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## Cinema as Eye: Vision, Gaze, and Incompleteness in Mick Davis's Modigliani (2004)

### Abstract

This study explores the visual and symbolic functions of the eye in Mick Davis's Modigliani (2004) in relation to Amedeo Modigliani's paintings. It examines how eye contact operates not merely as a visual motif but as a narrative and philosophical device that mediates seeing, perception, and meaning. Through qualitative analysis of selected film scenes and artworks, the research investigates how cinematographic elements—such as lighting, framing, and mise-en-scène—intersect with the representation of incomplete or absent eyes. Framed by theories of visual narrative and gaze, the analysis reveals that the eye functions as both a metaphor of psychological depth and a dialogic space between viewer and image. The recurring motif of the incomplete eye encourages active participation and interpretive engagement, suggesting that meaning arises from the interplay between visibility and invisibility. Ultimately, the study argues that eye contact serves as an interdisciplinary visual language that expands cinematic interpretation.

**Keywords:** Cine-Eye, Gaze; Visual Perception, Modigliani, Cinema

## Sinema Olarak Göz: Mick Davis'in Modigliani (2004) Filminde Görme, Bakış ve Eksiklik

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Mick Davis'in Modigliani (2004) filmi ile Amedeo Modigliani'nin resimleri arasındaki ilişki bağlamında gözün görsel ve simgesel işlevlerini incelemektedir. Araştırma, göz temasının yalnızca bir görsel motif olarak değil, aynı zamanda görme, algı ve anlamı aracılık eden anlatsal ve felsefi bir araç olarak nasıl işlediğini ele alır. Seçilmiş film sahneleri ve sanat eserlerine yönelik niteliksel analiz yoluyla, ışık, kadraj ve sahne düzeni gibi sinematografik öğelerin eksik ya da tamamlanmamış göz temsilleriyle nasıl kesiştiği araştırılmıştır. Görsel anlatı ve bakış kuramları çerçevesinde yapılan çözümleme, gözün hem psikolojik derinliğin bir metaforu hem de izleyici ile imge arasında diyalojik bir alan işlevi gördüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Tekrarlanan "tamamlanmamış göz" motifi, izleyiciyi anlamın görünürlük ile görünmezlik arasındaki gerilimden doğduğu aktif bir yorum sürecine davet eder. Sonuç olarak çalışma, göz temasının sinemasal yorumu genişleten disiplinlerarası bir görsel dil olarak işlev gördüğünü ileri sürmektedir.

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*Anahtar Kelimeler: Cine-Göz, Bakış, Görsel Algı, Modigliani, Sinema*

## **Introduction**

In Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2014), the multifaceted relationship between cinema and its audience is discussed, and how films elicit sensory experiences is emphasised. The concept of cinema and the eye, theorised under the title "*Cinema as the Eye*," focuses on the visual dimension of cinema and the central role of the act of seeing in the viewing experience.

*"In early cinema, the metaphorical role of vision and the eye is emphasised by the many prostheses with which they are associated"* (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2014, p. 165).

Therefore, we can say that the concepts of eye and vision in early cinema are used not only as a physical function but also as a tool with symbolic meanings. The concept of prosthesis symbolises that the eye goes beyond being a natural organ and is associated with different functions. This symbol enables the eye and seeing to gain new meanings through the use of tools such as cameras, telescopes, and magnifiers that replace or complement the eye. Thus, we can talk about the emergence of a new way of seeing with tools (prostheses) that increase or transform the perception power of the eye by expanding its natural limits.

As we can state that the camera or optical devices expand the function of the eye with different tools and reveal deeper, stronger, or different forms of representation of the act of seeing, we can also mention that the metaphorical meanings of the eye in cinema are enriched with these tools. Eye contact has been used prominently in many movements in the history of cinema. For example, in French Surrealism, it is possible to come across films that focus on the simultaneity and vulnerability of the eye. The eye stands out with its ability to witness different things at the same time and its vulnerability or sensitivity. The audience witnesses more than one event or emotion at the same time. In the films of this period, both beautiful and horrifying scenes can be seen simultaneously. Such films give the viewer a multidimensional perspective by bringing together different time periods and contradictory emotions.

Surrealist cinema points the viewer to different ways of seeing in a surprising way with such simultaneous images. In French Surrealism, the eye is treated not only as a powerful testimony tool but also as a fragile metaphor open to external influences. Surrealist films deal with this vulnerability both physically and psychologically: physical vulnerability is related to the eye's openness to threats from the outside world. For example, the eye-cutting scene in Luis Buñuel's

film *Un chien andalou* (1929) dramatically illustrates this vulnerability. Spiritual vulnerability, on the other hand, means that the eye is open to being emotionally affected. Since the eye is seen as the window of emotions, it directly conveys the mood of the characters to the audience. For this reason, the eye can become one of the most vulnerable metaphors of a film. Therefore, in the films of this movement, the viewer's eye becomes an instrument of testimony, placing him/her in a position that is both emotionally powerless and vulnerable.

By discussing the function of the camera as an "eye," Elsaesser and Hagener (2014) theorise how cinema presents the world from a particular point of view. Vertov (1929) argued that the camera can capture reality more accurately than the human eye and offers a more objective perspective by overcoming the limits of human perception. According to him, the camera's mechanical eye can show pure truth without personal prejudices or physical limitations.

We could take a closer look at the relationship between cinema and the eye through Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory. In Baudry's (1974) theory of the apparatus, the eye, its position, and the act of seeing are at the centre of the theory because all ideological processes of illusion and identification are related to visual experience. Baudry considers the viewer's eye as an important element of the cinema apparatus and develops his theory through the act of seeing (visual perception). According to Baudry, the viewer's eye is placed in a certain fixed position in the cinema experience, and this position forms the basis of the identification with the film. Thanks to this fixed position, the viewer sees the world seen by the camera and perceives it as his/her own point of view. Keeping the viewer's eye in a fixed position in the cinema hall—in other words, the central perspective of the projection—forces the viewer to focus completely on the film.

In Baudry's apparatus theory, the camera and the viewer's eye are equivalent to each other:

*"...the camera, which constitutes and dominates objects 'in the world', replaces the 'transcendental subject'. Thus, rather than identifying with the represented, with the spectacle itself, the spectator identifies with the thing that stages the spectacle, makes it visible, obliges the spectator to see what he sees"* (Baudry, 1974, p. 45).

In other words, camera movements produce meanings equivalent to the eye of the spectator. This creates an illusion of reality and binds the viewer emotionally to the film. In this case, the act of seeing is explained with reference to Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror phase. The viewer perceives the image he sees on the screen as his own ideal reflection and identifies with this reflection. In this process, the viewer puts himself in the place of the characters in the film, looks at the events through their eyes, and adopts their point of view.

Cinema conveys certain ideologies, thoughts, and value judgements to the viewer unnoticed through vision. While watching a film, the spectator believes that his/her gaze is independent and impartial. However, in reality, he/she has a gaze directed by the cinema apparatus and can only see the world presented to him/her. Baudry's (1974) article "*Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus*" is considered a prominent text among the early studies evaluating the medium of cinema within the framework of Louis Althusser's theory of the ideological apparatus of the state. This article laid the foundation and the theoretical groundwork for the approach that would later be known as Apparatus Theory. Throughout the text, Baudry refers not only to Althusser's conception of ideology but also to Freud's concept of the apparatus used to explain mental functioning. Freud's conceptualisation of the mind as a structural system allows Baudry to associate the cinema apparatus with both unconscious processes and ideological functions. Thus, the theory is considered as a psychic structure that addresses individual unconscious processes at the same time as it points to a social mechanism of ideology production (Mayne, 1993). The concept of the eye in cinema is also examined within the framework of the dynamics of the gaze in cinema. Based on Laura Mulvey's (1993) work on the Male Gaze theory, it is argued that in traditional Hollywood cinema, the viewer is usually directed to a male point of view and female characters are objectified. This approach has gained an important place in feminist film theory and questions how cinema reproduces social power relations through visual pleasure. The concept of the eye in cinema is not only a visual tool but also the basis of the emotional and psychological bond established with the audience. This tension also recalls Ortega y Gasset's (2014) reflections on how mass perception standardises ways of seeing.

Elsaesser and Hagener (2014) analyse in depth the psychological effects of cinema on the viewer. The rhythm of a scene created by film narrative elements such as cinematography or editing techniques can evoke concrete reactions in the audience. This shows that cinema is not just an act of "*watching*" but a bodily experience. This approach of the researchers overlaps with the theoretical discussions in the fields of cinema and psychology. Especially in films with intense narrative structure, the cognitive processes of the audience are almost managed by visual elements.

The "*Cinema as Eye*" theory focuses on the visual structure of cinema, how it shapes the viewer's perspective, and the process of creating sensory responses (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2014). This analysis is important in terms of revealing that cinema is not only a narrative tool but also an art form that directs sensory and psychological perception, paving the way for a conceptualisation

that can be addressed in film studies. The concept of the eye plays a central role in many disciplines of art, especially in visual narrative forms, in the context of perception, gaze, and representation (Boztan Bakır, 2024). Since cinema is an inherently visual art form, the eye is functional not only as a physical organ or as a tool of the visual function, but also in terms of directing the gaze, representing power, and the process of identification, which can be explained as establishing an emotional bond between the viewer and the character. In painting, the function of eye contact, unlike in cinema, is based on the power of fixing the gaze in the frozen moment of time and bringing the viewer into direct confrontation with the figure.

*“In portraits, colours appear more limited. The eyes are made larger than they should be and the expression is revealed more vividly and strongly. In contrast to the desire to reflect the expressions vividly with the eyes, a sad and dull expression should be mentioned. This dull expression is rendered in a natural and realistic style, as if to explain death to living people.”* (Ortakçı, 2024, p. 9).

By consciously using eye contact, artists have developed strategies to affect the viewer emotionally or invite them into the inner world of the figure. For example, in Amedeo Modigliani’s portraits, the eye image is sometimes left blank, signalling the unknown, while at other times it creates a strong emotional impact by looking directly at the viewer. In this context, the representation of the eye in cinema and painting stands out as a common narrative strategy in terms of both directing the gaze and creating psychological effects on the viewer. The effective use of eye contact not only adds depth of meaning to the work of art but also functions to make the viewer an active part of the work of art.

The eye is represented in many different ways. The depiction of the human eye surrounded by a radiating halo is a motif that has appeared in different cultural and religious contexts throughout history, symbolising the all-seeing and controlling quality of being. At the same time, this image of the eye can also be considered to assume a protective function rooted in the collective unconscious. Especially in folk beliefs, it is a common interpretation that it has a quality that repels malevolent energies or takes on the role of a divine protector. Dream symbolism and unconscious imagery further reinforce this protective dimension of the eye (Yücesoy, 2001). These multi-layered meanings of the symbol point to contextual flexibility in different disciplines. For example, while some studies treat this motif as a reflection of the human relationship of oversight and responsibility with the divine (Spencer, 1964), others interpret it as a protective archetype of

cultural memory (Eyer, 2015). However, it should be emphasised that due to the nature of concepts in social sciences, such groupings are probabilistic rather than absolute.

*“An image is a recreated or reproduced appearance. An image is an appearance or an order of images that has been detached and hidden from the place and time where it first appeared—for a few minutes or a few centuries. In every image lies a way of seeing”* (Karabulut, 2015, p. 3).

The image of the eye is often associated with visual narrative. For this reason, the eye, as the basic indicator of the human relationship with the world and how the artist perceives the world, has a functional and important effect to explore both the visual and psychological dimensions of art. Therefore, the use of the eye in different branches of art is a phenomenon worth analysing in terms of both aesthetic and narrative layers.

In this context, how can the completed or incomplete eyes in Modigliani’s paintings be related to the processes of looking and seeing in cinema? Can Modigliani’s representation of the eye be placed in a specific place within the theories of cinema, or is it only a form of expression specific to painting? Comparing these theoretical studies on the meaning of the eye in art and cinema with the images of the eye in Modigliani’s portraits offers an important field of discussion for a deeper understanding of the role of visibility and gaze in artistic narrative. This article aims to discuss how Modigliani’s eye metaphor can be related to theories of cinema. It will be evaluated how the eye figures, which gain meaning in the painter’s portraits, are parallel or distinct from the theories developed on vision and gaze in cinema, and the position of the eye in the common narrative language between art and cinema will be discussed. This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design to explore the symbolic and narrative role of the eye in cinema and painting. Rather than relying on numerical data or statistical models, the analysis focuses on meaning production through visual and thematic interpretation. The primary materials consist of selected scenes from the film *Modigliani* (2004) and a range of portraits by Amedeo Modigliani, especially those where the eyes are absent, obscured, or symbolically emphasized. Each visual material was examined through close reading techniques, focusing on cinematic elements such as lighting, camera angle, composition, *mise en scène*, and narrative rhythm. Similarly, the painterly features of Modigliani’s portraits were analysed in terms of their visual form, symbolic intent, and emotional expression.

The theoretical framework guiding the study draws upon established visual and psychoanalytic theories. Concepts introduced by Jean-Louis Baudry, Laura Mulvey, Dziga Vertov,

and Jacques Lacan provide a foundation for interpreting the act of seeing as more than a physical process. Instead, vision is treated as an ideological and psychological construct. In this respect, the research situates the eye not only as an anatomical feature but as a visual signifier charged with meaning. In particular, the film's cinematographic approach and the artist's stylistic decisions were interpreted through the lens of cultural codes, representational strategies, and viewer positioning. Rather than proposing a universal interpretation, the study prioritizes openness to multiple readings shaped by the viewers' subjective responses.

### **The Intersection of Gaze in Cinema and Painting: Modigliani**

Mick Davis's 2004 film *Modigliani* is a biographical work focusing on the life of Amedeo Modigliani, one of the most striking artists of the 20th century. The film portrays not only the artist's career and works but also his dramatic and tragic personal journey. By weaving together art, passion, and cinematic language, *Modigliani* offers an emotional narrative that immerses the audience in the artist's inner world and struggles. The film also reflects on the cultural and historical atmosphere that shaped Modigliani's artistic vision. Rather than isolating the individual from his environment, the narrative places Modigliani within a broader artistic community, portraying his conflicts with contemporaries and his resistance to established norms. In doing so, the film provides a nuanced perspective on how personal experience and collective context can influence artistic production.

### **Cinematic Gaze and Emotional Vision**

The opening sequence of the film introduces a tearful woman through a camera movement that transitions from a shoulder shot to a close-up of her face. Here, the camera directs the viewer's attention to her gaze and the emotional intensity in her eyes, directly harnessing cinema's power to generate meaning through eye contact. Her tears and penetrating gaze evoke a profound emotional response, amplified by the first dialogue delivered directly to the audience: "Do you know what love is? Real love? Have you ever loved so fiercely that you condemned yourself to an eternity of hell? I have." This line is reinforced not only by the dialogue itself but also by the emotional and narrative weight carried by her eyes.

In cinema, the close-up is a critical visual strategy for deepening the audience's connection to characters and enriching the narrative. As Deleuze and Guattari (2005) emphasize, such shots transcend surface appearances, revealing points where meaning intensifies. Close-ups do not merely display physical details; they mediate the emergence of new layers of meaning in the viewer's perception. According to their framework, the image itself does not inherently produce

meaning, but extreme magnification of details exposes emotional and intellectual intensities otherwise hidden or suppressed. In other words, the close-up transforms into a zone of intensity that unveils the subject's inner vibrations and existential states.

Just as eyes hold a special place in Modigliani's artistic philosophy, the film frequently employs close-ups to reflect characters' inner worlds and draw viewers into their emotional landscapes. The emphasis on eyes in the opening scene thus serves as a bridge to a broader exploration of the relationship between cinema and gaze. The camera does not merely focus on a character's face but transforms their gaze into a signifier that generates meaning. In this sense, the dramatic impact of close-ups in cinema, with their ability to forge emotional bonds with the audience, mirrors the film's reflection of art and inner expression. By integrating Modigliani's artistic point of view with cinematic techniques, the film makes the gaze visible both as a narrative tool and as a field of research. Similarly, in his paintings, eyes create various meanings as fragile, brave, or introverted, and as a door or window to the soul they compel viewers to look beyond the surface and engage with a world of unspoken meaning.

### **Eye as Symbol and Emotional Collapse**

The first dialogue at the opening of the film transforms the character's internal conflicts into a visual metaphor, not just words. The screen, which fades to black in the first scene, embodies Jeanne's 'love in hell'. Just as Jeanne rejects logic and proceeds by intuition, the darkness erases the function of the eye and pushes the viewer towards uncertainty. Jeanne's passion for Modigliani drives her towards a blindness that detaches her from reality. Close-ups and fade to blacks encode love as both an 'emotional spiral' and an 'existential void'. The film reveals the inevitable tragedy of passion at the end of the film through Jeanne's gaze disappearing in the darkness in the first scene. Thus, it becomes clear from the very first scene that the eye will be treated in the film not as a means of communication but as a symbol of surrender.

This visual strategy, centered around the eye and its symbolic absence, continues throughout the narrative. Rather than showing direct emotional expressions, the film often relies on visual abstraction to convey inner turmoil. Light and shadow are carefully balanced to reflect moments of instability, while fragmented framing distances the viewer from a fixed perspective. This stylistic choice reinforces the sense that perception itself is unreliable when filtered through intense emotional experiences. In this way, the film does not present vision as a stable or neutral act, but instead frames it as something shaped by desire, memory, and emotional disorientation.

### **Artistic Duality: Modigliani and Picasso**

After the emotional atmosphere of the film's opening, the ball scene reveals the artistic tension between Modigliani and Picasso. The film treats this relationship not only as a collegial rivalry, but as a clash of fundamentally different philosophies of life and art. While Modigliani stands out with his bohemian lifestyle and passionate personality, Picasso stands out with his strong character, artistic ambitions and innovative approach. Throughout the film, the opposition of these two characters arises not only from their personality traits, but also from the fundamental differences in their perspectives on art. Modigliani's introverted and emotional production process contrasts sharply with Picasso's extroverted and revolutionary understanding of art. This contrast symbolises not only the personalities of the two artists, but also two different approaches in the art world of the period. Through their interactions, the film presents a deep questioning of the nature of art, the creative process and the identity of the artist.

The tension between Modigliani and Picasso extends beyond their differing artistic methods; it also reflects the broader cultural shifts occurring in early 20th-century Europe. Modigliani's focus on emotional expression and aesthetic beauty stands in stark contrast to Picasso's break from traditional forms, exemplified by his groundbreaking work in Cubism. This clash of artistic ideals speaks to a period in which the very notion of artistic identity was being reevaluated, and the film presents this conflict not just as a personal rivalry, but as a microcosm of the larger artistic revolution that was taking place at the time.

The contrast between the two artists is further explored through their interactions with their surroundings and other characters. Modigliani's emotional depth is reflected in his interactions with those close to him, especially Jeanne, whose emotional and physical support plays a pivotal role in his artistic expression. In contrast, Picasso's relationships are marked by a more detached, almost transactional nature. This dynamic not only highlights their contrasting personalities but also mirrors their artistic processes. While Modigliani's art is the result of emotional immersion and personal struggle, Picasso's work reflects a more deliberate, intellectual process of exploration and change. The film, by juxtaposing these two approaches, subtly comments on the tension between artistic spontaneity and calculated innovation.

### **Jeanne Hébuterne and the Gaze of Sacrifice**

Reflecting the art scene of 1920s Paris, the film captures the atmosphere of the period with soft light plays and hazy images. After the ball scene, Modigliani's half-lit face visualises the artist's inner conflicts. While this lighting technique points to his hidden aspects, the darkness of one eye

emphasises the uncertainties of his creative personality. The focus then shifts to Jeanne Hébuterne. We see Jeanne behind a bed with iron bars. The image of her behind iron bars symbolises both her physical and emotional imprisonment. This space, full of Modigliani's portraits with missing eyes, shows how Jeanne sacrifices herself for the sake of love. When the camera turns to Jeanne's face, her half-shadowed expression reveals her repressed emotions and her escape from reality. The deficiencies in Modigliani's art and Jeanne's losses in love are rendered in parallel with each other through the film's play of light and shadow. While the language of cinema conveys the inner turmoil of these two figures to the audience through visual metaphors, each detail offers clues to the psychological depths of the characters (Martinez & Davis, 2004). The relationship between Modigliani and Jeanne is deeply connected to the artist's destructive creative process. Modigliani's bohemian life, while nurturing his artistic genius, also drives him to inner turmoil. Jeanne, on the other hand, surrenders to this stormy world with her whole self, placing herself at the centre of this destructive relationship with a passion that surpasses the limits of reason. What they have in common is that they break their ties with the real world and get lost in the universe of art and love they have created. Guided by intuition, she becomes a character blinded to reality, driven entirely by her feelings. In this context, her portrayal behind bars and the shadowed half of her face symbolize both her physical and emotional entrapment. As Jeanne surrenders her freedom to this love, she also succumbs to Modigliani's inner darkness. The unfinished eyes in his paintings visually mirror the incompleteness and emotional ambiguity haunting their relationship.

### **Philosophical Dimensions of the Incomplete Eye**

In cinema, the eye and gaze are not merely narrative tools but crucial signifiers of characters' psychological conflicts and inner realities (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2014). The shadows cast by side lighting on Modigliani and Jeanne Hébuterne's eyes recur as a visual motif throughout the film, reflecting the mysterious, dark, and destructive dimensions of their love. Thus, the interplay between cinema and the eye serves not only as a means of visual aesthetics but also as a bridge to convey characters' emotional transformations and hidden struggles. The obscured facets of Modigliani and Jeanne lay bare not only love's passionate facade but also its consuming, ruinous nature (Martinez & Davis, 2004). The layered meaning in *Modigliani* crystallizes in scenes emphasizing the artist's focus on eyes. Modigliani views eyes as reflections of the soul, insisting on truly knowing and feeling his subjects before painting their eyes. This philosophy is powerfully articulated in his first encounter with Jeanne. Turning to her, he declares: "*If I'm lucky one day,*

*I'll paint your eyes... When I truly see you, I'll paint them.*" This dialogue underscores that understanding emerges not through a direct gaze but over time, through multiple perspectives and spiritual engagement. Modigliani cannot complete Jeanne's eyes because he has not yet fully grasped her soul, which reveals an epistemological dilemma at the core of his artistic vision (Martinez & Davis, 2004).

A comparable perspective is offered by Slavoj Žižek's parallax view, which argues that "*when the vantage point shifts, reality itself changes*" (Žižek, 2019, p. 34). For Žižek, the eye can never fully grasp its object because each perspective generates new meaning (Žižek, 2008). The film intertwines Modigliani's art and cinematic language with this theory, framing the eye and gaze not as passive acts but as dynamic processes where meaning perpetually shifts and regenerates. The absent eyes in Modigliani's portraits align with Žižek's "*looking awry*" concept, serving as artistic elements that highlight the tension between absence and completion. As Žižek argues, "*Seeing an object 'as it truly is' is impossible; every gaze produces a distinct interpretation of reality.*" Here, the omission of eyes in Modigliani's figures stresses that vision transcends the physical and becomes a mechanism of meaning-making. Modigliani rejects a direct relationship between gaze and object. Instead, by leaving eyes incomplete, he compels viewers to project their own perspectives. This mirrors Žižek's theory that the absence of eyes forces the audience to complete the figures and generate meaning through their subjective gaze.

Modigliani's statement to Jeanne — "*If I'm lucky one day, I'll paint your eyes... When I truly see you, I'll paint them*" — reveals that eyes are not mere physical traits but entities tied to perception and spiritual wholeness. Resonating with John Berger's theory, the unfinished eyes signify that seeing is not purely optical but a process of meaning creation: "*Although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image also depends on our own way of seeing*" (Berger, 2017, p. 10). Modigliani's gaze is not superficial; his figures can only be completed once he fully perceives their souls. The incomplete or absent eyes in his works compel viewers to engage not just with visual surfaces but to actively participate in constructing meaning.

### **Philosophical Dimensions of the Incomplete Eye**

At this point, the foundational ideas presented in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* can be directly connected to Modigliani's art and to the film's focus on the motif of the eye. Berger explains that seeing is not only a physical act but one shaped by cultural, historical and ideological contexts. To see means more than perceiving the physical presence of an object, it involves

participating in a process of meaning making. According to Berger, the act of seeing is never neutral because social norms, art history, power relations and the personal experiences of the viewer all determine how images are interpreted (Berger, 2017). From this perspective, Modigliani's decision to leave eyes absent or partially complete in his portraits parallels Berger's theory of ways of seeing. The incomplete eyes in Modigliani's figures invite the viewer to project their own meanings onto the work. Berger also emphasizes that seeing is not fixed but continuously shaped by changing conditions. As an individual's visual experience develops, their ability to interpret reality gains more depth and complexity. In this sense, perception becomes a fundamental tool for understanding the external world and operates as a crucial element of visual interpretation (Berger, 1998). Thus, seeing should not be understood as passively accepting the reality offered by the artist but rather as an active process formed through the viewer's own visual experiences. The film's dialogues about sight highlight not only romantic expression but also Modigliani's artistic philosophy and his belief in the role of the gaze in revealing truth. For him, eyes are both the windows to the innermost soul and the foundation of a complete portrait.

To create visual impact, the intentional use of design elements in harmony strengthens the desired effect (Karaalioğlu, 2025). As Klee (2010) notes, the autonomy of form and color relationships can direct perception and emotional effect. In this regard, the prominence of the eye as a motif underscores the importance of design processes. Visual composition, color, and form relationships amplify expressive power, shaping the intended emotional resonance with the audience. The artist's studio and living space in the film are not merely physical backdrops but multi-layered narrative tools reflecting his psychological and social conditions. These scenes offer viewers a profound glimpse into both the artist's creative process and inner world.

Modigliani's attempt to paint Jeanne Hébuterne's first portrait is not only an artistic beginning but also reveals the metaphorical weight he assigns to the act of seeing. The most striking feature of Modigliani's portrait of Jeanne Hébuterne is that although the facial features are clearly rendered, the eyes are represented only as faint traces. This deliberate omission creates a deep uneasiness in the viewer. Jeanne's question '*Where are my eyes?*' reveals not only the incompleteness of the painting, but also a deep questioning of the metaphysical dimensions of the act of seeing. Modigliani's response, '*I couldn't see very far away. When I see the real you, I will make your eyes,*' reflects the artist's quest to grasp the essence of his model. This approach treats the eyes not only as an anatomical element but also as a reflection of the soul. Modigliani's decision

to leave the eyes for later emphasises the importance of the inner connection in the process of artistic creation. The viewer is invited to fill this conscious void with their own interpretations, becoming part of the artist's endeavour to grasp reality. This technique symbolises both an incompleteness and a desire for completion in Modigliani's art. The absence of eyes can be read as the visual expression of the artist's endeavour to reach the spiritual depth of the figures (Martinez & Davis, 2004). The spatial design of Modigliani's studio reveals the difficulties the artist experienced and the conditions that shaped his artistic production. This studio is not only a background, but also a reflection of Modigliani's living conditions and material difficulties. While the dark and disorganised space visualises the turbulence of his creative process, the use of light and shadow reveals the psychological states of the characters. Jeanne's half-lit face reflects the mystery of her relationships. This spatial design embodies both Modigliani's life struggle and his artistic vision.

Picasso's exhibition scene in the film reveals the difference in approach of the two artists through the eyes. The empty eyes in Modigliani's *Seated Nude* (1917) reflects his spiritual search. The realistic eyes in Picasso's portrait of Jeanne refer to his academic background. This contrast emphasises the fundamental difference between Picasso's early realist style and Modigliani's subtractive approach. The two different representations of Jeanne show the radical difference in the way the artists perceived the model. The artistic relationship between Modigliani and Picasso exhibits a dynamic of mutual nourishment despite fundamental differences. Picasso's artistic evolution is shaped in a spectrum ranging from classical realism to the Cubist approach he developed in 1907. Picasso's approach, which analytically dissects reality with cubism, contrasts markedly with Modigliani's expressionist style, which focuses on the spiritual depths of the figures. The film conveys Modigliani's creative process to the viewer through the streets of Paris and his studio spaces. The director often focuses on the artist's eyes and facial expressions, providing visual clues to his inner conflicts. These cinematic choices succeed in reflecting both Modigliani's artistic pursuits and his personal struggle in a multidimensional way. Camera movements and compositions convey the artist's worldview and the psychological dynamics of his creative process through a visual language (Martinez & Davis, 2004; Matthews, 1986). Eyes in the film evolve into a powerful metaphor for Modigliani's spiritual and artistic journey. Transcending mere physical detail, they become tools to mark transformative moments and deepen the narrative of his inner quest. Costumes and makeup further enrich this symbolism, tying visual elements to the film's thematic core.

In cinema, close-up techniques are a powerful tool for revealing the inner worlds of characters. Subtle details such as an actor's eye movements, gaze direction or eyelid tremors give the viewer deep clues about the character's psychological state. This technique not only presents a superficial image, but also embodies the character's inner conflicts, desires and anxieties. The camera follows the character's gaze, drawing the audience into the events. This approach transforms the eyes from a simple organ of vision into the cornerstone of the narrative. Thus, the act of gaze becomes central to both physical perception and emotional connection.

Costume design plays a pivotal role as a *mise-en-scène* element that amplifies the film's focus on eyes. Hats and headwear, for instance, are deliberately chosen to frame and accentuate the eyes, centering them within scenes to reflect characters' inner states. Similarly, makeup techniques—such as glossy or matte textures applied to the eyes—enhance emotional resonance. Moist eyes convey fragility, while dry, shadowed eyes signal emotional detachment. Through cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, the film constructs a narrative structure that continuously expands and transforms the symbolic meaning of eyes. Modigliani's approach to eyes symbolizes his desire to engage not just with the physical world but with spiritual and artistic dimensions.

While the director conveys the moments of the artists' completion of their works through the act of breaking a brush, Modigliani's throwing his brush into a wine bottle carries a deep meaning. This symbolic gesture does not represent the artist's escape from the creative process, but his confrontation with the chaos in his inner world. The wine bottle becomes both a means of escape and a part of Modigliani's creativity. The film reflects the formal deformations and perception of reality in Modigliani's art with surrealist techniques. The director pushes the boundaries of traditional narration to convey the artist's inner world, making the viewer a partner in Modigliani's unique perception of reality. This approach transfers the themes of incompleteness and completion in the artist's works into the language of cinema.

### **Surrealist Codes and the Metaphysical Eye**

Modigliani's art is deemed surrealist not for replicating reality but for filtering it through internal, spiritual, and intuitive lenses. Rejecting traditional figurative rules, he exaggerated forms and stylized facial features to foreground subconscious influences and his subjects' psyches. His elongated figures, slender necks, and unfinished or spiritually charged eyes reveal a quest to

explore inner worlds alongside physical reality. The mystical, metaphysical aura of his figures' eyes aligns with surrealism's introspective focus on spiritual existence.

Surrealist cinema transports audiences beyond the boundaries of rational thought into the fluid, often unresolved layers of the subconscious through imagery (Matthews, 1986). Rather than merely depicting visible reality, the film employs surrealist codes to foreground characters' subconscious and emotional worlds. Techniques like chiaroscuro lighting, tilted framing, and dreamlike or hallucinatory sequences align with the surrealist forms in Modigliani's paintings, crafting a cohesive visual language.

In this shared language of surrealism, both Modigliani's brush and the cinematic lens act as tools not just of representation but of revelation. What is shown on the canvas or screen is not meant to imitate the external world, but to translate what lies beneath it. The elongated figures and inward-looking eyes in Modigliani's portraits echo the fragmented, dreamlike qualities of surrealist film scenes, where light, shadow, and composition disrupt linear perception. These forms and methods do not aim to clarify but to evoke, inviting viewers into a space where the emotional and the symbolic take precedence over logic and realism.

### **From Visual Fragmentation to Ontological Unity**

The film's finale presents a visually and emotionally intense culmination that unites Modigliani and Jeanne Hébuterne in a shared destiny. Their all-night effort to finish the works prepared for the competition becomes a symbol not only of rivalry but also of a spiritual search and emotional exhaustion. In this decisive moment Modigliani completes Jeanne's portrait with fully realized and realistic eyes, which signifies a turning point. The careful depiction reveals his profound connection to Jeanne's soul and redefines the eyes as openings to inner depths rather than as simple facial elements. The film closes with a strong visual statement, suggesting that through these eyes their souls are finally able to see one another with complete clarity (Martinez & Davis, 2004). Jeanne Hébuterne's tragic end signifies a spiritual completion beyond physical existence. The completed eyes in Modigliani's last portrait symbolise that the unfinished bond in physical life has reached wholeness on a metaphysical plane. Death is not a rupture here; it is an ontological transition in which two souls gain the ability to '*see the invisible*'. Eye representations in the film are a dynamic semiotic tool reflecting the inner turmoil of the characters. The asymmetrical gaze, emphasised by the contrast of light and shadow, brings the conflict of consciousness and unconscious to the stage. For example, the darkness of one eye metaphorises repressed desires, while the brightness of the other metaphorises the inner search. Modigliani's missing eyes run

parallel to the characters' struggle for identity in the film. The ambiguity in the portraits is replaced by wholeness in the final scene as the light envelops the entire composition. This transformation reminds us of the power of art to *'record not the visible but the invisible.'*

The eyes, which are completed at the end of the film, symbolise the unification of the characters on the metaphysical plane rather than an artistic detail. This visual completion indicates that the souls establish a pure dialogue beyond bodily boundaries. Here, the eye becomes a tool that carries not only the gaze but also the ontological unity of the two selves. The climax of the narrative is embodied in this dual function of the eye (seeing and merging). The transformation of Modigliani and Jeanne's eyes is an allegory of existence that extends beyond physical existence. The eye is no longer an optical organ. The eye also acts as a bridge capable of intuiting truth, absolutising love and redefining existence. This cinematic language confronts the viewer with the power of art to *'make the invisible visible'* and presents death not as an end but as an aesthetic and metaphysical continuity.

### **Findings**

The analysis reveals that the eye functions as a powerful and multi-dimensional symbol in both the cinematic and painterly contexts. In Modigliani's art, eyes often remain unfinished or deliberately vague. This artistic choice opens a space where the viewer is invited to complete the portrait through emotional and intellectual engagement. Rather than presenting a closed meaning, the incomplete gaze creates an atmosphere of ambiguity, suggesting that the inner world of the subject cannot be fully grasped through visual realism alone. Similarly, the film *Modigliani* employs close-ups, low lighting, and off-frame gazes to construct a narrative around emotional absence and psychological depth. The eyes of Jeanne Hébuterne, in particular, emerge as a central visual motif that reflects both vulnerability and strength. Her gaze functions not only as a personal expression but also as a visual code pointing to sacrifice, longing, and existential rupture. These visual strategies connect with Modigliani's own paintings, where the gaze becomes a site of tension between presence and absence.

Another key finding is that both cinema and painting position the viewer as an active interpreter. The eye is not simply shown as an object to be looked at, but as a means through which the viewer enters the emotional world of the character or the subject. The unfinished quality of the eyes creates a reflective space where meaning is co-produced. This effect is reinforced by symbolic lighting and framing techniques, which blur the line between reality and emotion. In sum, the study

suggests that the eye serves as a narrative bridge that links the interior world of the character with the perception of the viewer. Whether depicted through camera work or brush strokes, the gaze acts as a tool for emotional resonance, philosophical inquiry, and interpretive openness. This shared function across media reveals a deeper connection between cinema and painting and affirms the eye as a central element in the art of seeing, feeling, and understanding.

### **Conclusion**

This article reinterprets the dialectical relationship between art and cinema by focusing on the eye. Among the findings of the article, it is revealed that the eye is not only a tool of perception, but also an interface where cultural codes, subconscious conflicts and discourses of power intersect. This strategy transforms art from a one-way narrative to a collective interpretation practice, and moves the audience from a passive position to an active producer of meaning. Cinema reconstructs reality with the perspective of the camera that differs from the human eye. The exclusion or blurring of a character's eyes from the frame is not only an aesthetic choice, but also an act of power that compels the viewer to invent the meaning of the invisible. The gaps open up both a narrative and ideological field of struggle in the mind of the spectator. Here, the act of seeing turns into a silent commentary on 'what we should see', blurring the boundaries of art and cinema. The capacity of cinema to fix the viewer in an ideological position deciphers the power struggles behind the scenes. Emphasising a character's eyes with harsh light or making them disappear in the dark is a tool that transcends purely aesthetic concerns. These choices become a visual manifestation of gender roles and class tensions. The act of seeing here ceases to be a physiological act and becomes a political reading practice in which the viewer confronts unseen social hierarchies. By reflecting these layers, art pushes the audience to question 'beyond the visible'. This study reveals the function of eye contact as a multi-layered narrative language in art and cinema. Rather than an optical process, looking is drawing a map of meaning in which cultural memory, breaking points of collective consciousness and ideological discourses are intertwined. The deliberate incompleteness in the Modigliani film forces the viewer to interpret the incomplete, moving art from a static representation to a dynamic field of interaction.

This study reveals that the eye contact in cinema and painting is not a mere act of seeing, but a process through which meaning is actively constructed. In Modigliani's film, the eye is transformed from a physical element into a key that unlocks the characters' spiritual labyrinths. Here, art takes the viewer out of the position of a passive recipient and makes him/her a co-creator of interpretation. Cinema and painting use the eye as both a technical and symbolic interface.

Modigliani's missing eyes and cinema's manipulative frames reflect a fundamental paradox of art and make us reflect on the concept of seeing. Seeing is at once a discovery and an implicit imposition. The representations of the eye in the film embody the ambivalent nature of seeing. While the film reveals the inner conflicts of the characters, it also confronts the viewer with his/her own prejudices. Through this dialectic, art establishes a tense partnership between the two, leaving the meaning neither entirely to the artist nor entirely to the audience. In this context, the act of seeing evolves into a field of existential negotiation rather than an aesthetic experience.

This study's findings contribute to theoretical debates on the role of the eye in meaning-making while proposing new avenues for future research. For instance, examining the metaphorical and diegetic functions of the eye across film genres (documentary, experimental cinema, etc.) could expand the boundaries of visual storytelling. Similarly, comparative analyses of the representation of the eye in painting among artists such as René Magritte, known for his use of the eye as a window or metaphor, M.C. Escher with his detailed drawings combining the eye with geometric and optical illusions, Odilon Redon with his mythological and dreamlike eye images in his symbolist works, or Frida Kahlo with her large, sharp-eyed eyes reflecting intense emotions in her self-portraits, might reveal universal and personal codes embedded in these images. Investigating interdisciplinary interactions between cinema and painting, particularly through the lens of the eye motif, could deepen our understanding of visual art's narrative potential. Ultimately, such studies would enrich explorations of how humanity uses visual language to interpret itself and the world, emphasizing that seeing is not just aesthetic but philosophical, psychological, and sociopolitical.

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