

Tracing The Cinematic Female Gaze Through Textual Film Analysis of Something Useful (2017)

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İşe Yarar Bir Şey (2017) Filminde Filmsel Metin Analizi ile Sinematik Dişil Nazarın İzini Sürmek

ABSTRACT

It is essential to investigate what constitutes the cinematic female gaze to discuss the potential differentiation in films directed by female directors from traditional cinema. The concept of the female gaze, frequently brought to the forefront in recent years, remains a subject of ongoing academic research. This study aims to contribute to the definition of the cinematic female gaze by examining how it is constructed in cinema. For this purpose, the film *Something Useful* (2017) directed by Pelin Esmer, was selected and analyzed using the textual film analysis method. This method distinguishes the film text from a written text and focuses on how structural, formal, visual, and auditory details such as camera movements, shooting plans, editing, lighting, sound, space, and setting construct meaning together with thematic and conceptual content. According to the findings, the look, sound, perspective, emotions, thoughts, feelings, and inner state of the female character in *Something Useful*, briefly the qualities that nourish her subjectivity—are conveyed to the audience or are made to be felt by the audience, through various cinematographic, editing, and mise-en-scène tools. The subjectivity of woman character is also thematically emphasized by her interaction with social life, relationships between women and, a curiosity to understand and define life. The film diverges from mainstream cinema codes by being process-oriented and having a passionate detachment effect by specific features and shooting plans. When these features are considered along with other studies in the literature, it becomes possible to propose a potential definition for constructing the cinematic female gaze.

Keywords: Cinematic Female Gaze, *Something Useful*, Pelin Esmer, Feminist Cinema, Woman Perspective, Woman Look

ÖZ

Kadın yönetmenlerin çektikleri filmlerde geleneksel sinemadan olası bir farklılaşmadan söz edebilmek için sinematik dişil nazarın ne olduğunu araştırmak gerekir. Son yıllarda sıkça gündeme gelen dişil nazar kavramı halen akademiye araştırılan bir konu olmaya devam etmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı sinemada dişil nazarın nasıl inşa edildiğini inceleyerek sinematik dişil nazar kavramının tanımına katkı sunmaktır. Bu amaçla, Pelin Esmer tarafından yönetilen *İşe Yarar Bir Şey* (2017) filmi seçilerek filmsel metin analizi metodu ile analiz edilmiştir. Bu metod film metnini, yazılı bir metinden ayrı tutar ve kamera hareketleri, çekim planları, kurgu, ışık, ses, mekân, dekor gibi yapısal, biçimsel, görsel ve işitsel detayların tematik ve kavramsal içerik ile beraber nasıl anlam inşa ettiğine odaklanır. Elde edilen bulgulara göre, *İşe Yarar Bir Şey* filminde kadın karakterin bakışı, bakış açısı, duygu, düşünce ve hisleri, içsel ruh hali, kısaca onun öznelliğini besleyen nitelikler, çeşitli sinematografi, kurgu ve mizansen araçları ile seyirciye gösterilmiş veya seyircinin bunları hissetmesi sağlanmıştır. Filmde kadın karakterin öznelliği kadınlar arası ilişkiler, kadının yaşamı anlama ve tanımlama merakı ve sosyal yaşam ile etkileşim içinde olması ile tematik olarak da vurgulanmıştır. Film seyircinin yaşadığı hazzı kesintiye uğratan niteliklere ve çekim planlarına sahip ve süreç odaklı bir film olması ile ana akım sinema kodlarından farklılaşmıştır. Bu özellikler alanyazında yapılmış diğer çalışmalar ile beraber ele alındığında, sinematik dişil nazarın inşası için olası bir tanım ortaya koymak mümkün hale gelir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sinematik Dişil Nazar, *İşe Yarar Bir Şey*, Pelin Esmer, Feminist Sinema, Kadın Bakış Açısı, Kadın Bakışı

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Introduction

The female gaze is a wide-ranging concept that can show up in various art fields such as photography, music, literature, theater, dance, cinema, painting, sculpture or digital arts. It refers to the perspective of women in art creation as well as the representation of women having agencies (Raamanujan, 2023). However, the manifestation of the female gaze varies across different art forms, depending on their technical characteristics. The cinematic female gaze can be understood as the way the female gaze is expressed within the art of cinema and the specific technical elements it includes. It refers to explanations developed regarding what distinguishes films directed by women. Although the female gaze concept has not yet been fully defined in the academy, examinations by theorists and writers highlight certain specific elements.

In her theory of the male gaze, Mulvey (1975) argues that in classical cinema, the woman is constructed as an object to be looked at and an image of spectacle, while the man is the bearer of the gaze. According to her, mainstream cinema involves scopophilic and voyeuristic acts. Scopophilia is used to express the erotic pleasure derived from curiously looking at other people as objects. According to Mulvey, this kind of gaze in cinema belongs exclusively to the male character or the audience that identifies with the male character. The male, as the bearer of the gaze and power, directs his gaze at the female character, who is a spectacle. As a result, the female character is objectified and turned into a spectacle on three levels: by the camera (male director), the male character, and the audience (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). Subjects such as sex, ego, logic, action, pleasure, and goal/end-orientedness are foregrounded in mainstream films (Ayala, n.d.).

The female gaze concept does not seem to be the exact opposite of the male gaze concept developed decades ago by Mulvey. It's not about asserting female dominance on screen, nor does it mean that we get to objectify men in reverse, as the male gaze does for female characters. And it doesn't focus on action (Forster, 2018; Ayala, n.d.). Cinematographer Ashley Connor offered the observation that "the male gaze seeks to devour and control, and the female gaze is more a frame of mind, where approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful" (Telfer, 2018).

This study aims to contribute to the definition and clarification of the cinematic female gaze more distinctly. It examines the elements that constitute the female gaze and how these elements are cinematically expressed. To achieve this, the film *Something Useful* (2017) by Pelin Esmer, a female director in Turkish cinema, has been analyzed cinematically to identify the elements that contribute to the concept of the female gaze. This study is significant in its

attempt to elucidate the female gaze through cinematic analysis. While much of the research in the field of women's cinema has been thematic, a detailed cinematic analysis is crucial in revealing certain indicators.

Literature Review

The early works of feminist cinema criticize the use of exaggerated, distorted, and stereotypical images of women in mainstream entertainment-oriented films, which serve as a means of escaping social realities. According to these critiques, traditional cinema reduces women to objects of pleasure, and represents them in unrealistic forms (Rosen, 1973, p. 134-352; Haskell, 1974, p. 25-40; Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). While critiquing these mainstream films, theorists also sought a new cinema approach through discussions of what feminist film is or should be.

Theorists such as Mulvey (1975, p. 7-17), Johnston (1999, p. 36), and Kuhn (1982, p. 157) consider feminist cinema in the context of a counter-cinema and believe that it should be alternative or different from traditional cinema patterns. According to this approach, the creation of feminist cinema should either destroy classical cinematic codes and reconstruct them with new forms of desire, or it should be a two-way process between entertainment cinema and political cinema. In the context of a critical stance towards the codes of traditional cinema, the unsettling of the audience through various techniques comes to the fore. However, theorists such as Kaplan (2001, p. 197) and Smelik (1998, p. 2) argue that feminist film practice should be developed from within mainstream cinema, rather than as a counter-strategy, suggesting that feminist cinema can be more effective through the use of traditional cinematic methods. Within the scope of feminist cinema, themes such as female pleasure and subjectivity (Zinn & Stanley, 2012; Ince, 2017), the female voice and experience (Silverman, 1990; De Lauretis, 1984), as well as motherhood and sisterhood (Kaplan, 2001) have been focal points of studies.

In the context of feminist cinema studies within Turkish cinema, discussions have focused on what constitutes women's films and whether the films of female directors in Turkish cinema can be classified as women's films. Öztürk (2004, p. 12), who studies women directors in Turkey, defines women's films as "films that emerge from women's experiences, focus on female characters or women's issues, break or even deconstruct the male discourse to a greater or lesser extent, or emphasize the feminine discourse in some way." From Öztürk's perspective, rather than directly opposing the mainstream, what comes to the forefront is the partial deconstruction of these codes and the emphasis on the feminine within mainstream cinematic structures.

Tanrıöver (2016, p. 10-13) notes that, based on her qualitative analysis of films made by women directors in

Turkish cinema since the 2000s, half of the films can be qualified as 'women films' focusing on women's issues or challenging the traditional representations, while the other half remain within the conventions of popular or art house cinema and the reason for this is mostly due to the market forces. Women's films in Turkish cinema have distinct characteristics compared to those of male filmmakers, such as the presence of a central female protagonist who is an active character in the story, representations that deviate from traditional gender stereotypes, and themes or narratives related to gender issues. According to Tanrıöver (2016, p. 13), women directors have contributed significantly to the development of new Turkish cinema over the past decade.

According to Sönmez and Satıcı (2019, p. 13-14) and Yaşartürk (2018, p. 524-525), the established and accepted gender stereotypes and images of female characters in the films of women directors in Turkish cinema after 2000 have begun to change and differentiate. Many sociological issues related to women such as migration, poverty, labor, gender, identity, and the realities experienced by women in society have become visible. Women have been addressed from different perspectives such as the body, space, motherhood, sexual experiences, sisterhood, and women's solidarity, with women contributing to the development of feminine subjectivity through their interventions in life.

In Turkish cinema after the 2010s, some authors emphasize that women directors began working within the framework of feminist film theory, producing narratives that align with feminist storytelling (Kaya, 2024, p. 52; Yıldırım & Vardar, 2024, p. 20-21). During this period, feminist film practices have emerged that highlight the subjectivity, independence, and empowerment of women in action, positioning themselves against the codes that reproduce sexism, that are implicitly or explicitly woven with feminist messages, and that aim to raise the audience's awareness of gender issues. They foreground a feminist perspective and feminine discourse in opposition to patriarchal narratives. In sum, studies show that since the 2010s, Turkish cinema, especially in films by women directors, has increasingly featured feminist narratives, presented female characters rooted in real-life experiences, and constructed female subjectivity and the female gaze.

The term gaze here is perceived as the character's act of looking, as well as her comments and thoughts on events and situations, that is to say, her point of view. What is tried to be reached and underlined with the terms of look and point of view is the female character's way of thinking and mental activities, meaning the subjectivity that distinguishes her from other characters. Smelik, who works on feminist cinema, examines the construction of female subjectivity by analyzing the female gaze and point of view in cinema. She

notes that the point of view is constructed on two levels: the optical/physical point of view and the mental point of view of the character. Based on Jost's (1989) study of point of view in the comparative narratology of cinema and literature, Smelik (1998) analyzes the female character's point of view by referencing three different dimensions of cinematic narrative: focalization, ocularization, and auricularization. According to Jost's analyzes of point of view in cinema, ocularization and auricularization refer to the semiotic level of seeing and hearing, whereas focalization refers to the narrative level of knowing and telling (Smelik, 1998, p. 64). Jost, building on Genette's (1980) analytical study of focalization in the narrative, adapted these three dimensions to the cinema, dividing each into various categories, similar to Genette's approach.

Ocularization refers to the visual manipulation by the camera to show what a character or narrator sees, essentially representing the character's optical or physical perspective. It is categorized into internal ocularization—both primary and secondary—and zero ocularization. Primary internal ocularization involves subjective camera shots directly reflecting what a character sees, while secondary internal ocularization is achieved through editing techniques that suggest a character's perspective. Zero ocularization denotes a camera view that follows events without attributing the visual perspective to any specific character (Jost, 1989, p. 22, 112; Jost, 2004, p. 77-79).

Auricularization refers to auditory manipulation in cinema, where the microphone captures what a character or narrator hears, often creating a subjective auditory experience (Smelik, 1998, p. 63). It is divided into primary internal auricularization, where sound distortions reflect a character's subjective perception, and secondary internal auricularization, where the context establishes the auditory subjectivity. Zero auricularization, on the other hand, occurs when the sound is detached from any character's perception, such as non-diegetic music or external sound effects (Jost, 1989, p. 57).

Focalization, on the other hand, refers to the mental perspective of the character, the narrative level of knowing, the character's perception and experience, the more cognitive and psychological level of what a character knows. It is divided into external focalization, where the audience only knows as much as the characters, without access to their inner thoughts or feelings; internal focalization, where the story is told by the character and the narrative aligns with the character's thoughts and experiences; and spectatorial focalization, where the audience is granted more knowledge than the characters. These modes help to determine how information, perspective, and subjectivity are conveyed to the viewer, shaping the overall narrative structure (Jost, 1989, p. 71-72). Thus, the cinematic narrative dimensions

analyzed by Smelik through the female character allow us to examine how the character's subjectivity is revealed.

Similar to Smelik, French (2021, p. 53) stresses strong connections between female subjectivity and the female gaze. She explores the concept through an examination of the approaches and films of female documentary filmmakers. In her words, "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). At the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), director and writer Joey Soloway (2016) provided insights into the female gaze and spoke of its three principles. The first one is *The Feeling Seeing* which involves using the frame and camera to invoke a feeling of in-feeling, rather than looking at the character, to make the audience feel what the characters are experiencing. The second principle Soloway calls is *The Gazed Gaze* which is basically about conveying to the audience what it feels like to be the object of the gaze, what it feels like to be seen, to be looked at. *Returning the Gaze*, as being the final principle, means "I see you seeing me", reflecting on the experience of being seen but now claiming a place for the character's own subjectivity.

Kuhn (1982, p. 169), traces the concept of 'feminine cinematic writing' which encompasses characteristics related to the female gaze. She tries to reveal similarities in form and content through four selected films (*Lives of Performers*, Yvonne Rainer, 1972; *Thriller*, Sally Potter, 1979; *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce*, 1080 Bruxelles, Chantal Akerman, 1975; *Daughter Rite*, Michelle Citron, 1980) by women directors. Based on her findings, the films share characteristics such as creating a sense of distancing between the audience and the narrative, and passionate detachment. The films often explore the dynamics within mother-daughter and sister relationships. They establish a discourse of female looks and points of view. Furthermore, they transform culturally established expressions related to women (Kuhn, 1994, p. 170-176).

In her study of the female gaze, Coles (2023, p. 17) identifies several key features of the concept. For her, the female gaze prioritizes internal thoughts and feelings over external actions and female desire over dialogue. It explores multiple identities and bodily perceptions of multiple characters. Characterization in this context focuses more on inner qualities rather than physical characteristics, often achieved through the camera's gaze. The deliberate use of cinematographic techniques and *mise-en-scène* highlight subtle movements and middle moments rather than the end goal, along with the strategic use of music, collectively shape and define the representation of the female gaze.

Malone (2018) covers around 50 films directed by women,

focusing on thematic issues that emphasize the female gaze. These include themes of female friendship, female intersubjectivity, women's independence, societal challenges faced by women, motherhood, gender norms, the female body, desire, and resistance against patriarchal structures. In addition, Malone examines cinematic elements associated with the female gaze, such as the visual dynamics of looking and being seen, the exploration of women's inner lives, thoughts and memories, the direct gaze of female characters, narratives told from their point of view, and the distinctive cinematography and camera techniques employed by these directors. When examining authors who have explored the concept of the female gaze, it is noticeable that certain elements are commonly presented within defined frameworks.

Materials and Methods

For the purpose of exploration of the components of the cinematic female gaze, the film *Something Useful* (2017) by Turkish woman director Pelin Esmer has been selected. The film tells the story of two women whose paths cross on a train journey from İstanbul to İzmir. Poet Leyla (Başak Köklükaya) is travelling to attend a dinner with her high school friends, while nurse Canan (Öykü Karayel) boards the train to administer a lethal injection to Yavuz (Yiğit Özşener), who has requested it due to his apoplectic state. This film was chosen due to its focus on the female characters' point of view, its emphasis on women's experiences, and its noticeable departure from mainstream cinema conventions.

Textual film analysis, a qualitative research method, was chosen to analyze the selected film from the perspective of the female gaze. In this method, the film text is considered as a different material from a written text, as a film has visual and aural tools in addition to its thematic content and it relies on the core skills of looking and listening to what is physically present in the films (Dyer, 2016; Bateman & Wildfeuer, 2017, p. 1-2). Analyze therefore focuses on how structural, formal, visual, and aural features such as camera movements, shooting plans, composition, editing, lighting, sound, space, setting, color, and costume construct meaning together with thematic and conceptual content.

An example of textual film analysis can be found in the study of Van Leeuwen and Boeriis (2017) who explore how film lighting contributes to meaning making by examining features such as brightness, hardness, color, and movement. In the film *Persona* (Bergman, 1966), they show that lighting contributes meaning making through its salience and shadows between characters, notably linking Alma's (Bibi Andersson) remaining in darkness to her confessing of shameful and dark moments in her past. Also, the contrasts in lighting segment the visual space, thereby enhancing the figurative distance and disconnection between characters.

Huvenne's (2017) examination of how sound and spatial elements create meaning in the film *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013) serves as another example of textual film analysis. According to this analysis, sound, and space interact as a unified audiovisual composition that shapes the audience's experience of the main character's lived space. The dynamic use of sound immerses the audience in the character's claustrophobic environment and spatial movement, while the first-person perspective of listening seamlessly integrates different experiential worlds into a cohesive experience through the audience. Here space is constituted through experience.

In this study of *Something Useful*, the research methods of data collection have focused on cinematic tools such as cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing tools that present visual and auditory data alongside thematic elements, in short thematic and structural features of the film together. The analysis has concentrated on how the selected visual, auditory, and thematic components in the film convey meanings related to the female gaze, using screenshots of frames from the film as supporting material to illustrate the analyzed elements. The research adopts an interpretivist approach within the feminist epistemological research paradigm.

Results

Cinematographic Components and Gaze

• Optical Gaze/ Ocularization

Mental Gaze/ Focalization

Something Useful invites the audience to look at and perceive the world from the perspective of the protagonist Leyla, often addressing questions such as, 'What is Leyla looking at? What captures her attention?' and often employing specific cinematographic to emphasize her optical gaze. In one particular scene Leyla's optical gaze is centralized as she reads a book in the dining car, sitting near the train window. The camera moves in to her with a tracking shot, as she lifts her head from the book and begins to look outside, emphasizing her observation and contemplation. A close-up is used when her image appears as a reflection in the train window. The train stops in front of a small house, we see a man painting the window of the house, and Leyla's close-up gazing towards the man as a reflection in the train window, within the same frame (Figure 1). As the audience observes the outside world from Leyla's point of view, they also see the reflection of Leyla's gaze in the window. This technique emphasizes Leyla's optical gaze by reproducing it through her reflection, allowing Leyla and the audience to simultaneously observe both the outside view and Leyla's own gaze in the same window.



Figure 1.

Leyla gazing at both the reflection of her own gaze and the painting man in the train window.

In addition to her optical gaze, the film highlights Leyla's thoughts, feelings, and questions about what she is observing, in other words, her mental gaze. The close-up shots of Leyla's gaze, reflected in the train window, often overlap with the landscape images she looks at, creating a visual fusion within the same frame. While these images are likely created through digital post-production techniques such as changing the image opacities and superimposition, they still convey a sense of reality on screen and contribute a poetic element to the film. What Leyla observes and experiences is the vibrant dynamic of life itself: a woman venting her frustration by kicking the wheel of a car (Figure 2), people joyfully dancing and socializing in houses, a couple embracing on a balcony (Figure 2), a graffiti artist painting an eagle on a train station wall and fleeing from the police (Figure 3), and people waiting at the train station. These moments of life capture Leyla's attention, and her perspective is given significance. Through the reflection of her close-up gaze in the train window, the film allows us to approach her facial expressions and understand her feelings. We see how she looks at other characters, and the outside world through the train window. We observe the way she smiles when she encounters something that resonates with her, as well as moments of sadness when she becomes lost in her thoughts. Leyla approaches life with an appreciation for its vibrancy and derives joy from her observations. Through the point-of-view shots that shows Leyla and what Leyla looks and sees respectively; in addition to the abovementioned shooting techniques, we can witness both Leyla's optical gaze and ocularization; and at the same time her mental gaze and focalization.

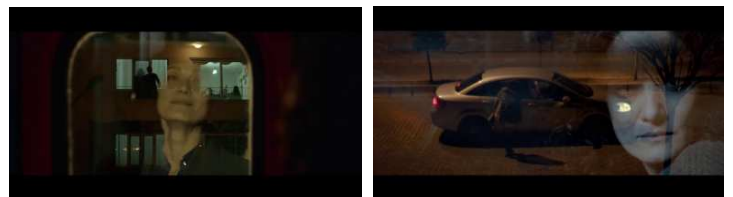


Figure 2 .

Leyla gazes at both the reflection of her own gaze and the views of dynamic life in the train window.

In fact, while Leyla's gaze remains a focal point in the film, the perspective of her female companion, Canan, is not

neglected. The director provides moments that highlight Canan's point of view as well. The scene at the train station where Canan's father talks to Leyla, expresses his concern for Canan and asks Leyla to keep an eye on her during the train ride, is one of them. Instead of showing Leyla or her father having the dialogue, the director chooses to show Canan in a head and shoulder close-up reaction shot. This visual choice allows us to clearly see Canan's reaction as she becomes visibly uncomfortable and annoyed by her father introducing her as a nurse to a stranger and asking her to be monitored. In another scene, while Canan and Leyla are sitting across from each other in the dining car, Leyla begins a phone conversation with her lover, who is an actor. This detail catches Canan's attention, as she dreams of becoming an actress herself. Instead of focusing on Leyla as she talks on the phone, the director opts for a shoulder close-up shot of Canan, capturing her looking at Leyla and revealing her interest in the conversation. These moments of Canan's perspective provide insight into her feelings and desires, adding depth to her character.

• Gazed Gaze, Returning Gaze

Passionate Detachment

It can be interpreted that Soloway's terms 'gazed gaze' and 'returning gaze' find their counterparts in different aspects of *Something Useful*. As mentioned above, the female character is objectified in mainstream films by the bearer of the gaze who are male characters, and by the audience. However, in *Something Useful*, Leyla herself becomes the bearer of the gaze before the audience. Leyla's gaze at her own image, especially through the reflections from the train window, is shown for almost the entire first half of the film. While the audience sees the reflection of Leyla's face on the train window, they also see Leyla, who is looking at her own image and being aware of her own gaze (Figures 1 and 2).

The heightened awareness of Leyla's self-perception is brought to light in the hotel room scene. Leyla and Canan engage in a conversation while commenting on the light and shadows cast on the ceiling. Leyla asks why Canan never looks at her own reflection in the train window. This interaction reveals that Leyla is cognizant of her own act of gazing at her image through the reflection on the window. The director goes beyond merely presenting images through reflections; she also prompts the characters to discuss their own reflections. It is not solely the audience that perceives and acknowledges these reflections, but also the female character herself who actively recognizes that she is consciously observing her own image through the reflection in the window.

The audience cannot objectify the character and simply gaze at her since she is conscious of her own gaze upon herself. Leyla emerges as both the bearer of the gaze and

subjectivity. The character's self-awareness of her own gaze makes it challenging for the audience to reduce her to an object, as she assumes a position of subjectivity and of the audience's pure subjectivity. The audience's pleasure derives from watching with the privilege of being an unknown third party—the scopophilic gaze is interrupted. This leads us to the passionate detachment of the audience, returning the gazing desire. This complex dynamic challenges the traditional power dynamics of the cinematic gaze and offers an exploration of the female perspective. Rashkin (2001, p. 98) in her review of Marisa Sistach's film *Anna's Steps* (1991), interprets the gaze of the main character Ana, who records and interprets daily occurrences through the lens of her video camera, as follows: "Turning her gaze on herself and on others, she begins to replace the dysfunctional mirror of patriarchal cinema with images that reflect her own thoughts, feelings, and questions".

• Internal Focalization, Mental Gaze

Entering the female character's frame of mind, internal diegetic sound as a technique that allows the audience to hear the thoughts and inner voice of the character is preferred. In *Something Useful* internal diegetic sound of Leyla immerses the audience in her mental subjectivity and provides insight into her perspective on events. Throughout the film, Leyla's inner voice is heard almost continuously, creating a narrative that delves into her thoughts, fictions, assumptions, and comments about her life experiences, revealing her internal focalization.

The film begins with Leyla's voice-over as the narration, saying, "Who was madly in love with whom at school, but then who married whom..." and her voice-over continues throughout the entire film. Even though the voice is independent of the body, we know that it belongs to Leyla. While the thoughts cross her mind about her upcoming graduation dinner, instead of her body we see a wall clock at the train station, a couple taking photos at the station before getting married, and for a brief moment, Leyla pacing back and forth. She also mentally anticipates the comments others will make about her, thinking: "Leyla is here too, she was a good girl..." These inner voice narratives serve as a form of internal monologue, providing insights into Leyla's interpretations of the events and characters around her. Her inner voice reflects her contemplation of Yavuz's last evening and his anticipation of death. The story of Yavuz, who has chosen death, is of great importance to Leyla. She expresses her connection to him by painting him with a pencil drawing on a blank white paper and developing an imaginary conversation. Her imaginary conversation with Yavuz reflects her curiosity and empathy for his experience, her own reflection on mortality as well as the choices we make in life and of existential questions.

According to Silverman (1990, p. 312-313) within dominant narrative cinema, female voice is often not heard independently from her body. Because the dis-embodied voice-over can be seen as exemplary for male subjectivity, attesting to an achieved invisibility, omniscience, and discursive power: "It is dangerous to allow female character to be heard without being seen, since it would put her beyond the control of the male gaze, and open the possibility of women participating in a phallic discourse". Indeed, in *Something Useful*, Leyla's voice takes on a disembodied quality, detached from her physical presence, as she reads poems or describes life and events. This departure from traditional conventions allows Leyla's voice to become independent and stand on its own, giving it a discursive vantage point and addressing the thematic core of the film. By going beyond the limitations imposed on the female voice, it becomes an integral part of the female gaze, revealing Leyla's perspective and discourse.

• Spectatorial Focalization

The thoughts of other characters in the film can also provide insights into the female character. Leyla's perspective on events is brought into focus by also being a topic of conversation among others. This gives us spectatorial focalization where the narration provides the audience with more information about the character than the character herself. In the graduation dinner sequence, the camera, positioned in the center of the circle of participants, pans clockwise to show each participant in turn. The shot begins from one end of the table, pans around, and ends with Leyla's poem and image. Leyla is often the focal point of the conversations, which continue with remarks like, "What would Leyla do in this situation since she's a poet..." In one of her interviews director Pelin Esmer notes that throughout the film, we see the world through Leyla's eyes, but in the dinner scene, we see how others perceive Leyla. "Although we only witness two days of Leyla's life in the film, seeing her through the eyes of others serves as a mirror that helps us understand the characters and their actions" (Yenilmez, 2017).

Mise-en-scène Components and Feeling Seeing

• Camera and Shooting Plans

In *Something Useful*, we often see the characters in different forms of close-ups such as choker, head and shoulder, over the shoulder, cut-in, front face, profile, reaction and extreme close-ups. The preference for so many close-up shots in the film seems to have been chosen to show the facial expressions, reactions, gestures and feelings of the characters, especially of Leyla and Canan, more clearly. On the other hand, through tracking and dolly shots, the camera follows Leyla and Canan forward and backward while they walk inside the train or on the street, slowly approaching to

their worlds. Pan and tilt shots, and slow tracking shots allow us to understand them more closely by following their behavior, the places they look at, the directions they go and small details about them. In addition, these camera movements, combined with close-ups, seem to preserve the dynamism and dramatic effect that arouses a sense of wonder, which is predominantly present in Leyla. Another notable shot in the film is the two shot of Leyla and Canan. Interacting with each other, they are often positioned either face-to-face or side by side within the same frame. Along with the other women who participate Leyla and Canan's dinner table in the train's dining car, they appear in group shot compositions, emphasizing the connections and relationships among the women.

Long takes - often exceeding one minute in length-are also a prominent feature in the film. Long takes are most noticeable during long and medium shots of the scenery flowing through the train window, accompanied by Leyla's inner voice allowing the audience to sense her rhythm as she watches the view outside. In addition, when sensitive details, mostly about Yavuz, are discussed, or in scenes where the characters are tense, continuous shots seem to be preferred in order to better convey these feelings to the audience. French (2021, p. 58) highlights the relationship between the length of the shot and the female gaze in her research. The emphasis on shot length is also evident in approximately 10 minute plan-séquence of the graduation dinner in *Something Useful*. This sequence is filmed using a 360-degree pan shot. The majority of the film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Mulvey & Wollen, 1977), shot as an alternative to the male gaze, consists of scenes in which the camera performs long, continuous 360-degree pans around a fixed location, depicting different aspects of a female character. The film, as Reynolds (n.d.) notes, attempts to construct a new relationship between the viewer and the female subject. By using 360-degree panning in the film, Esmer seems to emphasize not only the cyclicity of the conversations around Leyla but also the life that Leyla mentions in her poems.

• Lighting and Darkness

The female gaze is about a way of feeling seeing and using the frame to evoke and share a feeling of being in feeling rather than looking at the character (Tiff, 2016). As a director, Soloway "aims to get the audience to understand that she is not just showing something but wanting them to feel it", French (2021, p. 60) states. With regard to the film *Something Useful*, what stands out is the emphasis on Leyla's dominant feelings and general mood, which are central to the narrative and effectively conveyed to the audience through various mise-en-scène instruments.

In keeping with her role as a poet, Leyla's moods are mostly melancholic, thoughtful, sensitive, observant and curious. The fact that Yavuz wants to end his life because he is paralyzed increases Leyla's curiosity about his psychological state. Leyla, sitting across from Canan in the dining car, asks Canan questions to learn more about the subject. These questions bother Canan because she doesn't want it to be known that she is going to realize Yavuz's death. The tension between Leyla and Canan is transmitted to the audience through the changes made in light, sound and image. The lights of the train car go out completely, the rhythmic sound of rails heard in the background stops along with the sudden stop of the train. As Barsam and Monahan (2016, p. 180) note, darkness and shadow in *mise-en-scène* can refer to concealing or masking things. This sudden darkness creates an atmosphere compatible with the tension in the scene where Canan tries to hide her secret from Leyla and Leyla digs for the issue. In another scene, just before Leyla tells Canan that she wants to go to Yavuz's house with her, the train passes through a tunnel. The train is completely dark and the visible end of the tunnel is getting smaller. The entrance of the dwindling tunnel and the feeling of stuckness created by it remind us of Leyla's tense mood before she tells Canan that she wants to go to Yavuz's house together.

• Sound and Auricularization

In *Something Useful*, the sound element seems to contribute to the low rhythm of the film and the female character. In addition to the order of the shot lengths, other film techniques such as the rhythm of movement or sound in the *mise-en-scène* contribute to the rhythm of the film (Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 224). Since *Something Useful* mostly has long takes, the low rhythm of the editing draws attention. The first half of the film is dominated by a slow-paced sound produced by the train wheels moving on the railroad. Moreover landscape images flowing slowly from the train window in accordance with the tempo of the sound coming from the railroad also contribute to the soft rhythm of the film, which altogether emphasizes Leyla's calm mode.

The features mentioned in the film that contribute to the rhythm are observed in the speech sounds as well as in the ambient sounds. As emphasized by Bordwell et al. (2017, p. 282), people have distinctive rhythms, separated from each other by the characteristic frequencies, amplitudes and pitches of their voices, as well as by different patterns of pacing and syllable accentuation. The thoughts, the stories or poems that we hear as Leyla's inner voice are in a compatible tone with the tranquil rhythm of the editing and *mise-en-scène*. The cello sound is one of the elements that accompanies Leyla's thoughtfulness. It is not diegetic at first, and is incorporated into the narrative in the second half of the film as an instrument played by Yavuz's upstairs neighbour. In many films the sources of sound are clearly

diegetic or non-diegetic. Nonetheless *Something Useful* obscures this distinction and misleads the audience's perception of identifying the sound source. Leyla's realization of hearing the cello she had imagined on the train, in a later scene, serves as a parallel to many moments where her inner and outer worlds intertwine. The cello sound that accompanies Leyla's internal diegetic voice is presumed to be imagined by Leyla, and can be interpreted here as auricularization, which presents a different form of subjective perspective, as referenced by Smelik above.

• Setting, Prop and Symbolized Objects

Process-Orientedness

"The setting of a film story may take on strong symbolic overtones when it is used to stand for or represent not just a location but some idea associated with the location", says Petrie and Boggs (2018, p. 88). In *Something Useful*, it can be mentioned about the setting, prop and symbolized objects that convey the feeling of Leyla. The film begins with the image of the clock hanging on the wall of the train station. At this point, we hear Leyla's thoughts on the changes brought about by time, as inner voice, as she compares the past and present states of her high school friends. Her thoughts are symbolized by the image of the wall clock that opens the film.

The train, one of the main settings of the film, refers to temporariness, and also gives the general mood of Leyla who searches meanings in temporary moments of life as being a poet. Together with the subject of Yavuz's death, it supports the process-oriented nature of the narrative, as being one of the components of the female gaze. The ambiguity of whether or not Yavuz dies or not at the end of the film suggests that what is truly important in the film is not its conclusion, but rather the emotions experienced, thoughts pondered, and details noticed in the middle moments.

It is also possible to talk about the image of a crow that is frequently seen in *Something Useful*. The image of the crow appears in different forms as a huge graffiti on the wall in a train station (Figure 3), as a small drawing on the wall in the train toilet, or as a shadow on the ceiling of Yavuz's house. Finally, we come face to face with a real crow that perched on the balcony railings (Figure 3). The image of the crow, which represents both death and wisdom, winks at Leyla's sense of curiosity and quest to understand, know, recognize and define life, death, people and emotions.



Figure 3.

Two of the many frames in which the crow symbol is seen

• Color, Costume, Make-Up

The costume colors of both Leyla and Canan have the qualities to convey the emotions of these characters. It is noteworthy that Leyla's clothes are predominantly blue (Figure 4). Leyla has an elegant but simple style that does not want to attract attention. While she prefers a blue shirt, long beige skirt and a pale cardigan as her casual outfit, she wears a blue dress with a very simple make-up on her 25th year high school graduation dinner. It can be assumed that the color blue, which evokes peace, represents her serenity. As it is known, blue and green are among the cold colors that remain in the background (Petrie & Boggs, 2018, p. 202-204). Blue is a hiding color that does not want to attract attention. Leyla's unpretentious and cold color preference, among her female friends, who mostly dress in bold burgundy and red at the graduation dinner, suggests that she emphasizes other things in life instead of herself.

In contrast to Leyla, Canan is far from calm and she is confused. She wears a blue cap and an orange coat. She prefers brightly colored clothing such as yellow-orange sweaters indoors (Figure 4). Yellow and orange are the warm colors that shine out (Petrie & Boggs, 2018, p. 202-204). This vibrant color choice seems more appropriate for Canan, who is a more conflicted character than Leyla. These colors are also unsettling due to their impulsiveness and stimulation. This highlights the anxious state of Canan, who is questioning herself because the injection she is about to give will result in the death of a person. Petrie and Boggs (2018, p. 202-204) state that the use of directly opposite colors, such as warm and cold creates complementary harmony. This harmony shows itself when Leyla calms Canan and Canan brings excitement to Leyla's life.



Figure 4.

Leyla's calm color preference versus Canan's vivid color preference.

Thematic Components and Subjectivity

• Feminine Look of Curiosity

In her article "Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity", Mulvey (1996, p. 53-64), establishes a strong relationship between women's desire of curiosity and female subjectivity. According to her, the box referred to in the myth of Pandora is metonymically symbolizes the female genitalia and refers to secret and forbidden spaces. Mulvey associates the box with female curiosity, the desire to know, and the courage to look. Although female curiosity has historically been associated with negative representations, Mulvey's reading of the myth transforms these connotations into positive and liberating forces. According to her, a woman's courage to look at the forbidden and to see with the mind's eye, creates a new system of meaning where the female gaze, which reveals herself and possesses her own knowledge, is established through a subject-creating move. Mulvey's approach has a transformative impact on the distorted image of women.

In *Something Useful*, Leyla, who pursued a law degree to do something useful but was ultimately unable to sustain herself in that field, Leyla decided to become a poet. For Leyla, poetry is a way of holding on to life. She observes, participates in stories, and becomes a part of them to produce, write, and define life. In this context, Leyla's character exhibits a curiosity to see different perspectives of life. During her train journey, she witnesses numerous events as a result of her observations. They are all seemingly ordinary aspects of life but intriguing stories that can become a new poem for her. Her curiosity is a part of her effort and journey to understand and define human existence, and ultimately her own. According to Zinn and Stanley (2012), the desire to know, understand, and define life, and to do so in one's own voice, restores subjectivity in women (Zinn & Stanley, 2012, p. 172).

A dialogue between Yavuz, who wants to die, and the poet Leyla focuses on Leyla's curiosity. Yavuz thinks that Leyla is there because she wants to experience and witness such a moment as a poet. Leyla, on the other hand, says that she does not only wonder about death and life from a distance but that she lives and is affected by them. By telling Julio Cortazar's hopeful story *A Yellow Flower* to Yavuz, who prefers death, Leyla tries to convince him to live. This turns out to be another way for Leyla to hold on to life and refers to her subjectivity by engaging in actions that will bring about changes in the lives of people and events that she chooses to be a part of. As Smelik (1998, p. 32) states, female subjectivity is about being an active agent, who influences the social reality while being influenced by it.

• Female Intersubjectivity and Solidarity

Ince (2017, p. 13-15), who studies female subjectivities in contemporary women's cinema, interprets female subjectivity, based on Irigaray's (1993) relational theory of the female subject. According to her, female subjectivity is not supported in patriarchy; however, the symbolic representation of women's bonds with other women supports an economy that ensures the continuity of female subjectivity. Ince (2017, p. 44) observes that an important common feature of independent or auteur films directed by women is their emphasis on female intersubjectivity, particularly the relationships among women.

The support and solidarity brought by intersubjective relationships among women are also observed in *Something Useful*. Leyla and Canan are two female characters with different forms of tastes and pleasures derived from different social classes. Canan works as a nurse but dreams of becoming a famous actress. She is focused on earning the money she needs to take acting classes, but she has doubts about the rightness of the path she has taken to earn this money. Leyla, on the other hand, is a poet who appears to be financially secure, self-confident, and seemingly fulfilling her ideal. While Canan, driven by economic concerns, acts in a goal-oriented manner, Leyla, who questions and seeks to define life, exhibits a more process-oriented behavior.

As the film progresses, a friendship and solidarity develops between Canan and Leyla. Burdened with the fear of taking responsibility for the death of a paralyzed person, Canan shares this heavy feeling with Leyla. Leyla embraces Canan and compassionately comforts her, alleviating her feelings (Figure 5). The film portrays a different kind of friendship, characterized by a relationship of tenderness among women, where they touch each other and exchange affection. The solidarity between them manifests itself in different times, forms, and details throughout the film. Although it seems that Leyla provides primarily material and emotional support, their companionship is mutual. Thanks to Canan, Leyla finds herself in the middle of a very interesting story as a poet, that encourages her to write, think, and create, intertwining with her throughout the train journey. Leyla's existential questions and Canan's ambivalence about her desires bring them closer to each other.

Intersubjective relationships between women are also evident between Leyla, Canan and two other women who join their table in the dining car. The four women quickly bond and spend their evening meal chatting pleasantly. They give each other advice about their daily problems, talk about men, joke around, laugh, and enjoy themselves. Even the most taboo or secret topics are quickly discussed and brought out into the open. Emotional sharing, compassionate responses, and a sense of relief occur.

Yavuz's death, as a story of Canan's colleague is discussed in a public space, allowing an exchange of ideas, and energy, providing a sense of relief for the women (Figure 5).



Figure 5.
Female Intersubjectivities

Conclusion and Recommendations

When *Something Useful* is analyzed using the method of textual film analysis, it can be argued that the visual, aural, and thematic elements employed in the film, along with the dimensions of cinematic narrative that form the point of view, construct the subjectivity of the female character. According to the findings of the analysis, certain cinematographic techniques, camera movements, shot scales, and mis-en-scene elements frequently used throughout the film foreground and establish the female gaze.

Ocularization, which expresses the character's optical gaze, is shown through both the point-of-view shots and the reflection of Leyla's close-up on the train window, showing Leyla's gaze and the things she looks at within the same frame. The reflection of Leyla's close-ups on the train window, likely created using the superimposition technique during editing, also reveals her mental gaze, which is focalization. This is because we can see her feelings and thoughts about what she observes through the detailed expressions on her face. Leyla's close-up reflections on the window seem to resonate with certain terms put forward by theorists discussing the female gaze, such as the 'gazed gaze' and 'returning gaze,' which find their counterparts in different aspects of *Something Useful*. Leyla becomes the bearer of her gaze before the audience, by looking at her own image and her gaze turns into a gazed gaze. The return of gaze in this way also reveals the passionate detachment of the audience, as the scopophilic gaze is interrupted, an element that breaks with traditional cinematic codes. We gain insight into Leyla's thoughts and mental state through the internal focalization, which is conveyed throughout the film via her internal diegetic voice. On the other hand, information about Leyla's perspective is provided through spectatorial focalization, as revealed by what other characters say and think about her. The second female character, Canan's optical and mental gazes, are also acknowledged and predominantly presented in close-up reaction shots.

In *Something Useful*, the mood, emotions, and feelings of the female characters are placed at the center and are intended to be felt by the audience through various elements of mise-en-scène, such as camera movements and shooting plans, lighting, sound, setting, props, symbolic objects, color, costume, and makeup. and this gives us another female gaze feature, the feeling seeing. The director doesn't just seem to be showing something but is making the audience feel it. Close-ups, slow tracking shots and dolly shots, as well as pans and tilts that follow Leyla and Canan, allow the audience to observe them more closely. Long takes seem to be used to convey Leyla's slower rhythm and the characters' sensitive and tense emotions. A 360-degree pan shot within a plan séquence during the graduation dinner refers to the cyclical nature of life, as highlighted by Leyla in her poems, and breaks away from classical cinematic conventions. Sudden shifts between light and dark effectively convey the tension in the dialogues between Leyla and Canan. The slow-paced sound of the train wheels on the tracks, Leyla's inner voice, and the slow-tempo cello music convey Leyla's tranquil rhythm to the audience. This cello sound provides an aural subjective perspective, known as auricularization in cinematic narrative, as it is implied to be imagined by Leyla. Certain props, such as a wall clock, or settings like the train, refer to themes of time and temporality, which underscore Leyla's overall mood. This sense of temporariness in *Something Useful* also complements the process-oriented nature of the narrative and the female gaze, further distinguishing it from conventional cinematic codes. A symbolized object like the crow, representing both death and wisdom, hints at Leyla's curiosity and her search for meaning. The costume colors of both Leyla, who prefers cool tones like blue symbolizing her tranquility, and Canan, who wears warm tones representing her confusion, help to express the emotions of them. Thematically, Leyla's desire to understand and define life in her own voice reveals her subjectivity, a central aspect of the female gaze in *Something Useful*. Additionally, the developing friendship and solidarity between Canan and Leyla reflects the concept of female intersubjectivity, a common feature in films by women directors. This solidarity is reinforced by the frequent use of two-shots of Leyla and Canan, as well as group shots of them with other women in the film.

The study is limited to the analyze of one woman director's film however it is enriched with references to other works that explore the female gaze based on various women director films in the literature. For this reason, the sample used and analyzed in detail in the study is considered to be a representative of the universe of women's cinema. To better elucidate the cinematic female gaze, utilizing the transferability feature of the research, it is necessary to conduct further film analyzes using similar methods.

The concept of the female gaze, by its very nature, does not have very sharp lines or boundaries in terms of encompassing multiplicity and diversity. However, such as Uğuz (2023, p. 101) states, common features will become more visible through the analysis and interpretation of visual, auditory, and narrative elements in each different and new woman director's film, and this will make the concept more observable in cinema, presenting qualities that are continually open to rediscovery.

Based on the examinations conducted in the study, the following definition can be proposed for the cinematic female gaze. Films, utilizing cinematic tools to depict the subjectivity, optical and mental perspectives of the female character to the audience and to make the audience feel what the character feels; departing from traditional cinema with features such as reversal of the female gaze, passionate detachment, or distanciation; emphasizing themes that nourish female subjectivity, such as relationships between women, women's curiosity, and interaction with social reality, can be defined to suggest a cinematic female gaze.

In this context, it is recommended that researchers who would like to study and develop the concept of the cinematic female gaze, study women directors films benefiting from the detailed studies of point of view in film narrative. It is further suggested that the concept of the female gaze be specifically defined according to the technical characteristics of art forms, thereby broadening its meaning and definition.

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