

Unveiling the Gaze: Power, Identity, and Perception in the
Interdisciplinary Lens

Bakışın Ardındaki Perde: Güç, Kimlik ve Algıda Disiplinlerarası Perspektifler

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Öz

Bu kapsamlı inceleme, bakış kavramının çok yönlü boyutlarına derinlemesine bir yolculuğa çıkarak, farklı bağlamlarda bireysel ve kolektif kimlikler üzerindeki etkilerini inceliyor. Erken çocukluk gelişiminden başlayarak varoluşçuluk, sinematik gerçekler ve edebi analizlere kadar, metin felsefi, psikolojik ve sosyokültürel perspektiflere değiniyor. Bakış kavramının nasıl güç dinamikleriyle iç içe geçtiğini ve kimlik oluşturmada, arzuda ve gerçekliğin inşasında oynadığı rolleri sorguluyor. Lacan'ın içgörülerinden yararlanarak metin, illüzyonları, bütünlük arayışını sinematik eserlere de değinerek ışık tutuyor. Feminist eleştirilerden ve psikanalitik incelemelerden kaynaklanan edebi bakış açıları, bakışın karmaşıklıklarını çözümlerken cinsiyet, fetişizm ve güç ilişkilerine dair konulara değiniyor. Tartışma, toplumsal boyutlara kadar uzanarak, bakışın 'hayali coğrafyalar' ve 'hayali topluluklar' yaratmaya nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu inceliyor; bu bağlamda, Batı'nın egemenliği ve doğuculuğa odaklanıyor. Sonuç bölümü, bakışın evrensel gücünü vurgulayarak, edebiyattaki kutsal algılarla güncel medyadaki yaygın etkisi arasında bağlantılar kuruyor. Genel olarak, bu çalışma, bakışın karmaşıklıkları üzerine derin bir soruşturmayı içeriyor ve insan deneyimleri ile toplumsal yapılar üzerindeki yaygın etkisini ortaya koyuyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bakış, Güç, Kimlik, Algı, İllüzyonlar

Abstract

This article looks into the multifaceted dimensions of the gaze, examining its influence on individual and collective identities across various contexts. From early childhood development and existentialism to cinematic escapades and literary analyses, the text navigates through philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives. It scrutinizes how the gaze intertwines with power dynamics, revealing its roles in identity formation, desire, and the construction of reality. Drawing from Lacanian insights, the text dissects illusions, the pursuit of wholeness, and the cinematic escape from lack. Literary perspectives, including feminist critiques and psychoanalytic examinations, further unravel the complexities of the gaze, touching upon issues of gender, fetishism, and power relations. The discussion extends to communal dimensions, exploring how the gaze contributes to the creation of 'imagined geogra-

phies' and 'imagined communities,' with a focus on Western dominance and orientalism. The concluding reflection underscores the omnipotence of the gaze, tying together divine perceptions in literature and its pervasive influence in contemporary media. Overall, the abstract encapsulates a profound inquiry into the intricacies of the gaze and its pervasive impact on human experiences and societal structures.

Keywords: Gaze, Power, Identity, Perception, Illusions

Introduction

In human beings, the act of seeing, being seen, demonstrating, appearing, and being visible or invisible holds significant meanings according to cultural, philosophical, psychological, and social theories. Each domain underscores that establishing eye contact can serve as a rich source of information and evidence of power, indicative of hierarchical structures in race, class, and gender studies. Around the age of 10 months, babies begin to engage in 'eye contact,' marking the commencement of defining, examining, and interrogating the world, themselves, others, and various power dynamics. The very act of opening or closing eyes within a group becomes a critical area of study, contributing to the social, intellectual, and perceptual construction of reality. Hence, the concept of 'gaze' necessitates an interdisciplinary approach for a comprehensive understanding.

In this article, it is aimed to uncover the power and privilege associated with 'seeing,' getting into its gender, race, class, and psychological implications through illustrative examples. Mastery of the 'look' requires time and dedication, offering insights into self-consciousness, awareness of others, and the subjectivity or objectivity of 'truth'. Even existentialism is influenced by the potency of the gaze, as it reflects upon the existential condition of human beings. The gaze becomes a manifestation of existential angst, serving as a mirror through which individuals confront their own existence and the presence of others. In the gaze, existentialists find a constant reminder of their freedom and responsibility, as well as the inherent absurdity of human existence. Existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre emphasize the significance of the Other's gaze in shaping one's sense of self. The gaze of the Other confronts individuals with their own subjectivity, leading to feelings of vul-

nerability and self-consciousness. This confrontation highlights the existential tension between the desire for autonomy and the awareness of being subjected to the scrutiny of others. Furthermore, the gaze serves as a tool for existentialist exploration of authenticity and inauthenticity. Through the gaze, individuals are compelled to confront the authenticity of their actions and the sincerity of their existence. Existentialists argue that avoiding or manipulating the gaze of others leads to inauthentic living, as it involves denying one's freedom and responsibility in favor of conforming to societal expectations. In this existentialist context, the gaze becomes more than just a social phenomenon; it embodies the existential struggle for self-definition and authenticity in a world fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity. By acknowledging the potency of the gaze, existentialism invites individuals to embrace their freedom, confront their existential anxieties, and strive for authenticity in the face of external scrutiny.

In this article, it will be explained that scrutinizing the power of gaze facilitates a clearer understanding of the examination and construction of reality based on values.

Lacanian Perspectives on Identity, Desire, and Cinematic Escapades

Illusions arise from perceiving the world not as it is, but as it is imposed upon us through our experiences, including social, textual, and interpretive codes. There is a human inclination to view the constructed and imposed reality as whole, whether or not it truly exists. Additionally, individuals possess a strong desire to perceive themselves as complete, a notion Lacan deemed impossible (Lacan, 1977).

According to Heidegger (2008: 236), the notion of 'being whole' warrants scrutiny. He posits, "*We must accordingly ask whether this entity, as something existing, can ever become accessible in its Being-a-whole...Such a lack of totality signifies that there is something still outstanding in one's potentiality-for-Being.*". Lacan's theory supplements this perspective. The absence of wholeness stems from separation, leading to a sense of loss and an enduring yearning for the hunger of connected wholeness. This framework proves insightful when applied to the spectator experience in films, literature, or other artistic works, utilizing Lacan's mirror stage and the gaze. The absence of wholeness necessitates iden-

tification with 'others,' such as characters in novels, films, or artworks. Both theories underscore that 'gazing' is a fundamental element in self-construction. Lacan's rational deduction reveals that the purported 'lost' or 'lacking' part could not have truly been lost or lacking, as the subject was unaware of its existence beforehand. This implies that individuals, by internally and externally gazing at others, attempt to fill their inner emptiness and insatiable desires.

Lacan (2001: 1289) further explores the concept of impossible objectivity, stating, *"This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the image of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy, the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations."* The term 'jealousy' holds significance in understanding the impact of the 'other' on the self. In contrast, Heidegger articulates identity in relation to others, employing terms like 'against.' He asserts, 'Characterization does not start by marking out and isolating the 'I' so that one must then seek some way of getting over the Others from this isolated subject? By 'Others,' we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the 'I' stands out.' (Heidegger, 2008, p. 154). If the act of 'gaze' contributes to identity formation and is associated with the desire to be with the other, a yearning to be wholly different, or even a reduction in identification with subjects, the importance and power of gaze emerge as profoundly valuable considerations.

The cinematic experience offers an escape from the sense of lack, providing a realm of imaginary pleasure. Despite the illusory and visual nature of screen images, it enables individuals to envision themselves with a flawless symbolic identity. As spectators gaze into the screen, akin to the Lacanian 'mirror,' a sense of control over the images displayed is evoked. Conversely, anti-hero films present an opportunity to construct an identity by distancing the image from oneself through a process of 'otherizing.'

The enjoyment of illusion through gazing is a familiar aspect of cinema. However, numerous examples in film look into the problem of 'gaze' as a central theme. The roles or functions of gaze, coupled with its association with desire, can be illustrated through a simple example: *"Adam is born. Adam is alone (lonely). Eve is born. Adam desires Eve. Eve desires fruit."* (Tallack, 1987,

p.131). To convey the gaze is a double-sided term; without this duality, it has the potential to give rise to identity problems. James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' serves as a poignant and lucid example for understanding members of the black community. Baldwin's characters grapple with the need to look discreetly, finding themselves subjected to the gaze. Moreover, society, including Sonny's own family, neglects to acknowledge his success, effectively punishing him. The imperative of self-reflection from others is fundamental for selfhood. When people refuse to see him, Sonny becomes an invisible man and a stranger to himself. The absence of gaze renders him like a ghost, patiently awaiting recognition. Sonny's suffering emanates from the lack of the Other's gaze, casting his identity into ambiguity.

Literary Perspectives on Power, Fetishism, and Identity

From Plato's 'cave allegory' to contemporary theorists, the study of the importance and power of the gaze on one hand, and the enigmatic and endlessly deciphered nature of the gaze on the other hand, has been explored extensively. Different perspectives, characterized by limited, unclear, motivated, or unmotivated gazes, have given rise to diverse theories and approaches. For instance, psychoanalytic theory, including Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, examines the significance of the gaze in understanding unconscious desires and identity formation. Feminist theory, as exemplified by Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," critiques the power dynamics inherent in the gaze, particularly through the lens of cinema studies. Postcolonial theory analyzes the gaze in relation to colonial power dynamics and the representation of colonized peoples, as seen in Edward Said's work on "Orientalism." Queer theory challenges normative notions of desire and subjectivity in relation to the gaze, as explored by Judith Butler's concept of "performativity." Critical race theory delves into racialization and the construction of racial identities through the gaze, as evidenced in Frantz Fanon's examination of the colonial gaze in "Black Skin, White Masks." Marxist theory considers the gaze within the context of economic power structures and class struggle, exploring how it is influenced by capitalist systems of production and consumption. These diverse theories and approaches offer unique insights into the complex interplay between the gaze, power dynamics, fetishism, and identity within literature and cultural discourse. Often, these perspectives regard each other with

paranoid eyes. The power of the gaze is frequently utilized as a threat, with feminist theory raising questions about a potential 'female gaze,' paradoxically examined within the context of male gaze dominance. *"In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female binary. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly."* (Mulvey, 2006, pp. 982-989). Female sexuality and power are perceived as non-natural, prompting Helene Cixous to choose a mythical character rather than creating a new, powerful figure who dares to gaze at men.

While Helene Cixous calls upon women to write boldly and exuberantly in 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' she utilizes a mythical image, describing hair made of serpents with eyes that can grasp anything like a rope. The head can perceive through the snakes' eyes, even from behind, capturing anyone desired. Her gaze, mere and powerful, has the potential to petrify onlookers. Cixous emphasizes, *"...Let us not be trapped by an analysis still encumbered with the old automatisms. It's not to be feared that language conceals an invincible adversary because it's the language of me..."* (Cixous, 1976, p. 887). The irony lies in the invitation and encouragement for women to write with a mythical figure that can easily be associated with the castration anxiety of males.

The first limitation lies in arousing all Freudian fears in men by using a threatening figure to mock them, while the second involves constructing feminism entirely around women's bodies. Perhaps unconsciously, Cixous appears to have viewed her gender through a 'male gaze.' Regrettably, her excessive focus on the female body gives rise to another form of fetishistic approach.

Freud outlines the function of a fetish, stating, *"It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. It also saves the fetishistic from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects."* (Freud, 2009, p. 24). According to Freud's theory, Cixous similarly achieves a triumph over men and protection against them through fetishism. This serves as a compelling example of the usage of 'gaze,' illustrating how opposing genders can claim their ideas in similar ways, effectively blinding each other to facts. Even if individuals are confident

in their intentions, the meaning multiplies in accordance with the act of gazing.

An additional literary example arises in the works of Henry James, a male writer with benevolent intentions who often creates naive, kind, and innocent heroines. 'As a male and as a writer, he was free to romanticize the characteristics prescribed for the oppressed sex and throw them into relief with a few restrictions of his own...' (Tallack, 1987, p. 78). In projecting his own dilemmas and weaknesses onto female characters, James inadvertently engages in a male gaze cliché, possibly viewed as 'fetishistic' according to Laura Mulvey's film theory approach, which I apply to literature characters. Mulvey might analyze these characters as exemplifying voyeuristic modes of the male gaze, related to patriarchy, confining women to passive objects of desire. Dreiser's "Sister Carrie", for instance, embodies the codes of the 'bad woman,' and Mulvey would likely interpret it as a voyeuristic mode of the male gaze, associating it with patriarchy (Dreiser, 1976). Her emphasis on 'looked-at-ness' aligns closely with Berger's statement, "*Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.*" (Berger, 2008). This type of male gaze reduces women to passive objects of desire. Although I've attempted to illustrate the male gaze through literary texts, Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema reinforces the male viewer's identification with the gaze of the camera and the male hero, relegating female characters to the role of objects to be looked at.

It is also worth noting that Michel Foucault's concept of the panoptic gaze shares similarities with Mulvey's perception of how men look at women, how women look at themselves, and how women look at other women. The prohibition of the eye and its abnormal influence on human psychology serve as a common foundation. This can entail being followed, observed, becoming one's own police, internalizing self-control, and living with uncertainty about being watched. Foucault's perspective on the power of the gaze proves highly effective across various social contexts. He contends that 'panoptic gaze has a constitutive impact upon the subjectivity of the individuals in its field of view: "The techniques of disciplinary power (of the construction of the subject) are conceived as capable of 'materially penetrating' the body in depth without depending on the mediation of the subject's own representations..." (Krips,

2010, pp. 91-102). People become paranoid about being followed at any time by anyone, essentially referring to being seen without seeing the observer. This creates feelings of fatalism, weakness, paranoia, and insecurity. Michel Foucault associates the 'inspecting gaze' with power rather than gender, race, etc. The power of the gaze provides the observer with unequal and undignified information about others, turning people into innocent victims of observers, voyeurs, and followers. Social construction falls under the control of this uncontrollable gaze. Those with the ability to gaze possess power.

Even a man wielding photographic apparatuses or a camera can instill a sense of threat, akin to someone with a knife, gun, or weapon. 'Loading' or 'shooting' someone's image becomes a form of violation. While photographers or cameramen observe and gather information through their images, individuals being observed become passive objects. The gaze imparts a sense of probing, penetrating, and control by an external observer. This can lead to deformation, distortion, and, consequently, impact the workings of the mind system, potentially bringing about change.

For instance, Walter Benjamin posits that not only artworks but also everyday objects impose various ideas upon us, ultimately leading to a tactile exchange. Benjamin further emphasizes the distinction between acting on the stage and in front of the camera, highlighting the estrangement felt by film actors in the face of the apparatus, akin to the estrangement before one's appearance in a mirror (Benjamin, 2006, p. 261). If a tool can wield such power due to its relationship with 'seeing,' Foucault's understanding of the power of the eye and how it becomes a control mechanism becomes clearer. This phenomenon is reminiscent of modern tourists who, rather than directly observing landscapes, museums, or works of art, capture images through photographs and videos, transforming what they see into papers, films, and internet content. This activity effectively turns all visual items into their own material and property.

The Power Dynamics of Imagined Geographies and Media in Shaping Identities

After attempting to illuminate how individuals are structured by the gaze of themselves and others, perhaps it is time to extend this understanding to

communities. For instance, Benedict Anderson argues that those in power have the ability to define others, thereby creating 'imagined geographies' and 'imagined communities.' (Anderson, 2016). This shift in perception ironically transforms the concept of 'imagined communities,' even within those very communities themselves.

The power of the white gaze, with its cultural dominance, successfully establishes a category of differences—the category of 'others'—through distinctions of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and class. The term "white gaze" refers to the perspective or viewpoint of individuals who belong to or identify with white-dominated cultures or societies. It represents the cultural dominance and privilege associated with whiteness, through which distinctions of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and class are established. The concept of the "white gaze" emerges as a critical lens in understanding the hegemonic influence of the West over the East within the complex tapestry of global power dynamics. Originating from colonial legacies and perpetuated through cultural, economic, and political mechanisms, this gaze imposes Western perspectives onto non-Western societies, shaping narratives, perceptions, and power dynamics. Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism' serves as an apt example of how dominant powers can assign names and descriptions based on their assumptions, imagination, benefits, and self-definitions. Said contends that there is no real line dividing the world into Orient and Occident. This unjust double gaze perceives the Orient as 'other'—impolite, irrational, esoteric, ignorant, shallow, etc. (Said, 2003). Such a logic of gaze perpetuates 'us and them' discrimination, leading to the objectification of the Orient, akin to Laura Mulvey's portrayal of passive females. Furthermore, it may evoke castration anxiety by positioning the Orient as both passive and barbarous, enigmatic, unknown, and a source of visual pleasure. Fundamentally, the white gaze operates as a mechanism of control and domination, reinforcing notions of Western superiority while exoticizing the East as the "other." Through centuries of colonialism and imperialism, Western powers have constructed a narrative of cultural and moral superiority, positioning themselves as the arbiters of progress and civilization. This narrative not only justifies colonial exploitation but also shapes Western perceptions of the East as backward, primitive, or in need of Western intervention. It is evident that in imagined geographies,

individuals may perceive themselves as inferior, underdeveloped, low, and weak due to the labels and observations placed upon them. This suggests that one group has the power to produce values for another group regarding 'who they are' and 'how they should be.' This gaze manifests in various forms of cultural production, from literature and art to media and academia, where Western representations of the East often exoticize, stereotype, or marginalize non-Western voices and experiences. These representations not only distort the reality of life in the East but also reinforce hierarchies of power that privilege Western perspectives and interests. The white gaze is deeply entwined with structures of economic and political dominance, as Western nations and institutions wield significant influence over the economies, governments, and societies of the East. Through processes of globalization, neoliberal capitalism, and development aid, Western powers extend their reach into every corner of the globe, shaping policies, markets, and social norms to align with Western interests. In this manner, the Western power gaze creates figures that are deemed inaccessible for Orientals. 'To become figurable – that is to say, visible in the first place, accessible to our imaginations – the classes have to be able to become in some sense characters in their own right.' (Jameson, 2007, p. 51). This dynamic becomes much more intricate and problematic as it involves the sudden classification as the 'other,' creating a challenging positioning for both oneself and others.

In this article, it is attempted to apply psychoanalytic concepts to orientalism, Homi Bhabha employs a similar approach in 'Of Mimicry and Man', formulating his perspective as 'almost the same but not quite' becoming 'almost the same but not white' (Bhabha, 1997). Bhabha suggests that colonized people, in their resistance to colonizers, harbor a desire to both resist the authority and emulate it as an ideal, powerful, and active figure, resulting in the creation of hybrid, cross-cultural, intermediate identities. This ambivalence emerges from the motion between unequal gazes. Third cinema emerges as a form of resistance against the power of being looked at. For instance, Kaplan asserts that 'easing the pain of having had to endure the imperial gaze is most needed for those whose bodies were damaged by the camera.' (Kaplan, 1997, p. 222). Certainly, viewing the world from the top of a skyscraper versus from the basement does not offer the same perspectives, powers, identities, and

logic. There are no definitive facts regarding 'other,' 'us,' or 'them,' only interpretations.

It appears that individuals, viewed as passive subjects under the gaze of powerful eyes, are not truly stable. Bhabha reveals the exchange of values through the assessment of human beings and the act of mutually gazing at each other, transvaluing cultural differences. Changes in one aspect of the gaze can elicit counter-actions in other facets of the gaze. The power of the gaze can be intricately linked to knowledge and control mechanisms. Those with intense, large, forceful, penetrating, and operative eyes exert more power, while others become diminished, inconsequential, stranger, weird, and abnormal. The observed individuals must adapt more in accordance with the powerful gaze.

Today, one of the most crucial and potent gazes is held by the media. A notable example is depicted in the film 'The Man Who Fell to Earth', directed by Nicolas Roeg and released in 1976, where David Bowie's character watches fifty-seven television screens simultaneously. This underscores the human desire to see more, reflecting an insatiable hunger for incredible power. As a technological device, the media possesses the capability to observe a multitude of things and selectively present them. It wields the power to render something visible or invisible, thereby having the authority to summon into being or eradicate, destroy, and abolish. In this way, the white gaze perpetuates a cycle of hegemony, where Western dominance over the East is not only maintained but also reproduced and normalized through systems of power and privilege. To challenge the white gaze and its hegemonic effects, it is essential to center non-Western voices, perspectives, and experiences, actively dismantling the structures of power that uphold Western supremacy. Only through this can a more equitable and just world be forged, where the East is respected and recognized on its own terms, free from subjugation to the whims of the West.

The capacity for 'seeing' has historically evolved into apparatuses, strategies, and systems of control, contingent upon the power of the gaze. This gaze power seeks to stabilize 'the other,' albeit often in an oppressive manner. The 'look' generates ambivalence within individuals and societies, encompassing

aspects of desire, admiration, and mimicry on one hand, and violence, antagonism, and aggression on the other. While the metagnostic power of gaze remains relatively unknown and insufficiently explored, the dominance and influence of the power aspect are evident, and this ability grants Him immense power. In Tolstoy's poignant tale, 'God Sees the Truth, But Waits,' we are prompted to contemplate the nature of divine perception – whether God merely observes through a neutral gaze or waits purposefully, perhaps even aligning with the complexities of the male or imperial gaze. Can you imagine a blind God? In Tolstoy's tale, the question arises whether God is truly waiting or simply observing through a male gaze or imperial gaze. However, it is reasonable to conclude that He is not looking through a female gaze and should not wait any longer!

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the gaze traverses vast interdisciplinary terrain, unveiling its profound implications for power dynamics, identity formation, and perception across diverse contexts. From philosophical inquiries into existential angst to psychoanalytic examinations of desire and Lacanian insights into illusions, the gaze emerges as a potent force shaping human experiences and societal structures.

Lacan's theory sheds light on the pursuit of wholeness and the existential struggle for authenticity, revealing how individuals navigate their sense of self in relation to others through the gaze. Cinematic escapades provide a platform for both illusion and identity construction, offering spectators a glimpse into their desires and fragmented selves. Literary perspectives, including feminist critiques and psychoanalytic analyses, expose the intricate power dynamics inherent in the gaze, from fetishism to voyeurism.

Moreover, the gaze extends its reach into communal dimensions, contributing to the creation of imagined geographies and communities. The concept of the white gaze exemplifies Western dominance and orientalism, perpetuating narratives of superiority and inferiority. Through systems of control and representation, the gaze becomes a mechanism of oppression, relegating certain groups to the margins of society.

In contemporary times, the media wields a formidable gaze, shaping perceptions and realities on a global scale. Yet, amidst the complexities of power and privilege, there exists the potential for resistance and transformation. By centering non-Western voices and challenging hegemonic structures, we can strive towards a more equitable world where diverse perspectives are valued and respected.

Ultimately, the gaze remains a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing both admiration and aggression, desire and violence. Its omnipotence invites reflection on divine perceptions and the nature of observation itself. As Tolstoy's tale suggests, perhaps it is time to reconsider whose gaze holds sway and whose voices are heard, for in the act of seeing lies the power to shape realities and define identities.

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