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# Dismantling the Illusion of Otherness: An Authorial Study of Lou Ye's Spring Fever and Blind Massage

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**Dismantling the Illusion of Otherness: An Authorial Study of Lou Ye's *Spring Fever* and**

***Blind Massage***

**Senior Project Submitted to**

**The Division of Arts**

**of Bard College**

**by**

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This project is dedicated to those young Chinese independent filmmakers who still believe in what they strive for, despite the status quo.

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**Chapter One - Introduction**

Jia Zhangke probably is the most internationally well-known filmmaker among the so-called Sixth-Generation Chinese filmmakers. As compared to Jia, Lou Ye, another member of the Sixth-generation, receives much less media and scholarly attention. The classification of Chinese filmmakers in terms of generation is loose in the sense that it is based on the generation of students from Beijing Film Academy. Loosely speaking, the Sixth-generation consists of filmmakers that were enrolled in Beijing Film Academy in mid- or late 1980s, such as Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan, Guan Hu, etc. Though I will not go into the details, there are indeed many differences between the Fifth generation and Sixth generation in terms of both aesthetics and production: for instance, the majority of the Fifth generation films are state sponsored, and most of them are crafted with high production values and long shots, centering around rural or suburban areas and group struggles; the Sixth generation turns its attention to individuals and urban lives, and challenges societal norms while addressing more taboo subject matter.

Born in Shanghai in the year of 1965, Lou Ye graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1993. The same year, he made his first film *The Weekend Lover*, which was released two years later. His second film *Suzhou River* (2000) was released in the year 2000, and helped him gain much international prominence. Interestingly, many of the studies and papers published in the west still only focus on *Suzhou River* as an investigation of Lou's style ( Silbergeld 2004; Searls 2001; Francke 2000). After his third film *Purple Butterfly* was released in 2003, Lou released one of his most controversial films *Summer Palace* in 2006. Both the sex scenes and depiction of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre lead to China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and

Television withhold it approval for Lou Ye to screen *Summer Palace* in the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. Against government disapproval, Lou still made it to Cannes to screen his film. In what follows, the devastating result was that Lou was banned from film production in China by the Chinese government for 5 years. *Spring Fever* was made secretly in 2009, in the city of Nanjing, and registered as a Hong Kong-French co-production. Ever since then, the label of 'international co-production' has been part of his films: from *Love and Bruises* (2011), *Mystery* (2012) to *Blind Massage* (2014). The secretly-made *Spring Fever* also marks the first time that Lou started to make films using the digital format.

Though in terms of social critique, Lou Ye's films share the similarities with Jia's in the sense that both of their films reflect a societal or generational struggle, the significant difference is that Lou is more interested in having the individual's desire for love and sex as an entry point into her spiritual world. As a Chinese, I feel significantly detached from Jia's films. Similarly, there have been discussions and debates on Chinese websites like Douban[1] on whether Jia's recent films such as *A Touch of Sin* is only a superficial representation of group and individual struggles or a genuine attempt as social critique. This project can been seen as an investigation to understand my own emotions and attachments. In one of the interviews, Lou expressed explicitly his interest in melodrama and romantic plots, saying that if we treat our lives as different trees, the notion of "love" might just be one particular leaf on the tree, yet the trees' living conditions can be told from a careful examination of this particular leaf.

I will divide the rest of this project into three chapters: in the first chapter, i.e. this chapter, I have given a brief historical background of Lou's career. In the second and third chapter, I will

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[1] A Chinese website where scholars, students and film lovers often come together and discuss film-related matters.

closely analyze the patterns and the stylistic structure of the two films and introduce the production details if necessary. In the fourth chapter, I will first review the debates over fictional emotions, as well as the function of techniques such as close-ups and point-of-view shots, and then proceed to analyze how Lou's dominant use of certain stylistic and formal strategies gives rise to the audience's emotional response as well as subjective experiences. Moreover, I will also argue that the styles of the two films also bring in new perspective in our understanding of certain techniques and their functions. In the fifth chapter, I will argue that Lou's intention behind the two films is not just only an invitation to feel, but also an invitation to reflect on our social or political identities. In doing so, I will also give a brief overview of the current status quo for disabled and LGBTQ population in China.

**Chapter Two: The Plot and Stylistic Patterns in *Blind Massage***

In their famous textbook *Film Art*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson argue that a film's *style* is constituted by different categories of techniques of the film medium, such as the as the mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound of the film. Thus when we talk about a film's style, we are talking about a particular formal system. The style of a particular film is closely related to the viewer's expectations and experiences of the film medium. As stated by them, "the spectator may not consciously notice film style, but it nonetheless makes an important contribution to the film's *ongoing effect* and *overall meaning*" (Bordwell and Thompson, 262). That is, the style of a filmmaker refers to the particular techniques that the filmmaker employ consistently. The keys in analyzing a particular filmmaker's style are to trace the patterns of techniques and then see how the techniques function in creating an overall effect and meaning. As noted by Bordwell and Thompson, "style [often functions] simply *perceptually*" (Bordwell and Thompson, 263).

In what follows, in the following two chapters, I will thus first introduce the story of each film, followed by the close analysis of the perceptual patterns.

1. **Story**

*Blind Massage* depicts the daily lives of a group of fully or partially blind masseurs who work in the Sha Zongqi Massage Center. The term 'daily lives' here refers to everything they have experienced inside and outside the Massage Center, such as love, desire, revenge and struggle. The massage center is called so because it is named after its two owners, Sha Fuming,

who is talkative and desires the 'ultimate beauty,' and Zhang Zongqi, who is totally the opposite of Sha Fuming.

Instead of focusing on the continuity of the narration, Lou shifts his, and thus the audience's, attention to the articulation of individual's subjective experiences and emotions, which necessarily results in a fragmented narrative of the story. The shift of focus and the articulation of subjective experiences will be discussed in detail later. Nevertheless, we are still able to pinpoint 7 main characters: Sha Fuming, Xiao Ma, Du Hong, Xiao Kong and Lao Wang, as well as Jin Yan and Tai He.

The film starts and ends with Xiao Ma's story. The role of Xiao Ma is special in the sense that he neither belongs to the blind masseurs, nor the so-called 'mainstream' people, yet he shares similarities with both which makes him both an isolated individual and a bridge between the so-called marginalized and mainstream worlds. Xiao Ma was not born blind. His sight was severely impaired after a car crash in which he also lost his mother. He was then sent to a special school for disabled people where he learned how to be a professional massage therapist. Xiao Ma doesn't seem to be close to anyone in the massage center. As a curious and inexperienced young man, Xiao Ma is trapped in his obsession with the unfamiliar female bodies. For instance, he was attracted to another main character, Xiao Kong, who already has her fiancé, Lao Wang. As a result of not knowing how to deal with Xiao Kong's body properly, Xiao Ma was persuaded to go to a brothel instead, where he falls in love with one of the prostitutes Xiao Man.[2]

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[2] It's not really a prostitute center. Its legal status is a hair salon. In many Chinese cities, tiny hair salons are implicitly known as the Red Light zone. Services provided in the venues include sex trade and other forms of service, such as hair washing and giving massages. Most of the prostitutes come from rural areas and are relatively young. Often they don't have fixed salary, and their income heavily depend on how many clients they have during day.

Mysteriously, after a fight with one of Xiao Man's clients at the brothel, Xiao Ma recovers some of his sight. He then disappears from the massage center. The film ends with a scene where the audience is told that Xiao Ma has opened his own massage center in a residence building with Xiao Man.

Sha Fuming, one of the owners, is romantic and obsessed with the notion of 'ultimate beauty.' He is interested in joining the people from mainstream society —the clients of the massage parlour, for parties, and he dreams of marrying someone who possesses perfect physical beauty. His obsession with the imagined 'ultimate beauty' then leads him to an illusion of his love for Du Hong, who is constantly praised by the center's clients for her beauty. The line between 'love' and 'search for beauty' is blurred for Sha. His attempt to attract Du Hong never succeeds. His obsession with Du is finally punctuated by Du's leaving the center. During the dinner with his employees, a dinner that was originally held to welcome back Du, Sha throws up blood seemingly without cause. The center was closed and the employees were dismissed after that, and Sha stayed in his house for recovery while indulging in his usual habit of reading romantic poetry.

Du Hong was likely born in Nanjing, given her strong local accent. As mentioned above, she is constantly praised by the clients for her enormous beauty, though she herself takes the praises to be some form of harassment. While her beauty attracted Sha, she herself is actually attracted by Xiao Ma, who eventually turns her down. One night during a chaos, Du breaks her right thumb: someone accidentally slams the door on her right hand. Du is hospitalized for months, receiving continuous support and encouragement from her colleagues. The day she returns to the center, though Sha was planning a welcome-back dinner for her, she decides to leave the center.

Though deeply in appreciation of other blind masseurs' help, Du is determined to be as independent as possible.

Lao Wang, one of Sha's classmates, who came to the massage center with his fiancé Xiao Kong, and who is partially blind, from Shenzhen. Lao Wang was born in Nanjing, where his younger brother still lives with his parents. Xiao Kong was born in Nantong, a city that is approximately three hours away from Nanjing. They came to Nanjing to ask for help from Sha since they lost their money in the stock market. Despite the tangled relationship between Xiao Kong and Xiao Ma, the couples have their own trouble. On the one hand, Xiao Kong's parents are against their marriage, i.e. her parents do not want Xiao Kong to marry a fully blind person; on the other hand, Lao Wang's younger brother gets into money-related trouble with a gang. Lao Wang eventually ends the harassment from the gang to his family through the use of violence, and returns to Shenzhen with Xiao Kong after the center is closed.

Though Jin Yan and Tai he are not as dominant as other main characters, their story adds another layer to the narration. Jin Yan was not born blind, but her sight deteriorates as time goes. As compared to other blind masseurs, Jin has a unique sense of urgency to appreciate and catch the possible experiences around her. She takes care of Tai He, who is fully blind and not talkative, and wants a real relationship with Tai He. Though attracted to Jin Yan, Tai He was not prepared for a relationship because he did not deserve Jin Yan's love or a relationship in general.

**2. Stylistic Patterns**

In this section, I will lay out the patterns of techniques that are employed by Lou in *Blind Massage*. Lou, together with his cinematographer Zeng Jian, have developed a highly

experimental and idiosyncratic approach in *Blind Massage* to both express and relay the daily

experiences of the blind people. Before discussing why and how Lou's approach in *Blind*

*Massage* creates a unique first person experience for the audience to take on an unimaginable

perspective, i.e. the blind people's perspective, I want to first discuss the patterns of techniques.

I argue that there are at least four special aspects, both visual and auditory, that constitute

Lou's personal approach in this film: 1) selective focus; 2) drastic change of lighting; 3)

predominant use of medium close-ups and close-ups; 4) minimal use of eyeline match and

shot-reverse-shot; 5) the use of voiceover and other types of auditory complement. The five

aspects sometimes work together to create a particularly subjective experience.

## 2.1 Selective Focus

"Selective focus" is a general term that is self explanatory: the cinematographer chooses to

focus on a specific part and let the rest fall into blur. There are two main types of shots that

contrast each other in *Blind Massage*: the shots with everything perfectly in focus within their

plane of focus, and the shots where we see the use of selective focus.



Figure 1. Blind students are playing goalball.　　　Figure 2. Xiao Kong (left) and Lao Wang (right).

For instance, we see a contrast between figure 1 and figure 2. Figure 1 belongs to a scene where the blind students from the special school for disabled people are playing goalball. Here we see that everything within the plane of focus is in perfect focus. It is a normal shot that we commonly see in many other films. Figure 2, however, is a shot with very shallow depth of field, i.e. only the protagonists Xiao Kong and Lao Wang in the foreground are in focus.




Figure 3. Lao Wang waiting for taxi.　　　　　Figure 4. Everyone is leaving.

Similarly, we can also see a very shallow depth of field in both figure 3 and figure 4 where the protagonists are walking on street. The focus is only on the protagonists in the foreground, and the background of the shots are completely blurred. Moreover, it should also be noted that shot scale here in figure 2, 3 and 4, i.e. medium close-ups, also focuses the audience's attention on the facial expressions and emotion cues of the characters. That is, for figure 2, 3 and 4, the selective shallow focus functions in tandem with shot scale, i.e. medium close-ups, to direct the audience's attention to the emotion cues of the characters.

Figure 2, 3 and 4 can be seen as a more regular use of selective focus, i.e. it is constantly used to create a shallow depth of field in which only the protagonists in the foreground are in

focus. Besides the regular use, Lou and his cinematographer Zeng also use selective focus more

creatively to create some special visual effect.



Figure 5. Xiao Ma running on the streets.



Figure 6. Xiao Ma returns to the center.

For instance, we see completely distorted and blurred background in figure 5 and figure 6. Figure

5 is part of a scene after Xiao Ma had a fight with Xiao Man's client and suddenly regained some

sight. He was running crazily on the street. Though we, as the audience, can still tell that there

are some black cars in the background, the very shapes of the objects in the background are not

only blurred but also distorted. Similarly, figure 6 belongs to a scene where Xiao Ma went back

to the center after the fight, a scene that immediately follows figure 5. It is not only that the

background is blurred, dark and indiscernible, but also that part of Xiao Ma's own face and body

in the foreground is also blurred distorted.

Though it is true that dramatic narrative films always use emphasis on aligning the spectator

with the facial expressions of the characters and thus helping the audience see their facial

emotion cues, there is an unusually high and special emphasis in this film.

**2.2 Drastic Change of Lighting**

By 'drastic change of lighting,' I refer to those scenes where there is a sudden switch from ordinary indoor lighting to a minimal use of light or even darkness. Though I name this pattern 'drastic change of lighting,' it is made possible through editing rather than an on-scene manipulation of light. The production details will be discussed in later sections. Both figure 7 and figure 8 belong to one single scene: in the very beginning of the film, we are told that Xiao Ma was hospitalized after the car crash that caused his loss of sight. Xiao Ma and his father were told that his loss of sight might be permanent and incurable. Xiao Ma is meandering around in the hospital and greeted by the old lady in figure 7, whom Xiao Ma might have known for a long time. In Figure 8, the old lady asks whether Xiao Ma had his meal and was about to pass two dishes to him. The scene suddenly darkens when it switches to Xiao Ma's point of view, as we can see from Figure 8. With the loss of focus and the use of filter, we can barely distinguish anything from another, except for the two bright round-shape objects at the bottom of the screen, i.e. the two dishes that the old lady was about to pass to Xiao Ma.

Though it is true that in this scene blurred shots are also used from a third person perspective, they are predominantly used as Xiao Ma's point-of-view. One reason to explain the use of blurred shots for a third person perspective might be that the scene itself intends to relay to Xiao Ma's subjective experience, especially his visual perceptual experience, a frequent switch between different lightings might end up distracting the audience's experience.

Figure 7. Hospital
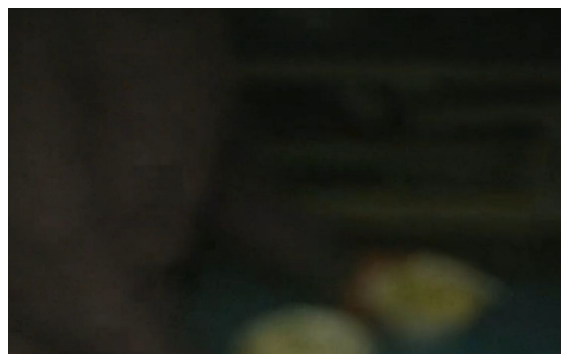


Figure 8. Hospital

Another time we see this abrupt editing is when Xiao Ma has a fight with Xiao Man's client.

Both Figure 9 and Figure 10 show Xiao Ma lying on the floor painfully after he is thrown out of

the hair salon by the client. Figure 10 immediately follows Figure 9, and we see, again, a very

abrupt editing of two frames with completely different conditions of lighting. The abrupt

transition from figure 9 to figure 10 indicates the beginning of us taking on Xiao Ma's point of

view. The relationship between point of view shots and the use of selective focus and lighting

will be discussed in detail later.



Figure 9. Xiao Ma lying on the floor.



Figure 10. Xiao Ma lying on the floor.

**2.3 Dominant use of Medium Close-ups and Close-ups**

Most of the scenes are shot indoor, i.e. the Sha Zongqi Massage Center, and we see an predominant use of medium close-ups and close-ups. When the camera records the movements and conversations between the blind masseurs, it does so mostly through close-ups. For instance, figure 11 belongs to a scene where Lao Wang is calling Sha Fuming to see whether Xiao Kong can work in the massage center; figure 12 is when Xiao Ma is physically approaching Xiao Kong in the middle of a room. Figures 13, 14, 15, and 16 all belong to a single scene where the blind masseurs are having their break after lunch. Everyone is doing their own things and having their own thoughts in the same room with no one talking or interacting. The scene starts with a medium close-up of Jin Yan eating a tangerine, as shown in figure 13, the camera then zooms into Jin Yan's face where we see her swollen eyes and tears, as shown in figure 14; as the scene continues, we then see a collage of close-ups of everyone's expressionless faces, as shown in figure 14, figure 15 and figure 16.

Interestingly, as we can see from figure 14, 15 and 16, the characters' facial expressions are much more ambiguous and less easily readable, probably because of their blindness. One of the effects of the close-ups is thus that they draw the audience's attention to the unusual facial and emotion cues on the blind people's faces.

Figure 11                                                            Figure 12

Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

## 2.4  Minimal Use of Eyeline Match and Shot-reverse-shot

As compared to the dominant use of close-ups, we see a minimal use of eyeline match and

shot-reverse-shot, which is clearly a function of the fact the protagonists of the film are mostly

blind people. Eyeline match is one of the dominant techniques used to suggest spatial contiguity

between two shots, especially during conversations. As a result, in scenes where conversations

between characters happen, we either see that the camera focuses on one particular character

talking, or that both or all the characters are within the frame.

For instance, when the protagonists are having conversations with one another, or

conversations with people from the 'mainstream' society, we either only see a medium close-up

of one of them, or we see a medium shot or medium close-up of two or more people who are

having the conversation simultaneously. For instance, figure 17 and figure 18 are part of a scene in which when the massage center's clients are praising Du Hong's beauty. The conversation starts with the male client asking whether the masseurs are actually blind. As Du Hong and Sha Fuming reply to the client, the camera turns to both of them. After two rounds of shot reverse shot, the camera finally focuses on Du Hong's face as the conversation goes. As we can see from figure 17 and figure 18, the camera is fixed on Du Hong's face regardless of whether she is the one who is talking, placing a greater emphasis on her reactions as other figures speak offscreen. As the audience, we are not able to see the feedback in terms of facial expression from the male client due to a lack of the reverse shot. Another time we see a clear shot reverse shot cut is when the gang come to Lao Wang's home asking for money and Lao Wang is negotiating with them.



Figure 17                                        Figure 18

As a contrast to the scene of figure 19 and figure 20 where the camera is fixed on one protagonist's face when there is an ongoing conversation, we sometimes also see the camera fixed on both or all of the protagonists' faces when they are talking to each other. For instance, figure 19 and figure 20 belongs to a scene in which Jin Yan is requesting Tai He's response after her confession. Throughout the whole conversation, the camera is fixed mainly on Jin Yan's face as she is the active one in this scene who is demanding a response, and half of Tai He's face in dark given he is the passive one in this scene who can barely give a proper answer.

Figure 19                                                   Figure 20

Though we barely see any eyeline match shots or cuts, we do see an increasing use of eyeline

match with Xiao Ma after he regains some degree of sight. For instance, after Xiao Ma was

thrown out of the hair salon by Xiao Man's client, he runs back to the massage center; he

curiously explores the center after cleaning his face. In figure 21, we see a medium close up of

Xiao Ma curiously staring at the interior of the center; the camera then shifts to the other side of

room showing us what Xiao Ma has been staring at (figure 22). The glance/object-cut thus

presents us a point-of-view shot of Xiao Ma's.





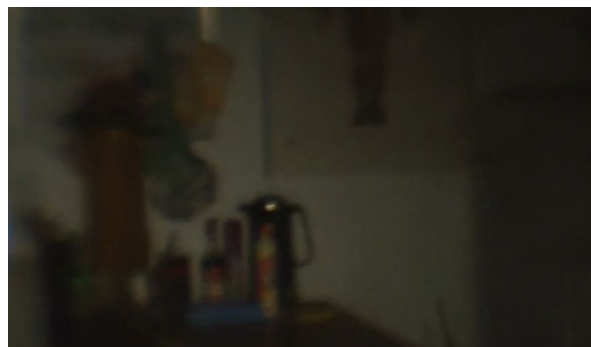Figure 21                                                   Figure 22

## 2.5 The Use of Voiceover and Other Types of Auditory Complement

Another special technique used by Lou in *Blind Massage* is the use of voiceover and other

types of auditory complement. The film begins with a white background with credits in black in

the middle, followed by a voiceover in Mandarin that reads off the credits. Having a voiceover reading the credits with a news broadcast tone has almost never been used in past films.

Given that the narration focuses more on individual experiences and struggles, the transition between different scenes might thus be undermined at first glance. Lou makes use of the voiceover to help transit a scene to another, i.e. the voiceover tells what happens to a protagonist off the screen or how the protagonist thinks. For instance, figure 23 and figure 24 belong to the opening scenes where the audience is introduced to Xiao Ma's tragedy. It starts with images about the car crash when Xiao Ma is still young (figure 23), followed by images showing Xiao Ma hospitalized after he has grown older (figure 24). The smooth transition between the two shots is made possible by the voice-over's continuity in narrating how Xiao Ma finally realized that it is not the case that his loss of sight is only temporary. Similarly, after Sha got rejected after the matchmaking meeting, we see him walking in the corridor in a bewildered yet relaxed manner. The voiceover (figure 25) helps with the transition in explaining the concept of the 'mainstream world' from the perspective of the the blind people like Sha, i.e. how the 'mainstream world' seems to be a totally different world and yet Sha is eager to be part of the 'mainstream world.'

Moreover, similar to the voiceover reading off the credit case, we also constantly hear other types of auditory complement such as the sound from talking clocks. For instance, figure 26 shows that the talking clock presents the time, 11:16 pm, as sound to remind Xiao Kong and Lao Wang to go to bed.
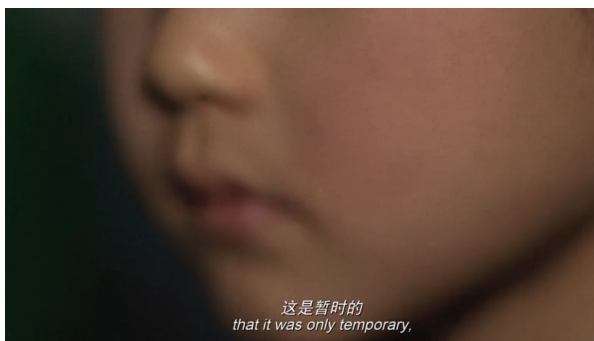
Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26

## 3. Production Details

Since we usually don't see patterns of special effects like drastic change of lighting and selective focus in feature films, it is worth discussing the production details that make these patterns possible.

According to the cinematographer Zeng Jian, the two cameras used are ALEXA cameras in which the latest model ALEXA M is the main camera (She Ying). ALEXA M is convenient to use in small and tight space, and it is good at tight corner shots (ALEXA M). As mentioned above, the majority of the shots in *Blind Massage* are interior shots, and there are many shots in which several activities are happening in the same compact room simultaneously. Moreover,

besides the fact that the compact indoor space itself creates some obstacles for the recording of

several activities at once, there are  a few other aspects that also make the shooting even more

difficult. For instance, Lou is committed to a minimal use of a stable and choreographed

mise-en-scène and he encourages the spontaneity in acting; as a result, he never blocked the

actors before shooting in the production of *Blind Massage* (She Ying). Not being blocked as a

rehearsal might not be a problem for professional actors, but it does make the job of the

cinematographer more difficult especially when there are simultaneous performers in one room.

The speciality of ALEXA M thus makes it more conducive for the cinematographer to get high

quality images while moving flexibly with the camera in the space, or corners of the rooms if

necessary.

The effect of selective focus is made possible by the use of Lensbaby lenses (Yu Yan Yuan).

In short, Lensbaby is a line of cameras that combines a simple ordinary lens with something like

a bellow, as shown in figure 27.



Figure 27.

With a Lensbaby, it is easier for the cinematographer to move the sharpest area of focus

conveniently and flexibly. As we have seen in figure 2, 3, and 4 above, the protagonists in the

foreground are kept in focus, and everything else are out of focus.

The most interesting part might be the drastic change of lighting. As mentioned in the last section, the drastic change of lighting is made possible through editing. To make the editing possible, Lou and Zeng prepared three different types of shots in shooting some special scenes.The three types of shots include: 1) a normal shot with a normal lens in daylight or normal lighting; 2) a shot at night with tilt-shift lens and filter if necessary; and 3) a shot at night with Lensbaby and filter if necessary. By "normal," I mean the shot that is taken without special effects. With three options for the same scene, Lou thus has more flexibility when it comes to editing, i.e. choosing the combination and composition.

It is also worth mentioning that there are more experiments attempted by Zeng when shooting with Lensbaby. According the Zeng, he found a way to make the lighting and images more flexible and emotional. When he was doing random experiments while setting the lens to maximum aperture, he found that waving his fingers occasionally in front of the lens would also make the brightness of the images flux correspondingly. This special method is then used most intensively when shooting the scenes where Xiao Ma regained some sight and explored the world around him.

The purpose of the special effects is to relay the perception and thus visual perceptual experience of blind people, especially those who are only half blind. In other words, the special effects are used to make the point-of-view shots of the blind people more vivid and substantial.

**Chapter Three: The Plot and Stylistic Patterns in *Spring Fever***

**1. Story**

    *Spring Fever* starts with an affair between two homosexual males, Jiang Cheng, a travel

agency officer, and Wang Ping, a bookstore owner. They are having a trip to a suburban area,

escaping from the city lives and the people they know. Luo Haitao, an unemployed student, is

hired by Wang's wife Lin Xue, a middle school teacher, to spy on the couple and collect photo

evidence of their affair.  On the one hand, Wang tries to introduce Jiang to his wife as his

classmates by arranging a dinner together; on the other hand, the private investigator Luo has

already helped Lin identify Jiang's face outside Jiang's office. Upon obtaining enough evidence,

Lin stomps into Jiang's office and accuses him of getting into dirty affairs and destroying her

family in front of his colleagues.

    Jiang breaks up with Wang after the confrontation with Lin. Jiang goes to one of his favorite

pubs where he meets Luo. Luo helps Jiang out in a fight, and somehow gets attracted by Jiang

himself even though he has his own girlfriend Li Jing, who works in a factory. While Luo is

attracted to Jiang, Li is getting into trouble: she loses her job because the factory she works for is

closed due to illegal practice, and Li is trying to get her boss out of jail in return of his taking

care of her in the factory.

    It seems that Jiang starts to get a new life and even a new relationship after breaking up with

Wang. Wang finds it impossible to accept the reality and finally decides to commit suicide in the

Mountain of Zijin. Jiang and Luo decide to go road tripping after each of them is  informed of

Wang's death, Li also joins them after her struggle to get her boss out. The trip in the end

becomes a remedy for all three of them. Li finds out the affair between Jiang and Luo, but hardly

knows how to react. She behaves as if nothing has happened few hours later in front of Jiang and Luo, but eventually disappears on their way back to Nanjing. Jiang and Luo also break up on their way back.

Wang's wife's revenge is a fight and an accidental cut on Jiang's neck. Jiang ends up getting a lotus tattoo to cover his scar, and starts his new life with someone else whose gender and sexual orientation remain unclear.

## 2. Stylistic Patterns

I argue that the style of *Spring Fever* is made possible through the following patterns of techniques: 1) dominant use of medium shot and close-ups; 2) dominant use of follow shots; 3) dominant use of natural lighting; 4) fragmented narrative; and 5) the explicit emphasis on transtextuality.

### 2.1 Dominant Use of Medium Shots and Close-ups

More than half of the shots on the protagonists are medium shots or close-ups, regardless of whether they are interior or exterior scenes. Figure 28 belongs to a scene from the beginning where Jiang and Wang rent a house in a suburban area to take a break from their families, colleagues and urban lives. Throughout the entire scene where Jiang and Wang stay inside, having sex and reading "Nights of Spring Fever (《春风沉醉的夜晚》[3]), we only see medium shots and close-ups of their bodies and faces.

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[3] Their titles are the same in Chinese.

Or take another example of the interactions between Lin Xue, Wang's wife, and Luo Haitao. Figure 29 is an example of the shots of their interactions. Whenever we see Lin and Luo meet to discuss the details of Jiang and Wang's affair as well as the collection of pictorial evidences, we always see a medium shot of their bodies with both of them occupying the screen, regardless of whether they are having a conversation within a crowd on a noisy street.





| Figure 28 | Figure 29 |

Similarly, regardless of exterior or interior scenes, we also see a predominant use of close-ups, which can be shown from the following examples. Figure 30 is a close-up of Lin Xue's face after she meets with Luo to exchange their information about Wang and Jiang's affair; we see on her face a resistance to the collection of information, and an anxiety about the possible actions she is going to take. Figure 31 is a close-up of Li Jiang's face where she is working at her own pace, calmly. Figure 32 belongs to the scene where Wang commits suicide eventually, after he realized that there is no way his relationship with Jiang can be recovered; both his fear and determination, and both his confusion and acceptance of the reality are made extremely explicit through the close-up of his face before and after he cut himself. Figure 33 is a close up of Luo Haitao's anger, anxiety and worries; this is a shot belonging to the scene where Luo receives a text message from Lin informing him about Wang's suicide and asking him to

pretend that they do not know each other at all. By the time Luo receives Lin's text, he is

already involved in a semi-triangle relationship with Jiang and his girlfriend Li.

As compared to the dominant use of close-ups of blind people's emotion cues in *Blind*

*Massage*, in *Spring Fever* we clearly see how the dominant use of close-ups of emotion cues

help convey the complex emotions, feelings and struggles that the characters have and the

audience can easily relate to.



Figure 30
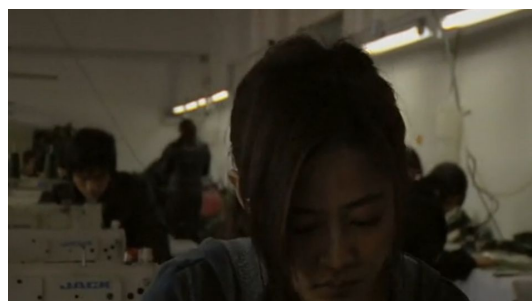


Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33

## 2.2 Use of Tracking Shots and Minimal use of Point-of-View shots

Besides the dominant use of medium shots and close-ups, Lou Ye and his cinematographers

also heavily employ tracking shots. For instance, we see how Lin walks back after meeting with

Luo (figure 34); we see how Jiang and Wang are flirting with each other in the corridor even

before they enter the room (figure 35); we see how Jiang knocks into some guy in the pub after

he hangs up Wang's phone call, which brings him and Luo some trouble (figure 36); and we see

the internal struggles that Wang is going through on his way to the top of the Mountain of Zijin,

before his suicide (figure 37).

The use of tracking shots, on the one hand, helps with the transition between scenes given the

fragmented narration in *Spring Fever*; on the other hand, builds up a suspension of the audience's

reception of emotion cues from the characters.



Figure 34



Figure 35



Figure 36
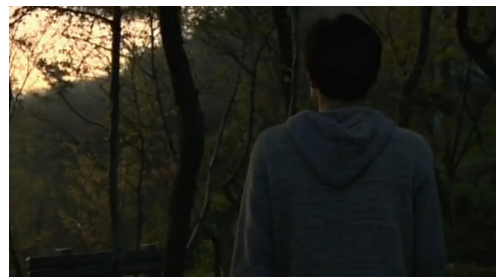


Figure 37

**2.3 No Artificial Lighting**

*Spring Fever* is shot entirely with available light and without the use of artificial lighting (Yu Yan Yuan). As some film critics have pointed out and complained about, the refusal to artificial lighting makes the protagonists and other figures in many scenes indiscernible. Even they set the optical aperture to its maximum, it is still hard to tell what is happening in many scenes.

For instance, figure 38 is a shot of the views outside the window from the suburban house that Jiang and Wang rent for their short trip, with relatively enough light, we can tell that it is a caliginous and humid afternoon. Figure 39 belongs to the scene where Jiang meets Wang in his own bookstore, though the camera is positioned outside the bookstore, their bodies are relatively indiscernible due to the low light in the interior. Similarly, both the figures in figure 40 and figure 41 are hardly discernible because of the lack of sufficient lighting.



Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41

## 2.4 Explicit Emphasis on Transtexuality

As introduced in the introduction, though the film *Spring Fever* itself is not strictly an adaptation of Yu Dafu's "Nights of Spring Fever",  part of Lou Ye's intention is to call into the question of contemporary people's spiritual plight by drawing the connection to Yu Dafu's writing. The special aspect of the film, i.e. its transtextuality with Chinese literature back to the 1920s and 1930s, is still made explicit in the film, through subtitles, voiceover and the protagonists themselves.

For instance, figure 42 and figure 43, though the image itself is indiscernible due to low light, are part of a scene where Jiang and Wang are reading Yu Dafu's 'Nights of Spring Fever' after sex. Figure 44 belongs to the scene in which Luo and Li are walking on the old wall in the misty morning after Wang's death; a famous quote from Zhu Ziqing's[4] 'Moonlight over the Lotus Pond (《荷塘月色》)' is typed on the right hand side of the screen. The scenes that figure 44 and figure 45 each belongs to are connected by a sound bridge, i.e. the sound of Lin's student reading out loud the passage "Moonlight over the Lotus Pond." In figure 45, on the one hand, we can hear the student reading out the passage loudly, on the other hand, we see the police officers inform Lin the death of her husband.

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[4] A famous Chinese literati.

"付房钱之后只能剩下二三角小洋来"
"Once my rent is paid I've only got a few pennies left"

Figure 42



"足证我的志气还完全没有消磨尽哩"
"Proof that my spirit isn't completely exhausted"

Figure 43



Figure 44



"遮住了 不能见一些颜色"
"hidden from our gaze, invisible"
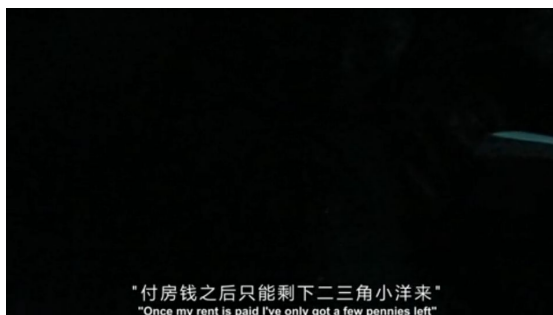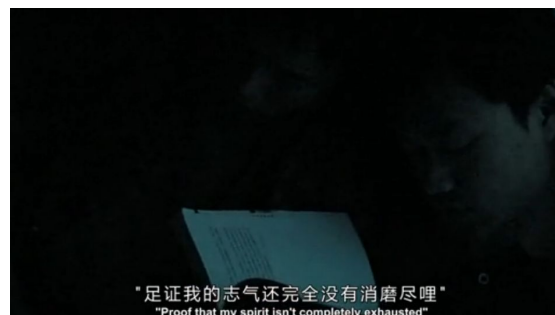
Figure 45

## 2.5 Fragmented Narrative

The narrative in *Spring Fever* is mostly linear and chronological, except for a few flashbacks of Wang and Jiang reading Yu Dafu's 'Night of Spring Fever' in a dim room. Though the narrative is generally temporarily linear (no chronological), it is elliptical, i.e. there are temporal gaps between the scenes.

For instance, right after we see Luo Haitao and Li Jing have sex, the scene is immediately cut to Jiang walking on the street to have his breakfast; right after a few seconds we see Jiang ordering his breakfast, the camera immediately switches to Li signing in to her shift to work. Or right after we see Li and Luo dancing for fun in Jiang's apartment, the scene cuts to Li meeting

with her old boss's friend. The flashbacks of Wang and Jiang reading 'Night of Spring Fever' are inserted after Jiang met Wang in his bookstore, before Wang commited suicide and in the last scene after Jiang makes out with with his new partner.

### 3. Production Details

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lou made *Spring Fever* secretly while he was banned from making films for five years by the Chinese government. The special circumstances require him to minimize the mise-en-scene. As a result, as compared to the production of Blind Massage, there is no use of special effects in the making of Spring Fever. It is most likely that they use some consumer DV camera to shoot the film, though the exact model is unknown.

Due to the special circumstances, Zeng and Lou decided to follow the Dogme 95 manifesto (Yu Yan Yuan). Dogme 95 as a controversial movement was put forward by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995. To emphasize the traditional values of story and acting, they advocated a set of rules called "the Vow of Chastity" to decentralize the role of technology and special effects in filmmaking. "The Vow of Chastity" (Von Trier and Vinterberg) includes rules such as "The camera must be hand-held," "The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa," "Special lighting is not acceptable," "Optical work and filters are forbidden," etc. Von Trier and Vinterberg believed that by minimize the artificial and excessive use of technology, they could thus "force the truth out of my characters and settings" (Von Trier and Vinterberg) per se.

Though originally when the "Dogme 95 Manifesto" and the "Vow of Chastity" were published, films had to fulfill all the ten rules in order to be credited as a Dogme 95 film, the

strict definition of a Dogme 95 film was soon diminished by the two founders themselves. For instance, von Trier's own film *The Idiots* (1998) was criticized for using an artificial soundtrack, and Thomas Vinterberg's film *Fasten* (1998)[5] was criticized for using extra lighting. The movement eventually ended in 2005 due to the fact that the founders realized they ended up making merely formulaic films.

Though strictly speaking, i.e. if we follow the ten rules strictly, *Spring Fever* is not a Dogme 95 film, it does not undermine the fact that the production of *Spring Fever* is inspired by and follows the style of Dogme 95, e.g. the use of hand-held camera, the minimal use of mise-en-scene and the zero use of artificial lighting. According the Zeng, the whole cinematographer's crew consists of only three people including himself (Sun).

Moreover, the fact that Zeng and Lou intentionally followed the Dogme 95 style does not rule out the real constraints and challenges they encountered when making the film secretly. For example, as Lou mentioned in his interview (Lim), the whole crew, even though they only had a small crew, needed to prepare to stop shooting any moment of time if something happened, i.e. the state authorities found out, which in itself required a restricted mise-en-scene in terms of shooting openly in public spaces lest they be discovered. As Lou himself admitted in an interview, "we had to be prepared that every minute our shooting might be all of a sudden stopped by someone" (Lim).

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[5] *Festen* was directed by Thomas Vinterberg anonymously as part of the Dogma95 movement.

**Chapter Four: the Audience's Subjective Experience and Emotions**

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring how the style of the two films give rise to the audience's subjective experience and emotions. In doing so, I will also be constantly drawing to debates among film scholars and philosophers on the nature of filmic emotions and the functions of different types of film techniques; I will pay special attention to close-ups and point-of-view (POV) shots, given the predominant or special use of them in the two films. By making the connections between Lou's techniques and the conclusions from scholarly debates, I should be able to explain how these two films encourage the audience's unique subjective experiences

1. **Emotions in Film Experience**

**1.1 Genuine Emotion or Quasi Emotion**

As Greg Smith has pointed out in the very beginning of his book *Film Structure and the Emotional System*, "there is relatively little written by cinema scholars on film and emotion *per se*"(Smith, 3), even though it is widely acknowledged that emotion plays a central role in our subjective experiences with film. Film scholars and philosophers of film have constantly argued about the nature of emotion, e.g. whether the emotions we experience in interacting with films are genuine emotions, or the emotions we experience is a result of identification with the characters, though they barely reach any consensus.

Philosophers take artworks like novels and films to be a special type of artwork, i.e. they are representational in nature. These types of artwork create some fictional background while at the

same time induce affective responses from the audience. For philosophers, an immediate

problem, the so-called "Paradox of Fiction," arises when they try to understand the nature of

emotion from the perspective of audience. The paradox is presented as follows.

1. We experience emotions directed at fictional characters and stories.
2. One has to believe that X exists in order to experience towards X.
3. But certainly we do not believe that fictional characters and stories exist.

The three premises are inconsistent with each other. Different philosophers have taken different

approaches in response to this inconsistency. For instance, Richard Moran argues that whatever

emotions we experience about fictional characters are genuine emotions; Kendall L. Walton,

however, proposes a 'make-believe' theory into the study of fictions and argues that we the

audience only experience a quasi-emotion when interacting with fictions.

Are the emotions we experience when interacting with films genuine emotions? This is a

question that seems self-evident to a lot of people, but puzzles scholars. Using audience's

reactions and emotions in horror films as an example, Kendall L. Walton argues the emotions we

have directed to fictional characters are different from our real ones because the filmic emotions

do not motivate the same reactions and motors as what real emotions do. For instance, imagine a

case in which both the protagonist and you see a monster coming onto the screen. Though both

of you and the protagonist would feel afraid and scream, only the protagonist would try to flee

the room or call someone else for help. Simply based on the argument that the two instances of

emotions you and the protagonist experience do not lead to the same type of action, Walton

argues that the emotion of the audience ought not to be real but only a type of quasi-emotion.

These quasi emotions are possible because we the audience take films to be a certain type of

prop that prescribe our specific imaginings and thus make-believe about the existence of fictional stories and characters.

The radical claim about quasi-emotion and make-believe theory soon receives resistance and objections from other philosophers and scholars. For instance, Noel Carroll questions that if there is this strong relation between us making-believe of the fictional stories and our 'quasi-emotions,' then Walton faces a challenge in explaining why sometimes even if the audience imagine what is happening in the films they are still not moved by the films. Philosophers like Tamar Gendler also argue that Walton's quasi-emotion account seems to entail that if we experience emotions about other type of non-existent objects or characters, e.g. historical figures, we are also experiencing a quasi-emotion, which is problematic.

Moreover, if we follow Walton's example, it also leaves almost no space for any degree of freedom from the perspective of both the filmmakers and the audience. That is, if we want to adopt Walton's model, we have to ask ourselves: is it necessary for filmmakers to restrict their technique to induce one particular emotions? Does it mean that all the audience should always feel the same? Certainly not. That said, the rest of the discussion concerns only how genuine emotions from the audience are possible and set aside the question of the possibility of quasi-emotions.

### 1.2 Emotion and Identification

Scholars from the Cognitivist camp in general rejects the notion of identification because they find the psychoanalytic use of 'identification' in relation to the audience's emotions too broad and problematic. For instance, Greg Smith, from the Cognitivist camp argues that "a better

way to think of filmic emotions is that films extend an invitation to feel in particular ways" (Smith, 12). That is, instead of 'making people feel,' films offer invitations to feel; and individuals can accept or reject the invitation. However, the invitation claim made by Smith is rather radical: he argues that in order to accept the invitation, one must be an "educated viewer' (Smith, 12) in the sense that one has the 'prerequisite skills required to read the emotional cues" (Smith, 12). That is to say, only when one has the prerequisite skills as an educated viewer, one thus enters the realm of a choice, i.e. a choice to either reject or accept the invitation based on one's recognition of the cues.

However, whether the notion of 'identification' should be completely abandoned if one is not taking a psychoanalytic approach is still an open question. For instance, Berys Gaut argues that it's striking to see the notion of 'identification' being rejected by most cognitivist scholars, even though there is widespread use of the term 'identification' in viewers' reports of their subjective experiences with film, not to mention the use of 'identification' in daily conversations. That is, ordinary audience, regardless of whether they are educated viewers being aware of cues or not, often self-report that they are moved by the films because they identify with some of the characters.

The problem cognitivist critics such as Currie have against the relation between identification and POV shots for example is that the consequences of identification and imaginations simply are not entailed by the very act of identification per se. They argue against it by drawing connection to the POV shots from the perspective of the killer in horror films, and argue that the function of POV shot is to "disguise the killer's identity" (Gaut, 204), instead of put the audience in a position that they take up the killer's perspective.

As Gaut has rightly pointed out, even though the point of killer's perspective in horror films is well argued, it is itself sufficient to reject the relation between identification and POV shots in films in general. What Gaut points out is that both the previous theorists who worked on identification, i.e. the psychoanalytic scholars, or argued against the notion of identification, i.e. the cognitivist scholars, all made the same mistake by talking the notion of identification as a global concept, which it is not.

Gaut argues that the act of identification is *aspectual*. According to Gaut, "to identify perceptually with a character is to imagine seeing from his point of view; to identify affectively with a character is to imagine feeling how he feels…" (Gaut, 205). Gaut provides a commonsense argument against the global understanding of identification, i.e. it is simply impossible for a viewer to take up all properties of a character in order for identification to happen. In what follows, Gaut argues that 'once we construe identification as a matter of imagining oneself in a character's situation, the issue becomes pertinent of *which aspects* of the character's situation one imagines oneself in.' (Gaut, 205)

The different aspects of identification are themselves distinct from each other, though not necessarily mutually exclusive from each other. What the term 'distinct' entails is thus that our simple perceptual identification with the character does not entail the fact that we identify ourselves with the character affectively and emotionally, though the possibility of one giving rise to another still holds.

Talking about the emotional aspect of identification, Gaut then goes on to make further distinctions: the difference among affective identification, empathy and sympathy. Gaut argues that affective identification requires someone to imagine how the character feels while the notion

of empathy simply entails how one actually feels how the character feels. As Gaut himself argues, "the idea of empathic identification is that one feels toward the situation that confronts the character what the character feels toward it; and since the situation is merely fictional, the possibility of real emotions directed toward situations known merely to be fictional must be allowed" (Gaut, 207).

Slightly different from the notion of empathy, the notion of "sympathy" refers to the care for the character. As Gaut has rightly pointed it out, "this care can be manifested in variety of mental states: fearing for what he is feeling, getting angry on his behalf, pitying him, feeling alienated at his triumphs, and so forth" (Gaut, 207). It should also be noted that how we feel, as well as why our feelings and the characters' feelings are different have to do with the amount of information we as the audience have. In this sense, Carroll in right in pointing out that partial correspondence itself is insufficient for identification.

## 2. The Functions of Techniques

As Smith has argued, films do not make people feel but rather invite people to feel. One of the gestures of their invitation is thus the cues embedded in filmmakers' styles. In this section, before discussing how the two films of Lou send out invitations, I want to first discuss the functions of Lou's most significant patterns in the two films: the predominant use of Close-ups, especially the close-ups of human faces, and the special use of Point-of-View (POV) shots.

**2.1 Close-Ups**

Ever since the invention of film as a new technology, one of the the special privileges of film, i.e. the possibility of close-ups, has attracted much attention from both early filmmakers and early film theorists. For instance, both Jean Epstein and Bela Balázs have praised and investigated the special functions of close-ups in narrative and the portrait of characters.

In the very beginning of his essay "Magnification," Jean Epstein boldly asserts that "the close-up is the soul of the cinema" (Epstein and Liebman, 9). As an early film theorist, Epstein argues that close-up is what essentially separates films from theater; and the special value of the close-up lies in its relation to the notion of p*hotogénie* that is introduced by Epstein. As scholars have noticed, the term '*photogénie*' is "usually considered to be theoretically incoherent. No doubt this is due to the fact that *photogénie* is designed to account for that which is inarticulable, that which exceeds language and hence points to the very essence of cinematic specificity" (Doane, 89). Since my focus here is on the role of close-ups, and for the purpose of the discussion of close-ups, I will take what Epstein means by *photogénie* in the essay "Magnification" as a moment of dominant affect and emotion created by the uniqueness of cameras and transcended from the physical bases of cameras. The film technique of close-up is one of those that make the expression of *photogénie* possible according to Epstein.

For Epstein, the close-up is special because it is an "intensifying agent" (Epstein and Liebman, 13) and an "emotional indicator" (Epstein and Liebman, 14) that often overwhelms the audience and directs their attention. What makes the intensification of emotions possible is the notion of "proximity," i.e. it allows "maximum visual acuity" (Epstein and Liebman, 14). Only close-ups can make the following descriptions possible:

> Muscular preambles ripple beneath the skin. Shadows shift, tremble, hesitate. Something is being decided. A breeze of emotion underlines the mouth with clouds. The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A wave carries them away. Crescendo. A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with tics like a theater curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis. Crack. The mouth gives way, like a ripe fruit splitting open. As if slit by a scalpel, a keyboard-like smile cuts laterally into the corner of the lips. (Epstein and Liebman, 9)

However, it should also be noted that given Epstein's understanding of *photogénie* and the essence of cinema is closely related to the notion of 'movement,' he values close-up only when it is in motion. For instance, he makes it explicit in the very beginning of "Magnification" that "[he] [has] never understood motionless close-ups. They sacrifice their essence, which is movement" (Epstein and Liebman, 9) That is, for Epstein, close-ups lose their special functions in transcending emotions out of the physical bases of cameras and films when they are prolonged. To what extent Epstein is right in claiming that motionless close-ups lose their significance is a question that will be explored later in relation to Lou's two films.

Similarly, Bela Balázs also highly praises the function and value of close-ups in film techniques. Interestingly, he also opens his first "The Close-Up" with a hyperbolic comment that "Close-ups are film's true terrain. With the close-up the new territory of this new art opens up" (Balázs, 38). It is through close-ups that the audience is able to see the details that they might otherwise miss, and it is through close-ups that the audience start to feel and see something new. Similarly, Balázs also catches the special intention behind close-ups: the filmmaker guides the audience's attention through close-ups and thus close-ups play a role in helping emphasize what is intended by the filmmakers.

Balázs argues that because of the emphasis and redirection of attention, the audience often find themselves lose the sense of space and thus the awareness of immediate surroundings with close-ups, e.g. they are alone with the magnified faces. It should be noted here that though this position is interesting, it is sometimes challenged by other scholars who argue that close-ups usually function with many other types of shots often establishing shots etc, and thus they don't necessarily create a sense of space. According to Balázs, the loss of sense of space thus creates a new dimension called "*physiognomy*" (Balázs, 100). Again, similar to Epstein's notion of *photogénie*, the term *physiognomy* introduced by Balázs is also controversial. It is used by Balázs in a way to describe the capacity to tell human beings' characters simply from their faces. To what extent the theory of *physiognomy* is valid is not the concern of this project, nonetheless the structure of the theory in relation to close-ups still help us understand why the close-ups, especially the close-ups of human faces are so special: it tells us *something* that is most subjective and personal about the characters, something that might be unbearable for the audience once is magnified and thus intensified. For instance, Balázs himself argues in the essay that

> "In the proximity afforded by the close-up, micro-expression appears so big that large-scale expression becomes simply unbearable. This is why, in modern films, acting has become increasingly discreet. Where the slightest trembling of an eyelid can be seen clearly, everything over and above this seems exaggerated. Genuineness is more rigorously scrutinized. Artifice and makeup are unmasked. Glycerine tears are out of bounds. Large gestures are convincing only in elemental outbursts; and here they appear as abnormalities, as ecstasy, hysteria or madness. Restraint, in contrast, has come to have the more powerful effect." (Balázs, 104 & 105)

That is, close-ups, especially close-ups of human faces, make the less visible details possible and thus transcend our understanding and even reactions about the characters.

As mentioned above, Balázs argues that the use of close-ups, i.e. the presentation of isolated faces, brings us into a new dimension where the audience is taken out of their current sense of narrative space. Scholars like Gilles Deleuze, inspired by Balázs, also claim that "the close-up does not tear away its object from a set of which it would form part, of which it would be a part, but on the contrary it abstracts it from all *spatio-temporal coordinates*, that is to say it raises it to the state of Entity" (Deleuze, 96, emphasis in origin). That is, the use of close-ups detaches whatever is being emphasized from the rest of the narrative. This position of close-ups abstracting the emphasis from the rest is then challenged by contemporary scholars such as Mary Ann Doane, who argues that the use of close-ups by filmmakers actually lacks the so-called *autonomy* that is frequently assigned to it by scholars such as Balázs and Deleuze. By citing examples from different films, Doane argues that even though there is "a residue of separability, an uncontainable excess, attached to the close-up" (Doane, 104 & 105), we should examine close-ups more carefully in terms of its scale.

However, what is indicated and what I am arguing in this paper is that a close-up or a close-scale shot as a stylistic device functions holistically within the overall editing design or formal system of a film. While one may have elliptical shot-to-shot relationships usually a close-up is used to emphasize a detail and when a close-up is used as a close-scale shot of a character's face it allows the audience to assess the emotional state of the character. The reason Balázs and other early film theorists emphasized the importance of the "close-up" or the

close-scale shot is because they wanted to argue for the distinctiveness of the medium of film, i.e. they are more interested in providing a "medium-specificity" argument.

To summarize, above I have given an overview about how some film scholars and theorists understand the function of close-ups. Both early film theorists Epstein and Balázs argue that close-up plays an essential role in film techniques because it makes maximum visual acuity possible and thus either transcends the emotions of the faces or make the audience see what they are not able to see otherwise from the characters. However, to what extent close-up is an isolate from the rest of the narrative remains debatable. Balázs argues for the defamiliarizing aspect of close-ups, while Doane argues that close-ups are not as autonomous as suggested by Balázs. What I am arguing in this project is that, similar to Doane's position, the use and the function of close-ups depends on the overall formal system, how the device is used within this overall formal system.

## 2.2 Point-of-View (POV) Shots

In general, the term 'Point of View' shots often refers to the techniques used by filmmakers to show the point of view of the characters in film, i.e. what the characters are seeing, to the audience. In other words, a POV shot perceptually aligns the viewer with one or another character.

However, how a POV shot can be taken is not standardized. For instance, it is possible that we see a POV shot of a particular character while at the same time the character is still visible in the shot, e.g. the shot is taken over the shoulder or from the back of the character. It is also possible that we see what the characters are seeing through eyeline matches. That is, a structure

of a POV shot can consist of two different shots that are conveyed to the audience as if they are temporally and spatially continuous. The first shot often shows that the character is looking off screen or looking at some particular direction or object; given that the position or viewpoint of the character is already assumed by the first shot, the second shot can then show what *that thing* is and what exactly the character is looking at by showing the object itself. This structure is considered as the basic POV structure by Edward Branigan (Branigan 1984).

The two examples of how a POV shot can be taken seems to suggest that the POV shots are actually taken from an objective angle, i.e. we see what the characters are seeing from their viewpoint but not through their eyes. For instance, Joseph V. Mascelli, in his *The Five C's of Cinematography*, argues specifically that

> Point-of-view, or simply p.o.v., camera angles record the scene from a particular player's viewpoint. The point-of-view is an objective angle, but since it falls between the objective and subjective angle, it should be placed in a separate category and given special consideration. A point-of-view shot is *as close as an objective shot can approach a subjective shot*—and still *remain objective*. The camera is positioned at the side of a subjective player—whose viewpoint is being depicted—so that the audience is given the impression they are standing cheek-to-cheek with the off-screen player. The viewer *does not see the event through the player's eyes*, as in a subjective shot in which the camera trades places with the screen player. He sees the event from the player's viewpoint, as if standing alongside him. Thus, the camera angle remains objective, since it is an unseen observer not involved in the action. (Mascelli, 22)

What is suggested by Mascelli is that a typical POV shot structures does have to involve two separate shots, i.e. the viewpoint shot and the object shot. As long as a shot is preceded by a character looking off screen or looking at something, it is possible that that shot is a POV shot. Moreover, what is being asserted by Mascelli who is himself a cinematographer is that, at no point a POV shot can be subjective. A POV shot can be the more subjective than any other shots

in a film, but it still *remains objective*. It remains objective precisely because that we the audience do not see through the character's eyes but only from his viewpoint, and this is a position that is highly controversial.

The position that a POV shot remains objective is sometimes challenged by other scholars. For instance, philosopher Berys Gaut argues that a POV shot can be subjective and it does provide the opportunity for perceptual identifications with the characters from the audience's perspectives. However, the term 'perceptual identification' can be challenged by cinematographers like Mascelli in the sense that it is not identification, but rather a semi-subjective view from the viewpoint of the characters. Though the term 'perceptual identification' itself might not be strong enough the argument for the subjectivity of POV shots, Gaut continues to argue that a POV shot not only provides the opportunity for the audience to see what the characters are seeing, but also how the character feels. That is, a POV shot does open the room for affect identification. To argue for the possibility of affect identification, Gaut uses an example from *The Silence of the Lambs (1991)*

> Consider the shot ...from the point of view of Buffalo Bill, who is wearing green-tinted night-glasses, looking at Starling (Jodie Foster), while she flails around in the dark, desperately trying to defend herself from him. Certainly, we have no tendency here to empathise or sympathise with Bill – our sympathies lie entirely with Starling – but the shot does tend to foster our imagining of Bill's murderous feelings (partly because we can see their terrifying effect on Starling). (Gaut, 263. *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*)

That is, even if a POV structure follows the most basic structure as suggested by Mascelli and Branigan, i.e. a viewpoint shot followed by an object shot, there is still room for the POV shots to be *subjective*, instead of semi-subjective. Even if Mascelli as a cinematographer disagrees with scholars who argue for the subjective nature of POV shots, he necessarily faces difficulty

explaining the emotional aspect of certain POV shots. Questions that can be asked to Mascelli on behalf of Gaut include: "how can a shot that remain objective has emotional aspect in it", "if a shot has emotional aspect in it, whose emotion is it?" and etc.

Above I have briefly introduced some debates over the nature and structure of POV shots. First, in general, filmmakers, cinematographers and film scholars agree that a POV shot does have a certain structure that shares a close connection with eyeline matches, i.e. a continuous editing between a viewpoint shot and an object shot. However, there is relatively less consensus on whether POV shots are subjective or objective. Some argue that POV shots remain objective simply because the audience do not see through the characters' eyes through POV shots but only their viewpoints; but some argue that POV shots can transcend to certain degree of subjectivity because sometimes the audience not only see what the characters see but also feel how the characters feel.

What I am trying to argue in this project is that, similar to close-ups, POV shots should be understood more as a narrative device, i.e. how it communicates particular sorts of knowledge either of the plot or of the character to the viewer. The special use of POV shots in *Blind Massage* conveys a particularly great depth of subjectivity or character's information.

**3. Subjectivity in *Spring Fever* and *Blind Massage*: How the Two Films Bring in New Perspectives**

In this section, I will hence closely analyze how the patterns and style of the two films give rise to how stylistic strategies encourage the audience or invite the audience to experience particular emotions, as well as how Lou defamiliarizes the POV device in unusual and

interesting ways. Though both films are about socially marginalized groups, Lou refuses to leave

the audience an impression in the sense that the relation between them and the characters is in

the form of 'we vs them.' By 'we vs them,' I mean the mentality that is shared among many

people to categorize LGBTQ or disbaled people as the *other* or *them*.

As Lou himself said explicitly several times in different interviews, by making *Blind

Massage*, he and his team intended to bring the audience to a realm in which they can be

immersed in the experiences of the blind people.


**3.1 Cinema Vérite**

At first glance, it seems that the distance between the audience and the characters is already

brought closer by the cinema vérite style of the two films, though *Spring Fever* follows a more

strict Dogme 95 style. Vérite style often transgresses the conventions of classical cinema to

create what is conceived as a more "realistic" cinematic experience, and accomplishes so through

the use of another set of conventions that are deviations from the classical norm. As part of Lou's

overall style, both films are shot with hand-held, mostly shaky, cameras. Moreover, the

minimum use of direct light in *Blind Massage* and the complete absence of artificial light in

*Spring Fever* further reinforces the experience of time and space among the audience, which in

turn reveals extra information to the audience that they might be unable to see otherwise.

Sometimes it is also through the shaky camera that it promotes certain types of emotional

engagement. The existence of a so-called objective narrator is often eliminated. For instance, the

audience often have difficulty distinguishing the characters from one another or from the

backgrounds in many scenes in *Spring Fever*, due to insufficient lighting.
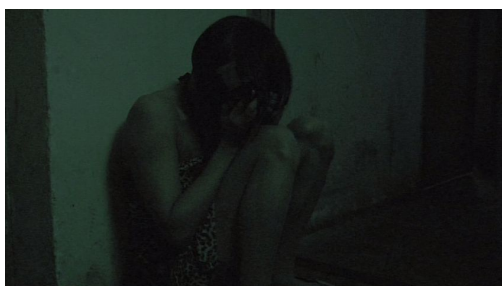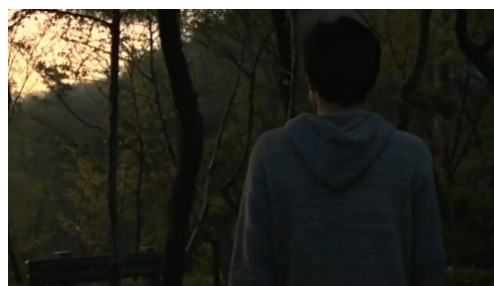
Figure 46



Figure 47



Figure 48



Figure 49

Figure 46 is when Luo meets Lin on a corner of a street at night, exchanging the evidence they

have collected about Wang's affair with Jiang. Luo's figure is completely in dark and thus

distinguishes himself from both the background and Lin. Without the extra light to highlight the

protagonists, which are usually a technique by other filmmakers, the audience actually get a

better sense of both the space and time. Without the extra light as a distractor, the audience also

experience the source of light coming from the left corner, i.e. the back of Luo, and reflects on

Lin's face. Similarly, figure 47 is when Luo's girlfriend Li talking to her boss's old friend

secretly in his car, and tries to ask for help to get her boss out of prison. This scene happens right

after Lin danced with Luo in Jiang's apartment. The surroundings are impossible to see, and the

only slightly brighter objects in this image are Li's face and her seat. It's through Li's face the

audience gets the sense that she is talking to someone else. The completely honest darkness not

only informs the audience the time and compact space that the characters are experiencing, but also reinforces the sense of secrecy and emergency among the audience: it is so emergent in the sense that she has to talk to him even though it is so late; it is suspicious that she has to talk to him in an enclosed dark space.

Figure 48 is depicts Jiang crying at a corner of a pub after he is informed about Wang's death. We see him in a female dress, curling up against the wall. The floor is almost indistinguishable from the background. Figure 49 shows Wang walking towards the peak of Mountain Zijin, after a night's struggle. The light is mostly low except for the visible first light from the top left corner. It is exactly the early morning light, without distracting lighting, that informs the audience of the real time when this scene takes place in the plot. The function of the absence of extra lighting in figure 47, 48 and 49 reveals some unseen aspect of the characters' decisions precisely through the reinforcement of the sense of time and space among the audience. That is, it is exactly through the honest dim light that we see Jiang's heartbroken struggle, i.e. hiding himself in a dark corner trying to digest the news alone; and it is exactly through the absence of distracting light that we see the difficult decision made by Wang to end his life after a long night's struggle, i.e. after a long night's struggle, he has to make his mind as soon as possible before a day starts to prevent any possibility of changing his mind.

Paradoxically, it is by making the shots less legible and partially obscuring the characters faces at times that audience is encouraged to focus even more dominantly at the characters plights and infer an even more complex interiority upon them.

Talking about how the cinema vérite style relay the experiences of the characters to the audience, it is not only that the minimal use of artificial or direct light that encourages the audience to think and experience from the character's perspective. Lou's shaky camera sometimes is even more aggressive in the sense that it directly puts the audience into the experiences and perspectives of the characters. That is, sometimes the audience is forced to be part of the characters by the shaky camera.




Figure 50                                                    Figure 51

For instance, figure 50 and figure 51 belong to the same scene in which the blind masseurs are trying to stop a taxi to get Sha, who just spit out blood in the middle of a dinner, to hospital. The audience see the blind masseurs who are desperately asking for help through a shaky and emotional camera. The camera is so shaky and indecisive in the sense that it does not seem to know where to shoot and whom to shoot: it sometimes turns swiftly back to Sha who is still coughing, and sometimes swiftly turns to the street when it hears the noise of car coming. The shakiness of the camera not only reveals the anxiety and sense of helplessness among the blind masseurs, but also forces the audience to take the same perspective and thus tries to create a sense of anxiety among the audience. It's through the shakiness and emotion of the camera that

the audience is forced to experience the emotions of the masseurs, i.e. they have no other choice but to see the characters through the shakiness of the camera. In this sense, the role of an objective observer or narrator is eliminated and the audience assume a point of view that belongs to a collective body, i.e. the anxiety and helplessness shared among the blind masseurs.

The cinema vérite style, at first glance, seems to be incompatible with the fast-paced narrative in *Spring Fever*, even though both *Spring Fever* and *Blind Massage* pay more attention to individuals and their reactions while having a fragmented narrative at the same time. The surface level incompatibility lies in the sense that on the one hand, the hand-held camera, synchronized sound and minimal use of artificial lighting reinforces the audience's experience of the actual space and time and thus invites the audience to experience what the characters are experiencing; on the other hand, the fast-paced and fragmented melodramatic narrative often overwhelms the audience and thus distances the audience from their everyday lives and their own personal experiences.

## 3.2 Close-Up

On the one hand, Lou's intention to focus on the narration of the characters inevitably results in the fragmented and elliptical narrative; on the other hand, the fragmented melodramatic narrative is risky in the sense that it threatens audience comprehension .The strategy taken by Lou to compensate and bridge the gap between the seemingly incompatible is thus the dominant use of close-ups or medium close-ups.

Figure 52



Figure 53



Figure 54



Figure 55

Lou replaces a lot of transitions between scenes with close-ups of the characters' faces, e.g. when

Luo identifies Jiang outside his office (figure 52), or right before and after Wang cut his wrist

(figure 53), or after Luo is informed of Wang's death (figure 54), or after the Li witnesses the

affair between Jiang and Luo and three of them pretend nothing happened after that (figure 55).

For instance, in the scene where Luo is informed of Wang's death, the only shot in the scene is

the close-up of Luo's face, and nothing else. That is, sometimes close-ups are what constitute *the*

*entire* scene or at least majority of the scene.

The significance of close-ups constituting the entire or the majority of the scenes is that 1) it

does grant close-up *autonomy* in the sense that close-ups push forward the narrative alone on

themselves; 2) the prolonged close-ups are what do the important job of inviting emotional

identification. As mentioned above, some scholars such as Balázs and Deleuze argue that

close-ups abstract and isolate whatever is being emphasized from the rest of its spatio-temporal

coordinates and narrative, which is challenged by Lou's use of close-ups. By constituting the

entire scene or majority of the scene, close-ups *are* themselves an essential part of the narrative.

Moreover, the property of constituting the entire scene inevitably challenges the position of

Epstein who thinks that prolonged close-ups are less effective because they lose the essence of

movements. The prolonged close-ups are powerful and effective in the sense that it is exactly

because of their prolonged presence that the audience get a longer cue, and thus invitations, to

sympathize, if not empathize, with the characters. The prolonged close-ups make the irritation

and desire to revenge (figure 52), the struggle between love and death (figure 53), the shockness

and guilt (figure 54), and the sense of loss (figure 55) impossible to miss. That is, even if the

audience would not empathize with the characters here, the overwhelming omnipresent

prolonged close-ups almost force the audience to sympathize with the characters, and this is

when the audience start to get affectively influenced by the narrative.

When there is this predominant use of close-ups to convey the emotion cues of the

characters, we see that many times off-screen space is cued for the viewer through sound. For

instance, the location and time is told via the tranquility in the background in figure 53, via the

traffic noise in figure 54, and via the noise from the ferry in figure 55.

Though both *Blind Massage* and *Spring Fever* dominantly use close-ups and medium

close-ups, the function of close-ups is not entirely the same between the two films. Besides the

overwhelming invitation for emotional identification, the close-ups in *Blind Massage* also serves

to create a defamiliarized sense of space and thus helps relay the subjective experiences of the

blind people. In this sense, the use of close-ups in *Blind Massage* does agree with the position of

Balázs and Deleuze to the extent that whatever is within the gaze is an isolate from its

spatio-temporal coordinates. *However,* unlike what is suggested by Balazs, the significance of

being an isolating device here has less to do with *what* is being gazed; instead, it is the

experience of gazing at something in isolation that subsumes the audience into the subjective

perceptual experiences of the blind masseurs. As we can see from the figures (figure 56, 57, 58

and 59), once there is a use of several or a series of  of close-ups, the audience's sense of space

and location may be thrown into uncertainty if there is no establishing shot to clearly relay

spatio-temporal locations, i.e. it is difficult or impossible to tell the location and surroundings of

the characters. Because of the close-ups, there is not much visual information that can be

processed by the audience themselves, which will more or less create a sense of loss among the

audience. This weakened sense of space and location is part of Lou's intention to force the

audience to be in the subjective visual perceptual experiences of the blind characters. In other

words, by throwing spatial relations into uncertainty the audience may feel a sense of

disorientation akin to being blind. But this is of course only an artistic approximation, true

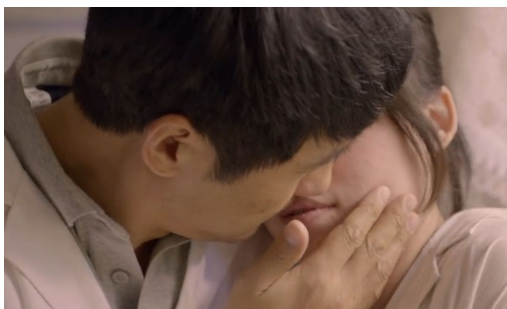blindness would necessitate a dark screen and theater.



Figure 56                                   Figure 57

Figure 58                                          Figure 59

### 3.3 A New Experience of Space

Talking about the sense of space, *Blind Message* also challenges the audience's understanding of the boundary between private space and public space, which in turn creates another level of sympathy or even empathy. Talking about space, our perceptual system is the first and foremost in guiding us to navigate through the space. In what follows, without a properly functioning perceptual system, it is conceivable that our ordinary boundary between private and public space, between what is seen and what is unseen will also be challenged.

Because the characters are blind Lou must conceive of alternate ways of having them communicate than are available to people with sight. As introduced in Chapter Two, figure 60 belongs to the scene in which the female masseurs are enjoying their post-lunch time in the living room. At the same time, Xiao Ma is approaching and getting close to Xiao Kong in a way that may be unique to blind people interaction with one another. This type of contact is frank and direct, and also private. 'Frank and direct' in the sense that Xiao Ma creates a nonconsensual intimacy between him and Xiao Kong due to his sexual desire. 'Private' in a sense that without making any sound or noise, this type of information is only available between these two characters and not the rest. As a result, we see the rest of the people are unaffected by what has

been happening between Xiao Ma and Xiao Kong even if they stay in the same compact space. Even though the living room is considered as a relatively public space when all the masseurs are enjoying their breaks together, interestingly something extremely private can co-exist within the public space.



Figure 60



Figure 61



Figure 62



Figure 63

Or consider another example with figure 61, figure 62 and figure 63. This scene happens after Xiao Ma gets released from the police department due to prostitution. He emotionally breaks down, and returns to the massage center. After he enters the living room, he asks whether anyone else is in the room; given that no one replies, he immediately starts to cry. Interestingly, right after he starts crying, Du Hong makes her presence explicit by trying to comfort and confess to Xiao Ma. This is when Xiao Ma realizes that he is not actually alone in a private space. More

interestingly, the private conversation between Du Hong and Xiao Ma is then interrupted by the

third person's presence, i.e. Sha Fuming accidently drops his music box on the floor. In contrast,

this time Sha refuses to make his presence explicit by not answering to Du Hong and Xiao Ma's

question. As a result, as shown in figure 63, when Xiao Ma stands up and is about to leave, he is

still not sure whether there is a third person present in the room. In this sense, the sense of space

is completely idiosyncratic in the sense that there is no common reference. That is, because of

the lack of visual information amongst the characters, a completely public space from the

perspective of Sha can be seen as a private space from the perspective of Xiao Ma or Du Hong.

Together with the characters, the audience also switches between different sense of space.



| | |
|---|---|
| Figure 64 | Figure 65 |

Another example of a challenged understanding of space or what is seen can be shown from

figure 64 and figure 65. Figure 64 and figure 65 belong to the scene in which Sha is having a

blind date with both the female's (Xiao Zhang) parents being present. Even though Sha

understands that it is a blind date and Xiao Zhang's mom is looking for a desirable partner for

her, Sha only talks about poems and literature, which annoys Xiao Zong's mom. Here when Sha

Fuming is introducing Braille to them, we see a sad asymmetry. On the one hand, Sha enjoys

what he is introducing; on the other hand, Xiao Zhang's mom is impatient in what he is saying.

We see that on the one hand, Xiao Zhang's mom is getting really impatient and annoyed, on the

other hand, Xiao Zhang's dad is assuring Sha that they are actually listening to him. That is, the

visual information of Xiao Zhang's mom's impatience can never be received and thus proceeded

by Sha. What we can see can never be seen by Sha. This is one of the moments when I

personally get emotionally affected by the film: a mix of sympathy and empathy. On the one

hand, I, as someone who has normal sight, feel guilty for how Xiao Zhang's mom treats Sha; on

the other hand, I care about Sha's experience to the extent that I immediately start to reflect on

how I should treat disabled people if there is such an asymmetry.


**3.4 Point-of-View Shot**

It is not obvious to me as to why there is only a minimal use of POV shots in *Spring Fever*.

One plausible explanation I can think of is that the role of emotional invitations is largely

occupied by other techniques such as close-ups and cinema vérite. Interestingly, there are plenty

POV shots in *Blind Massage*, a film that we wouldn't even expect any POV shots given the

definition of POV shots. Moreover, it is also possible that if a film is shot with longer takes and

ensemble staging or group shots then it would be easier to shoot on the fly or without much

planning, whereas strict POV shots may require more planning and thus more time and

resources.

Two most beautifully done and explicit scenes in the form of POV shots are 1) after Xiao Ma

recovers some degree of sight after the fight with Xiao Man's client (figure 66, 67, 68, and 69);

and 2) the last scene where Xiao Ma walks back to his own massage center and looks at Xiao Man's face (figure 70, 71, 72, and 73).

As introduced in Chapter Two, when using Lensbaby to relay the visual perceptual experience of the blind people, the cinematographer Zeng Jian sometimes waves his finger in front of the lens to make the reception of light vary in degree. In the scene where Xiao Ma runs back to the center with some recovered sight, we not only see the images get darkened and out of focus, we also see the lighting changing more frequently and drastically. This is when we, the audience, see through Xiao Ma's eye, i.e. this scene is much more radical than simply a scene from the viewpoint of Xiao Ma. Unlike what is argued by Mascelli that POV shot remains on the level of viewpoint and thus is objective, Lou's technique experiments completely reject Mascelli's position. That is, we not only see through the character's eyes, we also see *how* the character sees the world.

Moreover, together with the extremely shaky camera, we not only are perceptually aligned with Xiao Ma, but also emotionally identify with him. It is through the shakiness and frequent variation of light that we understand, if not share, how hectic Xiao Ma is trying to observe the world that he hasn't seen for years.



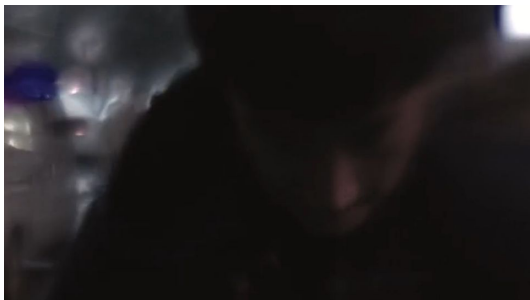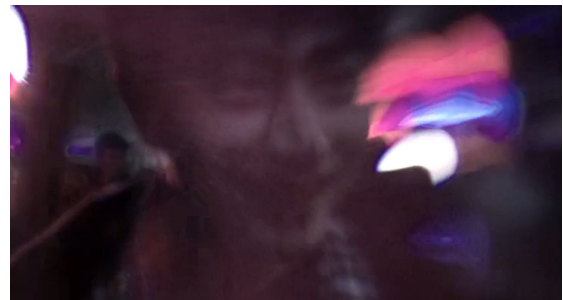Figure 66                                    Figure 67
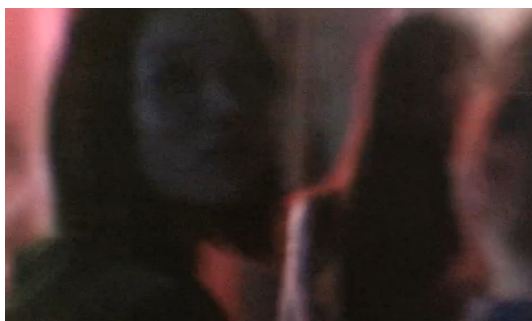
Figure 68                                                        Figure 69

Interestingly, the last scene where Xiao Ma sees Xiao Man's face in front of his massage center not only challenges Mascelli's position that we do not see through the eyes of the characters, but also challenges an even more commonly agreed position that a POV shot is always accompanied by a POV shot structure. Instead of following the so-called basic structure that combines a viewpoint shot with an object shot, Lou decides to show how a shot that is in perfect focus and light (figure 70) can be morphed into the shots that get darkened and out of focus (figure 71, 72 and 73). The cue here is no longer the traditional viewpoint shot, but the contrast between the two shots.
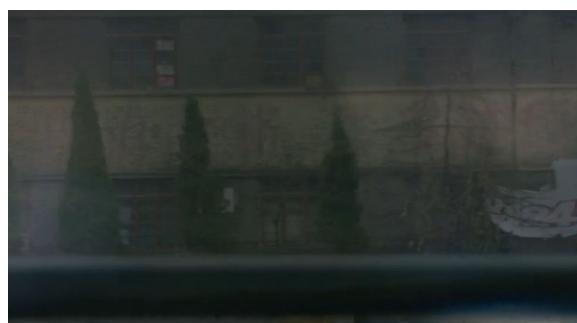




Figure 70                                                        Figure 71

我深爱的那个姑娘
*My beloved girl,*



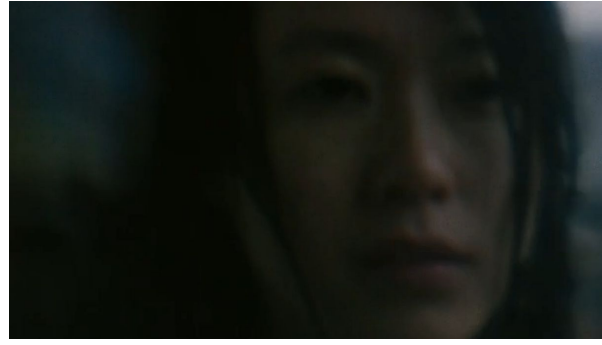Figure 72                                        Figure 73

The reason as to why I argue that the above two scenes are the most explicit scenes on POV

shots is that Lou and Zeng's use of Lensbaby and thus selective focus brings in another new

perspective into the understanding of POV shots. The traditional understanding of POV shots

indicates that a POV shot is a small part of a film that helps the audience perceptually identify,

and probably sometimes either emotionally or epistemically identify, with the characters. The

revolution in *Blind Massage* lies in the fact that Lou pushes the definition of POV shot even

further, i.e. the audience is able to see *how* the characters see. The notion of 'how' here can even

refer to sensory qualities and input. Once we see how the definition of POV shot is being pushed

from a simple 'what' to 'how,' we are then able to see other less explicit POV shots. As

mentioned in Chapter Two, one of the patterns in *Blind Massage* is the dominant use of selective

focus with Lensbaby. Moreover, I also argued above in the close-up section that one function of

close-up shots in *Blind Massage* is that it restricts the possible visual information in the

peripheral and thus creates a distorted sense of space. Similarly, the function of selective focus

here is also to restrict the possible visual input and thus relay the visual perceptual experience of

the blind people. In what follows, we can see that even the audience are not directly seeing

through the eyes of the characters, with the frequent use of selective focus, the audience is forced

to be immersed in the visual perceptual experience of the characters.

**Chapter Five: Struggles as an Individual and Struggles as A Society**

In the previous chapters, I have argued how the unique styles and techniques of Lou give rise to the subjective experiences and emotional response among the audience, while at the same time challenge the traditional understanding of techniques such as Point-of-View shots and Close-ups. In this chapter, I will further explore the significance of Lou's invitations for emotional response and argue that the both *Blind Massage* and *Spring Fever* create a platform for reflection through different types of emotional identifications.

1. **What is it Like to Be Disabled or LGBTQ in China?**

Both the disabled people and LGBTQ in China are marginalized in the sense that they are both invisible, though the degrees of invisibility vary.

Several factors contribute to the invisibility of the disabled in China. First and foremost, disabled people barely have access to even basic education in China. As introduced in the beginning of *Blind Massage*, the blind people are sent to special schools from a young age. In those special schools, they learn the basic skills to survive, i.e. to navigate through the surrounding space and to learn a skill to earn a living. Unlike the status in the states, there is almost no special assistance provided for disabled students in the so-called mainstream schools system across China. Disabled students either need to navigate through the curriculum on their own, or simply just drop off. For instance, in a recent New York Times article , a disabled yet talented student's mom talked about the discrimination his son had been suffering from in the so-called mainstream schools:

> Now in junior high, [Mike] has no special assistance in class and has to navigate the curriculum by himself. It takes him hours to take exams, trying to see the tests with what little vision he has in one eye. Because of his handicap, he receives no grades. With no grades, he is practically shut out from higher education.

> "We are still trying to find a way for him," said Mike's mother, who requested anonymity to avoid further discrimination against her son. "Maybe he can go abroad or study art, but it seems there is no way for him to have access to higher education in China." (Farrar)

What this suggests is that disabled people have been marginalized from the so-called mainstream society even since they are very young. Mike's family is actually only an exception in the disabled population, i.e. not many families have the ability and access to help their disabled children to stay in school until junior high. For instance, according to China's disabled Persons' Federation, "at the end of 2012, more than 90,000 disabled children had no access to schooling, according to the China Disabled Persons' Federation" (Farrar). In what follows, non-disabled people have been separated from disabled people since the very beginning of their lives, and the term 'disability' only exists as a concept that is abstract from their everyday experiences, which in turn fosters the understanding of "we vs them."

Based on my personal experiences, throughout my fifteen years of stay in China I rarely encountered any disabled people in my everyday lives, even though "the total population of people with disabilities reached 82.96 million, or 6.34% of the total Chinese population" ("Facts on People"). Besides the fact of having no access to school, they rarely have the literal access to majority of the public buildings and facilities, i.e. public buildings and facilities are rarely accessible for the disabled population. For instance, it is not until 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics, that the famous Great Wall and Forbidden City became accessible ("Great Wall"), not to mention facilities and attraction in smaller cities.  Just based on my personal experiences, I

have rarely seen accessible restrooms in public buildings and facilities, the so-called accessible

elevators are under-maintained in lots of public areas, and the tactile pavings are often designed

in a way as if they are just decorations that would only misguide the blind people.

Moreover, as said by Maya Wang, a Hong Kong-based research with Human Rights Watch,

"Higher-education discrimination is the tip of the iceberg. A lot of students with disabilities face

discrimination at the lower levels" (Farrar). The discrimination against the disabled people in

China is a top-down discrimination. It is not until 1980 that the government officially changed its

way in referring to the disabled people, i.e. prior to 1980, the disabled people in China were

referred to as *canfe*i (残废), which has a strong negative connotation as 'the useless' (Wang).

Until today, social security system for disabled population is underdeveloped in China, which in

turn increases the gap between the disabled population and the so-called mainstream society in

terms of living condition.

As a result, because of the lack of access to education and public facilities, because of the

lack of support from the social system and government, and because of the lack of interaction

between the disabled population and the mainstream society, the notion of 'we vs them' has been

reinforced again and again in our's understanding of the Other.

Similarly, the same problem of invisibility and discrimination also exit for the LGBTQ

population. It was not until the year of 2001 that homosexuality was removed from the official

list of mental illness in China, which is 28 years behind the states. And it was not until 2014 that

courts ruled against therapy to "correct" homosexuality. However, it does not mean that the

therapy to "correct" homosexuality has been completely banned from China. For instance, up

until today, parents still send their homosexual children to the notorious "clinical psychiatrist"

Yang Yongxin to cure their homosexuality through the infamous electroconvulsive therapy practice.

The human rights movements for the LGBTQ population also often face obstacles in China, though partially because that human rights movements in China receive enormous pressure from the Chinese government in general. The pressure of being LGBTQ and advocating equality for the LGBTQ population in China is from both the government and the traditional values in society. According to the report from The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), only 5% of the LGBTQ population in China comes out of the closet at school or work, and only 17% of them comes out of the closet to their families (Shen and Pelzer; Qian). Up until today, the legal system seems nowhere close to legally protecting the LGBTQ population from hate crimes and discrimination at school or job markets. The pressure from families lies in the fact that most of the Chinese population still highly upholds the value of having a family. The LGBTQ population often feels the pressure to arrange sham marriages. Unmarried women who are older than 26 or 27 are commonly referred to as "the leftover women."

Moreover, being single, as opposed to 'getting married,' also faces either implicit or explicit discrimination from the legal system. For instance, individuals are required to get the Permission to Give Birth (准生证) once they get pregnant and before they give birth. Children who are born without the Permission to Give Birth will automatically become the undocumented once they are born. Being undocumented in China simply means not having access and right to even the basic living support and education. However, in order to get the Permission to Give Birth, individuals have to be married. Gay marriage is still nowhere close to be legalized in China. What it implies

is that, besides the notorious One-Child or Two-Child policy, the LGBTQ population do not even have the rights to give birth, a right that is supposedly inalienable, in China.

### 2. Dismantle the Illusion of the 'Other'

As introduced above, the discrimination from both the legal and social level in China creates this 'we vs them' border between the so-called mainstream society and the disabled or LGBTQ population. In this section, I will argue that the intention behind Lou's efforting in fostering empathy and sympathy is an effort to dismantle the illusion of the 'we vs them' border. By 'illusion,' I am not arguing that the discrimination and misunderstanding between different groups do not exist; rather, I am arguing that Lou is challenging the illusion of 'they' being fundamentally different from 'us.' How *fundamentally different* can the socially marginalized groups be from the so-called mainstream? I believe this is one of those that inspire Lou's investigation in both *Spring Fever* and *Blind Massage*. The filmmaker defamiliarizes traditional POV structures and enlists particular devices to defamiliarize the classical tradition of mainstream filmmaking and in the process encourages the audience identify with particular marginalized groups in China.

As noted by many scholars and critics, one of the overarching themes in Lou's films throughout his career is 'Love and Sex.' Regardless of whether it is in *Suzhou River*, or *Summer Palace*, or *Love and Bruises* or *Mystery*, the struggles for love and sex are the struggles for individual identities and self-knowledges in Lou's films. As Lou himself stated,

> "Sex is an indispensable part of a natural human being. Starting from sex, each individual human being can learn how to frankly face himself and the freedom he has, and learn how to listen to and follow himself instead of others" (Lim).

What is suggested by Lou is that love and sex are the entries to know both ourselves and others. The property of being both private and universal is what makes love and sex the bridge between different individuals and different social groups. It is private in the sense that it is one of the moments where individuals learn to be frank to themselves; it is also universal in the sense that it is a shared experience which opens the possibility for empathy.

Love and Sex thus becomes the guiding inquiry into the spiritual and daily lives of both the LGBTQ and disabled people in *Spring Fever* and *Blind Massage*. It is in their struggles for love and sex that we start to see the similarities and differences. For instance, one of the intentions of Lou in *Spring Fever* is to downplay the notion of 'gender identity.' The traditional dualistic understanding of gender identity, i.e. female vs male, has been challenged by queer theories and gender studies. The hegemony of the dualistic understanding of gender identity is part of what gives rise to the discrimination against the LGBTQ population, as well as the dichotomy between them and the so-called mainstream. One of the strategies used by Lou in *Spring Fever* is thus the use of jump cut in sex scenes. The significance of the use of jump cut is that it downplays the role of position in sexual intercourse, which is often related to the power relation between different genders. As Lou himself admitted in an interview, downplaying the significance of position in sexual intercourse will thus redirect the audience's attention to the individuals themselves and the communication between them, instead of what identities or roles they play. [6]

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[6] 實際上第一場做愛就是用跳切方式，馬上就切換他們的位置，先把所有的那個概念打破，然後關注他們之間的溝通，我覺得這是一個語言問題，就是你怎麼拍得能夠自然和由衷一些，如果你看性別看得很淡，自然這個就會傳達給觀眾。你看強調他們之間的溝通，他們之間的溝通越是真的，越是能解決所有的問題，就是說我就希望忘了，你就看就完了，哪怕你是一個空洞的，或者怎麼樣的沒關係，我們不排斥我們不把整個觀眾想得太好，但是你如果排斥這個，你如果排除這種，你看性別看得很淡，自然這個就會傳達給觀。

In doing so, it opens the possibility for the presupposed 'difference' and 'otherness' to be

replaced by an empathy, or at least sympathy, for what is being pursued and desired via sex.

Though Lou tries to build the bridge for empathy and sympathy through both style and

narration, this is not to say that he thus denies the difference between the mainstream and the

socially stigmatized groups. For instance, as suggested by critic Zhang Shida (張士達), we see

an absence of 'rule-following' in Spring Fever in terms of the relationship among partners. This

absence of 'rule following' is extremely explicit in the triangle relationship among Jiang Cheng,

Luo Haitao and Lijing, which might be a result of the influence of Truffaut's *Jules and Jim.* For

both Luo and Jiang, on the one hand, they are aware of the relationship between Luo and Li, on

the other hand, they are both attracted to each other but trying to keep it underground; for Li,

even after she witnesses the affair between Luo and Jiang in the middle of their trip, she has no

idea what she should do next. None of the characters have any idea where to go next. As a result,

we see them singing and dancing in the Karaoke room as if nothing has ever happened, and then

cuddling together on the boat to keep themselves warm in the wind. Right after the cuddling

scene, we then immediately see the breakdown of the love triangle, i.e. Li completely disappears

and Luo and Jiang break up in the middle of a highway. The sense of loss and lack of directions

is not only conveyed through the melodramatic narrative, but the very facial expressions of the

characters through close-ups. What's more, Zhang Shida also suggests that the absence of

rule-following reflects the underdevelopment of the LGBTQ sub-culture in many middle or

small cities in China ("Lou Ye: Wo Men Ke Neng").[7]

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[7] 對於習慣觀賞各國同志電影的觀眾來說，《春風沉醉的夜晚》可能將帶來相當顛覆且具挑戰性的觀影經驗，因為尋常的角色扮演與情慾模式，在此都被模糊了界線。在任何一個同志文化已較為發達成熟的地區，都會出現遊戲規則、美學品味等特定次文化屬性，但在這些次文化尚未成形之前，一切探索都有可能，一切組合都不怪異，《春風沉醉的夜晚》呈現的便是

Moreover, we also see the desire and struggle for love in a more dominant way among the characters in *Blind Massage*. For instance, as mentioned in Chapter Two, though the female character Jin Yan is only partially blind, her eyesight is deteriorating as time goes. She fights to 'see' and experience as many things as possible before she turns completely blind. Time is much more crucial for her than anyone else. As a result, we see her consistent effort asking for an answer from Tai He, we see her heartbroken face via close-ups, we see her obstinate effort trying to take care of and getting close to Tai He even after getting rejected, and we finally see her jubilant face at end of the film. Personally, I am overwhelmed by how dominantly Jin Yan tries to grab as much as possible before she turns completely blind, and how she never lets go anything. It is almost impossible to miss her despair and sense of urgency, e.g. those conveyed via the predominant use of close-ups.

Similarly, we see another obstinate desire and obsession for beauty in the character Sha Fuming. Sha is different from every other blind masseur in the sense that he is romantic and constantly tries to be accepted by the mainstream society. His obsession with the notion of 'the ultimate beauty' is intensified and reinforced by him being blind. For instance, he gets obsessed with Du Hong after he keeps hearing from his clients how astonishingly pretty Du Hong is even though he himself is not able to see her. It is precisely due to the fact that he himself is not able to experience or verify the beauty in Du Hong that he gets stuck in his imagination of the notion of beauty. The more he is aware of his inability to 'see' physical beauty, the more obsessed with the empty notion he becomes. Even though the obsession and desire for 'beauty' can be universal

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中國社會對同志不鼓勵、不建議、不認可的氛圍之下，一種因在檯面下卻反倒更加曖昧流動的情慾空間。

among different individuals or groups of people, the notion of 'beauty' that traps Sha is only accessible for the people from the mainstream because it is solely created based on appearance, i.e. the input of visual information. The character of Sha Fuming invites sympathy in the sense that it pushes me to rethink how much and to what extent the values from the mainstream society become the hegemony and thus reinforce the borders between the two.

What's more, it is not only the universal desire for love and sex that plays the role of bridging the so-called two worlds, but also the desire for respect among the blind masseurs. By focusing on individuals and their emotions, Lou actually downplays the discrimination against the disabled people in contemporary China. The only few scenes of disrespect we see in the films are when Xiao Zhang's mom gets really impatient at Sha talking about poems in a blind date, when Lao Wang is called 'the blind cunt' by the gang members after they fail to get money from Lao Wang, and when Xiao Man's friends in the hair salon reminds her not to get serious with Xiao Ma simply because Xiao Ma is blind. The responses to disrespect or the desire for respect is manifested differently among different characters: for instance, Lao Wang chooses to cut himself to make sure that his family would no longer be harassed by the gang, and Du Hong chooses to leave the massage center to assure her friends that she can survive on her own.

## 3. What's Next?

Lou's investigations into the so-called 'the other' do not end at the level of sympathy or empathy. If the invitations for emotional identifications such as sympathy and empathy are not the end, what's next? Lou has always been praised by both Chinese and non-Chinese critics as

the rebel and dissident in contemporary Chinese film production for his constant effort and initiative in challenging the governmental censorship. Though the label of 'rebel' is true in the sense of the dismissal of censorship, but it is by means that the significance of Lou's films should thus be reduced to the level of counter-censorship.

Lou boldly argues that the plight or the challenges that the LGBTQ population is currently facing are exactly the same problems that everyone in China is currently struggling with. It makes much less sense to call the marginalized groups 'the other' once we realize how many similarities we share in common ("Lou Ye: Wo Men Ke Neng").[8] The common similarities range from the confusion and struggle for social and political identity to the deprivation of basic human rights ("Lou Ye: Wo Men Ke Neng"). [9]

One big question that Lou brings into *Spring Fever* with the help from Yu Dafu's 'Night of Spring Fever' is that: how far we have gone, as individuals and as a society, as compared to eighty years ago?[10] In his 'Night of Spring Fever,' Yu Dafu expresses a literati's depression and struggle to survive and assert his identity in the 1930s' China. The invitation to reflect on the

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[8] Here Lou explains how he refueses to treat the plight of the LGBTQ as merely an isolation in a larger societal struggle. 其實同性戀所面臨的問題幾乎是今天我們所有人需要面臨的問題，我們總是覺得同性戀是另類，是他者，實際上不是的，在精神上，從某種角度看，我們可能都是同性戀，也正因為同性戀所涉及問題越來越具有普遍性，所有稱呼「同性戀」本身也變得越來越沒有意義，想一想，我們不太稱呼男女關係為「異性戀」"

[9] 如果說針對的話，就是同志問題吧，就是同志問題涉及輻射的其他一些問題，就是從我來說，我對輻射的部分更感興趣。我和梅峰的開始都是這樣的，就是不是對同志問題本身，而對同志問題帶來的周邊的問題，更有共鳴，從個人感覺。然後涉及的問題就比較多了，比如命名問題、個人問題、概念劃分、分類呀，就是所有這一整套系統，全是在所謂同志問題周邊的。所以慢慢也是一個學習過程，然後你會發現特別有現實性，哪怕把背景全虛了都沒有關係，因為同志問題本身就已經涉及很多現實狀況和處境，大的小的都有。

[10] 雖然這麼長時間過去了。精神上我們沒有太大的改變，為什麼呢？這是一個可以現在問的問題。

social and political identity is extremely important in today's China. Due to the income

inequality, due to governmental censorship and due to the absence of the freedom of speech as

well as other basic human rights, different groups of people in China have become much more

divided than ever. The access to power, media and wealth determines the respective bubble that

each individual is stuck in. On the one hand, the oppressed have little little access to media and

power, and whatever happens to them might happen to anyone else sooner or later; on the other

hand, people with vested interests live in the illusion that as long as they keep the 'we vs them'

border from the oppressed group of people, they will be safe and their interests will be intact. As

a result, the notion of social or political identity becomes an empty concept in contemporary

Chinese society, i.e. whoever is outside my bubble and class becomes 'the other.' The naive act

of 'self-protection' is manifested precisely in the form of the absence of empathy and sympathy.

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