

# An analysis of the meaning constructed by woman gaze through cinematic instruments in Yeşim Ustaoglu's film *Clair Obscur* (2016)

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## Abstract

Although the woman gaze concept in cinema has not yet been clearly defined in the academic literature, it refers to the gaze, perspective, voice, subjectivity, experiences, and inner world of the woman director and the woman character. The aim of this study is to contribute to the definition of this concept by investigating the tools through which meaning is constructed via the woman gaze in cinema. To this end, the film *Clair Obscur* (*Tereddüt*, 2016), directed by Yeşim Ustaoglu, which focuses on the viewpoints, and experiences of women characters, is examined through textual film analysis with a holistic approach. According to the findings, in *Clair Obscur*, the subjectivities of women characters are prioritized through different cinematographic, editing, and mise-en-scène tools. The film distinguishes itself from mainstream cinema codes with its disturbing thematic narrative. Consequently a definition for the construction of meaning through the woman gaze in cinema can be mentioned.

## Keywords

cinema, woman gaze, yeşim ustaoğlu, clair obscur, woman viewpoint

## Highlights

- It is crucial to study films of women directors that differ from traditional cinema, as they provide more realistic and positive representations of women on screen for female audiences.
- The concept of the woman gaze will become more visible and observable through the analysis of visual, auditory, and narrative elements in each unique and emerging film by women directors.
- The woman gaze emerges as an encompassing concept for all art forms with visual, auditory, and narrative elements while also differing in terms of specific technical features pertinent to each field.

# Yeşim Ustaoglu'nun *Tereddüt* (2016) filminde kadın bakışı aracılığıyla inşa edilen anlamın sinemasal araçlar üzerinden analizi

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## Atıf

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## Öz

Sinemada kadın bakışı akademik alanyazında henüz net bir biçimde tanımlanmamış olsa da, bu kavramın kadın yönetmenin ve kadın karakterin bakışı, bakış açısı, sesi, özneliği, duygu ve deneyimleri ile içsel dünyasına göndermede bulunduğu belirtilebilir. Bu çalışmanın amacı sinemada kadın bakışı aracılığıyla anlam inşasının araçlarını araştırarak bu kavramın tanımına katkı sunmaktır. Bu amaçla, makalede Yeşim Ustaoglu tarafından yönetilen ve kadın karakterlerin bakış açılarına, duygularına, deneyimlerine ve içsel dünyalarına odaklanan *Tereddüt* (*Clair Obscur*, 2016) filminde ortaya çıkan kadın bakışı bütünsel bir yaklaşıma sahip olan filmsel metin analizi ile incelenmiştir. Elde edilen bulgulara göre, *Tereddüt* filminde kadın karakterlerin özellikleri farklı sinematografi, kurgu ve mizansen araçları ile öncelenir. Film, içeriğindeki tematik anlatının rahatsız edici özelliği ile ana akım sinema kodlarından farklılaşır. Sonuç olarak sinemada kadın bakışı aracılığıyla anlam inşasına dair bir tanımlamadan söz edilebilir.

## Anahtar kelimeler

sinema, kadın bakışı, yeşim ustaoglu, tereddüt, kadın bakış açısı

## Öne çıkanlar

- Kadın seyircilerin perdede gerçeğe daha yakın ve pozitif kadın temsilleri görebilmesi anlamında geleneksel sinemadan farklılaşan kadın yönetmen filmlerinin incelenmesi önemli hale gelmektedir.
- Kadın bakışı kavramı, her farklı ve yeni kadın yönetmen filminde görsel, işitsel ve anlatısal öğelerin analiz edilmesi sonucu daha görünür ve gözlemlenebilir hale gelecektir.
- Kadın bakışı kavramı görsel, işitsel ve anlatısal öğelere sahip tüm sanat dalları için hem kapsayıcı hem de alana özgü teknik özellikler için farklılaşan bir kavram olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the woman gaze has long been a subject of research by numerous theorists and writers in the fields of art, literature, and cinema; and it continues to be frequently explored and discussed, while most writers agree that it has not yet been clearly defined in academic literature (French, 2021; Forster, 2018, 12<sup>th</sup> June; Daila, 2023, 20<sup>th</sup> May). The notable author Laura Mulvey (1975, p. 11) coined the term "male gaze" to articulate the objectification of women characters through the perspectives of the camera, male characters, and the audience. According to Mulvey, men hold the power of the gaze, which is both scopophilic and voyeuristic simultaneously. Mulvey's groundbreaking analysis of the male gaze is crucial for understanding film production, but acknowledging the woman gaze is also essential. Since Mulvey's seminal works, the concept of the woman gaze has persistently lacked a clear definition and rigorous academic scrutiny. It is also important to note that Mulvey did not refer to the "woman gaze" in her discussions.

To understand the concept of the woman gaze, it seems necessary to take a closer approach to the term "gaze". Here, the term of gaze refers to both the physical look of the woman character and her mental perspective. It encompasses not only the act of optical looking but also includes the character's comments, thoughts, and perspective on events and situations—a manifestation of her point of view. The terms "look" and "point of view" here emphasize the woman character's unique way of thinking and mental activities, which define her subjectivity and set her apart from other characters.

Anneke Smelik (1998, p. 56, 66-68), who researches the representation of woman subjectivity and gaze in cinema, approaches the concept of point of view in two different ways. Examining the perspective in the films of women directors, Smelik states that woman subjectivity in films is constructed both with the mental perspective and the optical perspective of the character. According to her, mental attitude and physical perception are different but not very separate processes. While the visual manipulation of the camera showing what the character sees, as well as the optical/physical perspective of the character, relates to the term "ocularization"; the character perception, mental perspective and experience in the narrative brings us to the term "focalization". Focalization, in contrast to ocularization, refers to the more psychological and cognitive level of what a character knows (Smelik, 1998, p. 63).

Considering the perspectives of women directors and authors, the woman gaze, apart from the woman character's optical and mental point of view, seems not simply the inverse of the male gaze. It is neither homogeneous nor monolithic, but it can take on various forms. It may be more effective to define the woman gaze by outlining what it is not, rather than attempting a rigid definition. For example, the woman gaze does not aim to establish women's dominance on-screen, nor does it involve objectifying male

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<sup>1</sup> This study is derived from the findings of the doctoral dissertation titled *The Possibility of a Feminine Language in Cinema: A Sociological Perspective on the Films of Women Directors in Recent Turkish Cinema*, which was conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Erol Demir in the Sociology Program at the Graduate School of Social Sciences at Ankara University and accepted on January 20, 2022.

characters, as the male gaze often does with women characters (Forster, 2018, 12<sup>th</sup> June). The concept of the woman gaze differs from the male gaze by shifting the focus from physical attributes and visual stimulation to the emotions and inner world of characters. According to Ayala Daila (2023, 20<sup>th</sup> May), the man gaze tends to emphasize elements related to desire, sex, or ego; whereas the woman gaze prioritizes the emotional depth and subjective experiences of characters. "If the male gaze is all about what men see, then the female gaze is about making the audience feel what women see and experience" (Forster, 2018, 12<sup>th</sup> June).

Regarding the literature, it is notable that there are numerous theorists, both past and present, who have directly worked on the concept of the woman gaze or indirectly worked on related concepts. Smelik (1998, p. 56) connects the construction of woman subjectivity in films directed by women to the woman gaze and considers it from the perspective of women's point of view. Lisa French (2021, p. 53) delves deeply into the concept of the woman gaze by analyzing the approaches and films of women documentarists, with a particular emphasis on woman subjectivity. In the words of French, "The key marker of the female gaze is the communication or expression of female subjectivity—a gaze where female agency is privileged and which is shaped by a female 'look', voice and perspective" (French, 2021, p. 54).

Alicia Malone (2018) highlights and briefly discusses approximately fifty films directed by women and addresses thematic issues that she believes foreground the woman gaze such as women's friendship, women's independence, societal challenges faced by women, motherhood, gender stereotypes, women's bodies, desire, and resistance against patriarchy. Malone also briefly touches upon cinematic aspects related to the woman gaze, such as looking and being seen, women's inner worlds, memories, and thoughts, the direct gaze and perspective of women characters, a narrative told through the eyes of women characters, as well as the cinematographic work of the directors. Annette Kuhn (1994, p. 169), while investigating the concept of "feminine cinematic writing", essentially follows the methodology employed by other theorists researching the woman gaze. She attempts to uncover commonalities in form and content through four selected films<sup>2</sup> directed by women. According to her research, commonalities include the presence of distanciation between the audience and the narrative, and the passionate detachment. The films often focus on relationships between mothers, daughters, and sisters. They establish a discourse of women looks and points of view. Furthermore, they transform culturally established expressions related to women (Kuhn, 1994, p. 170-172, 176).

Hailey C. Coles (2023, p. 17), in her research on the female gaze, reveals that this concept possesses certain characteristics. It prioritizes internal thoughts and feelings over the action taking place. To her, the woman gaze privileges woman desire through dialogue; it focuses on multiplicity of identities. The characterization focuses on inner characteristics rather than on physical characteristics, achieved through the camera's

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<sup>2</sup> *Thriller* (Sally Potter, 1979), *Lives of Performers* (Yvonne Rainer, 1972), *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1980), and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975).

gaze. Non-verbal elements such as mise-en-scène, the physical expression of bodies, blocking, alterations in camera angles, foci that emphasize nuanced and subtle movements and middle moments rather than the end goal, and sometimes pervasive use of music all contribute to the shaping and characterizing of the woman gaze.

Discussions on studies about women directors in Turkish cinema focus on whether the films can be classified as women's films, whether women characters are portrayed as active subjects and free from gender stereotypes, whether the films address the experiences faced by women in society, whether they challenge the patriarchal discourse, and whether they highlight a feminine discourse (Öztürk, 2004, p. 12; Tanrıöver, 2016, p. 321). In scholarly analyses of Turkish films<sup>3</sup> from a feminist perspective, issues such as questioning the language of mainstream cinema, the perspective of women directors challenging gender roles, gender differences articulated from the perspective of women characters, the portrayal of the inner worlds of women characters to the audience, woman subjectivity and desire, women's friendship and solidarity seem to be among the common features in the films of women directors (İnceoğlu, 2015; Aslan, 2018; Elpeze Ergeç, 2019; Özdemir, 2019; Ekici, 2022).

When looking at the definitions and approaches of the woman gaze, we see that the look, point of view, gaze, internal thoughts, standpoint, and feelings of the woman character are prioritized. And they are revealed by specific camera language and non-verbal elements. Woman subjectivity, subtle and little moments, and details rather than the end goal seem to be other important issues in the woman gaze. Additionally, we can say that there is a focus on specific topics concerning women's relations or problems women face in society; and a departure from mainstream cinema by creating distance between the audience and the film, thereby interrupting pleasure.

This study aims to investigate holistically how the meaning is constructed through the woman gaze in films by women directors and to contribute to the definition of the woman gaze in cinema. To this end, the study traces the concept of the woman gaze in cinema by examining the film *Clair Obscur*<sup>4</sup> (Tereddüt, Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2016). This film has been selected due to its focus on the perspective of the woman character, its emphasis on the individual and societal issues and conflicts experienced by women, and its departure from mainstream cinema conventions. The importance of this study for the literature lies in the fact that detailed analyses of cinematographic tools in studies on the woman gaze in films directed by women and a comprehensive analysis that considers all cinematic tools holistically are very few. Most of the studies conducted in this field focus on only thematic issues. This study can be seen as a step towards filling this gap. It is believed

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<sup>3</sup> *Mustang* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015), *Something Useful* (*İşe Yarar Bir Şey*, Pelin Esmer, 2017), *Love in Another Language* (*Başka Dilde Aşk*, İlksen Başarır, 2009), *The Blue Wave* (*Mavi Dalga*, Zeynep Dadak & Merve Kayan, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> The film won the Best Film, Best Director, and Best Actress awards at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Antalya International Golden Orange Film Festival. Additionally, at the 2016 Haifa International Film Festival, *Clair Obscur* received a special mention in the Mediterranean Golden Anchor Award Competition (IMDb, \_\_\_\_a). The film was in theaters for thirty two weeks, attracting an audience of 25.248 and grossing a total of 256.275 TL (Box Office Turkey, \_\_\_\_).

that, to better define the concept of the woman gaze, more films need to be scrutinized in cinema in terms of cinematic tools as well as thematic tools.

In *Clair Obscur*, a young psychiatrist named Şehnaz (Funda Eryiğit) spends part of the week in a rural town near Istanbul for her mandatory service. On weekends, she returns to her home in Istanbul, where she lives with her husband Cem (Mehmet Kurtuluş). Although their marriage appears happy from the outside, Cem's addiction to pornographic films causes Şehnaz to become increasingly unhappy. On the other hand, Şehnaz is assigned a legal case involving a girl named Elmas (Ecem Uzun). Elmas was forced to marry when she was a child by her own family and is initially considered a suspect by the police due to the deaths of her husband and mother-in-law. However, according to the apparent scenario, Elmas had locked herself on the balcony to escape her husband, who was forcing her to have sexual intercourse at night. Her husband, who was locked inside, died from carbon monoxide poisoning due to the burning stove. Fundamentally, both women experience the consequences of the male gaze in society, leading to feelings of unhappiness and inner conflict. These two women, belonging to different classes and backgrounds, reflect each other through their bodily experiences, becoming mirrors and salving each other's dark sides with their light.

Within the context of the woman gaze in cinema, the cinematic perspective of director Yeşim Ustaoglu becomes significant. With six feature films<sup>5</sup> and several shorts, Ustaoglu has received numerous awards in the best film and best director categories at national and international film festivals (IMDb, \_\_\_\_b). She is considered one of the best directors and auteurs among the pioneers of contemporary Turkish cinema. Her films frequently address and focus on social and political issues that are not easy to discuss publicly, and she constructs a dramatic narrative around the societal and personal experiences of women. The themes of water, death, journey, identity, and otherness are often prominent in her films. Her cinematic style is marked by a critical approach. Besides focusing on social and political issues, she carries an unsettling and critical attitude against social norms and patriarchy. She prefers cinematic techniques that center the viewpoint of characters positioned as the other, thereby creating an alternative subjectivity (Atam, 2010, p. 170; Ceyhan & Sancar, 2019, p. 32, 37; Öneren Özbek, 2021, p. 210, 226).

In this study, instead of basing or using the concept of (feminist) counter-cinema, which is entirely opposed to mainstream cinema conventions, an independent cinema approach that differentiates from mainstream codes has been referenced, therefore the study assumes that the concept of the woman gaze aligns more closely with the independent cinema approach.

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<sup>5</sup> Six feature-length fictional films of Ustaoglu are *Trace* (İz, 1994), *Journey to the Sun* (Güneşe Yolculuk, 1998), *Waiting for the Clouds* (Bulutları Beklerken, 2003), *Pandora's Box* (Pandora'nın Kutusu, 2008), *Somewhere In-Between* (Araf, 2011), and *Clair Obscur* (*Tereddüt*, 2016).



## Methodology of the study

This study investigates the elements that support the woman gaze in the film *Clair Obscur*. To answer this question, the research employs the textual film analysis technique with a holistic approach. Unlike purely written literary texts, film text is evaluated differently, as it encompasses not only narrative/thematic elements but also visual and auditory components that appeal to the eye and ear. Richard Dyer (2016, 26<sup>th</sup> January) and, John Bateman and Janina Wildfeuer (2017, p. 1-2) emphasize the necessity of considering textual film analysis in conjunction with visual and auditory tools. They suggest focusing on the common human senses, setting aside aspects related to the production or consumption stages of the film, cinema audiences, or cultural codes. In this context, textual film analysis is based on the simple skills of looking at and listening to what is physically present in the films. Coles' approach to the female gaze aligns with textual film analyses. She asserts that the process of analyzing films diverges from literary analysis due to the visual nature of the film. To comprehensively understand a film, it is essential to examine both the script and the visual rhetoric together. This requires a consideration of the film's structure and pacing, as well as an analysis of elements of mise-en-scène, and the prominence and focus within scenes (Coles, 2023, p. 3).

In this regard, the film *Clair Obscur* has been analyzed in terms of its cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, and thematic content; briefly, its structural and thematic features which together present a holistic approach and are considered to give the study its importance in the literature. The focus of the analysis has been on how the preferred visual, auditory, and thematic elements in the film carry meanings in terms of the woman gaze. Rather than technical aspects, the aim has been to see how the centrality of the woman gaze manifests in choices related to cinematography and mise-en-scène design. In the analysis, editing tools were considered within cinematographic instruments. The study is limited to one women director's film analysis however it is enriched with references to other works that explore how the woman gaze and women/feminist cinema can be realized. For this reason, the sample used in the study is considered to be representative of the universe of women's cinema.

## Research findings and discussion

### ***The woman gaze through cinematographic instruments***

In *Clair Obscur*, both Elmas and Şehnaz's subjectivities are consistently reconstructed through the demonstration of their optical and mental perspectives to the audience. The film employs various techniques such as the over-the-shoulder shot, point-of-view shot, and selective focus to portray the character's optical viewpoint which Smelik (1998, p. 66-68) refers to as ocularization.

The over-the-shoulder shot, which is the closest to the subjective shot according to Joseph V. Mascelli (1998, p. 22), is frequently used in different sequences to indicate Şehnaz's look. The camera positions itself just behind her shoulder as she gazes at the

waves by the seaside, observes the city view through the window, or drives a car. The point-of-view shot is another optical standpoint that enhances subjectivity by inviting the audience to see through the eyes of the gazing character (Kolker, 2006, p. 95). In *Clair Obscur*, point-of-view editings are constantly employed to center the perspectives of the two women characters. The wave images following Şehnaz's gaze from behind the curtain, and from the mobile phone screen direct our attention towards what captures her interest the most. Similarly, the film guides us to understand Elmas's interests by presenting images of places and people from her balcony, following her gaze. Selective focus is one other technique used to emphasize the characters' optical looks in the film. In one instance, the camera is positioned behind Şehnaz as she looks at the waves through a sheer curtain. First, Şehnaz and the curtain are clearly seen, but gradually they become blurred, while the image of the waves comes into clear focus.

In *Clair Obscur*, we observe also the mental viewpoint, which Smelik (1998, p. 66-68) refers to as focalization, including the characters' thoughts, standpoints, emotions, as well as their experiences. During the therapy sessions, most of the dialogues between Şehnaz and Elmas are recorded with continuous right and left camera panning, without cuts, instead of using the more conventional shot/reverse shot combination. In a long take shot lasting over three minutes, the panning camera moves with Elmas as she constantly shifts from right to left, giving life to the dialogues between herself and her mother. Another long take, lasting more than a minute and a half, screens Elmas lying on the ground, crying as she narrates the story of her family forcing her into marriage. Similarly, the crucial scene discussing Elmas's actual age is completed without cuts, most likely due to its pivotal role in the narrative analysis. In these long takes, we are immersed in following the characters and the dialogue, and fully engaged with the setting and the ongoing sensitive dialogue, never disconnected for a single moment.

The long takes add realism, tension, and dramatic emphasis to the scene by preserving real time, space, and the actors' performances (Mercado, 2011, p. 173). In *Clair Obscur*, the use of long takes may have been employed to concentrate the audience's attention and maintain a sense of real-time, effectively conveying Elmas's feelings as she experiences the painful consequences of forced marriage. Heddy Honigmann notes that the length of the shot is one of the elements that could be felt there is a woman director, "she has more tendency to be more patient in looking and time passing" (as cited in French, 2021, p. 58).

Psychiatrist Şehnaz is the other focus in *Clair Obscur*, as she begins to see her patient Elmas as a reflection of her own painful marriage. The deliberate use of various close-up shots draws our attention to observe Şehnaz's body movements, facial expressions, and reactions. One notable example is the love-making scene. Through sharp head and shoulder close-ups, the focus remains primarily on Şehnaz's face before, during, and after her intimate moments with her husband Cem. Making her the central focal point of these shots, creates the impression that the audience should primarily be concerned with Şehnaz's feelings and experiences within her own body. In the love-making scene between Şehnaz and her lover Umut (Okan Yalabık), the camera once again solely focuses on her face for 45 seconds without any cuts. This head and shoulder close-up captures



her breathing, pain, pleasure, and joyful cries, accompanied by her expressive facial gestures. From Ustaoglu's eye, Şehnaz seems an independent subject of her own pleasure and the owner of her body far from being a passive object. According to Aslı Ekici (2022, p. 145), who critiques mainstream cinema from a feminist perspective based on Mulvey's male gaze theory, the depiction of the woman body in close-ups fetishizes the woman character. However, interpreted from the perspective of the woman gaze, the depiction of the woman character's realities along with her feelings and subjectivity in details, aims to demonstrate her as a person rather than a fetishized object.

Close-ups and extreme close-ups seem to be frequently utilized in *Clair Obscur* to enhance the understanding of the main characters' facial expressions and mental states. Şehnaz's pensive state of mind as she gazes at the waves, her passionate mood while engaging in virtual intimacy with her husband in front of the computer, and her inner tension during psychiatric sessions, are discerned clearer through close-ups. An extreme close-up shot accentuates the nervousness in Elmas's hand gestures as she enacts her mother smashing the beans, and the distress in her hands rubbing together while discussing her marriage, thereby emphasizing both the intricacies of her life and her perspective on events. As Coles (2023, p. 4) states, the female gaze privileges body language and physical touches over words.

The hand-held has also been one of the preferred techniques to focus on the gestures and mimics of the character and to transfer the emotion of the scene to the audience since it often gives the feeling of reality with a shaky effect and the character's subjective point of view. In *Clair Obscur*, we follow Şehnaz's face and body in a fast rhythm with both the rapid movements of the handheld camera and the jump-cuts as she gets prepared to get to the hospital in the morning. Conversely, in the evening at home, as she sits on the sofa in front of the computer to speak virtually to Cem, with the tracking shot, the camera slowly moves in closer to her. The rhythm of the camera movements seems to mirror the rhythm of Şehnaz, adapting to her speed or slowness, thereby conveying her mood to the audience.

The subjective points of view of the main characters are also effectively portrayed through scenes where they recall past memories or experience nightmares. These sequences, visible only to the audience and not to the secondary characters in the film, bring the characters' mental states to the forefront. Elmas's recollection of the stormy night when her husband and mother-in-law died is conveyed to us through flashbacks, providing insight into her perception of her experience. The eye-shaped pendant that Elmas holds during a therapy session is connected to a nightmare scene where she holds the same eye in her hand through a match-cut. Similarly, during a scene where Şehnaz is sleeping, an extreme close-up shot of her eye fills the frame before transitioning to her nightmare with a simple-cut. In her nightmare, she perceives a man approaching her while she lies in bed. Through this nightmare, we are guided to understand her inner complexity.

### **The woman gaze through mise-en-scène instruments**

Mise-en-scène seems another significant contributor to the construction of meaning via the woman gaze. In *Clair Obscur* lighting reveals the feelings of the women characters. Light and dark are embodied in the name of the movie. The French title for the film is *Clair Obscur*, meaning "light-dark"; and the Turkish title is *Tereddüt*, means "hesitancy" and gives the feeling of Şehnaz. The title *Clair Obscur* highlights the light and dark sides of both women. While Elmas embodies light and openness with her childhood and innocence, she experiences darkness with her terrible experiences. While Şehnaz embodies light by being educated, open-minded, and modern, she experiences darkness due to her position in her marriage. The transition between light and dark becomes visible with sea waves. The film begins with images shot by the underwater camera, positioned under the dark sea, as it slowly rises from the dark to the top of the waves in the daylight. As the camera rises above the water, water drops are felt on the screen reminding us that the film is not lavender and roses, calling us to reality.

The use of sound and music has the effect of bringing the feelings of the women characters to the fore. Şehnaz's pensive mood is accompanied by the powerful sound of the waves hitting the shore. In the scene where Elmas holds the hand of and gets strength from her friend who comes to visit her after the therapy session, or in the scenes where Şehnaz seems to be carrying the burden of Elmas in addition to her own, a sad piano music that provides continuity and sometimes tense music is heard as non-diegetic sounds.

Space and setting also reveal the feelings of the characters. The places and characters with which Elmas is related are dark and gloomy. She spends her days shuttling between the apartment where she lives and the opposite apartment that belongs to her mother-in-law. The fact she is responsible for the cleaning and cooking of both houses and the care of her mother-in-law, and is forced to meet her husband's sexual desires at night shows the size of the weight she is under. On the other hand, it is understood that the two-story house in Istanbul where Şehnaz lives with Cem, belongs to the upper-income group in many respects. The spaciousness, glossy furniture, fireplace, interior design with special local lighting, liquor corner, and library emphasize that Şehnaz and Cem live in a luxurious house. Their risotto and wine dinners and occasional house parties highlight their middle-class urban lifestyle. The space, objects, decor, and characters associated with Şehnaz appear more refreshing and bright compared to Elmas's dark world. However, Şehnaz experiences her own darkness behind closed doors. Selime Büyükgöze (2017, p. 19, 23) examines the dichotomy of home and the outside world in *Clair Obscur* within the context of gendered spaces. For both characters, the home represents not only a symbolic space of entrapment but also a place where they resist and fight for survival. Conversely, the outside world holds liberating and transformative qualities for both women. In this way, the gendering of spaces diverges from conventional cinema.

The waves that support Şehnaz's pensive mood also form a part of the setting and a continuity element between most scenes. Waves turn into motif of the film that manifest in different forms. Either they cover the whole frame, or we see them accompanying

Şehnaz's thoughtful mood, creating the impression of helping her to measure and mature her thoughts and to face herself. Waves also exist in Şehnaz's nightmare by surging into the entire apartment and squirting from the windows and balconies. Büyükgöze (2017, p. 22) describes the waves in *Clair Obscur* as a pivotal image symbolizing fear, desire, passion, and longings for both Şehnaz and Elmas.

Just as the waves turn into a symbol, the storm becomes an indicator for Elmas of the night her husband and mother-in-law died. While the bedroom curtain flies in the room at night of the storm, Elmas sits in the dark praying that her husband won't touch her, she quickly stands up to close the window with the sound of the storm. She remembers what happened that night in the therapy session by recalling the storm and contributing to her treatment. The storm can be thought of as a metaphor chosen to point out the magnitude of the violence women experience behind closed doors. Elements such as recurring symbols and motifs are more important than the role in certain scenes, Andrew M. Butler (2005, p. 32) states. Elmas' anger, sadness, fear, and resentment come to the fore through the objects used in the therapy sessions. The eye-shaped pendant that Elmas holds in her hand and other objects such as a red pen, watch, boxes, thorny rose and cardigan she chooses in the room are the supporting accessories when she is reviving her nightmare.

The moods and qualities, contrasts, conflicts, and light and dark sides of Elmas and Şehnaz reveal themselves also with their costumes and make-up, as well as the place and decor they are associated with. The information that Elmas comes from a conservative family is conveyed with her long closed coat and headscarf. In one scene, her husband brings her an unobtrusive dark khaki overcoat that is a few sizes big for her, and Elmas has to climb onto a stool to be able to put on the coat and look in the mirror. This overcoat is like a symbol bringing to mind that her husband gives Elmas heaviness that she cannot bear for her age, and that embodies the weight of Elmas's emotions. Şehnaz, on the other hand, is dressed in casual, comfortable, and stylish clothes at the hospital where she works as a psychiatrist in the same town. When she goes to see her husband in Istanbul, she prefers more assertive costumes. She has the appearance of an attractive and modern urban woman with the low-cut white blouse, red lipstick, dark eyeshades, and high heels she wears while attending the business party of her husband.

Other properties related to the mise-en-scène that bring the feelings of the women characters into focus are the mimics, body movements, and performances. In her acting, Ecem Uzun reveals both the childlike feelings that refer to the bright side of Elmas and the anger feelings that make up the dark side of the character. Uzun, who has acting experience in front of the camera since her childhood and besides still has the appearance of a small child despite her age (24 when the film was shot), was chosen for this role, resulting in a good acting performance in Elmas character. Childish feelings are observed when Elmas gamifies the housework as well as her mimics. The way she dances with the cleaning staff plays with a coin on the bed sheet she spreads, uses cigarettes and breathing by the sea as secret escape points, evokes her innocent and childlike side and that she is actually a child. When her real age is revealed by a bone age test to be under

18, her lack of criminal capacity is also proved, and can no longer be held responsible for the murder of her husband and mother-in-law.

### ***The woman gaze through thematic instruments***

The concept of the woman gaze assumes partially or significantly challenging the male narrative, questioning mainstream cinema codes rather than entirely opposing them as it is in the independent cinema, and highlighting the woman's narrative. Although *Clair Obscur* does not very much violate the mainstream cinematic language with its formal elements, its focus on issues women face in society and the detailed depiction of these problems is unsettling and disrupts the audience's sense of pleasure.

The film emphasizes the issue of child and forced marriage which is depicted in all its realities. Elmas is a girl who was married off when she was a child. This crime committed against her by taking away her childhood rights creates traumatic effects on her. Disturbing details regarding the themes of child labor exploitation and being forced into sexual intercourse, in terms of Elmas being forced to do housework and elderly care, are shown in the film with close and extreme close-ups. The issue of early and forced marriage, as a cultural problem, is also in focus in *Mustang* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015), which was filmed in the same years as *Clair Obscur*. The film focuses on the sisters who were forced to marry at early ages and its traumatic effects.

*Clair Obscur* draws attention to the fact that male violence does not discriminate against class or culture and that this is a social problem, through Şehnaz's marriage. Her husband Cem, who is addicted to porn movies, causes Şehnaz to feel inadequacy and unhappiness, causing her to question their relationship. According to Monique Wittig (1980), pornographic discourse is a part of the violence strategies applied to women; as well as being humiliating and degrading, it is also a crime against the humanity of women (Wittig, 1980, p. 106). Şehnaz wants to end the relationship, but Cem does not hesitate to use physical violence to prevent her from leaving. This prolonged violence until the early hours is depicted using a jump-cut technique; shortcuts of the night's violence are edited and seen one after another. According to Murat Toprak (2013, p. 88-90), the jump-cut technique, which gives the impression of missing segments of time, can be used to create a Brechtian alienation effect, drawing the audience's attention more to the content than the film technique. These jumps can disrupt the viewer's perception of time and space, reminding them they are watching a film, and causing discomfort. Ustaoglu may have employed jump-cuts in the scenes depicting violence against Şehnaz specifically to focus the audience's attention on the theme of violence itself.

The woman gaze involves the woman subjectivity which is related to the reproduction and transformation of women's images in cinema. Women should share their disturbing, real, and negative experiences, as well as their positive, powerful, liberating, combative, pleasure-based, and solidarity-oriented experiences. When examining theorists' definitions of woman subjectivity, several prominent aspects of women characters emerge. They are active agents and play active roles in the narrative, interacting with the

social reality. Their passion, attachment to life, curiosity for knowledge and learning, efforts to define life and themselves, transformation of stereotyped woman identities, and the ability to make decisions about their lives are highlighted features (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 184; Smelik, 1998, p. 32).

In *Clair Obscur*, Şehnaz is noteworthy for not accepting and conforming to patriarchal norms as they are and for resisting by attempting to change reality. She is depicted as a character with willpower and agency. By listening to Elmas's problems in depth, Şehnaz provides psychological support and prevents her from going to prison. By causing a change in another person's life, she becomes an active subject. She tries to identify the issues in her own marriage and demonstrates the will to end the relationship, thus taking an active role in her own life as well. Moreover, by following her desires, she begins another relationship that makes her feel more hopeful. As noted in academic studies analyzing the film *Clair Obscur*, the women characters take action, influencing the narrative, and are depicted as active subjects who defend their lives within the story (Büyükgöze, 2017, p. 23; Ceyhan & Sancar, 2019, p. 36).

Another prominent element in the construction of meaning by the woman gaze is the relationship between women. Kate Ince (2017, p. 44) notes that a fundamental common characteristic of independent or auteur films directed by women is the focus on "female intersubjectivity", specifically the relationships between women. In her analysis of *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), Brenda Cooper (2000, p. 281-283) underlines the significance of featuring women protagonists and themes centered around women, supportive women friendships and solidarity, relationships and women activities within the frame of woman gaze concept. In a review of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019, Céline Sciamma), Veronica Esposito (2021) argues that the woman gaze follows the characters as they "begin to comprehend how to see themselves and each other".

Baran Barış (2019) highlights that *Clair Obscur* offers an alternative to traditional narrative structures by depicting examples of solidarity between women. The encounters between Elmas and Şehnaz initiate the healing of their respective traumas, marking the beginning of their journey toward freedom (Barış, 2019, p. 547-548). Throughout the film, leveraging the support and advantages provided by their relationship, both women characters transition from their negative situations to more positive ones. Upon being brought to the hospital, Elmas is initially held responsible for the deaths of her husband and mother-in-law. Through the supportive approach of psychiatrist Şehnaz, Elmas begins to express herself verbally and physically. Şehnaz, through Elmas's expressions, uncovers the truth that her age was manipulated to marry her off at a young age, and legally, she was not an adult but a child. While under normal circumstances, Elmas could face severe punishment for the crime of killing her husband and mother-in-law; with Şehnaz's support and influence, she becomes able to overcome this situation with a minor sentence due to her young age or even complete acquittal.

On the other hand, Elmas also serves as a mirror to Şehnaz, enabling her to recognize her own issues. Being sexually exploited, Elmas reminds Şehnaz of a similarity present in her life, although she can't fully define it. Regardless of their social class within the

patriarchal societal structure, men's perspectives on women can bear similarities. Şehnaz realizes that the source of her unhappiness is her husband's addiction to pornography. It is significant from the perspective of the woman gaze as it illustrates how women from different classes and backgrounds can reflect each other through their bodily experiences and similarities.

In her analysis of the film *The Blue Wave* (*Mavi Dalga*, Zeynep Dadak & Merve Kayan, 2013) as a woman narrative, İrem İnceoğlu (2015) argues that the portrayal of relationships between women in all their ordinariness signifies a feminist stance. Young women's sharing experiences together are presented as everyday images, viewed through the woman gaze, with the perspective of the woman character becoming the focal point of the film (İnceoğlu, 2015, p. 89, 92). The depiction of relationships between women and the focus on the moments of ordinary life with its realities and aesthetics in women directors' films are the features deviating from mainstream cinema, and also the prominent features of the woman gaze.

## Conclusion

In the film *Clair Obscur* woman character's gaze constructs meaning concerning the woman subjectivity both with cinematic and thematic instruments drawing a holistic approach. The film deviates from traditional cinematic forms and focuses on unsettling issues for the audience, such as various forms of violence against women in society and their long-term negative effects on them. More importantly, these issues experienced by women in society are depicted from their own viewpoints to the audience. The audience looks at what happens to the woman character from her standpoint. In the film, the meaning constructed by woman gaze and subjectivity at its core is manifested in various forms as a demonstration of the viewpoint of the woman character. The findings obtained in *Clair Obscur* appear to be consistent with the elements identified in previous studies related to the woman gaze (Smelik, 1998; French, 2021; Malone, 2018; Kuhn, 1994; Coles, 2023). The optical/mental viewpoints and feelings of the characters are highlighted using different cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène instruments to foreground their inner worlds, perceptions, and feelings.

*Clair Obscur* employs various techniques such as the over-the-shoulder shot, point-of-view shot, and selective focus to portray the character's optical gaze and subjective viewpoint. For featuring the character's mental viewpoint, specific camera shots, movements, and editing techniques are engaged. Long take shot lets the audience focus its interest enough time on the woman character's feelings and thoughts. Head, choker, shoulder, medium, and extreme close-up shots draw the audience's attention for a closer examination of the character's reactions, facial expressions, body movements, and conflicting feelings and allow them to perceive her mood and state of mind more clearly. Hand-held camera movements; tracking shots, pans-tilts, and jump-cut editing techniques are operated to follow the character's rhythm and mood. The flashback and nightmare transitions such as match-cut or straight-cut, direct us to delve into the



character's mental state and we are guided to understand her inner world and the complexities of her experiences.

It is observed that *mise-en-scène* is also carefully used to emphasize the gaze, inner world, characteristics, and conflicts, intensify the emotion and feelings of the woman character, and strengthen the effects of these feelings on the audience in *Clair Obscur*. Lighting and the transition between light and dark reveal the dominant feeling of the woman character. The use of sound and music; recurring symbols, motifs and objects chosen to be used in the film bring the emotional state of the character to the forefront. Space and setting designs refer to the features and feelings of the character. The moods and qualities of the women characters reveal themselves also with their costumes and make-up, as well as the place, decor and colors they are associated with. Above all, mimics, body movements and performances related to the character's acting reveal sharply her feelings and standpoints under specific experiences and problems she faces in her life. Şehnaz, while having the image of an attractive urban modern woman through her make-up and costumes, and residing in a luxuriously decorated home, lives her own darkness behind closed doors. The color of the waves, which mirrors Şehnaz's thoughtful mood that is observed in her detailed mimics, dominates the film. On the other hand, Elmas, who carries the lightness of her childhood, shuttles between two apartment flats where she is exploited by her husband and mother-in-law and is compelled to wear clothes that feel burdensome to her. Her expressions and acting performance, which clearly convey both her childlike feelings and anger, reinforce her mood in the film.

When examining the thematic elements that reveal the woman gaze in the film, it centers on disturbing issues such as early and forced marriage encompassing multiple forms of violence, sexual and physical violence against women, and the long-term negative effects of these issues. The depiction of women's experiences in society with its realism creates a passionate detachment affect on the audience. The film also emphasizes the resilient, resistant, solidarist, and positive aspects of how women characters cope with these issues. By trying to define themselves and life, women characters become subjective agencies interacting with society. The film also highlights the solidarity of women and women inter-subjectivity as methods used by women characters to cope with the problems. By means of this solidarity and inter-subjectivity, the women characters transition from their initially negative situations to more positive ones, achieving a form of emancipation. From these perspectives, *Clair Obscur* deviates from and presents an alternative to mainstream cinema, embodying a woman gaze through its thematic focus.

Rather than providing a comprehensive definition of the woman gaze, this study identifies the elements that contribute to it. In this context, the woman gaze can be characterized by the following elements: social and individual experiences or issues faced by the central woman character; her methods of coping with these issues depicted from her perspective; her feelings and emotions in response to these experiences conveyed or evoked to the audience by cinematic tools, focus on woman subjectivity; and challenges of traditional cinematic codes by creating distance between the audience and passionate detachment. It should be noted that Ustaoglu's overall cinematic narrative and

standpoint contribute to the definition of the woman gaze concept, particularly in terms of adopting a critical stance toward the issues and experiences women face within the framework of social and patriarchal norms and offering suggestions related to the mechanisms through which women cope with these challenges.

As a result, the film *Clair Obscur*, examined in this study, emerges as an exemplary illustration embodying the characteristics of the woman gaze, reflecting Ustaoglu's intentional deviation from mainstream cinematic norms. In alignment with the theorists' suggestions, it can be stated that the woman gaze cannot be confined within rigid boundaries of definition but rather appears as a concept evolving through detailed visual and auditory analyses of each new film, presenting qualities that are continually open to rediscovery.

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