

“Their Ears Have Eyelids”: Blindness, Sound, and Materiality in Bollywood Films of the 20th Century

This paper examines two significant musical dramas from popular Hindi cinema—Dosti (1964) and Sparsh (1980)—both of which centre on blind protagonists, to explore the relationship between blindness, sound, and materiality in twentieth-century Bollywood films. Moving beyond the conventional tendency to treat disability merely as a narrative device for characterization or emotional appeal, the study shifts its analytical focus to the often under-explored elements of film production, particularly the popular song sequences that are integral to the aesthetic and narrative structure of Hindi cinema. In mainstream Bollywood, picturised songs typically function as spectacles that visualize romance, desire, and emotional intimacy within dreamlike or fantastical settings. However, in films featuring blind protagonists, these song sequences acquire an alternative function: they become crucial sensory tools through which characters navigate both their emotional landscapes and their physical surroundings. As a result, music and sound are not supplementary embellishments but central modes of perception and engagement with the world. In Dosti and Sparsh, sound plays a formative role in shaping the lived experiences of characters with visual impairments, thereby challenging dominant assumptions about sensory hierarchy, embodiment, and materiality. These films foreground auditory perception as a primary means of interacting with the environment, destabilizing the visual dominance that underpins much of Western epistemology and cinematic language. Through carefully constructed soundscapes and musical sequences, the films invite audiences to inhabit a world where listening replaces seeing as the dominant sensory mode. This shift aligns the spectator’s experience more closely with that of the blind protagonists, fostering an embodied form of spectatorship that privileges sound, rhythm, and voice over visual spectacle.

Drawing on the concept of sonic materialism as articulated by Christopher Cox, this paper explores how the intersection of sound and blindness in these films opens up a unique framework for examining materiality. Sound is not treated as abstract or immaterial but as something that physically interacts with bodies and environments, producing a tangible presence that can be sensed, navigated, and interpreted. Its ephemeral and unfolding nature offers a model for conceptualizing existence as a process of continual becoming rather than a fixed state of being. Within this framework, auditory experience becomes a site of resistance against visual-centric modes of knowledge production.

Finally, the study considers how the shift from what is seen to what is heard disrupts dominant visual narratives in filmmaking and reshapes the audience’s sensory alignment with blind characters. By privileging sound and music as central narrative forces, Dosti and Sparsh contribute to a renewed understanding of disability, music, and sensory experience in mainstream Hindi cinema of the twentieth century. These films not only challenge ableist assumptions embedded in cinematic form but also expand the aesthetic possibilities of Bollywood by demonstrating how sound can function as a material, affective, and political medium.