

DECENTRALIZING THE GAZE: FEMINIST GAZE, INTERFACE, AND SPATIAL ORGANIZATION IN THE VR180 DOCUMENTARY SERIES *COURAGE TO QUESTION*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how gaze is organized in VR180 documentary practice and how visual and spatial guidance operates as an implicit interface from a feminist perspective. It focuses on *Courage to Question* (2019), a four-part VR180 documentary series selected as a formally coherent yet internally varied corpus addressing women’s rights across different sociopolitical contexts. Using qualitative and interpretive close reading, the study analyzes three interconnected dimensions: the spatial organization of gaze, attention-directing strategies, and embodied spectatorship. Feminist subjectification functions as a cross-cutting interpretive criterion across these dimensions. The findings show that VR180 offers bounded perceptual exploration within a hemispherical field, while spatial composition, character placement, movement, textual inserts, direct address, subjective camera positions, editing, and spatial transitions continue to organize attention. Across the four episodes, women are positioned as producers of testimony, knowledge, collective action, and political claims, extending representation beyond victim-centered narratives. To explain this relationship, the study proposes the concept of the “semi-decentralized feminist gaze”. The concept describes a gaze regime in which perceptual authority is shared between the formal organization of the work and the viewer’s situated choices of looking. Its feminist significance emerges from the relation between spectatorship and the

subject positions produced by the documentary. The framework extends feminist questions of visual power to the spatial and interface-based conditions of VR180 spectatorship. It is proposed as a case-derived analytical framework, the broader applicability of which requires further research.

Keywords: *VR180 Documentary Production, Courage to Question, Interface Design, Semi-Decentralized Feminist Gaze, Embodied Spectatorship.*

BAKIŞI MERKEZSİZLEŞTİRMEK: VR180 BELGESEL DİZİSİ *COURAGE TO QUESTION* ÜZERİNDEN FEMİNİST BAKIŞ, ARAYÜZ VE MEKÂNSAL ORGANİZASYON

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, VR180 belgesel pratiğinde bakışın nasıl örgütlendiğini ve görsel-mekânsal yönlendirmenin feminist bir perspektiften örtük bir arayüz olarak nasıl işlediğini incelemektedir. Çalışma, farklı sosyopolitik bağlamlarda kadın haklarını ele alan, biçimsel açıdan tutarlı ve kendi içinde çeşitlilik gösteren dört bölümlük *Courage to Question* (2019) VR180 belgesel dizisine odaklanmaktadır. Nitel ve yorumlayıcı yakın okuma yöntemiyle bakışın mekânsal organizasyonu, dikkat yönlendirme stratejileri ve bedenlenmiş izleyicilik birbiriyle ilişkili üç analitik boyut olarak incelenmektedir. Feminist özneleşme ise bu boyutları kesen yorumlayıcı bir ölçüt olarak ele alınmaktadır. Bulgular, VR180'in yarımküresel görsel alan içinde sınırlı bir algısal keşif olanağı sunduğunu, mekânsal kompozisyon, karakter yerleşimi, hareket, metinsel eklemeler, doğrudan hitap, öznel kamera konumları, kurgu ve mekânsal geçişlerin dikkati örgütlemeyi sürdürdüğünü göstermektedir. Dört bölüm boyunca kadınlar, tanıklıklarını dile getiren, bilgi üreten, kolektif eylemde bulunan ve politik söylem geliştiren özneler olarak konumlandırılmaktadır. Böylece temsil mağduriyet merkezli anlatıların ötesine taşınmaktadır. Çalışma, bu ilişkiyi açıklamak amacıyla “yarı-merkezsiz feminist bakış” kavramını önermektedir. Kavram, algısal otoritenin yapının biçimsel örgütlenmesiyle izleyicinin konumlanmış bakış tercihleri arasında paylaşıldığı bir bakış rejimini tanımlamaktadır. Feminist boyut, izleyicilik deneyimiyle belgeselin ürettiği özne konumlandırmaları arasındaki ilişkide ortaya çıkmaktadır. Önerilen çerçeve, feminist görsel iktidar tartışmalarını VR180 izleyiciliğinin mekânsal ve arayüz temelli koşullarına genişletmektedir. Vakadan türetilen bu analitik çerçevenin

daha geniş ölçekte uygulanabilirliğinin farklı örnekler üzerinden araştırılması gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *VR180 Belgesel Yapımı, Courage to Question, Arayüz Tasarımı, Yarı-Merkezsiz Feminist Bakış, Bedenlenmiş İzleyicilik.*

INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital image production technologies are transforming the aesthetic, spatial, and experiential dimensions of cinematic narrative. Virtual reality (VR)-based moving-image productions, in particular, move the viewer from a fixed, external observer position to a subject positioned within space, physically and perceptually involved in the experience (Grau, 2003, p. 13; Slater, 2009, pp. 3549–3552). This transformation necessitates a rethinking of the fundamental concepts of classical cinema: framing, editing, and the gaze.

Current studies on VR experiences mostly focus on immersion, presence, and the production of empathy. The relational structure established with the interface and its connection to gender representations are discussed within a more limited framework (de la Peña et al., 2010, p. 291; Rose, 2018; Kazlauskaitė, 2023). The fundamental problem in this context is how the gaze is organized in VR filmmaking and how this organization functions as both an aesthetic and an interface mechanism. Particularly in VR experiences where the gaze is positioned within space and (sometimes partially) directed, the question of whether it is completely free or directed by specific visual arrangements becomes crucial.

In the current literature, the interface is often approached as a technical or software-based surface (Manovich, 2001). However, it is also emphasized that the interface is both a tool and a form of relationality (Galloway, 2012, p. 30; Hookway, 2014, p. 4). Drawing on this perspective, this study reconsiders the interface as an implicit visual organization that shapes the relation between gaze and image. In this sense, the interface is no longer confined to screens, controls, or technological mechanisms. Rather, it becomes an aesthetic arrangement that operates within the visual field itself. The guidance, limitation, and organization of the gaze constitute the fundamental mode of operation of this implicit interface.

Gender-related VR scholarship spans avatar-based self-presentation, embodiment, and social interaction (Freeman & Maloney, 2021; Zhang & Juvrud, 2024), as well as gendered differences in VR experience associated with

headset design and cybersickness (Stanney et al., 2020). Related studies on body ownership and perceptual placement, in particular, show that the viewer becomes a spatially positioned subject in the VR environment (Slater et al., 2010; Kiltner et al., 2012, p. 374). Although viewer position and witnessing have been discussed in VR documentary and narrative studies, the organization of the gaze as an interface structure remains underexplored (Nash, 2018, p. 120; Dooley, 2017). For example, Wei et al. (2025) examined how participant gender, avatar gender, and narrative gender affect gaze preferences in VR film education. Their findings indicate that female participants using female avatars were more likely to adopt what the authors describe as a “female gaze”, favoring soft lighting and emotionally oriented shots (Wei et al., 2025). However, this literature largely focuses on the dimensions of experience, interaction, and representation. In this context, conceptualizing the gaze as an interface structure and addressing the limited gaze regime offered by the VR180 format through a feminist perspective are the focus of this study.

Feminist film theory has demonstrated that the viewer's position is not neutral by revealing the ideological nature of the gaze (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). This approach reveals how visual arrangement relates to gender, while later studies have discussed the connection between the gaze and processes of representation, identity, and subjectification (Doane, 1982, p. 82; Kaplan, 1983, p. 29). Although this theoretical framework was largely developed within the context of classical cinema, VR environments, in which the viewer is physically positioned within space, have also been examined within the scope of feminist science and technology studies (Egliston & Carter, 2021, p. 4). Kate Euphemia Clark (2025) argues that the relationships between body, technology, and subjectification in VR experiences need to be rethought through a gender lens. In this context, additional theoretical approaches that address the relationship between the gaze and the interface are needed for VR production.

This study, building upon these findings, combines feminist film theory, phenomenological approaches to spectatorship (Sobchack, 1992, p. 67), and interface theory to propose the concept of a “semi-decentralized feminist gaze” as an analytical framework for explaining the organization of the gaze in the VR180 experience. The concept describes a viewing condition in which the viewer has a degree of perceptual freedom, while the visual field remains shaped by the technological limits of VR180, spatial organization, attentional cues, and individual choices of looking. Its feminist dimension is related to the way women are positioned within this viewing structure as subjects who speak, produce knowledge, and articulate political agency, rather than being defined primarily through their visibility within the image. The gaze regime is therefore approached

as an aesthetic, spatial, and technological relationship that shapes where the viewer can look, how attention is organized, and how the viewer is positioned within the experience. The analysis develops around three axes: the spatial organization of gaze, attention-directing strategies, and embodied spectatorship. The theoretical scope of the concept is discussed in greater detail in the literature review, while its analytical use is specified in the methodology.

The study focuses on the following research questions:

1. In the VR180 documentary format, through which visual strategies is the gaze guided as an interface structure?
2. How can the limited gaze regime offered by the VR180 format be interpreted from the perspective of feminist theory?

Courage to Question (2019) was selected purposively according to criteria directly related to the research questions. The series is particularly suitable for the analysis because its four episodes were produced within the same VR180 project and therefore constitute a formally coherent corpus in which recurrent strategies of gaze organization can be compared. At the same time, the episodes address different geographical and sociopolitical contexts while sharing a thematic focus on women's rights, testimony, political agency, and social transformation. The series also employs a range of visual-spatial strategies, including character placement, direct address, subjective camera positions, textual inserts, compositional emphasis, and transitions between individual and collective spaces. These characteristics allow the study to compare how perceptual exploration and narrative guidance operate across different narratives while the technological format remains relatively consistent. The case is therefore used not to generalize its formal characteristics to all VR180 documentaries, but to examine the analytical potential of the proposed framework through a formally coherent yet internally varied corpus.

Unlike 360° VR experiences that provide a spherical visual field, the VR180 format offers a limited, directed field of view (Banchi et al., 2020). While the visual field in 360° VR environments can, in theory, extend in every direction (Li et al., 2019, p. 1), VR180 narrows this field through a hemispherical frame. As a result, the viewer's gaze does not move within a completely unrestricted space. Rather, it is positioned and guided by a specific visual arrangement (Murray, 2017, p. 132). In this respect, VR180 differs from the broader spatial freedom associated with VR360 (Dooley, 2017). It creates a hybrid form that stands

between classical cinematic framing and spatially explorable viewing, where the gaze is neither entirely fixed nor entirely free.

Methodologically, this study is based on a qualitative and interpretive close reading of the episodes. It focuses on elements such as framing, spatial limitations, character placement, subjective camera use, textual elements, and compositional emphasis to examine how looking is shaped by visual and spatial arrangements. Throughout the study, the terms “viewer” and “spectator” refer to the perceptual position constructed by the formal and spatial organization of the work rather than to empirically measured responses of individual users. Accordingly, the study does not claim that all viewers respond to these strategies in the same way. Instead, it analyzes the possibilities, constraints, and orientations constructed by the documentaries themselves. Through this approach, the study aims to make visible the relationship among interface, gaze, spatial organization, and gender representation in VR180 documentary practice. It seeks to contribute to the dialogue between VR studies and feminist film theory by conceptualizing gaze as an interface structure and by developing the “semi-decentralized feminist gaze” as an analytical framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines the hybrid position of VR180 between conventional cinematic framing and spatially explorable viewing, focusing on the aesthetic consequences of its limited visual field. Existing VR research has largely approached immersive experience through concepts such as presence, embodiment, participation, and user agency, while the question of how the hemispherical field of VR180 structures and limits gaze has received comparatively less attention. Mel Slater’s concepts of “place illusion” and “plausibility illusion” explain how users experience virtual environments as perceptually credible spaces (2009, pp. 3549–3552). Similarly, Nonny de la Peña et al. discuss VR through immersive journalism and emphasize the viewer’s experiential and emotional participation (2010, pp. 291–293). These approaches provide important accounts of presence and participation, but they do not directly explain how gaze is organized within a bounded visual field or how this organization intersects with gendered relations of looking. The following discussion, therefore, considers embodiment, witnessing, attention guidance, interface, and feminist film theory as complementary perspectives on this problem.

VR experience, as both bodily and perceptual, has developed in relation to embodiment studies. In the bodily experience of VR, Konstantina Kiltēni, Raphaēla Groten, and Mel Slater show that the viewer is physically in the experience in terms of self-location, agency, and body ownership (2012, pp. 373–376). This marks an important shift because it positions the viewer as a subject in space rather than as a disembodied point of view. In a similar way, work on body ownership illusions by Mel Slater and colleagues suggests that putting users in different bodies changes perception and behavior (2010, pp. 1–2). These studies turn the viewer away from the disembodied eye and into an embodied subject in VR. Yet while embodiment studies redefine the viewer’s position, they do not fully explain how the gaze is organized visually.

In VR narrative and documentary studies, the transformation of the viewer’s position is discussed through the concepts of witnessing and participation. Kate Nash defines the VR documentary experience as “immersive witnessing”, arguing that the viewer is not merely a spectator, but a subject ethically and emotionally positioned within the narrative (2018, pp. 119–122). This approach reframes witnessing as an ethically charged relation of mediated presence, in which the viewer is brought into proximity with represented others without collapsing the distance that separates their experiences. However, this framework primarily addresses how the viewer’s gaze is directed at an ethical and experiential level. Kath Dooley, on the other hand, states that in VR narrative practices, viewer attention is directed through visual composition, movement, and sound (2017). This finding problematizes the idea of free gazing offered by VR, demonstrating that the viewer’s experience is still aesthetically structured. However, while these studies define the mechanisms of direction, they do not conceptualize them as an interface organization. Mandy Rose (2018) similarly approaches VR as a visual technology capable of producing bodily engagement rather than simply as an escapist medium. Studies conducted in Türkiye similarly focus on aspects of VR that transform the viewer’s gaze and discuss the effects of this technology on cinematic narrative. Technology transforms the relationship that documentary cinema establishes with reality from merely representational to a constitutive element that constructs the viewer’s spatial experience (Aytaç & Dönmez, 2024; Çankır, 2024, p. 278). This is because the transformative nature of VR and 360° films individualizes the collective viewing experience, placing the viewer in the position of an active user (Dönmez & Erkiçi, 2018, p. 41). This transformation increases the viewer’s control over the narrative space, reshaping the director-centric perspective of traditional cinema towards a spatial exploration process (Çankır, 2024, p. 288; Dönmez & Erkiçi, 2018). However, when this exploration process confronts the limited visual plane of VR180, the

viewer's absolute dominance over the narrative gives way to an aesthetically restricted selectivity (Cantekin, 2023, p. 7).

Interface theory provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between users and systems. Lev Manovich defines the interface as a system that organizes the representation of cultural data (2001, pp. 65–71). Alexander R. Galloway, on the other hand, considers the interface not merely a surface but a form of relationality, emphasizing the interaction between the user and the system (2012, pp. 25–30). Branden Hookway expands this discussion by conceptualizing the interface as a way of thinking that structures experience (2014, pp. 3–7). However, these studies largely proceed through technical systems, software, and user interaction. The interface is not considered an aesthetic organization operating within the visual field. The concept of “implicit interface”, which is central to this study, is reinterpreted based on approaches that emphasize that implicit interactions occur without the user's explicit request or awareness (Ju & Leifer, 2008). In XR research, gaze-based interaction can involve systems that respond to users' gaze behavior without requiring explicit commands (Plopski et al., 2023). In this study, however, “implicit interface” refers to an aesthetic condition in which the gaze is spatially directed and constrained, rather than to a technical interaction mechanism. This organization of the gaze is related to attention redirection strategies in the VR field (Rothe et al., 2019). These strategies, classified by Sylvia Rothe et al. (2019), are systematic methods used to manage the viewer's attention in cinematic VR environments. These approaches make it possible to consider attention guidance as a form of interface organization and to ask how such organization spatially positions the viewer.

Rather than remaining a passive recipient in the narrative space, the viewer becomes an observer who negotiates their own perspective within a limited field of movement. In this framework, the interface is no longer a fixed boundary. Instead, it functions as a dynamic, relational encounter space between the human body and technology. Thus, the VR180 visual layout technically limits the gaze. But this limitation also produces a particular kind of experiential relationality. Within this restricted field, the interface operates less as a visible technical layer than as a visual organization embedded in space itself. VR180 recasts the director-centered framing of traditional cinema as a device-body interaction in which the viewer's bodily presence is in dialogue with the technological interface (Bender, 2018; Clark, 2025; Rainoldi, 2022). These spatial constraints do not eliminate conventional cinematic framing. They also shift the viewer from a perspective largely conditioned by the director's framing into a more interactive field of experience, where the viewer constructs their own space of discovery

(Kim, 2021; Rainoldi, 2022). The restrictive structure of VR180 thus creates layers of viewing. The gaze is spatially oriented, but each viewer encounters the narrative space differently.

At this point, interface design transcends a simple technical tool, functioning as an aesthetic medium that governs the experience of the gaze and shapes the sense of presence (Rainoldi, 2022, pp. 249–250; Rose, 2018). The precise organization of visual cues directs the gaze's attention while allowing for a limited but personalized process of discovery (Bender, 2018). Therefore, this design approach, which challenges the myth of absolute user control in VR, reveals a positioned form of interaction where the viewer's body and the limitations of the interface are intertwined; this, when considered from a feminist perspective that questions traditional power relations, enables a more complex process of subjectification (Clark, 2025).

Recent studies on the use of avatars and gender performances in VR environments show that users re-experience their gender identities, in addition to being represented through digital bodies (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024). This indicates that, in VR experiences, the subject moves from a position that is constantly reproduced through bodily and technological mediations rather than from a fixed identity position. It has also been shown that the processes of subjectification in VR environments are shaped by the identification relationships that users establish with avatars. Guo Freeman and Divine Maloney show how users negotiate self-presentation and self-perception through avatar-based interaction in social VR (2021, p. 3). VR studies in the context of gender primarily focus on identity, representation, and embodiment processes. Studies have shown that immersing oneself in different bodies has transformative effects on perceptions and attitudes (Banakou et al., 2016, pp. 2–5; Peck et al., 2013, pp. 780–783). These studies strongly highlight the identity and representational dimensions of VR but leave the question of how the viewer's gaze is visually organized and directed secondary. Therefore, this literature offers a limited discussion on the structural organization of gaze.

These discussions also point to the role of representational technologies in shaping visual power relations (Dönmez & Erkölcü, 2018, p. 54; Wagner & Blewer, 2019, p. 35). In VR180, technological limitations, perceptual agency, and gendered representation operate in relation to one another. Viewer agency depends on the conditions through which looking is organized and on the position assigned to represented subjects within this visual structure. Questions of visibility, voice, knowledge, and political agency become part of the same spatial relation between viewer, interface, and represented subject. This perspective

connects the spatial organization of spectatorship in VR180 with feminist critiques of visual power.

Feminist film theory has long examined visual representation as a site where power relations are produced and maintained. In VR environments, these relations also take shape through the technological and spatial conditions that organize how the viewer encounters the visual field. The hemispherical boundaries of VR180 can be understood as an aesthetic intervention space that structures the viewer's bodily presence through a technological interface, enabling bodily engagement while also defining its limits. This approach, by contrasting with the technological optimism of VR, often referred to as an empathy machine and frequently assuming a universal subject, requires us to develop more agile and critical frameworks that will allow us to understand how the viewer's experience is shaped by gender, spatial positioning, and historical contexts (Clark, 2025; Rose, 2018). The tension between technological possibilities and the viewer's bodily subjectivity also suggests that VR180 narratives can function as political spaces in which regimes of visual power are renegotiated (Bertrand & Salter, 2024, p. 119). In this context, Laura Mulvey's (1975) conceptualization of the male gaze in traditional cinema constitutes a fundamental theoretical reference point for analyzing power regimes in which looking is organized through an active/male and passive/female division and the female figure is positioned as an object of visual pleasure. However, the VR environment, by making the viewer a physical presence within this represented world, allows for a re-evaluation of the frame-centric gaze relations of classical cinema.

Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological viewer approach (1992) allows us to question the subject-object duality in film theory by redefining the viewer as a producer of bodily and sensory meaning integral to the cinematic experience, rather than merely a visual receiver. This approach enables us to conceptualize the spatial constraints experienced by the viewer through the technological interface as a process of bodily subjectification. Feminist film theory and phenomenology offer complementary perspectives on the VR180 experience. Feminist film theory draws attention to the ideological and gendered organization of looking, while phenomenology helps explain the viewer as a spatially and sensorially situated subject. In this context, the camera's point of view is reconceptualized as an ontological domain that defines the subject's spatial existence, going beyond a technical function. In VR environments, the user becomes a subject positioned within the experience and physically relating to their environment (Sobchack, 1992; Clark, 2025). This situation directly integrates the perception of the visual field with bodily experience, while also

strengthening the experience of presence, allowing the viewer to feel as if they are actually there within the narrative space (Rose, 2018, pp. 138–140). Thus, the gaze gains meaning as the way the subject spatially and sensorially settles into the world (Rainoldi, 2022; Sobchack, 1992).

Taken together, the literature reviewed above explains several important dimensions of VR spectatorship but leaves their intersection in VR180 documentary practice less clearly defined. Feminist film theory has shown how gaze is shaped by ideological and gendered relations, although its foundational formulations were developed primarily in relation to frame-bound cinematic spectatorship (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 1982; Kaplan, 1983). Phenomenological approaches explain the viewer's embodied and spatial relation to the image (Sobchack, 1992), while cinematic VR research demonstrates that perceptual exploration can remain aesthetically guided (Dooley, 2017; Rothe et al., 2019). Interface theory provides a relational account of how users are positioned in relation to technological systems (Galloway, 2012; Hookway, 2014). What remains less clearly explained is how these conditions operate together in a format such as VR180, where the viewer is spatially situated and perceptually mobile within a bounded visual field while gaze remains subject to aesthetic guidance and gendered relations of representation.

The concept of the “semi-decentralized feminist gaze” is proposed to address this intersection. Semi-decentralization describes a distribution of perceptual authority between the formal organization of the work and the viewer's situated choices of looking. The gaze can move within the hemispherical visual field, but this movement remains conditioned by the technological limits of VR180 and by compositional emphasis, character placement, movement, editing, textual inserts, direct address, and subjective camera positions. The feminist dimension concerns the relationship between this organization of looking and forms of subjectification in which women are positioned as producers of testimony, knowledge, political discourse, and collective agency. In this formulation, the presence of women within the image or the gender of the filmmaker is insufficient on its own to establish a feminist gaze. What matters is the relation between the organization of spectatorship and the subject positions produced by the work.

The proposed framework connects feminist theories of gaze with research on embodiment, attention guidance, and interface in order to examine the coexistence of bounded spatial exploration, aesthetic guidance, embodied spectatorship, and feminist subjectification in VR180 documentary practice. It is used here as a case-derived analytical framework rather than as a universal model

of VR180 or feminist immersive media. The methodology specifies the analytical indicators through which this framework is examined across the four episodes of *Courage to Question* (2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative and interpretive close reading to examine how gaze is organized in VR180 documentary practice, how visual and spatial guidance operates as an interface, and how these arrangements can be interpreted through feminist theory. The corpus consists of the four-part VR180 documentary series *Courage to Question* (2019), produced by Google, filmed by an all-female team, and directed by Megan Sullivan: *Ep 1: Chief Kachindamoto*, *Ep 2: Lydia Cacho*, *Ep 3: Asha Kowtal*, and *Ep 4: Alice Marie Johnson* (Saada Saar, 2019; Albrink, n.d.; UN Women, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e). The episodes address different forms of gender inequality and political struggle while using the same VR180 format, allowing recurrent and varying strategies of gaze organization to be examined within a coherent corpus.

The study employs close reading as its primary method. Using this approach, the examined series was considered an interpretive text with visual and auditory codes from which meaning is produced in a cultural context (McKee, 2003, pp. 4–5). It also allows analysis of the series' form as a function of framing, spatial organization, visual composition, and sound use (Bordwell et al., 2019). During the analysis process, the representational forms of visual materials, meaning-making processes, and cultural contexts were also considered (Rose, 2001, pp. 25–26).

The four episodes were watched repeatedly to find common strategies of gaze organization, including spatial framing, character placement, camera movement, textual inserts, direct address, subjective camera use, compositional emphasis, editing, and spatial transitions. The analysis focused on scenes in which the viewer's gaze appeared to be directed by spatial arrangement, narrative emphasis, or visual composition. Rather than measuring audience reception empirically, the study examines the textual, aesthetic, and spatial structures that direct the viewer's gaze. Claims about spectatorship in this study refer to the viewing position constructed by the work, not to the actual responses of individual viewers. Table 1 summarizes the analytical scope of the study and the main gaze strategies identified in each episode.

Table 1.
Analytical Scope of Courage to Question (2019) Episodes

Episode	Main Subject	Main Theme	Key Gaze Strategies
Chief Kachindamoto Duration: 6:30	Child marriage	Education and social transformation	Classroom framing, village square, young mother figure, circular narrative structure
Lydia Cacho Duration: 5:39	Human trafficking and journalism	Survival, testimony, and solidarity	Mirror scene, reenactment, subjective camera, circle composition, direct address
Asha Kowtal Duration: 5:23	Dalit women’s rights	Caste-based discrimination and collective resistance	Public space, bus scene, textual inserts, banners, collective spaces
Alice Marie Johnson Duration: 7:11	Mass incarceration	Imprisonment, liberation, and social reintegration	Prison corridor, cell space, subjective movement, direct address, homecoming

The recurring strategies identified across the episodes were organized into three formal analytical dimensions, with feminist subjectification treated as a cross-cutting interpretive criterion. Table 2 presents the indicators used to apply this framework across the four episodes.

Table 2.

Operationalization of the Semi-Decentralized Feminist Gaze

Analytical dimension	Indicators examined
Spatial organization of gaze	Hemispherical limitation, framing, subject placement, spatial transitions, organization of the visual field
Attention-directing strategies	Movement, compositional emphasis, textual inserts, direct address, subjective camera use, editing
Embodied spectatorship	Spatial proximity, point-of-view positioning, movement through represented space, witnessing
Cross-cutting feminist subjectification	Direct testimony, knowledge production, political speech, collective agency, movement beyond victim-centered representation

The three formal dimensions were examined together rather than as isolated categories. Feminist subjectification was treated as a cross-cutting criterion because its significance emerges through the interaction of spatial organization, attention guidance, and embodied spectatorship. This structure allows the proposed framework to connect formal organization with the positions constructed for women as speaking, knowing, and politically acting subjects.

Sound was considered during repeated viewing because auditory cues can contribute to attention guidance and spatial orientation in cinematic VR (Dooley, 2017, pp. 167–169). No sufficiently consistent sound-based strategy was identified across the four episodes to support systematic comparison as a separate analytical dimension. For this reason, sound is treated as part of the contextual audiovisual experience, while the comparative analysis concentrates on the visual and spatial strategies directly related to the research questions. A systematic analysis of spatial audio falls outside the scope of the present study.

The “semi-decentralized feminist gaze” is used in the analysis as a relational framework connecting these formal and interpretive dimensions. The examination focuses on how bounded spatial exploration, aesthetic guidance, embodied positioning, and feminist subjectification interact within each episode. The framework is applied by examining recurring formal strategies and their relationship to the positions constructed for the viewer and the represented subject.

DECENTRALIZING THE GAZE IN VR180 DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

Courage to Question (2019) is a four-part VR180 documentary series produced by Google in collaboration with UN Women and Vital Voices for International Women's Day (Saada Saar, 2019; UN Women, 2019a). The project aims to make visible the experiences of activists fighting for women's rights across the world and amplify their voices to a wider audience through innovative storytelling technologies (Saada Saar, 2019; UN Women, 2019a). Filmed by an all-female team, the series was directed by Megan Sullivan, and all episodes and the trailer were edited by Shannon Albrink (Albrink, n.d.). The series focuses on the stories of Senior Chief Theresa Kachindamoto, who fights child marriage in Malawi; Lydia Cacho, a journalist and activist working against human trafficking and sexual exploitation in Mexico; Asha Kowtal, a representative of the Dalit women's movement in India; and Alice Marie Johnson, who fights against mass incarceration policies in the United States (Saada Saar, 2019).

The series focuses on gender inequality, systemic discrimination, human rights violations, and women's forms of resistance. It aims to place the viewer within the everyday lives and struggles of these women. Through the semi-spherical visual space of VR180, the viewer is positioned as a witness within the narrative, as well as an outsider looking in. For this reason, *Courage to Question* (2019) offers a useful case study for examining how VR180 organizes the gaze, shapes embodied experience, and opens a space for feminist viewing.

SPATIAL ORGANIZATION OF GAZE

In the *Courage to Question* (2019) series, the VR180 format creates a hybrid visual space between traditional cinematic framing and the broader spatial exploration of 360° VR. The viewer can redirect attention and examine environmental details, while the hemispherical field limits the range of possible exploration and helps preserve narrative emphasis. In this hybrid configuration, VR180 maintains a particular relation between viewer agency and cinematic framing. Space functions as more than a represented setting; it participates in structuring the viewer's experience (Rainoldi, 2022, p. 242). In *Courage to Question* (2019), spatial organization also operates as an experiential interface that shapes how the viewer encounters the visual field. This organization positions the viewer in relation to characters, environments, and narrative events (Galloway, 2012).

The episode focusing on Senior Chief Theresa Kachindamoto builds its spatial structure around education and social change (UN Women, 2019b). The documentary begins in a classroom, where a female student stands at the blackboard while other students sit at their desks. The viewer can look around the classroom and notice the students, objects, and details of the space. Yet the hemispherical frame keeps the gaze within the classroom and keeps it from leaving the main narrative focus. The documentary then proceeds on a local bus ride. The roads, the rural landscape, and the route to the village put the story in its social context. After that, it switches to different spaces, such as the village square, residential areas, and aerial views of the village. At the end, the return to the classroom makes the documentary circular. These transitions also reorganize the viewer's field of exploration. Each cut introduces a new bounded spatial field while establishing new points of narrative attention within the hemispherical frame. The return to the classroom gives it a symbolic role within the episode, linking education to the struggle against child marriage. As Servet Can Dönmez and Hakan Erkılıç note, VR experiences place the viewer inside the represented world and increase a sense of spatial closeness (2018, pp. 49–50). In this episode, the school, village, and public spaces are experienced from within, bringing the viewer into closer spatial relation with the represented social environment.

The episode about journalist Lydia Cacho is organized around childhood, journalism, and solidarity (UN Women, 2019c). It opens in a child's room, where a young girl stands in front of a mirror. The viewer can notice details such as a pink toy rabbit, colorful bed linens, a bag hanging on the wall, and other toys in the room. Although the viewer can look around the space, the composition keeps the girl at the center of attention as she faces the mirror. The narrative then shifts to various urban spaces that Cacho travels by car. As the process of combating human trafficking unfolds, call centers, safe shelters, shared living spaces, and computer rooms become visible. The shelter is represented as both a social environment where women's empowerment processes take place and a physical space that provides protection. According to Gillian Rose (2001), visual representations generate meaning from the cultural and spatial relationships surrounding them. In the Lydia episode, the spatial structure extending from the child's room to the shelter creates a meaning-producing organization that makes visible the relationship between individual experience and collective solidarity.

In the Asha Kowtal episode, spatial organization is established through the visibility of caste-based discrimination in daily life in India (UN Women, 2019d). In the opening scene, markets, streets, and public spaces are represented as social spaces from which Dalit women are excluded. Then, the environment in which Dalit women live becomes visible through local buses, rural settlements, and

everyday living spaces. Later in the documentary, domestic spaces reflecting impoverished living conditions, rooms where education is provided, and meeting areas where women gather are shown. Training scenes in the courtyard of an old building and interior spaces where women prepare for protests make the contrast between oppression and resistance visible on a spatial level. The viewer can redirect attention within these spaces, focusing on different people and environmental details. However, the narrative structure constantly redirects the gaze back to the social conditions in which Dalit women live. As Mesut Batuhan Çankır states, VR environments place the user within the represented environment (2024, p. 288). In the Kowtal episode, the viewer is positioned within this social environment instead of observing the living conditions of Dalit women from afar.

In the Alice Marie Johnson episode, the spatial structure is established through the transformation between imprisonment and liberation (UN Women, 2019e). The documentary opens with a scene of a bus entering the prison complex. The gaze is placed within a subjective perspective moving towards the prison area. Security areas, corridors, and prison structures become visible from the very beginning. As Johnson's narration continues, small cells, common living areas, and prison corridors are shown, allowing the viewer to experience the boundaries of prison space. As the narrative progresses, the spatial organization changes. Car journeys, public spaces, and finally the family home become the new spaces of the narrative. This transition from prison spaces to the home environment reveals freedom as both a legal decision and a spatial transformation. Editing reinforces this transformation by replacing the prison's restrictive spatial field with progressively more open domestic and public environments. Each transition reorganizes the bounded VR180 field and changes the viewer's spatial relation to Johnson's experience. Kate Euphemia Clark (2025) argues that the relationship between body and space is restructured in VR experiences. In the Johnson episode, the viewer also encounters this transformation from imprisonment to freedom through different spatial layers.

Across the four episodes, spatial organization produces different forms of bounded exploration. Kachindamoto's story moves between the classroom, the village, and public space; Cacho's episode connects private memory with shelters and spaces of collective solidarity; Kowtal's narrative distributes attention across public, domestic, and activist environments; and Johnson's episode moves from confinement toward progressively more open spaces. These variations show how VR180 reshapes cinematic framing through a sequence of spatial fields that remain open to limited exploration. The viewer can move perceptually within

these environments, while the work continues to define the spatial range and narrative orientation of that movement.

ATTENTION GUIDANCE AND THE IMPLICIT INTERFACE

Although VR180 allows a degree of perceptual exploration, attention remains aesthetically organized within its hemispherical field. Character placement, movement, compositional emphasis, textual inserts, direct address, subjective camera positions, and editing establish probable centers of attention without fixing the gaze to a single point. This organization can be understood through the concept of the implicit interface developed in this study. Wendy Ju and Larry Leifer (2008, p. 72) describe implicit interaction as a process that operates without explicit user commands, while Rothe et al. (2019, p. 17) show how cinematic VR uses attention-directing strategies to negotiate viewer agency and narrative control. Editing is particularly significant in VR180 because a cut replaces one bounded field of possible exploration with another. The viewer retains perceptual choice within each shot, but each transition reorganizes the available visual field and establishes a new spatial context for attention. In *Courage to Question* (2019), the implicit interface operates through visual and spatial arrangements that guide attention while preserving a limited degree of perceptual choice.

This orientation is clearly seen in the episode featuring Kachindamoto. In scenes depicting village life, the gaze can focus on individual characters and environmental details. However, the emotional center of the narrative is built around the figure of the thirteen-year-old mother holding her baby, standing in front of the girls gathered around the tree in the village square (UN Women, 2019b, 02:05–02:40). The subject's central positioning and the placement of the other figures within the composition constantly draw attention back to this point. While the gaze could theoretically focus on different children, the narrative emphasizes the young mother's experience. A similar orientation is seen in the initiation camp scenes (UN Women, 2019b, 03:27–04:01). The girls sitting inside the reed hut can be viewed from different angles, but, for example, in the next shot, the visual arrangement continually draws the gaze's attention to the children whose eyes are blindfolded. Thus, themes of child marriage, sexual abuse, and social pressure cease to be merely narrative subjects and become central to the visual organization. The scene exemplifies attention-guidance strategies of the kind classified by Rothe et al. (2019). The gaze retains a degree of choice, while compositional cues preserve the narrative's ethical focus.

In Cacho's episode, the redirection of attention operates through a more complex structure. The reenactment scenes used to narrate the stories of human trafficking victims create a subjective gaze organization that places the viewer within the events. The subjective camera arrangements used, particularly in the kidnapping and human trafficking scenes, remove the viewer from the position of an outside observer and place them within the experiential realm of the events. Thus, the gaze is directed and moved into a specific subjective position. In the segment where Cacho recounts her kidnapping experience, a scene is shown where a person is forcibly put into a vehicle (UN Women, 2019c, 01:15–01:31). Although the gaze can look in different directions within the image field, the direction of the characters' movements and the axis along which the event takes place constantly direct the flow of attention to the center of the experience of violence. A similar structure is seen in the story of the young girl kidnapped from Venezuela. Throughout the encounter on the street, the journey, the hotel room, and the process of exploitation, the viewer can examine environmental details, but the narrative structure constantly emphasizes the victim's experience. This is consistent with Galloway's (2012) approach, which defines the interface as a relational structure that shapes the user experience. Here, the interface functions as an invisible organization that determines the direction of the gaze. Later in the episode, during scenes of women forming a circle, attention shifts from individual stories to collective solidarity. The viewer can focus on the faces of different women, but the circular composition of the scene constantly draws the gaze back to the idea of shared struggle and support.

In the episode of Kowtal, the implicit interface becomes particularly evident in scenes where everyday discrimination is made visible. In the scenes where Dalit women boarding the bus are harassed by the stares of male passengers, the gaze can observe different passengers, but the placement and movement of the characters constantly redirect attention to the oppression faced by the women (UN Women, 2019d, 00:13–00:27). Similarly, the informative texts presented against a black background also enable the gaze to evaluate subsequent images within a specific interpretive framework. In this respect, the text layouts also function as part of the implicit interface. Later in the episode, in the room where women and children are preparing for a protest, a banner reading "Dalit Women Fight" forms a visual focal point (UN Women, 2019d, 03:56–04:07). Although the viewer can look at different people in the room, the composition constantly directs attention to this slogan, representing the common struggle. Thus, the narrative establishes an organization of attention that progresses from individual experiences to collective resistance.

In Johnson's episode, attention-directing strategies are structured around the prison experience. The subjective camera movements used to narrate Johnson's entry into prison guide the viewer through prison corridors, cells, and common areas (UN Women, 2019e, 00:56–01:28). These subjective camera movements, progressing through the prison corridors, also allow for an immersive experience of space. However, this freedom of movement is limited. The emotional center of the narrative is constantly linked to Johnson's experience. Especially in scenes showing the small cell, the gaze can shift to different points in the space. But the physical limitations of the confined area highlight a specific point. This illustrates a tension between viewer orientation and narrative control that has been discussed more broadly in cinematic VR research (Kim, 2021; Rothe et al., 2019). The black background information texts used throughout the segment connect Johnson's personal story to the wider issue of female incarceration. In this way, the viewer's attention shifts from an individual experience to a broader form of structural inequality. The moments when Johnson looks directly into the camera are also important (UN Women, 2019e, 05:50–06:23). As the camera moves closer to her face, the surrounding space becomes less prominent, and the gaze shifts directly to Johnson, the person carrying the narrative. The sequence demonstrates how attention in VR180 can be repeatedly re-centered without eliminating the viewer's ability to inspect the surrounding field.

The four episodes organize attention through different combinations of the same underlying relation between perceptual choice and aesthetic guidance. Kachindamoto uses character placement and compositional emphasis to maintain attention around child marriage; Cacho combines subjective reenactment, movement, and direct address to organize testimony; Kowtal uses textual inserts, slogans, and collective compositions to frame political resistance; and Johnson combines subjective movement, confined space, textual information, and direct address to connect imprisonment with political transformation. The implicit interface operates through different formal arrangements across the series, continually reorienting attention within the limited VR180 field.

EMBODIED SPECTATORSHIP AND FEMINIST REPOSITIONING

In the *Courage to Question* (2019) series, the viewer does more than simply gain information about social inequalities or witness specific events. Through the VR180 format, the viewer is spatially positioned in relation to the narrative, while perceptual proximity can intensify the experience of witnessing. According to Sobchack, the viewing experience is a sensory encounter established through the body (1992, p. 10). This bodily encounter, considered alongside the feminist film

theory approach that treats the gaze as an ideologically and socially positioned relationship of seeing (Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1983), demonstrates that the viewer's position in the VR180 experience is also a political issue. Jingyi Zhang and Joshua Juvrud (2024, pp. 5, 8) report that embodied and nonverbal interactions in social VR are associated with empathy, deeper social connection, increased presence and intimacy, and stronger emotional bonds between users. Together, these perspectives support an understanding of the viewer as a spatially situated witness to the struggles represented across the series.

In the episode of Kachindamoto, this situation becomes particularly visible through the representation of girls who are victims of child marriage. The thirteen-year-old girl carrying her baby (the young mother figure) directly confronts the viewer with this experience. Although the viewer can avert their gaze, the young mother's position within the scene creates a strong emotional connection. Similarly, in the initiation camp scenes within the cleansing tradition¹, the blindfolded girls do not leave the viewer in the position of an observer. They place them within the scene. The aim here is not so much the visual exposure of victimization, but rather to enable the viewer to confront the consequences of child marriage. In this respect, the episode supports the experience of bodily witnessing mentioned by Sobchack (1992). It invites the gaze to the position of an ethical witness. At the same time, girls are represented as individuals exposed to the effects of specific social structures. The episode also places Kachindamoto's intervention and the emphasis on girls' education alongside these scenes of victimization. Feminist subjectification emerges through the contrast between the social structures imposed on girls and the forms of political action presented as capable of transforming those structures.

In the episode featuring Cacho, the relationship between embodiment and subjectification becomes more pronounced. In the mirror scene, Lydia's explanation that her mother taught her children to constantly ask questions and, when they found answers, to ask themselves, "What can I do to change this?" (UN Women, 2019c, 00:24), can be read as a symbolic beginning of the female subject's political awareness. Here, the gaze is on the young girl's self-reflection. In contrast to Mulvey's (1975) approach, which holds that in classical cinema the female body is often positioned as an object to be observed, in this scene the female subject (the girl) appears as a figure who constructs her own gaze and develops her own subjective position. In the later parts of the documentary, the subjective camera work used while describing Lydia's experience of abduction,

¹ In Malawi, "sexual cleansing" is a harmful rite-of-passage practice that violates girls' rights and bodily autonomy (Warria, 2018).

torture, and death threats creates a perspective that fosters closeness to the experience of victimization. However, the narrative is not solely based on trauma. The empowerment processes of women living in shelters, through solidarity circles, educational spaces, and rebuilt lives, are also made visible. In this episode, the gaze also accompanies processes of solidarity and healing as it witnesses violence. Cacho's direct statement to the camera at the end of the segment, "I am a journalist" (UN Women, 2019c, 05:22), constitutes the subjective climax of the narrative. The gaze is now that of a witness, the recipient of her political statement. In this scene, the female character is a subject telling her own story and directing her political statement directly to the gaze. This direct address interrupts the gaze's function as a one-way viewing relationship.

In Kowtal's episode, feminist repositioning is established through collective struggle rather than individual experiences. While the discrimination and violence suffered by Dalit women are made visible, the narrative does not focus solely on stories of victimization. Girls receiving education, young women who want to become human rights defenders, and solidarity networks become important parts of the narrative. Especially in the scenes where women and children prepare banners together, the gaze can focus on different individuals. However, the composition constantly directs attention to the idea of shared struggle. The slogan, "Dalit Women Fight", again functions as a space of subjectification where women construct their own political voices. The gaze consequently expands from individual figures toward a collective space of political subjectification. At the end of the episode, Kowtal's statement "We are the future" (UN Women, 2019d, 05:02), accompanied by the girls disembarking from the bus one by one, ensures that they are represented as active agents of this social transformation.

In the episode featuring Johnson, the experience of embodiment and repositioning is constructed through liberation. As the viewer's gaze moves through the prison corridors, cells, and confined spaces, it is spatially brought closer to Johnson's experience. However, the narrative is not limited to the prison experience. The sections in which Johnson discusses her educational activities and the pardon process, as well as the scenes in which she reunites with her family, make the subject's reconstitution visible. As Clark (2025) states, the relationship between body and space is constantly restructured in VR experiences. In this episode, the transition from prison to home appears as a process of the subject's repositioning. In particular, the final scene, where she celebrates with her family, takes the narrative out of victimhood and concludes it with re-established social ties and solidarity. Thus, Johnson is represented as a human rights advocate who speaks on behalf of other female prisoners, in

addition to being a woman who was imprisoned in the past. This form of representation shows that VR180 shifts the sense of witnessing toward a perspective on transformation, solidarity, and the production of political discourse.

Across the four episodes, the framework takes different forms. In Kachindamoto's episode, bounded spatial exploration accompanies a compositional emphasis on child marriage, as well as scenes of education and political intervention. Cacho's episode uses subjective reenactment, direct address, and shifts between individual trauma and collective solidarity to frame testimony as a form of political agency. Kowtal's story draws attention across public spaces and collective bodies, with slogans, educational scenes, and protest preparation foregrounding collective resistance. Johnson's episode links spatial confinement, subjective movement, direct address, and the movement toward domestic and public spaces to her emergence as an advocate for other incarcerated women. Across the series, the semi-decentralized feminist gaze develops through three recurring conditions: perceptual exploration within the bounded hemispherical field, aesthetic guidance of attention, and embodied positioning in relation to women represented as speaking and politically active subjects. The balance among these conditions varies across the four narratives.

These findings clarify how the proposed framework relates to feminist film theory. The feminist significance of the series emerges from the organization of looking and the subject positions it produces. The presence of women within the image forms only one part of this structure. Their positioning as producers of testimony, knowledge, collective action, and political claims is equally important, along with the spatial relation established between these subjects and the viewer. VR180 is approached here as a formal condition whose political significance depends on how its spatial and attentional possibilities are organized. The framework extends questions of visual power toward the spatial and interface-based conditions of spectatorship while maintaining feminist film theory's concern with the positions assigned to represented subjects within relations of looking.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how gaze is organized in VR180 documentary practice and how this organization can be interpreted through feminist film theory. The analysis of *Courage to Question* (2019) identified three interconnected dimensions: the spatial organization of gaze, attention-directing strategies, and embodied spectatorship. Across these dimensions, feminist subjectification emerged through the positioning of women as producers of testimony, knowledge, collective action, and political claims. The findings show that perceptual exploration in VR180 takes place within a bounded hemispherical field whose spatial and narrative organization continues to shape the viewer's possible orientations.

The concept of the “semi-decentralized feminist gaze” was developed to describe this relationship. The framework brings together bounded perceptual exploration, aesthetic guidance, embodied positioning, and feminist subjectification within a single analytical structure. It explains how perceptual authority is shared between the formal organization of the work and the viewer's situated choices of looking. The four episodes demonstrate that this relationship can be produced through different formal strategies, including character placement, movement, subjective camera positions, textual inserts, direct address, editing, and transitions between spatial environments.

The findings also contribute to discussions of interface in cinematic VR. In *Courage to Question*, guidance does not depend on a visible control layer. Spatial composition and attention-directing strategies organize the viewer's encounter with the visual field and operate as an implicit interface. Editing is particularly significant within this structure because each cut introduces a new bounded field of exploration and reorganizes the spatial conditions of attention. VR180 can thus preserve a degree of perceptual mobility while maintaining aesthetic and narrative orientation across successive spatial fields.

From the perspective of feminist film theory, the political significance of this organization depends on the relationship between spectatorship and the subject positions produced by the work. The representation of women alone is insufficient to define the gaze as feminist. In the series, feminist subjectification becomes visible through women's direct testimony, knowledge production, political speech, collective resistance, and movement beyond victim-centered representation. The proposed framework extends feminist questions of visual power toward the spatial and interface-based conditions through which looking is organized in immersive media. It also places embodied spectatorship within

this discussion by considering how the viewer is positioned in relation to represented subjects within the narrative space.

The “semi-decentralized feminist gaze” is proposed here as a case-derived analytical framework, with *Courage to Question* providing a formally coherent but internally varied corpus through which to examine its analytical potential. The study does not claim that the framework describes all VR180 documentary practice or feminist immersive media. Its scope is also limited by the absence of empirical audience research. References to the viewer describe a perceptual position constructed by the documentaries' formal and spatial organization rather than by measured responses from individual users. Sound was considered as part of the audiovisual experience, although spatial audio was not examined as an independent analytical dimension. Future research could compare VR180 and 360° documentary practices, examine spatial audio more systematically, and combine close textual analysis with audience studies, head-orientation data, or eye-tracking methods. Such work could further investigate how perceptual agency, technological limitation, attention guidance, and gendered subject positions interact across different forms of immersive documentary.

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