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Seeing differently: (De)Constructing cultural narratives of blindness in *al-Kīt Kāt* and *Scent of a Woman*

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Abstract
While disability studies have significantly evolved over the past few decades, cinematic representations of people with disabilities, particularly in Egypt, still remains an understudied area. Thus, the present paper uses the cultural model of disability to comparatively analyse two culturally diverse films that feature visually impaired protagonists; namely, the Egyptian *al-Kīt Kāt* (1991) and the American *Scent of a Woman* (1992). The study investigates the lives of two males who experience blindness after having been sighted, and analyses their culturally-constructed impairment, submission to/subversion of mainstream stereotypes, control (or lack thereof) of the metanarrative of blindness, and the effect of their impairment on the quality of their lives and the lives of those around them. It concludes that the films contribute to deconstructing dominant ableist narratives critiqued within disability studies, offering representations of blindness that are empathetic, multidimensional, and resistant to cultural stereotypes.

Keywords Cultural model of disability, Deconstructing stereotypes, Metanarrative of blindness, Films, *al-Kīt Kāt*, *Scent of a Woman*

Introduction

Disability has always held a paradoxical position within human history and culture. People with disabilities (PWD) have been contradictorily viewed as blessed, distinguished, and elevated, or cursed, marginal, and defective across cultures, countries and eras; as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson [1, p. 51] puts it, "disability presents at once a problem and an opportunity for solutions. There inheres, in other words, in all things disability a contradiction" [1]. The current study investigates how two films that belong to different cultures—the Egyptian *al-Kīt Kāt* 1991[1] [2], hereafter *KK*[2], and the American *Scent of a Woman* 1992 [3], hereafter *SW*—function as "cultural stations of blindness" that "are always impactful on understandings of blindness; on blindness as understanding" [4, p. 1]. The films challenge mainstream perceptions and promote audience immersion in metanarratives that expand a deeper understanding of the lives of visually impaired characters. Although numerous studies focus on either *al-Kīt Kāt* or *Scent of a Woman*, a comparative study that examines both from a cultural approach of disability has not been identified.

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[1] al-Kīt Kāt Is an area situated in Giza governorate near the Nile, in Egypt.

[2] Translation of the dialogue from *al-Kīt Kāt* is done by the authors.

Theoretical framework

The two most prominent frameworks for understanding disability have historically been the medical model—which focuses on the human body as a pathological site—and the social model, which believes disability to be caused by societal barriers: the former "locates impairment in the individual as someone who lacks the full complement of physical and cognitive elements of true personhood and who must be cured or rehabilitated," while the latter locates disability "in the environment—in social attitudes, institutional structures, and physical or communicational barriers that prevent full participation as citizen subject" [5, p. 119]. Proponents of the social model believe that "all bodies are socially constructed. … Social constructionism makes it possible to see disability as the effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social justice rather than medicine [6, p.173]. This societal hostility towards PWD led to the emergence of "the distinction between disability (social exclusion) and impairment (physical limitation) and the claim that disabled people are an oppressed group" [7, p.198].

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed the emergence of the cultural model of disability within the humanities to build on the social model and investigate how disability is constructed, represented, and given meaning in cultural con/texts such as literature, art, philosophy, and film. This model approaches disability not as a fixed physical condition, but as a system of meanings that emanates from "the set of social, historical, economic, and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body" [8, p. 2]. Its core assumption is that "disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions" [9, p. 6]. One of the key strengths of the cultural model is its ability to unsettle normative constructions of disability by revealing the cultural mechanisms through which disability is routinely misrepresented. As such, the cultural model offers a valuable analytical framework for literary and artistic studies, where meaning is generated not only through social structures but through metaphor, genre, and narrative/artistic forms.

Anne Waldschmidt, for example, argues for an interdisciplinary approach that combines disability studies and culture, and "assumes that impairments and disabilities are structuring culture(s) and at the same time are structured and lived through culture" [10, p. 20]. Despite the heated discussion on the differences between the social and the cultural models of disability, this paper sides with Waldschmidt's opinion that on the one hand, critical disability studies should recognize the social and cultural construction of disability [10, p. 23–24], and on the other hand, "it is the cultural model which provides an additional and also wider perspective and inspires us to both historicize, generalise and theorise the issues in question" [11, p.77-78].

Among the various studies on disability investigated via the cultural model, those on blindness stand out as symbolically charged and heavily stereotyped: "Blindness functions as a powerful narrative and metaphorical device that is frequently projected in literature and film. Blindness, represented as sightlessness, receives its sensibility from an ocular-centric conception not only of knowing, but also of functioning 'normally' in the world where lack of normalcy is understood as an incomplete way of being human" [12, p.65-66]. The problem with such a view is that it limits blindness to what can only happen to sight, which contrasts blindness with the existence and power of sight more than anything else [12, p. 66]. Bruno Sena Martins argues that although dominant cultural portrayals associate blindness with tragedy, misfortune and incapacity [13, p.96], real life experiences of PWD prove they reject such tragic framing and strive to achieve self-fulfilment [13, p.97]. There is a chasm between the cultural stereotypes of the blind and their true identity.

Media portrayal of PWD can impact the perception, form the impressions and construct the culture of individuals with little or no interaction with PWD [14]. Disability is used as "a metaphor" in media, and this "can have substantial effects on public attitudes, impressions and prejudices" [15, p.5]. While some studies show that most images of PWD presented in media are extreme, featuring either negative or specially gifted persons, mostly a dichotomy of villain or saint [16, p.129, 17, p.825], others affirm that media has denied PWD any form of power: "Two of the most metaphorical traits—hero or villain—were relatively infrequent … . Two-thirds of all characters with a disability were depicted as being succored and three-quarters as submissive in their interaction with others. Thus, impotence and dependence characterize their relationships" [15, p.8]. The aforementioned images and themes are limiting—and sometimes even damaging—to PWD, since the mere repetition of cinematic representations makes celluloid personas more recognizable than real persons [18, p. xi]. On the whole, almost all the representations and recurring themes disempower, marginalize, dehumanize and other PWD [16, p.129, 17, p.825]. Whether the cinematic representation is positive or negative, "what is important is to acknowledge the power of filmicimages as representations. As such, they are a visible counterpart to the less-often visible social representations that mediate theway disability is conceived, perceived and lived" [19, p.2]. Cinematic representations of visual impairment—with their effect as "cultural stations" and vast viewer reaching

potential—could be an extremely important medium to promote a better understanding of PWD.

While blindness is the most recurrent physical disability projected onscreen [18, p.2], Georgina Kleege, divides blind film characters into those who are "timid, morose, cranky, resentful, socially awkward and prone to despair" and those who are "blind seers" [20, p. 45, 46]. She criticizes films where actors "represent blindness with an unblinking, zombie stare, directing their gazes upward to give the face a supplicating look of helplessness" and act clumsily, fumbling with their canes and stumbling over their guide dogs as if the simplest daily tasks are too troublesome for them [20, p. 45]. Bruno Sena Martins also warns against "most dramatic sociological insights" that lead to "the general identification of positive and empowering perspectives on blindness, as to the recognition of the disabling cultural values, those assertions can run the risk of erasing … experiences of suffering and privation more directly associated with the corporal fact of blindness"—that is, the deeply felt "phenomenological experiences of emotional and bodily suffering that we fail to grasp from the perspective of social constructions and impediments" [13, p.97]. In many cases, cinematic representations have categorically failed to grasp the essence of the impairment experience and instead turned it into a projection of the ableist interpretation of it.

Research on the cinematic portrayal of PWD on the silver screen has evolved significantly over the past decades, highlighting recurring patterns in how disability is constructed and perceived onscreen. In 2007, Rhonda Black and Lori Pretes [21] examined the presentation of people with disability in films, studying themes of "overall personality, community integration, and interpersonal relationships" against seven main stereotypes; namely "(a) pitiable and pathetic; (b) supercrip; (c) sinister, evil, and criminal; (d) better-off dead; maladjusted-own worst enemy; (f) burden to family/society; and (g) unable to live a successful life" [21, p. 66]. Building on the same framework three years later, Marta Badia Corbella and Fernando Sánchez-Guijo Acevedo [22] analysed the representation of blindness on the silver screen [22, p. 71]. These themes and stereotypes have turned into narrative motifs and representational patterns that are persistently echoed in disability cinema, solidifying their place in the cultural imagination and framing public perception of disability. It is within the cultural model of disability that this study focuses its analysis of blindness as a culturally constructed form of disability on *al-Kīt Kāt* and *Scent of a Woman*.

al-Kīt Kāt and *Scent of a Woman*

al-Kīt Kāt and *Scent of a Woman* feature the lives of two males who experience blindness after having been sighted, and discuss the cultural effect of their impairment on the quality of their lives and the lives of those around them. As such, the films function as cultural stations that "teach, inspire, model, habituate, norm, entertain, distract, anesthetise, engage, challenge, contest, subvert, critique and even potentially re-norm. Moreover, they are constructed, viewed, circulated, appropriated and re-appropriated from divergent perspectives and according to diverse interests that all merit scrutiny" [19, p.3]. Both films constitute an important means of analysing blindness within the cultural lens of disability studies.

al-Kīt Kāt is one of the films that best represent the "Egyptian neo realism" phase; the Director, Dāwūd ʿAbd al-Sayyid, "is a progressive auteur who wrote most of his own films, which act as provocations to change as well as artistic statements" [23]. He based the story of the film on Ibrahim Aslan's novel, *Malik Alhazeen* (*The Heron* 1983), wrote the script, and directed the film in 1991. Described as "anything but typical" and "certainly one of the most iconic films of end-of-century Egyptian cinema" [24, p.200], this two-hour film was a huge success at the time of its release and garnered several awards, among which is Best Director from *Biennale des Cinémas Arabes*, Paris, and *Damascus International Film Festival*, Syria, in 1992, in addition to making the list of the best 100 films in Arab Cinema.

al-Kīt Kāt features Mahmoud Abdel Aziz-one of Egypt's most acclaimed actors—as the visually impaired protagonist, Sheikh Hosni, who lives with his mother and son in the poor, densely populated neighbourhood of al-Kīt Kāt. His days pass among his friends, smoking hashish, dreaming of driving a motorcycle, and acting as a sighted individual despite his impairment [25, p.152]. *al-Kīt Kāt*'s design is so significant to the extent that the director dedicated the film to Onsi Abou Seif, the production designer, for his sophisticated yielding of the low-class neighbourhood in a studio-created setting: "Despite the bleakness of the characters and their situations, the rich visual texture of the peeling walls, decrepit buildings, and torn-up alleys is warmly portrayed" [24, p.201]. Space is considered an integral constituent of the film—an element that appears in the first scene where the impoverished neighbourhood is enveloped in darkness, signifying connotations of blindness along with references to the residents' miserable life.

Similarly, *Scent of a Woman*, directed by Martin Brest, is a Hollywood remake of the 1974 Italian film *Profumo di donna* (*Scent of a Woman*); both films are adapted from Giovanni Arpino's Italian novel *Il buio e il miele* ("Darkness and Honey" 1969) [26, p.123]. *Scent of a Woman* received many international entertainment awards. It won the Oscar for Best Actor and "was nominated for Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Writing, Screenplay, and also many other awards internationally" [27, p.682].

One of the reasons that have driven Al Pacino, who won the Oscar in 1993, to do the film "is to accept the challenge of playing a blind person, a challenge he is more than up to. You never question that Frank Slade is without sight; Pacino *is* blind, or seems to be" [28, p.208]. Part of Al Pacino's success is that he depended on achieving the illusion of blindness not on cultural stereotypes, but on his "memory" of blind people he has known and seen in life [29]. He also met with groups from blind organisations, which "helped him get into character by showing him how a blind person would perform tasks that formed the backbone of their everyday life" [30].

In *Scent of a Woman*, a two-hour-and-thirty-six-minute film, Al Pacino plays the role of Frank Slade: a blind, alcoholic, idiosyncratic ex-military Lieutenant Colonel. His niece seeks the assistance of Charlie Simms, a senior student, to look after him while she is out of town with her family. Slade plans to take Charlie on a "tour of pleasures," then commit suicide. Charlie, who is in trouble at school and is threatened to be expelled, is able to prevent Slade from committing suicide, while the latter defends him at school and saves him from expulsion.

Both films have sight and insight as their eminent motifs, and contextualise the interactions between the abled and disabled. *al-Kīt Kāt* features Sheikh Hosni's interactions with all the sighted and blind characters around him, portraying his ability to wear various hats and play several personas as per each interaction, while *Scent of a Woman* depicts how two different protagonists, a blind and a sighted—who come from different backgrounds and are at different ages—have a complementary relationship in which they exchange insights about life and enrich each other's lives.

(De)Constructing stereotypes

The (In)dependent

Both Sheikh Hosni and Frank Slade mirror some of the aforementioned media stereotypes of the disabled and simultaneously deconstruct them to show how the blind can enjoy life, form relationships, and be independent. Unlike films where the "emphasis is generally placed on the disability itself, rather than on the whole personality of the visually challenged person" [22, p.76], *al-Kīt Kāt* presents a fully-fledged protagonist who totally disregards his blindness; his main problem—as his son puts it—is that "he isn't convinced he is blind!" (*KK* 1:41:12). Sheikh Hosni comically reprimands his friend who assumes he is unable to see something a few minutes into the film: "Hey, I can see better than you in light and darkness too" (*KK* 00:03:12). If he has a defect that consumes him, it would be his addiction to hashish that led him to sell his house for daily doses of it from the neighbourhood's dealer, rather than his visual impairment, thus subverting all media stereotypes on blind individuals' assumed code of conduct.

Nahed Nasr states that while Sheikh Hosni aligns with ʿAbd al-Sayyid's "typical character going through a difficult evolution," it is important to note that "[b]lindness here is not only the physical inability to see, but the failure to perceive changing times [23]. Sheikh Hosni is full of illusions about what he can do despite his disability, and he thinks he can stop time by ignoring its constant movement." However, Nasr's opinion sides with the ableist notions of dis/ability, deeming it impossible—even presumptuous—for someone like Sheikh Hosni to aspire for a life that offers equal opportunity to both ends of the spectrum. Voicing such an opinion disregards the fact that "[d]isability is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy or excess–or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, it is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body" within a system that "produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Although this comparison of bodies is ideological rather than biological, it nevertheless penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status and power within a biased social and architectural environment" [31].

Within the cultural model of disability's emphasis that disability is constructed through social and cultural attitudes rather than individual impairment alone, Sheikh Hosni's behaviour in *al-Kīt Kāt* offers an interesting inversion of power dynamics. He subverts the "'independence–dependence, usefulness–uselessness, needed–needy, helper–helped' binaries" [32, p.117] assigned to blind characters in visual culture via "the metanarrative of blindness," defined by David Bolt as "the story in relation to which those of us who have visual impairments often find ourselves defined, an overriding narrative that seems to displace agency" [33, p.10]. *al-Kīt Kāt* abounds with humorous, yet revealing moments, where Sheikh Hosni reverses the roles; in a close up shot, the camera traces Sheikh Hosni's hands as he closes the shop after he and the gang have had their hashish soiree, and he laughingly calls out to his sighted friend: "Do you know the way, or you need me to take you, Ramadan?" (*KK* 00:06:53) demonstrating how the blind protagonist could assume authority over his spatial environment, an area typically associated with competences reserved to the sighted. Moments later, his serious concern for another man's safety as he closes the door of the shop—"careful with your hand, bro"—(*KK* 00:06:57) underscores his role as protector, not as the one in need of protection and guidance.

Sheikh Hosni, who used to be a music teacher until his wife died and he could not cope with his loneliness, turns into a comic trickster. In his interactions with others, he not only disregards his blindness, but wilfully acts as if he

is sighted. He meets Sheikh Ebeid, who is also blind, convinces him he is sighted, leads him to cross a busy street, takes him on an alleged river cruise where he—while having the boat secured to the shore—moves to create fake waves to give the illusion of danger from which he will save his companion, and insists on "showing" him photos of his youth and achievements. The scene of the two Sheikhs walking side by side, and Hosni's assertion "if the sighted like me won't help the blind like you, there is no good in us" (*KK* 00:17:11–21) have become an iconic comic and meme in the Egyptian and Arab culture. Sheikh Hosni's scenes with Sheikh Ebeid are paramount to the understanding of his personality and his tackling of his own blindness. The reversed roles, different metanarratives, and subverted stereotypes bring to the forefront Lennard Davis's [34] opinion that understanding "the disabled body" entails a "return to the concept of the normal body" and a focus on the construction of normalcy, rather than on the construction of disability, because "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" [34. p.3].

Like Sheikh Hosni in *al-Kīt Kāt*, Frank Slade in *Scent of a Woman* also exhibits several media stereotypes, only to subvert them later. He depends on "the mobility cane," which is supposed to be white to "permit visibility" [18, p.3]; instead, he uses a black one as a camouflage to hide his blindness, denoting a reversal of stereotypes and a mark of sophistication. Slade alternates between the stereotypes of sinister, pathetic, his own worst enemy, and sometimes better off dead. The long-distance shot of Slade's first appearance in a room behind the house of his niece conjures up a sense of confinement (*SW* 00:08:51): "Disabled characters typically begin their celluloid existence confined in some way and often in the care of another … . Confinement, whether spatial, social or psychological, introduces the key feature of the plot structure in movies with disabled characters, which is the character's struggle for independence … . In fact the problem of confinement is the problem of disability" [16, p.119]. The cultural myth of the blind's total dependence on the able for his survival is depicted by Charlie's entrance. The audience expect Charlie to be the saviour; "[t]he sighted man, the true protagonist, [who] reassures the viewer by taking charge of this walking-talking castration symbol and diluting the horror he provokes" [22, p. 48]. Charlie personifies the light that protrudes the "penumbra" of Slade's room and unconscious, to enlighten, give hope, and wings to Slade, who disdains the world that abandoned him [26, 123].

Paradoxically, Slade tends to alter the prescribed pattern of the disabled dependence on the abled saviour by depending on his superior military status, seniority, and sheer bluntness [35, p.634]. When Charlie touches him, he offensively threatens him in a military fashion and curses him: "Touch me again, I will kill ya, you little son-of-a-bitch. I touch you. Understand?" (*SW* 00:31:57–00:32:03). Charlie refuses at first to go with Slade to New York as it is "too much responsibility" (*SW* 00:33:14), because "the cultural narratives through which disabled people's experiences are perceived appear strongly attached to the personal anxieties projected from an 'able-bodied world'" [13, p.105]. The response of Slade, who reversely acts as Charlie's caretaker, is a powerful answer to the cultural limitations imposed on the blind; he authoritatively and superiorly reverses the roles: "I had a lot of 17-year-olds in my first platoon. I took care of them" (*SW* 00:33:19–21). Charlie is led by the hands of Slade—a blind man who teaches him "pearls" (*SW* 00:38:29) to experience life.

The close-up camera shot at the airport scene accentuates that Slade refuses any assistance; he pretends to be a normal person who subverts stereotypes and transgresses the boundaries of confinement created for the blind. He does not want to appear different, especially in public, and behaves contrary to the common view that dysfunctional veterans need support and medical attention. By doing this, Slade controls his metanarrative of blindness and states his claim to power which is evident when Charlie attempts to support him at the airport. Slade asks twice: "Are you blind? … Then why do you keep grabbing my god-damn arm?", he strictly adds, "I take your arm!" (*SW* 00:34:46–52). Slade refuses the public image produced by a teenager supporting a disabled man, which would create an image of Frank's powerlessness and indignity [35, p.634]. The relationships between the disabled and the abled are often depicted as stressful and problematic.

Sheikh Hosni and Frank Slade problematize "the metanarrative of blindness," providing genuine metanarratives that override the enforced stereotypes and expectations. The visually impaired protagonists of *al-Kīt Kāt* and *Scent of a Woman* are neither helpless, nor dependent. Their assertive behaviour, though reckless in many cases, defies all expectations of passivity or victimhood and claims agency despite blindness. In a clear subversion of dominant stereotypes, both protagonists are presented as persons, rather than blind persons or a metaphor, or a symbol. They are flawed, humorous, and outgoing. In doing so, both films feature them as characters that resist the simplification typical of Bolt's metanarrative.

The adventurous masculine

It is argued that blind men in films "gravitate to the traditional symbols of masculinity—cars and guns" as a kind of compensation for their "profound sexual problems" [20, p.50]. However, both protagonists prove the assumption wrong. Sheikh Hosni drives a motorcycle twice in

the film, once alone and once with his son, Youssef. In the first instance he drives the motorcycle of Soliman, the jeweller, as the latter approaches him to mediate with his mother-in-law to help him get his wife back. In a highly comic dialogue, Sheikh Hosni expresses his desire to try the motorcycle:

> *Sheikh Hosni: I heard you bought a motorcycle; between us, I plan to buy one and I wanted to try it.*
> *Soliman: You mean you'll get one for Youssef?*
> *Sheikh Hosni: No, no man. Youssef! Of course not. He's still too young. I will get it for myself. (KK 1:09:11-22)*

Soliman reluctantly lets him drive and the scene that follows is cinematically superb. A wide angle shot shows Sheikh Hosni as he tucks the rim of his galabia into his mouth and drives frantically all over the place, ruining merchandise and scaring pedestrians. The sounds of total chaos and screams last for a few seconds then give way to a background of nostalgic score against which the audience watch Sheikh Hosni's achievement, underscoring a thrilling, but unsettling, scene. Sheikh Hosni's commandeering of Soliman's motorcycle constitutes a reclamation of both agency and the public space traditionally reserved for the sighted, as "disabled people might key themselves to particular narratives in ways that reclaim agency, rather than only being constituted by them" [32, p.123]. This chaotic, wild scene dramatizes Sheikh Hosni's protest against being sequestered into a submissive role by an ableist, vision-centred culture.

Sheikh Hosni's second attempt at driving is at the end of the film. After reconciling with his son, sharing a song in unison, and laughing at the top of their lungs, Youssef proposes the idea:

> *Youssef: Let's go, Dad.*
> *Sheikh Hosni: Where to?*
> *Youssef: You want to drive a motorcycle, right?*
> *Sheikh Hosni: Are you serious?*
> *Youssef: Come on. Not from here, don't go there … it's the Nile …*
> *Sheikh Hosni:I'm used to drowning (laughter). (KK 1:47:48-1:48:10)*

Youssef's attempt to please his father and grant him his dearest wish constitutes a turning point in their relationship, along with marking a significant change in Sheikh Hosni's behaviour. The ecstatic attitude of the first ride gives way to a gentler, quieter demeanour. Though Sheikh Hosni remains as crazy as ever, increasing speed and making jokes, the scene marks a shift from individual assertion to shared experience—a moment of relational care and mutual trust.

Similarly, Slade's use of all his charm to get the Ferrari test drive aims at no compensation for sexual impotence; instead, he "wants to drive the Ferrari to recapture that feeling of power and control he compares to sex with a beautiful woman" [20, p.50]. Though usually in films blind protagonists drive during emergencies while receiving directions by their sighted companions [20, p. 50], Slade changes the metanarrative by wildly driving the Ferrari, underscoring freedom and masculine bravado: accelerated fast cuts alternate between Slade's hands, Charlie's tensed looks, and the speeding car in the streets of New York city reflecting the danger and the rush of adrenaline with Al Pacino improvising and shouting "Hoo-ah" as if in a battle, reclaiming freedom and agency (*SW* 01:41:36). Slade's adventure makes him gentler, rather than hypermasculine: in contrast to his anger at Charlie when he tries to support him, Slade says when he gets off the Ferrari: "Take my arm. I'm okay" (*SW* 01:46:40), proving that "these joyrides forge or solidify bonds between blind and sighted men" [20, p.50].

Slade is a trickster who is able to cajole the police officer, who stopped them for speeding, into letting them go without divulging his blindness. However, most abnormal behaviours from the point of view of the abled are normal to the disabled; such behaviours are their ways to cope with deep inner pain [27, p.683]. Although Slade's wild drive of the Ferrari is irritating, it solidifies the bond between him and Charlie. At the end of the film, Charlie negates "the myths that disabled people prefer 'their own kind' and are 'asexual, religious, and dependent'" [36, p.243]. He encourages Slade to be optimistic and to get married: "You're a good-looking guy, and you're fun to be with, and you are a great travel companion, sensitive, compassionate" (*SW* 2:05:45–57). He even introduces him to his pretty political science teacher.

Like other PWD who strive to have a place in ableist societies, both protagonists "[explore] possibilities for working with, reclaiming, or subverting aspects of disability metanarratives: transforming the cultural power of the metanarrative into a potential asset, rather than a disempowering force" [32, p.123]. In their adventurous scenes, Sheikh Hosni and Frank Slade reframe blindness and challenge the dominant metanarrative by overcoming limitations and turning them into adventurous, masculine activities that not only grant them a sense of satisfaction reserved for the sighted, but also allow them to claim agency and inhabit roles of control.

The supercrip

Visually impaired characters in films are presented as living in a special realm, different from that of the viewers [18, p.2]. They "are often depicted as having compensatory sensory abilities to make up for their lack of sight," like acuteness of hearing, powerful sense of smell and "an

abundance of special talents which seemingly make up for a lack of sight" [18, p. 2]. In several scenes the camera focuses on Sheikh Hosni's ears, and he manages to learn pieces of information unavailable to others. He goes to the café, and teases another person, "hello Chief Ramadan; sorry didn't see you on my way in; blind, hope you have it too (laughs)" (*KK* 00:12:54). Asked how he knew Ramadan was there, Sheikh Hosni replies jokingly, "I smelled you" (*KK* 00:13:09). In his two scenes with Megahed, his father figure, the camera zooms in on his ears as he focuses to determine whether the latter is there and ignoring him or not.

Scent of a Woman also focuses on the blinds' ability to develop other senses. In many scenes Slade leaves the audience wondering if he is really blind; for example, his harsh corrective response/warning to Charlie's military salute: "Next time, snap it out!", is followed by a shrewd comment: "This bat has got sharper radar than a nautilus" (*SW* 00:50:36–00:51:07). Slade's olfactory skill, bracketed by the title, becomes a symbol of strength and an entertainment trick for the sighted [20, p.48]. The camera zooms on Slade's face and nostrils, suggesting he is seeing through scent. The close-up brings invisible fragrance to life visually by revealing how Slade deduces women's appearance, personality, and dispositions through their scents. At the restaurant, he is attracted to Donna because of her perfume which he describes as "a nice soap-and-water feeling" (*SW* 1:19:44). He even uses the sense of smell to describe her: "5'7, auburn hair, beautiful brown eyes" (*SW* 2:30:08–15). Despite being blind, Slade confidently asks Donna if he can keep her company. She replies politely: "Well, I'm expecting somebody … any minute now." He asks: "Any minute?" adding flirtatiously "Some people live a lifetime in a minute" (*SW* 1:21:09–22). He then asks her to tango with him to perform an iconic dance for which he is only "gonna need some coordinates here" (*SW* 1:24:36). If anything, Sheikh Hosni and Frank Slade almost fit the stereotype of "supercrip;" they are capable of living autonomously, compensate for the lack of sight with acute hearing and smelling powers, and practice everyday life like any sighted individual.

The musician and the dancer

The original score of *al-Kīt Kāt* plays a vital role in screening the feelings of the main characters and tracing their development. The opening credits bring to the audience the voice of Sayed Mekkawy—a visually impaired, iconic Egyptian musician, singing a jovial song: "The Bulbul sang on the jasmine leaves, I will stay with you tonight till the morning. Oh nights of fun, be long and full of love; tonight the evening is beautiful and true, we have fun together with the gang" (*KK* 00:00–29-00:02:53). The song promises the "gang" ongoing fun and laughter, thus foreshadowing Sheikh Hosni's nights among his hashish friends. Yet, Mekkawy's presence from the outset centres the topic of blindness, presenting a successful, visually impaired cultural example and framing the film's challenge to dominant meta/narratives of dis/ability. The credits fade, blending the sounds of Sayed Mekkawy's song and laughter with those of Sheikh Hosni's and his friends', giving the impression that he was the singer all along.

Sheikh Hosni, the retired music teacher, is presented playing the oud and singing in several scenes where his creativity is apparent in his songs that represent a different style and genre [37, p.97], such as the one he sings with his son about hope and a better tomorrow at the end of the film: "Come on, let's go/Let's leave the day to itself/And each of us rides the horse of their imagination/Come on, come on" (*KK* 01:44:04–01:47:47). Sheikh Hosni's songs bracket his agency and reclamation of the right to merriment, humour, and sensuality that PWD are often denied.

The film's score manages to effect a nostalgic mood throughout. Director Dāwūd ʿAbd al-Sayyid "told his musical composer Rageh Daoud [38] to put some oud music accompanied by a very nostalgic instrument." They agreed on oud and organ which "produced *Kit-Kat*'s unusual yet acclaimed Soundtrack" [25, p.177]. Daoud explained in an interview that he chose to "employ the passacaglia—a Baroque musical form characterized by a repeated bass line or harmonic progression—as the structural backbone of the film's soundtrack." This choice proved to be both musically and thematically resonant, as Daoud created a unique sonic landscape that reflected the protagonist's psychological entrapment and contextualized the quiet dilemma of hope/despair and surreal humour that permeate the film.

Similarly, in *Scent of a Woman* the tango scene is iconic, accompanied by the music of Carlos Gardel's "Por una Cabeza" [26, p.124]. The theme of the "evocative, emotional" song—about a risk-taker who laments his fortune in love and gambling—reflects "the essence of the tango's dramatic and romantic spirit" [39], and aligns with Slade's inner struggle and repressed emotions. The charismatic Slade asks Donna: "Would you like to learn to tango? … I am offering you my service, free of charge" (*SW* 1:23:28–37). Donna is reluctant; she is "afraid of making a mistake" (*SW* 1:23:50). Slade assures her: "No mistake in the tango, Donna, not like life. … . If you make a mistake, get all tangled up, just tango on. Why don't you try?," hinting at Slade's risk-taking (*SW* 1:23:55–1:24:06). Donna's fear and anxiety can be a result of her inability to tango and can also be caused by the cultural judgement about the blind and the disabled. Learning to tango with a blind man in the open area of this restaurant risks having some embarrassing accidental mishaps in public because "hegemonic disabling values are reproduced

from the personal visceral anxieties of the 'able-bodied' towards disabled people. However, it is important to stress that the cultural role played by those anxieties is not understandable separately from their congruence with the dominant tragic views socially construed of disability" [13, p. 105].

In a close-up shot, Slade, with an unblinking stare, escorts Donna "to the middle of the dancing hall in a light, sweet way or, perhaps more than that, as an absolutely free, simple, and deeply sensitive man," defying "the limitations of his physical disability," and starts to "dance! … he refuses to repress himself. He makes that minute an eternity … . He throws himself into immanence and in life like a dance. He fears no contradiction" [26, p.124]. After the dance, Donna expresses her admiration towards Slade describing him as "one incredible dancer" (*SW* 1:27:30). Slade dances so skilfully that all the time during the dance, the audience applaud him and momentarily doubt he is blind. There is an analogy between tango and life; Donna's perfume and the tango symbolize "the purest expression of freedom, the true fragrance of life" [26, p.124]; they both breathe life into Slade.

Both protagonists use their talents as means of survival and self-definition; Sheikh Hosni's oud-played songs and Frank Slade's tango dance allow them to claim a space in societies that marginalize the blind. Such talents allow the two protagonists a spotlight where they become the centre of attention, not through pity or empathy, but rather through admiration. These moments reconnect them to their respective communities, allowing them a different social identity from that of PWD via a universal language (music and dance), granting them a non-visual mode of both agency and communication.

The anguished metanarrator

Both films succeed in capturing the emotional and physical pain people experience when they are exposed to corporal transgression and their bodies change in unexpected ways—like suddenly going blind. Bruno Sena Martins introduces the concept of "anguish of corporal transgression" to depict "the vulnerability in the existence given by a body that fails us, that transgresses our references in existence, … the anguish of corporal transgression permits us to consider dimensions of pain, suffering and existential anxiety where, against the conventional negligence, body and emotions acquire a noble status in social and anthropological reflections" [13, p. 99]. However, the two characters deal with such anguish in two totally different ways. While Sheikh Hosni does not exhibit any visible sadness over the loss of his sight, Slade falls into an abyss of despair.

The opening scene of *al-Kīt Kāt,* moves from the merry song of the credits to Rageh Daoud's nostalgic passacaglia as Ramadan, one of the gang, "betrays a playful fixation on [Hosni's] blindness and insistently … voices societal curiosity and the inquisitive attention of the larger audience" [37, p.100] by asking Sheikh Hosni curiously: "you never told us, how did you become blind?" Only to be answered immediately by the blind Sheikh's stock phrase, along with a successfully delivered, friendly slap on the face: "Am I blind you fool? I can see better than you in light and darkness too" (*KK* 00:02:35–46). Sheikh Hosni "uses jokes and playful swearing to voice his statements on the treatment of his disability. He tends to avoid confrontation and uses funny, evasive, and imaginative retorts to make his points about how his blindness is and should be treated" [37, p. 100]. He then recounts the story of how he came to lose sight[3] while the camera gradually zooms in on his facial expressions as they change from laughter to seriousness:

> *I was around 10 years old, we used to live in that house, before my step mom threw us out. I remember that day in detail. I woke up before sunrise, … as if the devil woke me up. I found myself walking towards the sea. I had a fever, a bad one. Heat was coming out of my body, and I had a painful pimple on my chest. I sat on the beach; the wind was still, as if God's anger had fallen over everything. I took a nap. I slept, didn't know for how long, until I woke up. Again, the devil woke me up. I saw there the best view of my life. … I don't know, maybe a woman taking off her clothes, sprinkling water on her body, and going into the sea. (KK 00:03:06–00:05:18)*

Asked if he knew who she was he immediately replies, "of course I knew . your Mama!" Among the gang's laughter, he continues: "I stared; it was my mistake that I stared at her," and "a week later, the light was gone;" only to be asked by Ramadan again: "you became blind?" which he jovially corrects: "the light was gone, you idiot! I didn't become blind! Have some damn vision" (*KK* 00:05:28–00:06:08). Despite his "humorously evasive and escapist narrative" [37, p.100], Sheikh Hosni's account of how he came to lose sight is both comic and rooted in a sense of guilt, emanating from the belief that "the problems of disabled people have been explained historically in terms of divine punishment, karma or moral failing" [7, p.197] because "disability is allegorical—it has to stand for something else—weakness, insecurity, bitterness, frailty, evil, innocence, etc" [40, p. 44]. Despite the jokes, Sheikh Hosni attributes his loss of sight to some sin that he has committed, and indirectly guides his friends to the decent manner through which to address the visually impaired.

[3] For a detailed discussion of the blind vernacular and the differences between Arab/Muslim and Western diction of blindness, see Ben Zahra (90–91, 100–104).

While Sheikh Hosni's story of the loss of sight is told in nostalgic tunes and bears glimpses of guilt under his disguised humour, Slade's story of how he lost his sight is told by his embittered nephew, Randy, over the dinner he crashes and ruins. Infuriated by Slade's inappropriate stories and remarks to his wife, Randy angrily, but in condescending sarcasm, exposes before Charlie how Frank came to lose sight: "He blew himself up … our Colonel here had a grenade juggling act at Fort Bragg or wherever it was they dumped him. … He was teaching hand-to-hand combat to second lieutenants" while so drunk that "he's really flying in class; he gets so excited he starts pulling the pins out; one grenade got away from him. Boom. … What kind of f***n' lunatic juggles grenades! And all Frank lost was his eyesight!" (*SW* 1:04:57–1:06:01). While Sheikh Hosni had full control over his narrative and voluntarily told his story, Slade was robbed of agency and forced into objectification, with no say in his own narrative.

Both protagonists experience moments of despair and share them with a close companion, but their reactions to these moments differ. *al-Kīt Kāt's* mostly care-free protagonist expresses sadness on few occasions throughout the film. Blamed by Megahed for selling the house for hashish, he anguishly retorts: "What are you blaming me for ʿAmm Megahed? For hashish? Hashish is the one and only sin in my life! After Youssef's mom died, I didn't even have one person to talk to; I talk to people over the waterpipe; I vent, laugh, and sing in a nice gathering, until I die" (*KK* 1:22:35–1:23:02). Towards the end of the film, he confesses to his son: "I sometimes wake up with a heavy heart, like I can't breathe. I then aspire for one thing only, to drive a motorcycle at top speed and fly" (*KK* 1:43:18–39). Despite the sadness and "the overwhelming nostalgia, the film does not advocate drowning in the past and ignoring reality" but rather promotes the best options for positively coping with life and its complications [23]. Sheikh Hosni's anguish does not envelop his life; instead, it pushes him to live freely until he dies.

By contrast, Slade's realization of his responsibility for his accident enhances his anguish of corporal transgression which is detected when he prepares for suicide dressed in his military grab, the only identity he knows. To fully grasp the concept of anguish of corporal transgression, Pacino met with New York's Associated Blind organisation, which helped him understand the trauma of gradually losing sight [30]. In the suicide scene (*SW* 1:53:15–2:2:50), Charlie's intervention—"get on with your life"—is met with Slade's wounded reply, "what life? I've got no life. I'm here in the darkness," indicating how for Slade total darkness is analogous to death. For an army man this is a double burden because he is supposed to be the "embodiment of hegemonic masculinity ideals," and is now perceived by societal norms as a metaphor of "weakness" and "inadequacy" [41, p.23]. Charlie desperately appeals to Slade to hand over the gun: "You're not bad, you're just in pain," and Slade screams angrily, "What do you know about pain?" (*SW* 1:56:35–48). With every verbal exchange the background music becomes louder until both crash down. Charlie's fear of Slade's suicide attempt is both empathetic and culturally rooted: "The disabled cannot show fear, sorrow, depression, sexuality, or anger for this disturbs the able-bodied" [42, p. 107]. The suicide scene is intense, with both Slade and Charlie reversing roles, reaching a moment of growth for both mentor and mentee, and sharing their feelings in an attempt to put a different end to Slade's metanarrative.

In both films, the loss of sight story reflects broader cultural attitudes toward blindness. While Sheikh Hosni's metanarrative normalises his blindness and uses humour, hashish, and fantasies about his abilities to resist pity and assert his autonomy, Slade's drowns in the tragic consequences of personal failure, suicidal thoughts and attempts at redemption. Despite their immensely different cultural contexts, both protagonists feature defiance against societal pity, and share a struggle to reclaim agency in a world that is framed to marginalise them.

Visual blindness vs. cultural blindness

One of the most significant scenes of *al-Kīt Kāt* is towards the end of the film, while the entire neighbourhood is paying condolences for the death of Megahed. The scene "situates Sheikh Husni within his community and reflects on his position and role as a blind man within the transforming al Kitkat culture, affect, and environment" [37, p.98]. Listening to the Qur'an that plays through a speaker hung on the highest building of the alley, the technician falls asleep and does not switch off the microphone. Sheikh Hosni broadcasts all the secrets: he has to leave because there is "a very beautiful woman waiting for [him] … she is really hot;" asked about the house, he declares: "I didn't sell it to Sobhy; I sold it to Haram. He made me sell the house for hashish, one piece a day for 20 pounds … Haram is really slick; just today he tricked the police, and got out! He is still dealing and selling, but from Hassan's house, that's why whenever the police search his house, they find nothing;" then he moves to issues of adultery: "But I really feel bad for Hassan, his wife kicked him out; Wow, these women! … do you know Rawayeh, Soliman's wife, she left the house two days ago, and no one knows where she went, and the poor guy is devastated" (*KK* 01:38:38–01:41:08). This particular scene shows the director's ability to manipulate the narrative, whereby he presents Sheikh Hosni as the omniscient narrator whose voice comes as if a divine one from the sky, unveiling the hidden part of the life of the alley's residents [43].

The secret-spilling scene is "a hilariously comic" one in which "[t]he Sheikh thus defies his neighbors' plans to take advantage of him because of his physical deficiency. It is precisely because he is blind that he manages to decipher and interpret other people's interests, thereby reversing the very notion of blindness as a handicap. It is he who 'sees' what everyone else is hiding, be it conspiracies, crimes, or sexual affairs" [44, p.128]. While we differ with Viola Shafik's interpretation of the scene as a deliberate act on Sheikh Hosni's part and a *wilful* broadcasting of the alley's secrets, we do agree that Sheikh Hosni "sees" what others do not. He actually uses his blindness as an eye opener that allows him insight into other people's lives.

Scent of a Woman similarly questions the concept of blindness, both physical and metaphorical. Slade addresses the school committee questioning its members' integrity:

> *You're buildin' a rat ship here. A vessel for sea-goin' snitches. And if you think you're preparin' these minnows for manhood, you better think again. Because I say you are killin' the very spirit this institution proclaims it instills! What a shame! What kind of a show are you guys puttin' on here today? I mean, the only class in this act is sittin' next to me. And I'm here to tell ya, this boy's soul is intact. It's non-negotiable. You know how I know? Someone here, and I'm not gonna say who, offered to buy it. Only Charlie here wasn't sellin' …. Makers of men. Creators of leaders. Be careful what kind of leaders you're producin' here. (SW 2:21:59–2:24:23)*

In one of Slade's tirades, Mr. Trask, the school principal, tells him: "Sir, you're out of order!" (*SW* 02:22:37); Slade sarcastically and boldly turns the table on Mr. Trask and answers with a language imbued with military imagery: "You don't know what outta order is, Mr. Trask! I'd show you but I'm too *old*; I'm too *tired*; I'm too f***n' *blind*. If I were the man I was five years ago, I'd take a flamethrower to this place! There was a time I could *see.* And I have seen. Boys like these, younger than these, their arms torn out, their legs ripped off. But there isn't nothin' like the sight of an *amputated spirit*" (*SW* 2:22:42–2:23:19; emphasis added). Slade, in the school speech scene, speaks "out against the hypocrisy and elitism" of Charlie's school [26, p.124]. In his passionate speech, he "demolishes the foundations of the cultural building forming our civilization;" he shows "the existence of other types of far more limiting disabilities. A legion of blind, deaf, dumb far worse than him: they neither see, hear, talk, touch or smell any odor. They prefer austere lives than to experience what is fresh in life even for a single instant" [26, p. 126]. Slade saves Charlie from expulsion by holding up a mirror to the school's committee so that they could see the reality of their disabled selves.

The climactic scenes in *al-Kīt Kāt* and *Scent of a Woman* portray both visual blindness and cultural blindness, highlighting how each protagonist has insight and sees more clearly than the able-sighted people in his community. Sheikh Hosni's accidental spilling of the neighbourhood's secrets exposes the truth of a community that sees his visual deficiency but hides its own moral flaws. Similarly, Slade's enthusiastic speech at Charlie's school disciplinary hearing exposes the school's moral blindness. Both scenes illustrate how the blind protagonists possess a clearer social vision than the sighted individuals around them.

Conclusion

al-Kīt Kāt and *Scent of a Woman* provide rich examples of David Bolt's argument that "[t]he most obvious cultural stations of blindness can be found in community" [4, p.1], where blindness is not merely a physical impairment but a phenomenon shaped by its cultural surroundings. Sheikh Hosni and Frank Slade are consistently framed through their relationships with others in their respective communities. Their blindness—and others' perceptions of it—is filtered through social expectations, local humour, frustration, and even their own denial of their state. For instance, their dreams of driving vehicles and their attempts at flirting with women are not merely personal fantasies but are acts shaped by how their communities constrain, ridicule, or romanticize them. Their blindness goes through different cultural stations, such as the opinion of Sheikh Hosni's disillusioned son, the gossip of his neighbours, the community of the café, and his own hashish friends on the one hand; and on the other Slade's embittered family, Charlie's companionship, the school community, and the various places he visits on his trip. Thus, their blindness proves to be not only physiological, but rather mediated through communal interactions, reflecting Bolt's claim that blindness is found and constructed in the cultural stations of everyday life.

Both films focus on external and internal factors of suffering. They fight stereotypes and prove that the blind can lead strong, empowered lives. They not only focus on the social and cultural causes of exclusion, but on the personal, individual feelings of shock and grief, physical experiences that result from sudden blindness. *al-Kīt Kāt* and *Scent of a Woman* critically engage with the metanarratives of blindness and cinematic stereotypes of visually impaired people by resisting and subverting them. Sheikh Hosni and Frank Slade are not defined solely by their blindness, nor is their agency diminished. Instead, both films offer complex, multidimensional characters whose visual impairment is acknowledged but not allowed to subsume their identities. In doing so, the films

contribute to dismantling dominant ableist narratives critiqued within disability studies, offering representations of blindness that are humanizing, multidimensional, and disruptive of cultural stereotypes.

Abbreviations

KK	*al-Kīt Kāt*
SW	*Scent of a Woman*
PWD	People with Disabilities

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