the blind" into two groups that are embedded in uneven power relations. The ability to see indicates the privilege to know and a possession of normative power. This uneven power relation embedded in the ability to look is significant in constructing sexual subjects, exemplified by the following scenes about Sha Fuming's struggle in his relationship with Du Hong, a female blind masseur in the massage centre.

The first scene illustrates how beauty is perceived in relation to blindness. In this scene, Du is preparing to serve a sighted male customer. Curious, the customer scrutinises and asks

Du, "Can you see?" After Du says no, he complains with astonishment, "How is it possible!" Du says, "Why impossible?" She hesitates for a few seconds, then smiles, "Is it a compliment?" He responds with certainty, "Of course. Like normal people. She is so beautiful. Really pretty. Beautiful!" The customer continues making comments. His words pose an incompatibility between beauty and blindness, perceiving beauty as essentially visual and able-bodied. "How is it possible?" "Like normal people. She is so beautiful." These comments imply a "neutral standard of female beauty" (Ma, 2019, p. 21) that is embedded in the patriarchal order that women's attractiveness is dependent on their "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Ma, 2019, p. 26). Ma argues with Laura Mulvey's (1975) tackling of the male gaze that objectifies the female characters as sex objects in mainstream cinema, where women can only be perceived as "the image" and men as "the bearer of the look". Therefore, the ability to look and see is demonstrated as the conclusive factor that shapes power relations.

What I find insightful in Mulvey's influential work is how she incisively tackles "the gaze" as the mechanism of cinema's phallogocentric and heteronormative structure. Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema targets pleasure as a generator of the spectators' drive to watch. By "gaze", Mulvey is adopting the Lacanian gaze, especially in the context of mirror stage identification. As Mulvey reads Lacan, the mirror stage, which refers to the growth phase where the children recognise themselves in the mirror, is significant for ego formation and self-identification. Moreover, she argues that mirror stage identification is always misrecognition. The self is recognised as an ideal image in the mirror, while the self is always imperfect.

Mulvey believes that mirror stage recognition is also significant in cinema. She argues that the male spectator, by identifying with the male characters, actively gains visual pleasure from the cinema. Such visual pleasure comes from the mainstream cinema's unconscious adoption of a patriarchal structure that portrays women as "passive sex objects" (Smelik, 2016) that merely serve male pleasure. In



other words, in cinema, women are not active agents but "objects to be looked at". Moreover, mainstream films have internalised the patriarchal structure and the camera internalises the male gaze. Therefore, by identifying with the film camera, male spectators fulfil their visual pleasure as gendered and patriarchal.

In other words, gaze theory underscores how spectators employ power via the gaze while gaining cinematic pleasure. Mulvey argues that the male gaze objectifies the female characters as sex objects in mainstream cinema, where women can only be perceived as "the image" and men as "the bearer of the look". While Ma (2019) adopts the Mulveyian gaze theory in tackling the "to-be-looked-at-ness" in *Du*, I suggest that it contributes to this paper in a way that articulates the ability to look like the conclusive factor that shapes power relations. However, while the Mulveyian gaze theory mainly tackles the patriarchal structure in cinema, it leaves a question mark on the validity of adopting it into the discussion of cinematic disabled sexuality. I suggest that in the specific case of *Blind Massage*, gaze theory's emphasis on vision could overcome this potential gap. Notably, Mulvey developed her theory from Lacan. Grosz (1990, p. 39) argues that the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is highly ocular-centric or vision-centred, prioritising the vision in his identification theory, relying heavily on the ability to see. For instance, the mirror stage identification explicitly demands that the child actively looks at their image in the mirror.

Furthermore, what the Mulveyian gaze theory has revealed intrinsically is the power that the cinema may employ. Such an argument inherits Foucault's (1995) power theory, which marks power as all-pervasive rather than exclusively monopolised by the sovereign subject. In the case of cinema, film internalises the power relation that disciplines women as passive objects to be looked at, catering to the male voyeurs.

We may ask the same question in the case of disabled sexuality: Does cinema employ a similar power relation that caters

to the able-bodied (or the sighted, in the specific context of *Blind Massage*) spectators, and thus, enforce a similar suppression towards the disabled, or the blind subjects?

I suggest that, in *Blind Massage*, the gaze does not only shape the power relation between female characters and male spectators but also between "the blind" and "the sighted". Notably, in the scene analysed, Sha Fuming, the massage centre's owner, stands aside as the male customer talks about Du. He is fascinated by the customer's words. After the customer leaves, Sha asks Du if she was born with blindness. She responds, "You could say that", without any further explanation. Following a brief silence, Sha walks away. Du's facial expression shows relief, and she rubs her left eye lightly.

The film enters the next scene, where Sha is massaging the customer who praised Du's beauty. He explains to the customer that he is replacing Du's shift because he worries that a green hand like her will fail to satisfy the valued customer. The customer continues his comments, "She is beautiful, did you know?" Sha responds, "How would I?" The customer immediately apologises for overlooking Sha's disability. Later, in another scene, Sha overhears some customers praising Du's beauty. He then stops Du in the office and starts touching her face. "I just want to know how beauty feels." However, he realises that he cannot understand beauty simply by touching Du. "I never pitied myself until today. What is beauty? It obsesses me every day, all the time, night and day, I just want to look at you. Du Hong... Beauty is attractive, isn't it?" Then he starts to sniff and lick his fingers, which just touched Du's face. "Beauty was a disaster, whose time had come. Sha Fuming had felt the essence of Du Hong's, and though he still didn't fully understand the importance of a woman's appearance, he knew one thing for certain. Love and beauty could be the same thing," the narrator states. The notion of beauty is engraved into Du and Sha by the sighted male customer's repetitive comments, which represents the "truth" from his witness. He is entitled to acknowledge the presence of beauty and lecture the blind masseurs on the "truth" about themselves. As Sha is visually

impaired, beauty, for him, has become a symbol of love that is desired but cannot be reached. Metaphorically, the idea of beauty also represents the “sexual attractiveness” of women, on the other hand (Ma, 2019, p. 21). In an erotic scene, the blind masseuse Jin tells her lover Tai that she is the second most beautiful girl in the blind massage centre. Here, beauty embodies sexual attractiveness. While Tai cannot visually experience the idea of beauty, Jin convinces him with examples of the sighted people’s comments. As a result, the vision has been flagged as an authority for sexuality and, therefore, a prerequisite to a desirable sexual relationship. In the case of Du, she is not only being gazed at as a woman but also as a woman with visual impairments, indicated by Garland-Thomson’s (2001, p. 346) incisive proposition that “being looked at is the social experience of being disabled”. Therefore, Du’s inability to look is both gendered and disabled. It is also notable that Du appears embarrassed towards the customers’ compliments and pity for her disability. Later, in her dialogue with Sha, where the latter is stating his desire for her beauty, Du angrily answers that beauty, as a visual notion, is meaningless for her. Therefore, the juxtaposition of sexuality and disability has complicated the theorisation of pleasure and gaze.

In *Blind Massage*, the normative gaze at the blind masseurs is even more intensified in the art forms dominated by visual sensations. According to Garland-Thomson (2001) and Markotic (2008), disabled people have been perceived and represented as objects of gaze that are analysed by the able-bodied in the media. Specifically, in visual arts, disabled bodies are often fetishised as exotic and, at the same time, denied as the improper bodies that uncomfortably trouble able-bodied people. In other words, disability has permanently been embedded with metaphorical implications. For the able-bodied, disability is denied for their fear of being disabled and is fetishised because of their “sentiment” for such “suffering” (Garland-Thomson, 2001, pp. 338-342). Notably, the viewers or spectators are often assumed to be the privileged subjects who are heterosexual, male, white, and able-bodied (Stacey, 1994; hooks, 1992). Therefore, as the gaze can inscribe normative cultural meanings into the cinema

(Mulvey, 1975), the bearer of the look, the spectator, possesses such normative power. This argument aligns with some significant critiques against the Mulveyian gaze theory. The crystallisation of “gaze” as the jumping-off point of disciplinary power flags an inevitable dilemma, as cinema is fundamentally nested in the capability to look. It may also solidify a binary subject-object relationship by constructing the characters as passive objects that bear the “gaze” and the spectators as the active object that gazes, whose desire and pleasure shape the cinematic representation. Hence, it implies a dangerous proposition that, for suppressed groups such as women and people with disabilities, there is no room for escape within the context of cinema.

While Mulvey (1975) argues that resistance can be realised by revealing the presence of the camera, disclosing how pleasure is formulated to subvert such patriarchal pleasures, in the case of *Blind Massage*, it is meaningful to ask whether or to what extent *Blind Massage* provides the potentiality of resistance towards the normative gaze. I argue that by interrogating the film’s cinematographic invention of “blind vision”, a new form of resistance could be imagined.

## Cinematography and the “Blind Vision”

In the 64th Berlin International Film Festival, *Blind Massage* was honoured with the Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution for cinematography. The cinematographer Zeng Jian coins “blind vision” to describe the film’s unconventional filming (Chen, 2015). Han (2020) argues that, in *Blind Massage*, blindness can be understood as one form of visual experience and contributes to formulating a novel sensual film style. However, as my analysis unfolds, blind vision should be developed into a radical move rather than a style that possesses the power of destabilising cinema’s ocularcentrism.

Lou Ye is keen on experimenting with cinematography (Cheng & Huang, 2010). He adopts a “semi-subjective image” (Wang,

2018; Han, 2020, p.116) to defamiliarise the audience with the characters. In contrast to the subjective image or the objective image, the semi-subjective image neither resembles the subjective angle of the characters nor represents the third-party observation. Take another film directed by Lou Ye (2000), *Suzhou River*, as an example. *Suzhou River* narrates a surreal love story. “I”, a photographer living in Shanghai, falls in love with a dancer named Meimei. From Meimei’s words, “I” has learnt a heartbreaking love story about how a boy called Mada deceived his lover, Mudan, which resulted in Mudan’s suicide. In Mudan’s last words, she said she would return for Mada as a mermaid. When Mada encounters Meimei, a girl who looks like Mudan and is dressed as a mermaid in the nightclub, he immediately takes Meimei for Mudan. However, it then transpires that Meimei is a different person. At the end, Meimei disappears from “my” world, and Mada dies in his journey while looking for Mudan, who, he believes is still alive. Bizarre and surreal enough, the police find Mada’s body alongside Mudan’s in the Suzhou River, revealing that Mada found Mudan in the end, and together, they had committed a Romeo and Juliet-style suicide.

Notably, “I” never shows his face during the film. Lou Ye plays an incisive trick in *Suzhou River*. By portraying “I” as a professional photographer, the images are naturally represented via “my” camera. According to Han (2020, p. 115), such a technique can be regarded as semi-subjective, as it blurs the boundary between the objective world and the subjective character and highlights the camera’s existence.

*Blind Message* employs the semi-subjective image for inventing blind vision through cinematography (Chen, 2015). Apart from normal lenses, Zeng Jian utilised Lensbaby and tilt-shift lenses to refilm the scenes by night, creating an interruptive experience and a “semi-subjective image” that shuttles between subjectivity and objectivity. The scenes shot with different techniques are edited together afterwards for an alien visual experience in cinema (ARRI, 2014).

The scene of Xiao Ma’s fight with Brother San is a legible example. Having fallen in love with the sex worker, Mann, Xiao Ma visits her workplace. He finds out that Xiao Ma is with Brother San, a sighted client, and then interrupts them. Furious enough, Xiao Ma is knocked out by Brother San and thrown out from the site. The sex workers attempt to stop them, “He is blind, Brother San!” Their words indicate Xiao Ma’s inferior position in a physical fight. When Xiao Ma’s body hits the ground, the surroundings suddenly transform from daytime to a night-time scene. The picture becomes nearly indecipherable as Brother San and the sex workers are in a quarrel and shove. The hand-held camera shakes intensively, and the sounds become fuzzy and distant. As soon as Xiao Ma stands up, the scene restores light, and the spectators can identify that Xiao Ma is standing on a daytime street, surrounded by crowds and vehicles. The on-lookers stare at Xiao Ma as he walks away. The close shot of Xiao Ma then becomes a close-up of his profile, and the scene darkens again. As Xiao Ma keeps running, brightness and darkness alternate repeatedly. For the spectators, this is not the most pleasant experience of film-watching. The disruption of the spectator experience echoes Mulvey’s (1975) proposition on dismantling the patriarchal order in cinema. She argues that, “the look of the camera” and “the look of the audience” are made “subordinate” to the “look of the characters at each other within the screen illusion” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 17). In other words, as the spectators cannot actively realise the camera’s existence and act of looking, they naturally internalise and reinforce the patriarchal structure. Accordingly, “the first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 17). In this sense, Zeng Jian and Lou Ye’s experiment with blind vision joins the pioneer against “traditional film conventions” described by Mulvey.

## Crippling the Vision in Cinema

While similar cinematography can interrupt patriarchal pleasure, it also interrupts the visual experience for the sighted spectators. The sighted spectators are not privileged (Han, 2020, p. 163). Therefore, the assumption of an able-bodied spectator and a prioritisation of vision has become a plastic idea. It echoes the crip theory's inquiry on the crystallisation of materiality as the irreducible bearer of meanings. Kafer (2013) argues that rather than a material condition, disability is formulated through discourses. Although vision has been marked as the source of power dynamics, crip theory indicates that the discursive power embedded in vision is not inevitable nor unmodifiable.

However, some criticise that portraying disability as the product of discourse risks conflating various disabilities and neglecting the embodied experiences of disabled people (Graby & Greenstein, 2016). For instance, it would be problematic to argue that the embodied experience of cerebral palsy and blindness are the same, as the latter clearly poses the specific question concerning the act of looking. Specifically, as we can identify in *Blind Massage*, this film treats blindness explicitly as a distinct form of bodily condition.

McRuer (2006, p. 30) has noticed the consequence of deconstructing a disability as he distinguishes a "critically disabled position" from a "virtually disabled position". By virtually disabled position, McRuer points out that crip theory seems to suggest that, to some extent, everyone can experience disability or be perceived as disabled at a certain point of their life, thus, disability is not a fixed identity or category but the result of perceived compulsory able-bodiedness. This virtually disabled position risks conflating various bodily conditions and embodied experiences. On the other hand, by turning to the critically disabled position, McRuer suggests that the adoption of crip theory needs to be treated critically, which means consciously taking its consequences into account (McRuer, 2006).

To stay critical, I suggest "crip" should be understood as the *verb*, therefore a *tool*, that provides the potentiality to make amends for the "damages" caused by crip theory itself. In *Bodies that Matters*, Butler (1993) responds to a similar query in queer theory, which asks, "if everything is discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is a text, what about violence and bodily injury? Does anything *matter* in or for poststructuralism?" (Butler, 1993, p. 4). Butler did not give a straightforward answer. Instead, they invite the readers to question "How and why materiality has become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction?" (Butler, 1993, p. 4).

By switching the question, Butler (1993) underscores that the assumed irreducibility of materiality is suspicious. Constructing matter as irreducible is another product of power structure, and matter does not pre-exist the discourses. In other words, Butler does not aim for an entire denial of materiality but a political standpoint that keeps us alert to its potential implications. I suggest that Butler's move towards matter can inspire us to consider whether the emphasis on blindness as material is also constructive and how such a revisit and re-theorisation of blindness can contribute to a non-normative elaboration of disabled sexuality in the case of *Blind Massage*.

*Blind Massage's* interrogation towards matter could be read more precisely alongside other films depicting blindness. I read it with Fernando Meirelles' *Blindness* (2008) and Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993). I argue that their cinematographic understandings of blindness reveal how vision is often understood as an irreducible material condition in cinema.

*Blindness* (Meirelles, 2008), adapted from Portuguese writer José Saramago's novel of the same name, describes an epidemic sparked by a blinding virus. People infected by the virus suffer from an amaurosis-alike symptom. The ophthalmologist in the film describes it as "all the lights were turned

on" (Meirelles, 2008), which brings enormous light into the pupil. The film is produced in low saturation and often uses overexposure to represent the viral "blindness". For instance, in the scene where the ophthalmologist starts showing amaurosis-like symptoms, he and his partner, the only immune person, are talking in the bathroom. The spectators can see their images reflected in the bathroom mirror from the outside perspective. Then, it takes a deep focus shot of the ophthalmologist's face reflected in the mirror with his partner's profile in the blurred foreground. The ophthalmologist's image almost blends into the overexposed background, shifting the focus to the woman's profile. The couple is quarrelling as the ophthalmologist worries about its infectivity and refuses to contact his partner physically. Their fight is filmed in a medium shot, rendering a spectator experience for the audience. The camera zooms into the overexposed background with dazzling whiteness as soon as the couple reconciles. In this scene, *Blindness* utilises unconventional cinematography that depicts blindness with overexposure and tilt-shift. Nevertheless, it adopts a realistic mimicking of the ophthalmologist's embodied experience of losing eyesight due to the over-absorbing of light.

*Blue* (Jarman, 1993) was produced as Jarman's last work in his last days suffering from AIDS, which caused him to lose most of his eyesight at the time. The film is in a class by itself, representing a void of blueness in stillness and Jarman's self-narration across the 79-minute runtime. He dedicates the sensational blue from his blindness to the spectator as a touching autobiography. The absence of cinematography speaks for the embodied experience of blindness. His voice states, "*In the pandemonium of image, I present you with the universal blue. Blue, an open door to soul, an infinite possibility becoming tangible*" (Jarman, 1993). It poses the impossibility of cinematography for blindness but the possibility of empathy at the same time. Instead of experimenting with cinematography, Jarman resists the idea of borrowing an ocularo-centric tool to represent the absence of vision.

On the other hand, *Blind Massage* neither employs realistic cinematography nor accepts the impossibility of cinematography. In Xiao Ma's defeat, the indecipherability of the image interrupts the cinematic experience for the spectators, revealing that the cinema is already "crippled" in the sense of crip theory, as the representation of normativity has always been fragile.

Furthermore, the very manifestation of a visually disruptive spectator experience may render a crip spectatorship. If the audience is identifying with the camera while being disrupted at the same time, they actively realise that their able-bodiedness has become untenable. According to McRuer (2006), they are experiencing their own disability at this very moment and have become "crippled" from their previous normative status. The Muleyian gaze theory becomes problematic in imagining a binary formulation of characters who are gazed at and spectators who gaze, as well as assuming monolithic spectatorship. In criticism against Mulvey, bell hooks (1992) coins the term "oppositional gaze" in black spectatorship. She first narrates her own experience as a black woman, for whom the "gaze has always been political" in both "black parenting and black spectatorship" (hooks, 1992, p. 115). She argues that gaze is always intertwined with power, as the repressed is obstructed to look. However, hooks deems that it does not necessarily lead to the complete erasure of agency and resistance. It is precisely because of such repression that "the overwhelming longing to look" is aroused. Especially in the domain of film and television, the underrepresentation or problematic racist representation of the black body can be interrogated by black spectators.

Moreover, as there is a gap between the subject in the films and the black spectators, black women cannot identify with the "imaginary subject" (hooks, 1992, p. 122). Therefore, their gaze is critical and constantly questions the representation in the films. She thus coins the term "oppositional gaze" in opposition to the Mulveyian gaze, emphasising another kind of spectator neglected in Mulvey's work that actively challenges

the patriarchal order. In the case of *Blind Massage*, although the blind is represented as being gazed at by the sighted, according to hooks, the power to resist is not deprived. The “crippled” spectators are given the ability of the “oppositional gaze” that interrogates the representation of blindness in cinema. In this sense, by adopting the structure of the “oppositional gaze”, the alteration of cameras as an approach to debunk the problematic representations is supplemented by querying another side of the power within the gaze; that is to resist. Therefore, it may flag a different resistance from Jarman’s (1993) complete rejection of cinematography.

### Gaze and Look: Revisiting Psychoanalysis

Han (2020) defines Lou Ye’s film style as “new sensationalist”, a term borrowed from Japanese literature theories that represent the arts that project subjective feelings onto objects, creating a “subjective reality” (Han, 2020, pp. 1-2). Specifically, for Lou Ye, this projection of the subjective feeling is realised via his continuous innovation in cinematography. Therefore, according to an interview with Lou Ye, the invention of “blind vision” becomes a way to represent the characters’ inner world, (Han, 2020, p. 158). For instance, the scene of Xiao Ma’s suicide alternates between brightness and darkness. It is unlikely that this is a realistic imitation of blindness but becomes a representation of the inner world of Xiao Ma. Overhearing that his blindness can never be cured, the world around Xiao Ma darkens, creating a feeling of despair and depression. According to Han (2020, p. 162), the sudden restoration of brightness signifies violence and suffering, rendering a shocking experience for the audience.

Similarly, Georgia Kleege’s (2018) book on disability and visual art argues against the idea of equating blindness with the “absence of sight” (Kleege, 2018, p. 28), citing a few blind authors’ autobiographical writings. In this way, she challenges what she concludes as “the hypothetical blind man”, referring to the pre-assumption of philosophical, theoretical constructions that wrongly equal “seeing” and “knowing” (Kleege, 2018,

p. 29). By dismissing this untenable equation, Kleege may inspire another interpretation of the “blind vision” that subversively interrupts the ocular-centric philosophy.

I therefore argue that such “blind vision” should not be understood as a literal expression of blindness. Kleege’s argument points out a potential gap. However, if the blind vision is not material, can we still argue that it actively challenges the ableist structure of cinematic pleasure? How should we comprehend it? Is it merely a representation of feelings? Or, as Kleege (2018) suggests, is it a subversion of the ableist foundation of visual art?

As I am mainly considering Mulvey’s (1975) appropriation of Lacan in gaze theory, it is notable that Mulvey has uncritically inherited its “ocularcentrism”. Mulvey’s theory is incisive in underscoring the equalisation of the ability to look and the dominant position of power in cinematic pleasure. Nevertheless, Grosz (1990, p. 39) points out that the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is “ocularcentrism” or “vision-centred”. Lacan seems to prioritise the vision as his theory of identification highly relies on the ability to actively look. For instance, the mirror stage identification explicitly requires the child to look at their image in the mirror actively. However, Grosz also underscores that Lacan has considered the identification process for the blind and argues it “may vary considerably from that of sighted subjects” (Grosz, 1990, p. 39).

Therefore, Lacan needs to be revisited and compared to the Mulveyian gaze theory. Specifically, I argue that Mulvey’s misreading of Lacan regarding the implications of “gaze” reinforces the ableist understanding of disabled sexuality in cinema.

Gaze is not a term monopolised by Lacan. Jean-Paul Sartre (1993) theorises “gaze” in terms of intersubjectivity, entailing the awareness that the act of looking realises others’ subjectivity. Notably, for Sartre, gaze is identical to the act of looking. However, when Lacan adopted and developed Sartre’s notion of gaze in psychoanalysis, the usage of gaze changed.

As Grosz (1990, p. 79) points out, for Sartre, the look/gaze underscores the subjects as the bearer of the look, and any subject can be 'the observer or observed'. However, Lacan prioritises "the possibility of being observed" (Grosz, 1990, p. 79). For Lacan, it is under the gaze that someone can realise their existence.

Furthermore, Lacan purposely distinguishes the gaze from the act of looking. In his seminar, Lacan (1998, p. 67-73) discusses "the split between the eye and the gaze", "in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field". Here, the scopic drive signifies the desire to see, and its circuit contributes to the formulation of subjectivity. According to Lacan, the scopic drive circuit is realised via three stages: my active desire to look, the reflex of looking at myself, and the other's observation of myself. Based on this, Lacan argues that the formulation of subjectivity is mainly completed by realising the other's observation of the subject. The other's look, or the gaze from the other, signifies the imagination of an ideal ego and projects such an ego onto the subject, creating the illusion of self-completeness. However, the subject cannot actively realise that the ideal ego is formulated by the other. Therefore, for the subject, the existence of the other has been neglected, which creates the illusion that the subject is actively looking at itself and creating the ideal ego. Lacan further argues that the gaze from the other leads to the circuit of the scopic drive. Therefore, before the subject is formulated, it has already been the object of gaze. Lacan's understanding of gaze is similar to Merleau-Ponty (1968), who argues that gaze always exists before my act of looking, and there is always a transcendent gazer gazing at me. Thus, my act of looking and formulating self-subjectivity is always passive. For Lacan, the gaze is one's to-be-looked-at-ness that indicates one is always under the surveillance of the Other.

In other words, the eye, or the act of looking, should be understood metaphorically in the Lacanian gaze theory. What is prioritised is not the ability to look but the possibility of being gazed at, for the former is explicitly determined by the

latter. This is manifested in the film *Blind Massage*. Revisiting the narrator's words that discussed the tension between the sighted and the blind, the sighted is perceived as the *all-seeing creature*, which seems to resemble the Other in Lacanian theory. Here, such an *all-seeing creature* does not refer to the sighted people but the norms that organise the society. Therefore, in the storyline of Sha Fuming and Du Hong, Sha's desire for the notion of beauty is driven by the power of the Other. Namely, his desire to look is determined by the condition of being observed.

However, it is notable that, in the Mulveyian gaze theory, the notion of gaze is used in conflation with the act of look. Mulvey emphasises that the male spectators internalise the patriarchal structure of pleasure by forcing their gaze onto the female characters. The male spectators are actively possessing such power and have become active agents. Such argumentation seems to result in a dichotomy of female or the blind as intrinsically passive and male or the sighted as active. This conflation of gaze and look results in the false impression that possessing the ability to look entails a monopoly of sexual pleasure and, therefore, excludes the blind. However, according to Lacan, every subject is constructed via the to-be-looked-at-ness, and it is not the ability to look that shapes the subjects differently. Moreover, as Lacan argues, the illusion of the ideal ego is untenable and will inevitably fail. Therefore, the desire for the able-bodied, heterosexual, masculine self will also fail.

The seemingly concrete correlation that formulates the materiality of vision as the basis of gaze is also theoretically untenable. Returning to Mulvey, she aims to answer, "how meaning is constructed via gender structures" (Smelik, 2016). For Mulvey (1975, p. 57), such a structuring process is realised through phallogentrism. The symbolisation of the phallus is explicitly realised through the image of women who do not possess the phallus. Therefore, women are always associated with castration, which is interpreted as a lack. To avoid such an unpleasant association, male spectators either practise the "sadistic voyeurism" that degrades and punishes the

guilty ones, or the “fetishistic scopophilia” that “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 14).

In other words, the key to Mulvey’s argumentation is that women are symbolised as “the lack” and “the desired object” simultaneously. Let us revisit some scenes from *Blind Massage*. After overhearing Du being described as beautiful, the question of “what is beauty” emerges for Sha. Sha lost his vision at an early age, so he barely knew what beauty was like. Internalising the customers’ words, for Sha, Du has transformed into an icon of beauty he could never comprehend. Furthermore, as the idea of beauty is fundamentally associated with the vision for Sha, I suggest Du is symbolised as “the lack” that constantly reminds Sha of a similar “castration anxiety”. This is to say that Du represents something Sha is lacking and is also becoming the object of desire. However, although it is undoubtedly gendered, it also sheds light on that gaze is symbolically a form of phallus that represents the patriarchal and ableist unconscious that generates the desire.

In *Bodies That Matters*, Butler (2011) revisits the psychoanalytic sexuality theories and marks an ambivalence. As Butler has identified, although phallus has been coined as a symbolic term that can reside on different bodily parts, it still stems from the penis in an anatomical sense in classic psychoanalysis theory. On the other hand, Butler coins the “lesbian phallus” as an approach to “break the signifying chain in which it conventionally operates” (Butler, 2011, p. 55). “If a lesbian has it, it is also clear that she does not ‘have’ it in the traditional sense; her activity furthers a crisis in the sense of what it means to ‘have’ one at all.” (Butler, 2011, p. 55) Therefore, what Butler has deconstructed is the seemingly concrete relation between the material anatomy and the symbolic meanings.

Therefore, the symbolic gaze does not have to be intertwined in the signifying chain that links the gaze and the materiality of vision. In *Blind Massage*, blind vision actively reminded the spectators of the transferability of the gaze. As the visual

experience has been interrupted, “the crisis in the sense of what it means to ‘have’ one” (Butler, 2011, p. 55) has been furthered to remind people of their potentiality in lacking it. In this way, it prioritises all non-visual sensations. Therefore, blind vision also lets the sighted spectators realise they can be gazed at. Echoing with bell hooks (1992), blind vision helps the blind subjects form an “oppositional gaze” that discomforts and problematises the normative experience of the able-bodied. As a result, the vision has been decentred. The conception of gaze has detached from the materiality of vision and become synaesthetic. In this way, Lou Ye successfully forms a non-normative cinematic experience that resists the regulation of disabled sexuality.

## Conclusion

When recalling the song performed by Zhou Yunpeng and my experience in the blind massage centre, they pose a similar inquiry on the ambivalence of vision. On the one hand, vision has normatively been centred as the prerequisite of intimacy, sex, and romance. In contrast, the absence of vision forms a synaesthetic experience that resists the excessive celebration of vision.

As elaborated, *Blind Massage* is very straightforward in revealing how disabled sexuality has been excluded and regulated from the normative society. Lou Ye, the director, invents blind vision as a novel film language to disturb such normativity. Rather than mimicking a particular visual experience, it queries the authority of vision in cinema art. According to gaze theory, the camera has been a normative tool that employs the regulative gaze and shapes those gazed at into passive objects. However, Mulvey’s gaze theory does not offer a convincing solution and even risks formulating a binary subject-object relation in cinema. By revisiting Lacan, I suggest that gaze is fundamentally a non-visual-centred notion. With fruits from post-structuralism, including crip theory and theories formed by Judith Butler, I suggest that the authority of materiality, including vision, is untenable, as it has already



been embedded in the chaotic discourse production process. Therefore, blind vision should not be considered a literal imitation of blindness but an active deconstruction of materiality and an attempt to reveal the resistance potential of cinema art. Within the blind vision, the sighted spectators experience no privilege regarding pleasure. They have become the objects that are being gazed at.

However, although Lou Ye successfully tackles the ambivalence in vision in *Blind Massage* and cinema, the film, including this paper, does not offer a final and conclusive solution. The richness of *Blind Massage* and its cinematic representation of disabled sexuality still requires further research and analysis. For instance, although this paper touches on the relationship between ocularcentrism and disabled sexuality, it does not elaborate much on how such a relationship is gendered. I am afraid I have to disagree with Ma (2019) on the inclusion of women in this particular film. As the main characters are mainly heterosexual males, the women characters are still portrayed as the objects of desire. Their embodied experience and feelings are nearly absent in the film.

Furthermore, the industry of blind massage has been facing criticism from the Chinese grassroots and academy. A blind masseur writes that, as blind massage has been promoted officially by the government, it has become viewed as the only future for most people with visual impairment in China (Wang, 2021). They are still excluded from society as non-normative and cannot enjoy equal rights to work. Furthermore, while the massage industry has been romanticised in the film, many masseurs work in uncomfortable working environments and face unfairly low wages. In a paper by Zhu and Huang (2020), they argue that perceiving massage as a natural career path for people with visual impairment is the outcome of society's excessive celebration of bodily capacity. Therefore, I adopt the standpoint of crip theory and queer theory that one needs to be continuously alert to every discourse that may crystallise the normative comprehension towards disability and sexuality. We must stay cautious because resisting normative power

is not merely a theoretical debate on the academy but an act, related to lived individuals. Therefore, I call for more attention, including more research as well as activism, in order to stop neglecting the embodied experience of lived lives.

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