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## Queering Sight: Visualising the Transversal Other in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*

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*The gaze has hitherto occupied a contentious position within theoretical discourse. While feminist and postcolonial approaches have succeeded in productively interrogating the unequal power dynamics produced by the gaze, purely naming and uncovering how these visual oppressions function do little to conceptualise possibilities of moving beyond sight's vilification in identity formations. Unlike other physical senses such as touch and smell that have already been theorised as bases of ethical intersubjective relationality, sight has yet to be reclaimed as part of an affirmative politics to disrupt the exclusionary processes that undergird identity politics. This article is, therefore, concerned with queer interventions to rethink sight as a possible mode of transgression from restrictive binarisms within identity formation. It argues that sight instead possesses the potential to liberate bodies and constrained subjectivities from the coercive frameworks of visual objectification. By queering sight, the article positions itself as a rejection of dualistic paradigms by subversively envisioning identities as transversal processes of liberation and becoming. To this end, I will engage with Josh Malerman's *Bird Box* (2014) where mediated acts of looking represent queer(ed) sources of danger and liberation. In its peculiar and particular denial of direct visual access, the novel's aesthetics allow for productive possibilities of visualising the transversal Other.*

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Much of the discourse on the gaze has connected it to the attempted mastery of the object of one's vision. That is, the gaze is routinely tied to the ways in which power structures are generated to know, to own, and to contain bodies and identities within hierarchical relationships.<sup>1</sup> While feminist and postcolonial approaches have succeeded in productively interrogating the unequal power dynamics produced by the gaze, purely naming and uncovering how these visual oppressions function do little to conceptualise possibilities of moving beyond sight's vilification in identity formations.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other physical senses such as touch and smell that have already been theorised as bases of ethical intersubjective relationality,<sup>3</sup> sight has yet to be reclaimed as part of an affirmative politics to disrupt the exclusionary processes that undergird identity politics. This article is, therefore, concerned with queer interventions to rethink sight as a possible mode of transgression from restrictive binarisms within identity formation. It argues that sight instead possesses the potential to

liberate bodies and constrained subjectivities from the coercive frameworks of visual objectification.

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queerness is signified as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” (8). She identifies the word ‘queer’ itself to mean “*across* – it comes from the Indo-European root – *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (Sedgwick xii, italics in original). Etymologically, ‘queer’ proposes both a form of movement and a torsion. In other words, ‘queer’ is a protean construction that manoeuvres alongside the discursive and material frictions of power within identity politics. Alexander Doty further suggests that the term ‘queer’ bifurcates into a “consciously chosen site of resistance and a location of radical openness and possibility” (3). To queer sight thus immediately foregrounds an emancipatory sense in operationalising the term. Bearing in mind these brief accounts of queering, the direction this article takes to queer sight traffics in several approaches that work between fields of enquiry indebted to psychoanalysis and the new materialisms. For this reason, its ‘composite’ methodology shares an affinity with Rosi Braidotti’s formulation of nomadic consciousness. She argues that the “transdisciplinary propagation of concepts has positive effects in that it allows for multiple interconnections and transmigrations of notions” (Braidotti 23). Moving across methodologies is thus a means to form “political resistance[s] to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity” while also exemplifying this article’s commitment to queer’s structural transversalities (23).

Queering is also that which transgresses constructed borders to resist classification and containment. Beyond just critiquing the restrictive functions of social norms, queering sight disrupts the hierarchised dualism between Self and Other. This article seeks to demonstrate how queering sight, both literal and figurative in its visual mediation of bodies, will fracture these static dyads to subversively envision identities as transversal processes of liberation and becoming. In so doing, the article positions itself as a rejection of dualistic paradigms by acknowledging the polyvalency of embodied performance, recognition, and looking. To this end, I will engage with Josh Malerman’s *Bird Box* (2014) where mediated acts of looking represent queer(ed) sources of danger and liberation. In its peculiar and particular denial of direct visual access, the novel’s aesthetics allow for productive possibilities of visualising the transversal Other.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section contextualises how *Bird Box* unsettles conventional Self/Other relations and their power dynamics therein. It provides possible explanations for the ways in which blindfolding disrupts the hierarchical formations

between humans and the creatures that are created through direct visual access. The next section then builds upon a character's unusual remark that the creatures are perhaps humans instead of unknown entities. Through a psychoanalytical lens, it examines the amorphous creatures via Julia Kristeva's formulation of the 'abject' and further interrogates the aforementioned dismantling of categorical distinctions in the realm of desire and fantasy. This section will also point out certain limitations of queering sight using the approach, particularly due to its proximity to linguistic structures that fail to contain or define the creatures. Because of these limitations, the third section is framed as a new materialist response to explore the additional unfoldings of identity that have otherwise been impeded by the previous methodologies. Through Gilles Deleuze's framework that emphasises an 'immanent' perception of the world, I argue that a more affirmative queer politics of sight can be yielded *prior* to the formation of the subject (and object) – a binaristic formation that already limits the potential for mutability in the previous approaches. Lastly, I conclude by considering more ethical ways of literary interpretation. By regarding the ideological positionings of readership as modes of situated blindfolding, I argue that the reader's interpretive gaze can be queered to continually liberate characters' becomings.

### **Queered Power Dynamics of Sight**

While filmic mediums such as *Bird Box*'s 2018 adaptation are able to screen images of characters engaged in acts of seeing, novels fall short of these possibilities. Additionally, the conditions prescribed in *Bird Box* also further prevent characters from opening their eyes outside the safety of their homes. These peculiarities make it such that any impulse to privilege ocularnormativity – to visually apprehend the storyworld – will enact unequal power structures of visual fixity for both readers and characters. Insofar as we are 'blindfolded' by the novel, *Bird Box* actively resists its own structural ossification by disrupting our impositions of sealed, hermeneutic meaning onto its narrative. Unlike its filmic adaptation in which the audience's gaze ironically eliminates a degree of ambiguity pertaining to the creatures' identities, queering sight in the text operates from the possibility of removing these cinematic sutures and thereby severely impeding our visual capacity. This in turn creates an alternative, mediated glimpse to destabilise the power dynamics generated by the gaze.

Malorie is the main focaliser through which readers are able to understand the dystopian conditions in *Bird Box*. Unknown and unseen creatures have allegedly populated the world which incite madness within those who gaze upon them. To prevent a loss of self, many survivors use blindfolds to mediate their sight in the open while they forage for supplies. Unlike

the people at Jane Tucker's School for the Blind who have permanently blinded themselves, this article opts to view the blindfolds as queer negotiations of sight which possess the potential for envisioning liberated subjectivities. This process involves the discursive and material ways in which the blindfolds generate a freedom of becoming for the creatures who are not subjected to humanity's restricting gaze. As Donna Haraway argues, vision "requires instruments of vision; an optics is a politics of positioning" (586). In other words, gazing is always an exertion of power; it is first constituted by a desire that precedes it and immediately followed by an inscription of the object of vision. However, because characters are consistently positioned behind their blindfolds, their limited visual dynamics create the possibility of partial perspective. Situating queered vision that is mediated through the blindfolds at sites of partialness, the "knowing self [then becomes] never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming another" (Haraway 586). Put another way, to become is to hamper becoming. One is a fixed identity anchored to the ocularnormative, the latter a perpetual process. The creatures' queer becomings, which I argue are located most notably in their trans-configurations of athwart manoeuvres, are more productive when analysis examines what they *do* across identity formations predicated on sight, rather than *what* they reductively signify within identity politics. The emphasis thus shifts from ontology (being) to movement (doing).

In Laura Kremmel's article on *Bird Box*, which addresses the possibility of pushing boundaries within ocularcentric thought, she highlights that "sensory disabilities, at their core, challenge conventional methods of accessing knowledge and understanding the world" (43). Unlike direct sight which potentially functions as 'gazing', the blindfolds work to undermine the power differential that succeeds an apprehending gaze. It is, therefore, important to distinguish the simple act of seeing from the gaze. The gaze is a "perspective – and, by extension, a subject position – that is dominated by vision" (Kremmel 44). Arguably, the gaze requires direct vision, a condition that is unavailable in *Bird Box*. As a subject position, the gaze denotes an intentionality within a look which subjects the Other to modes of negative relational difference. This difference is one that is couched in the politics of inequality and framed within the dyadic formation of Self and Other. Normative visual apprehension must be undermined in the novel to envision a more affirmative queer politics of sight.

Before this article moves to examine how the use of blindfolds queers sight, it is important to also consider the paradoxical conditions which restrict humanity's ability to gaze in *Bird Box*. These conditions enact power structures to regulate sight using blindfolds.

However, it is also *only* through one's mediated sight that humans and creatures can be liberated from the hierarchical frameworks of subjectivity. Similar to the enclosed box of birds the survivors have found in their routine scavenging, Malorie and her housemates are limited by their visual sensory perceptions after blindfolding themselves. This bird box 'effect' implies that while there is no manner of direct sight available to them, there is always an unnerving assumption of being seen:

The creatures of [Malorie's] mind walk horizonless, open fields. They stand outside the windows of former homes and gaze curiously at the glass. They study. They examine. They observe. They do one thing Malorie isn't allowed to do. They *look*. (Malerman 317, emphasis in original)

At least according to Malorie's mental constructions of the creatures in her mind's eye, the creatures possess the ability to see without being directly seen. If characters such as Malorie always blindfold themselves upon leaving their homes, then they have arguably negated the potential to gaze since they do not possess direct vision. The unseen creatures, however, are allegedly situated in a position to be able to gaze at humans and have the ability to inflict a self-abnegating insanity upon them if seen. Through this peculiar visual dynamic, Malerman's novel deals precisely with the impossibility of gazing for humans who have once treated sight as a prerogative for inscribing alternative bodies with inferiority. Blindfolding humanity thus preserves the creatures' amorphous configurations.

As a form of protection, characters in *Bird Box* enact power structures to control ways of seeing. They police themselves "in the mania of the moment [...] [and always] hold tightly to the concept of the blindfold" (7). Michel Foucault has considered that within the visualising practices undergirding surveillance, one "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication [...]. And this invisibility is a guarantee of order" (200). Since there is a lack of communication and reciprocity in the gaze between humans and the creatures, a controlling narrative of fear is generated regarding a policing Other that is not visible. The inhibitions of the blindfold thus function as self-regulating visual prisons to preserve this sense of precarious order. Two different ways of analysing *Birdbox* emerge by further interrogating Foucault's notion of panopticism – which, he argues, will imprison bodies since "[v]isibility is a trap" (200). Let us consider this brief statement alongside the text. Firstly, 'visibility' may be understood in the sense that one is trapped by one's ability to see, which is the case for humans in the novel. Here, the dynamics of gazing are reversed since the one who

gazes will subsequently induce their own entrapment within madness. Secondly, ‘visibility’ as *being able to be seen* traps both humans and the creatures; humans limit their movements based on the assumption that they are seen by the creatures, while conversely, if the creatures are visually apprehended by humanity’s gaze, then their subjectivity becomes incarcerated within the fixity of power binaries. However, the culture of surveillance through enforcing blindfolds and the blindfolds *as surveillance* open up new possibilities for both parties which exceed mere visual imprisonment within the conditions underlined by Foucault. As Braidotti reminds us, Foucault’s notion of power can be defined as both “restrictive (*potestas*) and also empowering or affirmative (*potentia*)” (4). Power’s diplopic valency – its ‘double-vision’ – allows us to consider the blindfolds in two congruous ways. While they regulate sight not unlike Foucault’s panopticism, they also possess the power to visually enable manoeuvres of becoming. The affirmative facets of power manifested through the blindfolds can thus be examined as direct challenges to the ocularnormative restrictions in the text.

To envision the creatures’ transversality, we could perhaps consider how queer negotiations of sight through the blindfolds present opportunities to explore their discursive and material constructions. As Malorie observes, blindfolding is not a total deprivation of sight because “she knows that, even with your eyes closed, there *is* sight. She sees peaches, yellows, the colours of distant sunlight penetrating flesh. At the corners of her vision are greys...” (Malerman 229, emphasis in original). Arguably, Malorie’s sight is refracted to generate a degree of indeterminacy that is analogous to queer theory. In this context, to be indeterminate is to also bleed across the compartmentalising forces of visual apprehension. Apprehension denotes three nuanced but related meanings in *Bird Box*. To apprehend a thing indicates one’s conceptual mastery of it, but through this attempt to understand the Other, one imprisons another’s subjectivity as an object of knowledge and is besieged by anxiety and fear in this process, that is, becomes apprehensive. The blindfolds not only fracture visual apprehension as a totalising means to acquire knowledge of the Other but also assist in the unshackling of subjectivity and bodies from reductionist frameworks, such as that of Self-Other relations, that are generated by sight.

Curiously, *Bird Box* provides a theoretical possibility for characters to begin understanding the creatures in terms that connote a closer proximity to the Self. That is, they are perhaps humans, their desires, or what humans actively reject in themselves, rather than an impossible Other that cannot be known. Gary, a newcomer to Malorie’s safehouse, possesses a notebook that contains the delirious theories of his former housemate, Frank:

*[People] were told they would go mad. So they go mad [...] We do it to ourselves we do it to ourselves we DO IT to OURSELVES. In other words (make note of this!): MAN IS THE CREATURE HE FEARS.* (273, emphasis in original)

It is important to note that Frank's written account is pure conjecture since there is no indication that he has actually seen the creatures directly without a blindfold. Humans have also already seen each other without falling into insanity. By reducing the creatures to the mere inscriptions of "rules" on their bodies, Frank deprives them as autonomous subjects. That said, his speculations still inadvertently create an opportunity to queer them with the blindfold by problematising their previously accepted categorical distinction from humans. Since they are not simply 'objects' or totally Other because, according to Frank, "*MAN IS THE CREATURE HE FEARS*", perhaps it is possible to visualise them as 'abject'.

### **The Abject Fantasy of Becoming**

Abjection is a process that can occur in relation to sight as a catalyst.<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject is especially helpful in deciphering the queer implications of Frank's theories. She posits that abjection is caused by a fundamental breakdown in the distinction between Self and Other. Abjection, then, is motivated by "what disturbs identity, system, order [...] disrespects borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). In this regard, the creatures' indeterminately transversal forms – neither Self nor Other – share an affinity with the abject. Many characters, like Malorie, have seen the corpses of people who have killed themselves after allegedly perceiving the creatures. As *Bird Box* indicates, "'The Problem' always resulted in suicide [...] 'Self-destruction'. 'Self-immolation'. 'Hari-kari'. One anchorman described it as 'personal erasing'" (Malerman 237). Yet, the characters are also "very aware that no report described a man being attacked [by the creatures]" (Malerman 173). Since it is perhaps not the sight of creatures but rather corpses that trigger humanity's collective process of abjection, the starting point to imagine what the creatures might be thus hinges on the sight of corpses; they are the only physical referent available to 'access' these creatures. However, as corpses do not directly signify the creatures, the corpses only manage to further preserve their inscrutability. Representing the figure of death within life and the transient materiality of existence, the corpses' ambiguous ontology destabilises one's sense of self which is perhaps realised through humanity's "*insanity fuss*" and eventual suicide (Malerman 222).



In Kristeva's formulation, there is a difference between an understanding and knowledge of death – which in psychoanalytic terms involve linguistic structures of the Symbolic Order – and a sight of “death infecting life” through the corpse (4), where abjection functions as a *pre-lingual response*. This means abjection is also that which “draws me to the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). In *Bird Box*, Malorie thinks that the label ‘creatures’ is a “cheap word [and] out of place, somehow” (Malerman 73). She struggles with defining them using language:

*‘Barbarian’ isn’t right either. A barbarian is reckless. So is a brute [...] ‘Behemoth’ is unproven. They could be small as a fingernail [...] ‘Demon’. ‘Devil’. ‘Rogue’. Maybe they are all these things [...] ‘Imp’ is too kind. ‘Savage’ too human [...] If they don’t know what they do, they can’t be ‘villains’.* (Malerman 74-75)

From Malorie's unsuccessful attempts to apprehend definite and concrete meaning, it is possible to suggest that linguistic signs have failed to contain the creatures in their entirety. If the creatures may be considered abject, they generate, through abjection, the frontiers of identity which “demarcate a space out of which signs and objects arise” in the Symbolic Order that allows humans to separate themselves from an Other (Kristeva 10). Though this separation is perhaps problematic, because the Self–Other distinction may form hierarchical relationships, abjection becomes an instance that denies language's insistence on regulating meaning through constrained labels and identities within the Symbolic.

Accordingly, queering sight continues to succeed the process of abjection to further undermine signification processes in the Symbolic. The function of desire is critical because it is bound to socio-linguistic structures at the level of fantasy. Due to humanity's queered sight, the creatures instil fear in humans because they remain ambiguous. Desire, then, is not conflated with the erotic in *Bird Box*. Rather, the blindfolds create a lack at the heart of the desire to perceive the unknown creatures, and the positioning distance maintained by the blindfolds is that which ensures the persistence of this desire. The original owner of Malorie's safehouse, George, has consistently proposed theories to look at the creatures through “lenses”, “refracted glass”, “telescopes”, and “binoculars” (Malerman 98). He “wasn't satisfied with just talking about it [...] [and] was going to see it out, no matter how dangerous it was” (Malerman 99-100). In Judith Butler's conceptualisation, desire, if George succeeds, “is projected and takes a visual form [...] [where] *the body emerges* as an individuated object of perception”

(“Desire” 372, my italics). Rather than purely defined in terms of lack, desire also takes on a generative role in its visual construction of bodies.

While Butler’s idea is that “desire transfigured through projection gives rise to the idealized contour or morphology of the body” (“Desire” 372), this is immediately problematised since direct sight is queered by the blindfolds. There is also no specific original referent to construct the parameters of what constitutes the normative ‘ideal’. In Malorie’s rationalisation of the creatures’ forms, she tells herself that “*you add the details [...] It’s your idea of what they look like, and details are added to a body and a shape that you have no concept of*” (Malerman 317). In other words, her visual embellishment of the creatures in the realm of fantasy does not prescribe definitive characteristics that anchor them to any specific or coherent image. Although it may seem that the horrific sight of corpses haunting these images represents the “idealized contours or morphology” of the creatures’ bodies (Butler, “Desire” 372), it is precisely due to Malorie’s blindfolded sight and visual uncertainty which destabilise these ideals. Lauren Berlant further suggests that at the level of fantasy, “the subjectivity desire makes is fundamentally incited by *external stimuli* that make a *dent* on the subject” (75, my emphasis). Similarly, Malorie’s limited and limiting constructions of the creatures in her mind’s eye are but visual projections of an external world that appears to be mad in her state of paranoia. As Frank also reminds us, the creatures are products of “the rules we’ve ascribed [them]” (Malerman 273), which may very well imply that their ‘true’ materiality spills beyond the linguistic structures that diminish and (fail to) contain them. By reading Berlant’s assertions alongside Butler’s, they reiterate a sense that projected desire imposes reductionist frameworks to curtail or “dent” subjects by which prohibitive laws are “incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 171). Conversely, because the blindfolds queer humanity’s sight in *Bird Box*, the creatures’ unstable figurations are preserved by Malorie’s failure to read them as textual bodies where she struggles with appropriate meanings to define them. The blindfolds thus allow the creatures to actively transgress the gaze’s containment of their bodies within the delimited boundaries of language and desire.

### **Visualising the Transversal Other – The Discursive to the Material**

If we further interrogate Berlant and Butler’s theoretical claims, it appears that the creatures can only resist linguistic moulds and desire through active negation. That is, queering sight does little to fully liberate the creatures from binaries with humanity if desire and

language are products of normative frameworks imposed upon them. Since there are normative referents used to constitute the prohibitive laws signified on and through the creatures' bodies, queering sight in this manner may still ironically adhere to a matrix of normativity even if it attempts to undermine it. Difference, in this case, as noted by Claire Colebrook, "is negative [...] there is no difference itself as some posit or intuitable power" ("Queer Vitalism" 83). In a move towards rethinking difference as positive difference, an affirmative queer politics may be extrapolated from Gilles Deleuze's turn to an immanence of the material body and a reconceptualisation of the Self as composed of perceptions. Immanence is a monistic view that deviates from 'transcendence' – where concepts are aligned against a set foundation that exerts an external influence on life, such as linguistic structures – to focus on what intrinsically lies within.<sup>5</sup> More specifically for our purposes, immanence focuses on the creative power of life itself to engage with one's generative transformations. Succinctly captured by Colebrook, this means that the "task of thinking is not to see bodies in their general recognizable form" as what Frank and Malorie have tried to do despite their blindfolds, and what Berlant and Butler's theories are constructed upon, but "to approach the world as the unfolding of events" where potentialities may be encompassed within a material body ("Queer Vitalism" 83).

Immanence focuses on potentialising difference. 'Difference' involves the actualised difference between what already exists and the virtual difference of what can potentially *be*. Malorie has acknowledged the creatures' potentiality couched in virtual difference where they are able to "study", "examine", "observe", and "*look*" (Malerman 317, emphasis in original). Within these acts of looking is a focus on their potential viscosity in which the 'Self' in Deleuzian terms may be composed of perceptions. According to Colebrook, for Deleuze, before the 'I' is personalised through iterative difference and recognised within social norms, "there is the '*eye*' which is already the establishment of a qualitative relation or the unfolding of an intensity" ("Queer Theory" 16-17). For *Bird Box*, these unfoldings arguably suggest that the creatures are already produced and continually re-produced through a multiplicity of intensities that *precede* their linguistic representation. So, despite Malorie's conjectures of whether the creatures might be barbarians or brutes, demons or villains, one should be aware that these labels are highly normative and restrictive conceptual images tied to (her) desire. That is, even these images are still rendered unstable and incoherent by the complexities and variations of defining or imaging, for instance, the barbarian as 'barbarian'. The creatures' insistent untranslatability means that their virtual difference provides possibilities that they can transiently become, but will never be fully shackled to a specific image because "the self is

composed of perceptions, each of which just is its imaging of other perceiving souls” (Colebrook, “Queer Vitalism” 92).

Imaging the creatures through their virtual difference creates the possibility of an affirmative queer politics. Unlike Butler’s constructivist notions of a Self that can only exist through improvisation, performance, and recognition within social norms – one that is subjected to negative relational difference and as a Self already expressed and constituted – a Deleuzian Self *is* by its iterative difference, which also encompasses a virtual difference of things yet actualised. In *Bird Box*, there is a need to think beyond the restrictive images and normative concepts Malorie employs to visually apprehend the creatures. With each imaging and perception, a new unfolding potential is enacted. Perhaps this is why instead of perceiving the creatures within an exclusionary either/or framework like Malorie, she blindfolds queer sight to replace binary distinctions with the conjunctive synthesis ‘and’. The creatures embody transversal potentialities in which they can be “barbarians” *and* “behemoths” *and* “demons” *and* “imps” *and* everything in between to reflect their thwarted multiplicity in composite becomings (Malerman 74). Although these terms bear negative connotations, the key idea is a positive use of the conjunction ‘and’ that affirms the multiplicity inherent within any subject. For Malorie, she is not just a ‘woman’, but also a ‘mother’ *and* ‘survivor’ *and* ‘masculine’ *and* ‘feminine’ in which her possible becomings are always continually differentiating, unfolding, and transgressing. The list is not exhaustive.

A point to note here is that only one character, Olympia, describes the creatures as “beautiful” after perceiving them directly – a stark contrast to the earlier abject formulations premised on corpses (Malerman 190). Yet, Olympia’s claims still do not contradict Malorie’s blindfolded imaging of the creatures. The conjunctive synthesis “and” further allows the creatures’ identities to expand transversally and thereby incorporate different (virtual) materialities beyond those of their subjective imagings. This is to say that the creatures embody the potentialities afforded by the conjunction “and”; they can be both hideous and beautiful. The point is not to buy into the totalising fallacy of linguistic structures and their overcoding of materiality within identity politics. While represented through a textual medium, *Bird Box*’s creatures explicitly work against their discursivity and language in favour of visually-mediated partial formations that are, as Haraway reminds us, “always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming another” (586).

Ocularnormativity does not only refer to norms that are created by sight to restrict the economy of subjectivity. It also refers to the insular view of bodies and identities as

intransigently bounded to normative concepts. Queering sight through the blindfolds enables a visual perception of the creatures as representing positive difference in and of themselves and not through the negation of an Other; the blindfolds provide an optical distance that prevents visual apprehension while also allowing a consideration of the pre-personal perceptions that constitute and express a subject's actualised and potential becomings. Subjectivity can, therefore, be liberated from hierarchical binaries and be liberating for the subject who is immanently unbounded from, and irreducible to, any one normative concept or image.

### **Conclusion: Queering the Reader's Interpretive Gaze**

The concluding section considers the ideological positionings of readership created by *Bird Box*'s novelistic medium and the ways these might influence our engagement with, and queering of, the gaze during acts of interpretation; queering sight reveals that perception itself represents possibilities, not irrevocability. *Bird Box*'s constraints in its narrative and novelistic form eliminate the feasibility of creating ocularnormative knowledge for readers. The novel positions its readers in a situation where "everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered" (Barthes 147). It appears that to disentangle, one first needs to perhaps identify differences between things prior to unravelling them. Naturally, acts of decipherment, be they inadvertent or deliberate, are unavoidable in the process since they also draw upon normative images prior to inscription. However, queering the gaze within the praxis of readership means to circumvent interpretations that annul the subjectivity of others. As visual constructions of the creatures are also denied from the reader's perspective, their fictional reality is, as Pierre Macherey argues, "never completed, always escaping from a fixed gaze, never completely grasped, mastered, or exhausted, because [they] must always be prolonged" (58). Indeed, the gaze has always sought to curtail and contain bodies and identities that transgress beyond neat, normative borders. Though the creatures do not directly represent 'real' bodies in Malerman's fiction, nor do they neatly parallel queer(ed) bodies and identities in reality, the novel's resistance to their visual revelation generates challenges to the compartmentalising function of the gaze. Consequently, we are positioned in the interstices of linguistic insufficiencies to rethink our visualising practices.

Much like the characters' refracted sight, readership is akin to a form of situated 'blindfolding' that is premised on a lack of total visual access. This is where bounded identity frontiers are transgressed. Queering the gaze in our engagement with *Bird Box* grants us an affirmative perception of unconventional bodies that effectively gestates a mutable cartography

of unfolding relations. Although the novel's form positions readers within the impossibility of deciphering the creatures, it also pluralises new ways of "disentangling" its opacity that adds to a creative potentiality inherent within a queered gaze. Instead of subjecting bodies and identities to ocularnormative frameworks which are predicated upon the hierarchical separation of Self and Other, queering allows (in)sight to become a polysemic experience for the reader. The point is not to resolve the novel's formalistic gaps and absences. Rather, the reader transgresses a rigid positionality as interpreter of meaning and instead partakes in resisting fixity, opting to gaze without containing and to gaze where possibilities begin to unfold for constrained bodies and identities.

At both the level of content and form, *Bird Box* facilitates the preservation of difference as positive difference for the Other. The novel's visual opacities also allow sight to challenge its vilification in previous theoretical discourses. This process preserves an asymptotic distance between Self and Other which circumvents the mastery of one's object of vision. Sight then becomes an act of approaching, but never claiming a total knowledge of another. Queered imagings of bodies are consequently focused on exploring their unfolding potentialities and to envision liberated subjectivities without fixing them within hierarchical, binary relations. *Bird Box* thus takes the much-needed steps towards a more affirmative queer politics generated through sight that is indexed by the multiple becomings of a transversal Other.

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## Notes

1. Mary Devereaux's "Oppressive Texts" provides a concise summary of gendered gazing positionalities. In literal terms, the male gaze refers to male spectators and characters who engage in acts of looking that are directed at female characters. In figurative terms, the male gaze sexualises female characters and takes pleasure in their erotic objectification. For Devereaux, the male gaze can originate from female characters as well, when they "judge themselves according to internalized standards of what is pleasing to men [...] In this sense, the eyes are female, but the gaze is male" (337).
2. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" also develop the effects and consequences of gendered gazing practices, but their methodologies continually reiterate – and cement – unequal power dynamics of the gaze as its sole consequence. Instead, I approach the gaze using queer's insistence on transversal relations. Transversality implies a movement athwart and across the restrictive binaries of sight created by the aforementioned approaches.
3. In *Sharing the World* and "Toward a Divine in the Feminine", among others, Luce Irigaray locates the poetics of touch to examine intersubjectivity through how touch generates intimacy by



means of consent. Touch preserves one's subjective autonomy and unlike the gaze, does not apprehend the Other within hierarchical binaries. Additionally, Lenart Škof theorises a new conceptual space that he terms "mesocosm" in *Breath of Proximity*, where he locates breathing as the origin of ethical gestures in relation to the Other across cultures.

4. When Julia Kristeva writes about her visceral response to abjection, she focuses first on her body's receptivity to certain stimuli that precede her fascination/repulsion. An example that she raises is the manner in which her body's sensory experiences are directed towards perceiving an object's unclassifiability. The milk-skin (thin film on milk surface) is one such object where Kristeva claims to experience a "sight-clouding dizziness" when "the eyes see or the lips touch [...] a 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing" (2-3). This is because the milk-skin straddles the borders of milk and 'not-milk', its entire composition is neither fluid-like nor solid in its anhydrous powder form. In terms closer to the article, Kristeva also mentions that "corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3, emphasis in original). The ability to visualise the corpse's unsettling in-betweenness is that which catalyses her nausea and, therefore, threatens the expulsion of "I" beyond its neat identity borders.

5. For more examples, definitions, and contextual uses of Gilles Deleuze's key terms in his oeuvre, see Claire Colebrook's succinct glossary in *Understanding Deleuze*. One caveat to bear in mind is that some of these terms have never been explicitly defined by Deleuze. Their specific usages can also vary across his works and other scholars who interpret them.