

BLIND MESSAGE Chris Berry

Blind Massage 推拿

Lou Ye 娄烨

2014

117 minutes

Dramatic feature

Introduction

Blind Massage takes us into the world of the partially sighted and completely blind in China. Their frequent employment as masseurs depends on the conviction that, as one bodily sense declines, others are enhanced. The film takes place in a blind *tuina*-style massage clinic – a world within a world, where the blind live and work together. The routine of the clinic is disrupted by passionate affairs amongst the residents, providing plenty of opportunity for director Lou Ye to explore his signature interest in situations where people are pushed to the limits of self-control and beyond. The film raises questions about the experience of disability and how cinema can convey that experience to its audiences, as well as about what it means to be disabled in China. *Blind Massage* was adapted from the novel *Massage* (推拿) by Bi Feiyu 毕飞宇, which won the Mao Dun Literary Prize in 2008, and has since been translated and published in English.

Director

Director Lou Ye (born in 1965) is a member of the so-called “Sixth Generation” of Chinese directors, who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1989. They are also known as the “urban generation” because of their turn away from the Fifth Generation’s tendency to historical allegories told through tales set in the exotics borderlands of China, and their focus on contemporary everyday life. Most of Lou’s films do indeed have a contemporary or at least recent urban setting – *Blind Massage* takes place in Nanjing around the beginning of the new century.

However, Lou’s hallmark is his fascination with the point where illicit passions overcome rationality. This tendency has been apparent since his first film, *Weekend Lovers* (周末情人), made in 1993 but banned for two years because of its focus on sexual content. In *Blind Massage*, two new arrivals disrupt the routine. Wang is an old friend of the two clinic directors, and he turns up with his fiancée, Xiao Kong. Xiao Ma is a younger man who becomes obsessed with Xiao Kong. As in many of Lou’s films, the passions that are unleashed destroy the carefully constructed and modulated world of civilised rationality. But it is unclear whether, as conventional conservative morality would require, this is seen as a disaster, or as a price worth paying for the experience of overwhelming passion.

Blind Massage has been Lou Ye’s most well-accepted film in the mainstream world of Chinese-language cinema so far. In the past, his fascination with transgressive topics got him into trouble with the authorities. His 2002 breakthrough film, *Suzhou River* (苏州河) is about a videographer who becomes obsessed with a woman who performs as a mermaid in nightclubs. After he screened it without permission from the Chinese Film Bureau in the Rotterdam International

Film Festival, where it won the Tiger Award, a two-year ban on filmmaking followed for Lou. When he did the same thing at Cannes with *Summer Palace* (颐和园, 2006) a film that touched on the taboo of the 1989 student demonstrations in Tiananmen and became China's first film to feature full-frontal nudity, he incurred a five-year ban. In contrast, *Blind Massage* not only passed the censors in China and won two Golden Roosters in the People's Republic, but also went on to sweep the board with six prizes at the 2014 Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan, considered the equivalent of the Oscars for Chinese-language cinema.

Genre

As an auteur film directed at a festival audience, *Blind Massage* is an art film and therefore the antithesis of genre cinema. However, some see the art film as a genre in its own right. *Blind Massage* certainly shares the expected characteristics of art cinema, such as seriousness, manifestation of the auteur's signature (see above), and prioritizing exploration of character psychology over narrative progress.

Nevertheless, the film has generic elements. In particular, it invokes some of the conventions of the family melodrama, in both its Chinese and Hollywood forms. The Hollywood family melodrama features oedipal scenarios in which younger members of the family chafe against the restrictions imposed upon them by aging and often ailing patriarchs. An "intruder/redeemer" figure enters the household, and a variety of outcomes are possible, from their expulsion, to their assumption of the throne as new head of the family, or to liberation of the oppressed younger generation. In *Blind Massage*, the two existing heads of the clinic, Sha Fuming and Zhang Zongqi are dual heads of the family-like clinic, where the masseurs both work and live together. Xiao Ma is one intruder/redeemer, but so are Wang and Xiao Kong.

The Chinese form of the family melodrama film, the "family ethics film" (家庭伦理片), emphasises conflicts between duty and desire within the family. Where desire wins over duty, in the Chinese form of the genre, tragedy follows. One could argue that a hallmark of Lou Ye's films is sympathy for those who risk everything as their passions overtake them. In a context where conservative morality emphasises self-sacrifice for the collective, this is certainly part of what makes his films scandalous for many audiences. In *Blind Massage*, Xiao Ma's obsession with Xiao Kong triggers other passions and the collapse of the whole clinic, followed by the dispersion of its members. However, the narrative does not punish Xiao Ma. By the time everything falls apart, he has already transferred his affections and eloped with his new object of desire.

Synopsis

Xiao Ma loses both his eyesight and his mother in a childhood car accident. He is told this is a temporary condition, and when he discovers it is permanent, he tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide. Once he is grown up, he goes to live and work at the Sha Zongqi Massage Clinic in Nanjing. The clinic is named after its two directors, the outgoing Sha Fuming and the quieter Zhang Zongqi. The clinic operates much like a family, with masseurs working and living together.

Xiao Ma is not the only newcomer at the clinic. An old friend of Sha Fuming named Wang turns up asking for a job, after having lost a lot of money on bad stock market investments in

Shenzhen. He is accompanied by his fiancée, Xiao Kong. As soon as Xiao Ma catches her scent, he becomes obsessed with her. Meanwhile, Sha Fuming forms an equally unrequited and frustrating passion for another new arrival, Du Hong.

At the same time as trying to retain the affections of Xiao Kong and keep Xiao Ma at bay, Wang must deal with some serious family problems. His sighted brother is being chased by loan sharks, and Wang has to face them down. Meanwhile, Xiao Ma has been introduced to a nearby brothel, masquerading as a hair salon. He becomes attached to Mann, one of the sex workers, and one day he has a fight with one of her other clients. Surprisingly, the beating he sustains leads to the restoration of some of his sight. At the end of the film, the clinic has collapsed and the workers have gone the separate ways. Xiao Ma and Mann have set up their own small massage operation elsewhere.

Medical Humanities

Blind Massage raises questions for the medical humanities in its topic and narrative, and in how it is shot. The topic of blind masseurs raises questions concerning cultural beliefs about the blind and their social treatment. Blind masseurs are found all over China, and so it seems to be commonly accepted that this is an appropriate job for the blind. What kinds of social and financial support are provided for blind people in China? Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese Communist leader most associated with the post-Cultural Revolution reforms that led to the market economy boom in China, had a disabled son. Deng Pufang was made paraplegic when he was thrown (or, according to some accounts, jumped) out of a window three stories up and broke his back during confrontations with Red Guards on the campus of Peking University. His fate helped to draw attention to the suffering of the disabled and mobilise support for them, and he became President of the China Disabled Persons Federation in 1988. In 2008, a law was passed to protect the employment rights of the disabled, and there are specific regulations concerning blind massage as a profession.

What are social attitudes towards the blind in China? In the film, we see that Sha Fuming is very attractive to women, but that his girlfriend's parents are adamantly opposed to marriage, presumably for fear of the disability being passed on to any children they might have. Although the film itself does not pay much attention to different types of massage and their possible health benefits, the basic context of the story raises those questions. The *tuina*-style massage shown in the film is recognised as a TCM therapy.

However, what is perhaps most eye-catching about the film – pun intended – is how it communicates the experience of being blind to audiences. In doing so, it opens up questions about the nature of cinema itself. The perception that the blind are especially suited to becoming masseurs is not the result of shyness on the part of their clients, because it is normal to keep one's clothes on when being given *tuina*-style massage. Rather, it suggests a common belief that when one sense is impaired, others may be enhanced. As their eyes decline, the blind are presumed to develop an improved sense of touch. In the film, this compensatory quality manifests itself in a number of ways. Xiao Ma's hearing improves as his sight declines, and smell is clearly one of Xiao Kong's powerful attractions for him. Watching the blind masseurs living together, we become aware not only of the adjustments that are made in their living conditions to help them, but also how they are able to cope when there is a power cut and assist

their sighted clients, who become very disoriented. More poignantly, Sha Fuming's obsession with Du Hong opens up a discussion of what beauty means, because Sha has heard that Du is very beautiful but cannot see her.

The film draws our attention to the experience of blindness right from the very beginning, when the opening credits are read out loud. The cinematography of the film also often uses blurriness and similar techniques to suggest impairment of vision. However, it is notable that the film does *not* attempt to replicate the experience of the characters. Indeed, drawing our attention to and enabling us to imagine and feel what it might be like to be blind in *Blind Massage* is dependent on mismatches here. For example, it is precisely because we can see the opening titles of the film that we are surprised when they are read out loud and made to think about what it would be like to attend a film screening without being able to see the film.

The blurry, slightly dark cinematography in the early part of the film might at first be associated with Xiao Ma's deteriorating eyesight. But, in fact, as his eyesight declines, the cinematography returns to a more usual style that mimics regular eyesight. With our eyesight fully restored, the camera directs our attention to the fingers of the blind characters as they feel for chopsticks on the table and find their way around new spaces. It catches the expression on their face as they pick up a scent with their noses. And when Xiao Ma's eyesight comes back, our eyesight deteriorates as the blurry cinematography returns.

It could be argued that *Blind Massage*'s ability to draw us into the world of the blind is part of what the scholar Laura Marks calls "haptic cinema". "Haptic cinema" is quasi-synaesthetic. Synaesthesia is the condition where people have cross-sensory experiences: for example, someone reports seeing a certain colour when they hear a certain musical note. In the cinema, we cannot touch or smell, but by focusing the camera closely on the tentative moves of a blind person's hand, we might sense that we can feel with them. Cinema that makes these emphases becomes haptic. The use of music at a moment when Xiao Ma catches Xiao Kong's scent might make our pulse race, as though we too had smelled her presence, when in fact we have seen it but can never smell her. As *Blind Massage* goes on, we understand that blind people are neither saints nor monsters but regular folks like us. However, we also begin to grasp that going to the cinema is a bit like a temporary and inverted version of blindness. As we are deprived of the senses of touch and smell, our hearing and in particular our vision are enhanced in the cinema, and with our temporary "disability" as well as frustrations come new and unique pleasures.

Key questions

Why is massage considered an appropriate profession for the blind in China?

- What support does the state provide to the disabled in China, and in what forms?
- What is it like to be blind – in everyday experience and in terms of the attitudes of others towards the blind?
- How do our senses operate in relation to each other?
- What are the medical benefits of TCM massage techniques?
- What is synaesthesia?

Links to articles, websites, reviews

Maggie Lee's *Variety* review: <http://variety.com/2014/film/asia/berlin-film-review-blind-massage-1201095936/>

Los Angeles Times interview with Lou Ye: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-lou-ye-blind-massage-china-movie-market-20150215-story.html>

South China Morning Post interview with Bi Feiyu about the novel on which the film is based: <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/books/article/1795021/chinese-novelist-bi-feiyu-opens-readers-eyes-blind-masseurs-world>

On synaesthesia: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/07/070724113711.htm>

The World Tuina Association explains this form of massage: <http://www.tui-na.com/tuina.html>

China Disabled Persons Federation: <http://www.cdpcf.org.cn/english/>

Regulations governing blind massage in China:
http://www.cdpcf.org.cn/english/Resources/services/201603/t20160304_543166.shtml

Laws protecting the employment rights of the disabled in China:
http://www.cdpcf.org.cn/english/Resources/lawsregulations/201603/t20160303_542879.shtml