FRAIMING WOMEN:

EXAMINING THE MALE GAZE IN NADINE LABAKI'S FILMS

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at Notre Dame University-Louaize

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Media Studies: Television Management & Production

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by

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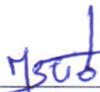

Dr. Maria Bou Zeid — 1st Reader

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II. Abstract

This study explores the representation of women in Nadine Labaki's films: *Caramel* (2007), *Where Do We Go Now* (2011), and *Capernaum* (2018). It examines the three films via Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and analyzes the position that the female occupies in the narrative structure and their treatment within the cinematic discourse. This thesis aims at proving that although Nadine Labaki is often referred to by critics as a feminist filmmaker dealing with women's issues, obsessions, concerns, and difficulties, as they face patriarchal society, her image, form, narration, and cinematic *écriture* complies with masculine voyeuristic standards.

This research reexamines the psychoanalytic theory derived from Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan that Mulvey uses to support her notion of the patriarchal gaze. It adopts the discourse analysis technique to investigate the three movies written, acted, and directed by Labaki through the lens of male gaze theory with its three parameters: the narrative, the characters, and the form (cinematic écriture). In addition to discourse analysis, the researcher triangulated the data with two interviews conducted with key informants well-versed in film critique and cinema expertise. The findings uncovered the feminism in the characters and narrative of Labaki's first two films, while the male voyeuristic cinematic écriture has been found in the three films under-study. Finally, the interviews further proved Labaki's use of camera framing to give the voyeuristic impression.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Feminism, Cinematic Écriture, Voyeuristic Camera, Lebanese Cinema, Laura Mulvey, Nadine Labaki, Caramel, Where Do We Go Now, Capernaum.

III. Introduction

In an ideal world, the role of women in film would be no different than men; filled with diverse casts of heroines, villains, leaders, and others. However, unfortunately, the representation of women in films has been historically dominated by the male-ruled industry, supplemented by men's visual fixations (Menard, 2017). Cinema has been studied as a representational apparatus, an imaging system designed to create representations of social reality and to reflect the spectators' position within it. Nevertheless, cinema is also a signifying practice that is directly involved in the creation of meaning, social values, and subjectivity. Therefore, the feminist critique of cinematic representation, as well as other critiques of visual pleasure and signification through images, have highlighted issues that need to be addressed critically and expanded upon (Lauretis, 1980).

Such issues include: What are the conditions of the presence of images in cinema? Do the pictures on the screen communicate sense and desire to the audience? How do people respond to images? How can spectators see things? What is the process by which the spectator assigns significance to what he/she sees? What is the use of language? What connections do language and sound have with images? All these questions necessarily require consideration of several areas of theoretical debate that have been involved in the study of cinematic signification and representation, such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism, enunciation, gaze, etc.

Cinema offers individuals distraction and escapism; the interest in the visual screen is the basis for people's fondness of movies. The act of watching has been historically consistent with the average person's behavior, as Alfred Hitchcock (1962) once said:

> "I'll bet you that nine out of ten people if they see a woman across the courtyard undressing for bed, or even a man puttering around in his room, will stay and look; no one turns away and says, "It's none of my business." They could pull down their blinds, but they never do; they stand there and lookout."

It has been well-noted that modern media is fixated with attractive appearances and visually appealing bodies, elements that are particularly required from women (Frisby & Aubrey, 2011). Historically, films are meant to relay stories, build characters, and provide contexts to their messages, a pattern that has been mapped out 100 years ago (Dawn, 2020). Images, however, invoke societal clues and messages that go beyond the audience's conscious awareness; for instance, the spectator is usually so indulged in the storyline that they miss how women are being framed in the composition. This specific positioning of women on screen is meant to invoke visual pleasure in the viewer under the name of realistic storytelling, though the audience itself might not be aware of such tactics. Visual pleasure in film usually targets the male spectator, aiming to satisfy his voyeuristic needs, a statement that will be revisited later on.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey argued that women in film have been represented as an object rather than a subject, materializing men's unconsciousness. She states, for instance, that women's "appearance is so much coded for a strong visual and erotic impact that it can be argued that they connote the true essence of being seen". Mulvey is a feminist scholar and filmmaker predominantly known for the theory regarding sexual objectification of women in the media, also known as the male gaze theory. The male gaze explains how women are gazed upon by the

audience; movies, for example, offer an unparalleled opportunity to act voyeuristically. Given that men dominated the movie industry in the 20th century; the cinematic medium has thus predominantly presented women from men's perspective. Therefore, Mulvey discussed the psychoanalytical concept of scopophilia regarding 20th century Hollywood films; influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, she viewed scopophilia through a phallocentric heteronormative lens.

Writer, director, and producer Noah Hawley, who created *Lucy in the Sky* (2019) and *Fargo* (2014), declared that he is aware of the male gaze, and thus, he tried to avoid it in his movies (Dawn, 2020). Hawley believes that "[t]he reality is, it has the insidious power of being considered 'normal,' in that the history of cinema is primarily male, and male directors tend to film women the way they see them, as opposed to the way women see themselves" (Dawn, 2020).

It has been more than 45 years since Mulvey initially instituted the term male gaze in her essay. This study will thus investigate whether the term male gaze is still valid in today's cinema and point to the masculine perspective in Lebanese movies, especially in the films of the Award-winning Lebanese director, screenwriter, and actor Nadine Labaki.

Labaki is known for addressing major taboo issues in a unique manner that has made her one of the most respected film directors of her age in the Arab world. Labaki has impacted the world as the first female Arab film director ever to be nominated for a Best Foreign Language Film Oscar for *Capernaum* (Newbould, 2019). At its premiere screening at Cannes in May 2018, the film received a 15-minute overwhelming standing ovation and proceeded to win the Jury Prize, one of the numerous distinctions on the celebration circuit (Aridi, 2018).

In the Arab and international media, Labaki's name began to become more prominent. In 2003, Labaki started directing music videos for the singer Nancy Ajram and had her first genuine forward leap with "*Akhasmak Ah*." The music video was considered controversial since it featured nudity and explicit sexual dances. Ajram's female waitress character, who serves and entertains male clients, was viewed simultaneously as morally dubious and excessively intriguing. Labaki defended her content, expressing that Ajram was depicting an emphatic and strong female figure (Mossalli, 2011).

> in the process of revolutionizing the Arab music industry through her professional relationship with rising Arab popstar Nancy Ajram. The two of them helped to redefine the image of the modern Arab woman: feminine, sexy, and in control (Jaafar, 2007).

Labaki built her career by co-writing, directing, and acting in her first feature film, *Caramel* (2007), or "Sukkar Banat." Premiering at the Cannes Film Festival, *Caramel* is enthusiastic and brimming with humor, however, it additionally addresses the taboos of the Arab world, including virginity, homosexuality, and betrayal (Salem, 2012) Striving to project the contemporary Lebanese woman, Labaki "created examples of Lebanese women who were very at ease in their bodies." (Walker, 2008). Labaki's films are diverse in nature; they include musical comedies about the division of religious sects, such as *Where Do We Go Now* (2011), and romantic comedies that feature talkative Lebanese women who gather at a beauty salon to discuss issues related to love and life's everyday ups and downs, such as *Caramel.* Nevertheless, one theme is constantly

displayed in Labaki's films, in that they deal with the power representation of women in modern society.

III.1 Purpose of the Study

This research aims to examine the intrinsic details of voyeurism by looking at Nadine Labaki's films through the lens of the feminist theorist Laura Mulvey. Using the male gaze theory, this thesis analyzes the image, form, and structure of Labaki's films. No other research has examined the three texts that are written, directed, and starred by Labaki from the perspective of Mulvey's male gaze theory.

IV. Literature Review

This chapter will present some of the key concepts of psychoanalytic film theory since the late 1960s. However, since the field is wide and varied on the subject, the literature review will necessarily be selective. It will define psychoanalysis, then discusses its dimensions through the visuals, and examines the spectator's identification with the cinematic image and with visual fiction. Moreover, it will tackle the gaze and the cinematic *écriture* and its ability in affecting the film spectator in understanding cinema. Afterward, it will discuss the enunciation in films and will consider the concepts, positions, and arguments that come across the visual pleasure writings of different authors.

IV.1 Psychoanalytic Film Theory

Film theorists, critics, and analysts have been drawn to psychoanalytic ideas to explain and understand cinema since the latter seems to share a fundamental kinship with the irrational that psychoanalysis attempts to explain. Cinema's relationship with the irrational is based on pleasure consumption; in fact, it has been argued that the cinema mobilizes the spectator's most primitive desires by telling stories of everyday romance that take on mythic proportions and by casting humans in the figure of the star, as a transcendent, god-like creature (Miller & Stam, 2004).

The meeting of psychoanalysis and cinema was in some ways inevitable, as both were born at the same time. Sigmund Freud first used the word *psychoanalysis* in 1896, only one year after the first screenings of Lumière films in the Grand Café (Stam, 2000). Beginning in the mid-1970s, and most notably with the special 1975 issue of the French journal *Communications* devoted to "Psychoanalysis and Cinema," semiotic discussions

began to be influenced by psychoanalytic concepts such as scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishism, as well as Lacan's conception of the mirror level, the imaginary, and the symbolic (Stam, 2000). The perverse pleasures of cinema, according to feminist psychoanalytic theorists, operate at the expense of women. Until recently, this Marxist-feminist tradition was the dominant strand of psychoanalytic film theory.

Christian Metz (1982) contends that cinema, as an imaginary signifier, is akin to a fetish and that the film spectator is a fetishist. Metz also claimed in "*The Imaginary Signifier"* (signifier is a term that refers to the study of signs and symbols, as well as how they are used and interpreted; it is most often associated with semiotics) that the cinema, as an imaginary signifier, encourages scopophilia in the form of voyeurism, which he implies involves sadism. Scopophilia is a sexual gratification that is derived from looking; voyeurism differs from scopophilia in that the voyeur's gratification is derived from gazing at somebody unaware of the voyeur's existence (Metz, 1982). Cinema may not be voyeuristic as a matter of principle, but it appears to fulfill voyeuristic desires.

Metz (1982) argues that since the cinematic signifier is both unreal in what it represents and imaginary in the form of its signifier, it increases rather than decreases the possibilities of recognition. Even before it becomes a part of a fictive imagined universe, the signifier is characterized by the Lacanian imaginary's duality of presence/absence. Since the feeble phantom-like figures on the screen practically encourage the viewer to invest said figures with their fantasies and projections, the sense of reality is stronger in the film than in the theatre. The cinema spectator first identifies with his/her own act of looking, with himself as a pure act of perception; as the condition of possibility of the perceived, and thus as a kind of transcendental subject (Metz, 1982).

Primary cinematic identification, according to Metz, is the spectator's identification with the act of looking itself:

> I am all perceiving. All perceiving as one says all-powerful… absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and ear without which the perceived would have no one to perceive it… in other words which constitutes the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film) … In other words, the spectator identifies with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness)

This form of identification is regarded as primary because it is the foundation for all secondary cinematic identifications with characters and events on the screen. The look of the camera and its stand-in, the projector, simultaneously constructs and directs this operation, which is both perceptual (the viewer sees the object) and unconscious (the viewer participates in a phantasmatic or imaginative way) (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

Metz (1982) psychoanalyzes and institutionalizes the three basic origins of cinematic pleasure: Identification (first with the camera, then with the character); voyeurism (observation of others from a safe distance), and fetishism (the play of lack and disavowal). Metz thus attempts to address a crucial question: Why do people go to the movies? What kind of pleasures are they looking for? How do they become a part of an institutional machine that both delights and deceives them? Answering questions about the intertwined roles of the real, imaginary, and symbolic in movie reception can also have a feedback effect, resulting in a new contribution to psychoanalysis (Stam, 2000).

In *"Upon Leaving the Movie Theater,"* Roland Barthes emphasizes the connection between cinema and early narcissistic unity:

> A film image (sound included), what is it? A lure. This word must be taken in its psychoanalytic sense. I am locked in on the image as though I was caught in the famous dual relationship which establishes the imaginary. The image is therefore before me, for my benefit coalescent (signifier and signified perfectly blended). Of course, the image maintains (in the subject that I think I am) a miscognition attached to the ego and the imaginary.... I glue my nose on the mirror of the screen, to the imaginary other with which I identify myself narcissistically (Barthes, 1980, p. 3).

The article eagerly praises the cinematic experience; Barthes' explanation is not only evocative of the theater experience but also informative in its references to spectatorship theories. The enjoyment and thrill are found in both the watching and the philosophy that accompanies it. Metz went even further to distinguish between primary psychoanalytic identity and primary cinematic identification, which is the spectator's identification with his own appearance (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

The first, and perhaps most direct, way to explore the diverse issues surrounding the gaze in the film is through the idea of the primal scene. In psychoanalytic theory, the primal scene is a painful infantile encounter, a visionary scenario involving the child's observation of parental intercourse (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). The primal scene dramatizes the emergence of sexuality; visions of castration reflect the root of sexual distinction. Freud (1963) is very specific about the universality of these fantasies, emphasizing the primal scene:

> Among the wealth of unconscious phantasies of neurotics, and probably of all human beings, there is one which is seldom absent and can be disclosed by analysis concerning the watching of sexual intercourse between the parents. I call these phantasies, together with those of seduction, castration, and others, primal phantasies.

Early in his career, Freud referred to all primal fantasies as scenes of archetypal situations, referring to them as *primal scenes* regardless of their content. For example, in the film *Numéro Deux* (1975) a primal scene involving a young girl's observation of her parents' anal intercourse in the kitchen is made by a close-up of the child's face superimposed over a picture of the couple. The child's single closeup bleeds into one of the couple, causing us to retroactively read the close-up as a vision scene (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

Robert Stam wrote extensively on psychoanalytic film theory in his *Film an introduction*; he focuses majorly on revealing the unconscious effect of images and cinema on spectators and subjects. The spectator's ability to mentally create continuous time and space from fragmented images depends on the gaze pattern which is subject to them through three organized relays of glances: (1) from the filmmaker/camera to the shooting scene (the scene observed by the camera); (2) between fictional characters; (3) from the spectator to the screen through the visual field. Glances keep the spectator in a state of meaning, coherence, conviction, and power. These traversing gazes are largely negotiated through shot-reverse-shot and point-of-view shots, which serve as the primary means by which "the look" is inscribed in cinematic literature (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

To summarize, psychoanalytic film theory aims to establish the complex myriad mechanisms by which the spectator-screen relationship links the human psyche, particularly the circulation of psychoanalytic attributes such as desire, phantasy, and identification. Among other cultural mechanisms, the spectator-screen process constructs the psychoanalytic subject, also known as the desiring subject, the erotic subject, and the screen subject.

IV.2 Cinematic Enunciation

In film theory, enunciation has come to represent the formation of subjectivity in language, as well as the development and control of subject relations through the imaginary relation formed between the narrator and the spectator through their mutual investment in the film's discourse (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). Enunciation studies focus on how the speaker or writer inscribes himself or herself in the message, specifically through first-person pronouns, temporal markers such as *now* or *then*, spatial references, and so on, thereby providing a certain mode of address to the spectator.

To give the viewer the idea that he/she is the producer of the film fantasy on the screen, the *true* dreamer, the implicit author, must be concealed. The spectator must be made to forget that they are watching external fiction originating from another source of desire. Metz explains: "I [the subject] adopt the filmmaker's look (without which no cinema would be possible)" (Metz, 1991). According to psychoanalytic film theory, there is often a point of enunciation in every film from which the cinematic debate continues.

In his impactful essay *Story/Discourse: A Note on Two Voyeurisms,* Metz claims (1976) that the classic film destroys the marks of enunciation; in this style of film, there

are no clear signs of a speaker or a narrator in the message, as the film appears to tell itself (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). Referring also to Emile Benveniste's (1971) definition of discourse, he declares: "[E]very enunciation assuming a speaker and a hearer and in the speaker the intention of influencing the hearer in some way" (Benveniste, 1971). By removing the marks of enunciation and masking the insignia of a *sender* or a *speaker*, the film encourages an imaginative exchange in which the *spectator* supplies his/her own ties to the utterance, appearing to permit and manage the unfolding spectacle of the film as if it were the result of his/ her own powers of enunciation.

Raymond Bellour, in a series of papers on Alfred Hitchcock, emphasizes the discursive marks of a narrator inside a classic cinematic text. In *Hitchcock, the Enunciator* (1977), Bellour recognizes Hitchcock's position as enunciator in some camera movements and positions, repetitions of framing and imagery, the character's intense gaze into the camera, and Hitchcock's autographical incorporation into the imaginary space of his films (Bellour, 1977). According to Bellour, Hitchcock marks his presence as creator/narrator in his films, thereby rendering them a mode of discourse (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

In *Hitchcock, The Enunciator* (1977), Bellour *also* examines Hitchcock's *Marnie* to show how the director uses his privileged role to reflect his own desire, demonstrating how the logical unfolding of the fantasy originates in the conditions of enunciation (Bellour, Hitchcock, The Enunciator, 1977). Bellour also coins the terms *camera-wish* and *film-wish* to describe the strange correspondence between cinema and unconscious imagination that is the foundation of psychoanalytic film theory. In cinema, enunciation establishes the viewer as a participant; it also describes the audience as a textual construct

whose role is understood as a critical component of the cinematic process and the development of meaning through exchange (Bainbridge, 2002). This, in turn, is contingent on the text's suppression of enunciation marks: the camera remains unnoticed throughout, and no attention is drawn to its presence (Bainbridge, 2002).

At the textual level, Bellour's (1977) work on Hitchcock as a model for enunciative theory showed that "the Hitchcockian method of enunciation...crystallizes around the desire for the woman" (Bellour, 1979). The issue posed by Bellour for conceptualizing a women's enunciation is explicit:

> There always exists, more or less masked or more or less marked, a certain place of enunciation…the place of a certain subject of discourse and consequently of a certain subject of desire…. The classical American cinema is founded in a systematicity which operates very precisely at the expense of the woman…by determining her image…in relation to the desire of the masculine subject…. [This is] a perspective which always collapses the representation of the two sexes into the dominant logic of a single one. (Bellour, 1979)

The idea of enunciation is possible by allowing the category of narrator, spectator, and text to be re-thought out from the female point of view, as a means to theorizing feminine subjectivity (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). To analyze the hierarchical arrangement of looking patterns, enunciation can help explain how a female filmmaker can navigate the diverse text visions. As a way of understanding the process of film viewing, enunciation will make it possible to conceptualize female spectator opportunities. As a way to identify textual instances, enunciation can show how the

desire of women can be expressed and discussed in a specific film (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, Psychoanalysis, 1992).

Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, Lizzie Borden, Sally Potter, and Yvonne Rainer have all taken into consideration the difficulties facing dominant film-based systems such as vision, narration, and address. Although the filmmakers most often do not specifically discuss psychoanalysis, their films summarize many of the key issues in feminist film theory. Janet Bergstrom concludes her appraisal of Claire Johnston's work by pointing out that the classical textual analysis "has consistently shown how women are operating in various but equally crucial ways to ensuring narration and positioning the enunciation" (Bergstrom, 1979). She articulates the issue of alternative feminist film practice as "how feminine discourse, women's desire, can coordinate cinematic enunciation, how women's discourse can be a different textual logic" (Bergstrom, 1979). Chantal Akerman's films demonstrated this re-articulation particularly powerfully.

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080, Bruxelles (1975), is a three-hour movie tracing, through a minimalistic, almost hyper-realistic scene, the daily tasks of a woman in real-time. This is watched in the endless, distanced camera by the woman who integrates everyday prostitution into her strict household routine (breakfast, schooling, shopping, sex, getting paid, dinners, etc.). Akerman describes her enunciating stance in this all-embracing, un-narrativized look that constructs a film:

> You know who is looking; you always know what the point of view is, all the time. It's always the same. But still…it was not a neutral look…. I didn't go in too close, but I was not very far away…. The camera was not voyeuristic in a

> commercial way because you always knew where I was. You know, it wasn't shot through the keyhole (Akerman 1977:119).

Discussing the secondary look register, Ackerman states:

> It was never shot from the point of view of the son or anyone else. It's always me. Because the other way is manipulation. The son is not the camera; the son is her son. If the son looks at his mother, it's because you asked him to do it. So you should look at the son looking at the mother, and not have the camera in place of the son looking at the mother (Akerman 1977:119).

Akerman systematically avoids the point-of-view shot and the shot-reverse-shot, both fundamental elements of the classical film, while simultaneously forming her vision, thereby rewriting enunciation marks the dominant film erases. Ackerman applies this method on both the primary and secondary levels of identification simultaneously; she reintroduces herself into the enunciative process by affirming that the logic of vision, which organizes shots and disperses the look, is emphatically her own.

The film constructs its climax precisely around an *exceptional desire*, leaving the audience to contemplate what cannot be seen, and this reflection poses inevitably questions regarding femininity itself (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). In this way, Akerman is able to appropriate the desire and vision articulation that determines enunciation in a film that encapsulates "la jouissance du voir" (the ecstasy of seeing). The reciprocal state of expression is already implicit in this concept since the images not only emanate from the desired source but are returned to an equally desirable source for the spectator. The term enunciation refers to both the textual articulation of the filmmaker's

desire through the visual field and the spectator's desire as it is engaged by this articulation.

Metz transforms the linguistic emphasis of enunciation into a concept of the enunciator as *producer of fiction,* indicating the process by which the filmmaker organizes the image flow, chooses and designates the series of images, organizes the diverse views that comprise the relay between the one who looks (the camera, the filmmaker) and what is being looked at (the scene of the action). He then connects this process to voyeurism as an example of "pure seeing," or, the ability to wield the objectifying gaze without its exhibitionist aspect (Metz, 1991).

IV.3 Visual Pleasure

There is no clear theory of voyeurism; rather, hypotheses have been proposed as possible theories, which are often not thoroughly investigated. The lack of follow-up investigations is often due to ethical concerns about performing empirical experiments in which individuals are subjected to stimuli that may cause them to act in ways that are distressing for them or for others, and result in criminal offenses (Duff, 2018).

Numerous psychoanalytic interpretations have been developed since Sigmund Freud's initial ideas in 1938. According to Freud, child sexuality is comprised of a variety of impulses that result in identifying others as the object of sexual behavior, amongst which is the impulse of looking (Duff, 2018) Voyeurism, the libidinal element of pleasurable looking, is fundamental to psychoanalytic film theory's model of cinema. In psychoanalysis, voyeurism refers to any form of sexual pleasure obtained by the vision and is commonly associated with a concealed vantage point, such as a keyhole. It is often used interchangeably with scopophilia, another word for the sexual aspect of seeing since

there is no precise distinction between the words in psychoanalytic literature. In general, both concepts are used in the cinema, where the visual is dominant; however, a difference between them is stressed, as scopophilia means a general enjoyment in looking, whereas voyeurism refers to a particular perversion (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). In the film-theoretical definition, screen images must appear to be manifestations of the spectator's own desire in order to accomplish the cinematic fiction; this process enables the film to create and sustain its fascinating grip on the spectator. In other words, as Bertrand Augst said in *The Order of [Cinematographic] Discourse*: "The subject-producer must disappear so that the subject-spectator can take his place in the production of the filmic discourse" (Augst, 1979).

However, Niklas Langstrom and Michael C. Seto's survey demonstrates that respondents have been sexually stimulated at least once by spying on someone having sex; men were generally more voyeuristic than women (Langstrom & Seto, 2006). This tendency may relate to the established pornography industry, which primarily focuses on a male audience. This was also evident in the study, as frequent use of pornography was the strongest indicator of voyeurism.

According to Raymond Bellou's (1977) study of Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie*, each filmmaker embraces and then designates "the look" in a specific way, thereby distinguishing a particular director's system of enunciation (Bellour, 1977). To explain how vision and desire are structured in the construction of the cinematic discourse, the enunciative framework is associated with systems of looking. Bellour argues that Hitchcock's ability to delegate his look to the male characters inscribes them into the "trajectory of virtual ownership of the object" through a demonstration of how *Marnie* is

constituted as the object of the desiring gaze of the male characters, Hitchcock himself, the camera, and, by extension, the audience (Bellour, 1977). When Mark Rutland imagines Marnie, a close-up shows that he is daydreaming about this woman whose virtual image he has helped to create. Her sudden appearance on the screen in a spot where Mark is unable to see her results in this conclusion:

> Mark's single-minded desire for Marnie is aroused by this relationship between himself and the image. Mark takes on Hitchcock's desire which Hitchcock can only realize through the camera (an apparatus) which forbids him to exercise his desire through possession, thus permitting him to represent it (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

Importantly, this is the desired relationship characterized by masculine subjectivity, in which the woman is undeniably placed as the image object of the gaze (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

The capacity of the spectator to mentally create a continuous-time and space out of fragmentary images is dependent on a system of looks, an organized relay of glances. The shot-reverse-shot structure, which is most often used in dialogue contexts, means an alternation of images between seeing and being seen, with the point-of-view shot anchoring the picture in the vision and viewpoint of one or more characters (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). As a result, the viewer identifies with someone who is still off-screen, an absent *other* whose primary purpose is to denote a room to be filled. The reverse-shot structure allows the viewer to become an invisible mediator between an interplay of looks, a fictive participant in the film's imagination. The

viewer's subjectivity is incorporated into the text, from a shot of one character looking to another character being stared at (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

According to Christian Metz (1975), the appearance of an off-screen character is reinforced by several techniques that create point-of-view, either by camera location (as in the optical point-of-view shot) or by visual distortions such as blurring or soft-focus (as in the semi-subjective shot). However, he claims that other components, rather than camera location, typically signal the character's point of view, such as the logic of the plot, a line of dialogue, or a previous shot (Metz, 1975). Metz's explanation of the trajectory of gazes that tie the audience through desire and sense relationships offers both a compelling justification for its presence and a provocative suggestion for its implementation.

Citing the absence at the heart of all cinematic representation and linking it to both phantasmatic systems of the imaginary and signifying processes of the symbolic, Metz (1975) describes the scopic regime in his article "The Imaginary Signifier" as follows:

> The practice of the cinema is only possible through the perceptual passions: the desire to see (scopic drive, scopophilia, voyeurism,) and the desire to hear which as well is *"pulsion invocante"*, the invocatory drive (Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, 1975).

Mary Ann Doane (1980) in *Misrecognition and Identity,* meticulously traces the idea of identity (both primary and secondary) as suggested by both Laura Mulvey and Metz, questioning the notion of a coherent place of mastery while also discovering either an omission of the feminine or incorporation into patriarchal meanings. The mechanisms of seeing illustrated by psychoanalytic theories of the apparatus scopophilia/voyeurism,

fetishism, and primary identity are inextricably linked to masculine subjectivity; they are not ideologically neutral, detached from the sense of sexual definitions. She then concludes:

> To talk of identity and cinema is to trace another way in which the woman is inscribed as missing, incomplete, a void, both on the level of cinematic representation and on the level of its theorization. Identification must be viewed in relation to the problematic of sexual distinction as long as it is a matter of image mastery, representation, and self-representation (Doane, 1980).

V. Theoretical Framework

This chapter discusses the feminist film theory, with a focus on the male gaze as described by Laura Mulvey. It constitutes the theoretical framework used to analyze the three films under study in this thesis and discusses scopophilia under voyeurism as well as the objectification of women in films. Moreover, it looks back at some of the contributions feminist film theory and criticism have made to the field of film studies and sketch out the reasons why feminist film theory has taken such a prominent position in thought about cinema, as well as set out a series of distinctions that serve as a framework for my subsequent research. The chapter ends with the research questions and hypotheses.

V.1 Feminist film theory

Feminism emphasizes the gender category and gender hierarchy in all forms of education and areas of inquiry; feminist film theory, specifically, started in 1970 and developed to be an academic discipline (Hollinger, 2012). Feminists were the first to identify the representation of women in media, with feminist film scholars starting to shape their examinations of how film texts work to instill patriarchal philosophy in female viewers, an approach known in the literary grant as a feminist critique (Hollinger, 2012). The female as a picture has long been a characteristic of film and related visual media, thereby necessitating a feminist approach, which made gender the axis of study and ushered a reconsideration of films for, by, and about women, as well as a transformation of film studies canons (White, 1998).

Feminist criticism investigates the power structures and psycho-social processes that dominate patriarchal culture, with the eventual goal of changing not only film theory and critique but also hierarchically gendered social relations in general (Stam, 2000). Film feminism, like feminism in general, was founded on early feminist texts such as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir's title suggests a rejection of Sigmund Freud's sexual monism, the notion that all sexuality was determined by a single, inherently masculine libido (Stam, 2000).

Since the camera represents the male perspective, films are shot from a male point of view. As a result, the *male gaze* establishes itself on the viewer, dictating how they should view female characters (Reisinger, 2021). Originating in film theory and critiques within the 1970s, the gaze alludes to how the spectator sees the visual representations, which includes advertisements, TV, and cinema. Customarily, it is the woman's picture, existing to be looked at (and to be craved) that is advertised to the male spectator-consumer who possesses the gaze (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). Laura Mulvey, one of the first feminist film theorists to address sexual orientation issues in film, centers on the pleasure of looking that the motion picture industry offers. In her paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey talks about the imbalance that exists between the male active bearer of the look and the passive female "to be looked-at-ness." She addresses Freud's concept of scopophilia, which depicts the pleasure of looking and isolates it into narcissistic and voyeuristic scopophilia (Reisinger, 2021).

Mulvey argues that classic Hollywood cinema is dominated by men, with women in media represented as passive objects of male desire due to being viewed from the eyes of a heterosexual man (Mulvey, 1975). Thus, this establishes the male viewer as the

target audience of media, and therefore, it prioritizes their needs. According to Mulvey, women are not placed in a role that enables them to take control of a scene; instead, they are present to be observed from an objectified point of view (Mulvey, 1975). She explains that "gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses" (Mulvey, 1975). Consequently, Mulvey argues for an interpretive use of psychoanalysis that shows how any cinematic project (particularly those associated with gaze identification, voyeurism, and fetishism) reinscribes patriarchal subjective structures (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

Mulvey (1975) discusses that "spectatorship in the cinema is organized along gender lines, creating an active (male) spectator in control of a passive (female) screen-object" (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). "Cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (Mulvey, 1975). By organizing its three looks (the camera, the characters, the spectator), cinema produces an eroticized image of the woman, naturalizing the masculine position of the onlooker and the pleasure involved. In this way, the modes of cinematic looking and identification force a manly point-of-view on the spectator, while the sensual effect of the coded woman's picture reflects what Mulvey described as the "to-be-looked-at-ness," thus presenting the woman as the spectacle itself. Regardless of the limits of Mulvey's theory, she was still the primary scholar to consider the suggestions of gender within the forms of cinema-spectatorship, and therefore, she defines the field on which women's activist film hypothesis would subsequently debate its issues. The cinematic

gaze is always produced by masculinity through the identification produced with the male hero and by the camera.

Nevertheless, one major issue that Mulvey addresses in her works is the matter of scopophilia in film. According to Mulvey, Freud associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, thereby subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Sexual pleasure, according to Freud, may be achieved by either touching or looking; on a pathological basis, scopophilia can thus be loosely interpreted as the act of deriving pleasure from looking. However, Mulvey addresses the oppressive gendering and patriarchal control involved in the act. She characterizes scopophilia as an active state in which the controlling male gaze objectifies and limits the passive woman on the screen, thus allowing the man to live out his fantasies and obsessions while the woman is restricted to their role of the bearer of meaning—and not its maker. (Mulvey, 1975).

Nonetheless, Mulvey invokes the populist lowest common denominator reaction, thereby limiting her understanding of narrative film. Mulvey's theory assumes that masculinity is normative and that femininity is characterized as a deviation from the masculine, resulting in a lack of presence. For Mulvey, identification is always with the male point of view, even for a feminine audience, just as females characters are always subject to the controlling male gaze (Mulvey, 1975).

Feminist scholarship can be considered from the point of view of three general areas, each presented in terms of female subjectivity and desire: Feminine spectatorship, female enunciation, and feminist textual practice. Mulvey's theory has brought the issue of sexual orientation into spectatorship in terms of a portrayal of a manly position of seeing, thus, arguing that the complete system of classical cinema worked according to

masculine measures that objectified and controlled the woman (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). Hence, the question of the female spectator became the primary line of investigation for women's activists. Gaylyn Studlar, for example, counters Mulvey by arguing that:

> [The] [c]inematic apparatus and the masochistic aesthetic offer identificatory positions for both male and female spectators that reintegrate psychic bisexuality offer the sensual pleasures of polymorphous sexuality and make the male and female one in their identification with and desire for the pre-Oedipal mother (Studlar, 1988).

Studlar (along with Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz) countered Mulvey by suggesting that the main spectatorship might lie less in voyeurism and fetishism and more in masochism, rooted in an ancient memory of a strong mother. For instance, male reactions to the spectacle of sexual difference may be more masochistic than sadistic:

> The cinematic apparatus and the masochistic aesthetic offer identificatory positions for male and female spectators that reintegrate psychic bisexuality, offer the sensual pleasures of polymorphous sexuality and make the male and female one in their identification with and desire for the pre-Oedipal mother (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992)

The close textual research by Studlar (1988) on the six Paramount films by Josef von Sternberg, starred by Marlene Dietrich, examines the roots of their visual and psychological complexity resulting in a significant revision of feminist-psychoanalytic theories of film gratification and sexual difference. Using Gilles Deleuze's

psychoanalytic-literary approach, Studlar demonstrates how masochism reached beyond the clinical realm and into the realms of creative form, language, and pleasure production (Studlar, 1988).

Thus, Studlar locates cinema's informing pleasure in the freedom from the limitations and determinations of superego power, as well as from the rule of the father and the symbolic overdetermination. Therefore, she emphasizes that play and pleasure are found in the deferrals of the masochistic scenario that is a film, rather than the pain of disavowal. Despite Mulvey's feminist film theory statements, Studlar argues that while cinema's pleasures may be perverse, but they are not exclusive to the male spectator, nor are they available to a female viewer solemnly on the condition that she abandons a masochistic identification with the passive female object to identify with the male spectator's privileged sadistic role (Sobchack, 1990).

Hence, Mulvey amended her position in "Duel in the Sun, Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where she argues for the existence of a continuous "a 'masculinization' of the spectator position regardless of the sex of any live moviegoer" in dominant cinema (Mulvey, 1981). Mulvey posits: "I still stand by my Visual Pleasure argument but would now like to pursue the other two lines of thought." Therefore, Mulvey still insists that female spectatorship must be considered. Reasserting her argument that pleasure by gazing is related to early libidinal encounters, she employs Freud's theory of femininity to describe how both men and women emerge from a phallic masculine stage, but that women cannot always behave with femininity and must return to this stage when they assume an active rather than passive role. Mulvey addresses opponents of visual pleasure and narrative cinema on the basis that cinema provides a

process of masculinization, which explains women's lack of participation in film. Mulvey replies that she, as a woman spectator, should instead be seen as free to act and manipulate the diegetic universe through her identification with the hero

Lastly, she concludes that the female viewer "temporarily acknowledges 'masculinization' in memory of her 'active' phase" (Mulvey, 1981, p. 15). Thus, the feminine position of seeing necessarily includes the identification with a foreign manly gaze psychic borrowing "transvestite clothes." Mulvey does not withdraw her earlier comments regarding Hollywood's masculinity, but she does argue that this masculinity is attractive to women in the sense that it allows them to reconnect with who they were at a younger stage of growth:

> The correct road femininity leads to increasing repression of 'the active' (the 'phallic phase' in Freud's terms). In this sense Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure, offering an identification with the active point of view, allow a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis

Afterthoughts is less well-known than Visual Pleasure, and when it is, it is often explored in conjunction with the original. While the essay has a lot in common with the original, it also has its own influence.

The feminine theory presented initiated gender into concepts of spectatorship, which became, in turn, a characteristic of feminine theory. As previously discussed, psychoanalytic film theory associates authorship to enunciation, characterizing the film director as the subject of desire and suggesting a manly enunciative position. This presents some intricate issues for characterizing female enunciation (Stam, Burgoyne, &

Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). In the field of film studies, the position of cinematic enunciation is central to discussions of female authorship (Bainbridge, 2002).

Mulvey agrees with Metz, who asserts that the "conditions of viewing and narrative conventions offer the viewer the feeling of staring into a private world," thereby establishing cinema as fundamentally voyeuristic. However, Mulvey also asserts that Freud describes the voyeuristic gaze as active, sadistic, and male. A potential answer argues that the voyeuristic male gaze is mobilized into a structure of identity, in which the male observer, through identification with the gaze of the male star, looks upon the spectacle of the female body (Allen, 2004). Mulvey goes on to explain the specific, nuanced mechanisms, such as scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishism, in which the male unconscious is implemented or performed in cinema on the image/body of a woman. Such enactments on women as an objectified other in film and other forms of representations are essential to the process of male subject development and signifying presence in a patriarchal culture. (Pribram, 2004). The eye of the camera, the gaze of the characters within the text, and the role of narrative enunciation are all male-oriented in such feminist studies. The film speaks from, by, and to the male unconscious, regardless of the gender of the audience. As the terms on which the screen-spectator relationship exists, the cinematic apparatus and film text position establish an ideal male spectator (Pribram, 2004)

The contribution of psychoanalytic feminist film theory is its effort to grasp women's exclusion from dominant discourses and structures of socio-cultural life as a result of male needs and drives for power. It is phallic oppression (including psychoanalytic theory) and it opened up a load of new ways to read films.

VI. Hypotheses and Research Questions

Since the term *male gaze* was introduced in 1975 by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,* very few studies dealt with its impact on modern film. The literature review and the theoretical framework of this thesis led to the formulation of some research questions from which several hypotheses will emerge. The research questions are:

RQ1: How does Nadine Labaki portray women in her films *Caramel* (2007), *Where DoWe Go Now* (2011), and *Capernaum* (2018).

RQ2: Are the different factors of male gaze theory evident in Nadine Labaki's films?

RQ3: Does Nadine Labaki have a voyeuristic image throughout her movies?

RQ4: Does Nadine Labaki have a male cinematic écriture according to the feminist film theory?

RQ5: How the positioning of women in the narrative structure prompts male gaze enunciation?

VII. Methodology

This chapter describes the data gathering process in order to answer the research questions. It starts by analyzing the three movies *Caramel* (2007), *Where Do We Go Now* (2011), and *Cappernaum* (2018), through Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze using the three indicators noted in the theoretical framework: the narrative, the characters, and the cinematic écriture. Consequently, the study will analyze the position that the female characters occupy in the narrative structure and their treatment within the cinematic discourse, to examine whether Labaki employed the voyeuristic male gaze in her works.

VII.1 Research design

This thesis adopts the discourse analysis technique to examine the three movies written, acted, and directed by Nadine Labaki through the lens of male gaze theory with its three parameters: the narrative, the characters, and the form (cinematic écriture). Discourse analysis is a qualitative and interpretive analysis tool that draws its conclusions from the material's description and contextual experience simultaneously (Luo, 2019). Subsequently, it has been recently applied to the study of communication (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011), and has been frequently used to analyze visual media such as advertisements, photographs, and films. As such, a discourse study would seek to assess these images' origins, their representation, and the social perspectives they propel (Ortega-Alcázar, 2012) through reflecting on the image composition, including elements present and excluded. Discourse analysis, in contrast to semiotic analysis, emphasizes the historical specificity of meaning creation; as a result, it surveys the context in which these representations were created as well as the role they play in a community (Ortega-Alcázar, 2012). Therefore, discourse analysis offers an advantage that can be used to

investigate a variety of circumstances and topics, as it enables researchers to reveal integrated beliefs significant in communication practices, a perspective that would be otherwise missed by other approaches (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

In addition to discourse analysis, the researcher will triangulate the data with two interviews conducted with key informants well-versed in film critique and cinema expertise. In-depth interviews are a qualitative data collection tool that allows for the gathering of knowledge about the interviewees' actions, attitudes, and perceptions (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Therefore, the researcher may gain new perspectives and data through these interviews, offering credibility and accuracy to the study's findings (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Subsequently, the aforementioned were conducted with Brian Eggert and Dr. Wissam Mouawad to dig deeper in the imagery details, feminist film theory, and the cinematic language in Labaki's movies. Brian Eggert is a film critic and researcher whose main areas of interest include film history, criticism, theory, social justice, style, genre, and classical Hollywood cinema. Eggert owns and operates the film criticism website Deep Focus Review. He is a member of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the Minnesota Film Critics Alliance, the Online Film & Television Association, the National Coalition of Independent Scholars, and the Large Association of Movie Blogs.

Another one-on-one interview was conducted with Dr. Wissam Mouawad, who holds a Ph.D. in Film Studies from Paris 1, Panthéon Sorbonne University. He has published numerous articles and book chapters about Arab Cinema. In addition, he is currently an Assistant Professor of Applied Media at the Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE.

The researcher interviewed the two cinema experts and critics to thoroughly look into the films of Nadine Labaki from a feminist perspective and to check whether the male gaze can be detected in Labaki's films. The cinema experts and critics were chosen based on their knowledge of the male gaze theory and the three films of Nadine Labaki. Their insights lead to realistic findings on the research topic.

VIII. Discourse Analysis

Movies offer an opportunity for the audience to act voyeuristically; as the industry has been dominated by the presence of men in the 20th century, the medium thus offers a representation of women from men's perspective more frequently than most. This thesis examines Nadine Labaki's films. Qualitative discourse analysis has been chosen to conduct this study in order to explore whether the male gaze is found in Labaki's films through her cinematic male language; as such, the analysis will be segmented into three parts per movie.

Mulvey explains that there are three perspectives to consider with the male gaze theory: the male narratives, the male characters, and the male cinematic écriture. However, before delving into the study of the films, it would be useful to remind the reader of the definition of male narrative, male characters, and male point of view in classic films. For instance, Mulvey remarks that in classical cinema the characters are male, the narrative is masculine, and the point of view is male. In classical cinema, male characters are the center of the plot, which often contrasts them against a cruel antagonist. Subsequently, the climax of the plot occurs when the male characters are heralded as heroes by neutralizing the antagonist and saving their love interest, the women in question. The implications of this narrative are that women evoke men's fear of castration; by saving the woman, punishing her, or over evaluating her as an unreachable object of desire, the male hero has neutralized the threat of castration that the woman has evoked on an unconscious level. This becomes the defining characteristic of the male narrative, which usually occurs in war films, detective films, or western films, which necessitates the presence of a male romantic hero contrasted against grander antagonists.

Additionally, classical cinema often features a wide array of male characters, often featuring the central roles. For instance, the male character is more often depicted as the detective solving a murder, the westerner needed to champion good causes, or the war hero saving the world from an immanent force like superman, spiderman, etc. Male characters such as these are normally portrayed as ruggedly masculine that enjoys war. A weaker masculine performance, such as "the male weepies," is often reserved in melodramas instead. Male performative dominance also permeates female-centered stories, such as *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, the *Beauty and the Beast*, and the *Red Riding Hood*. These stories fall into the dichotomy that Mulvey depicted, that of the passive and weak woman contrasted with the active hero, the man (Mulvey, 1975) . The same heterosexual division of labor occurs in society and films, as classical cinema depicts men as the working unit, while women stay at home.

VIII.1 *Caramel* (2007)

Narrative

Caramel (2007), Nadine Labaki's debut feature film, is set in a popular beauty salon situated in Beirut called "Si Belle," and follows the lives of five Lebanese women as they struggle with their romantic relationships in a country stifled by social taboos and restrictions. The film's title refers to a caramel paste made from sugar, lemon juice, and water that is used in beauty salons to soothe the skin during painful hair removal. The title is a metaphor that encapsulates the film's combination of sweet moments and difficult circumstances.

The fact that *Caramel* takes place in a beauty institute in Lebanon, and in a very popular neighborhood, is symbolic; the institute is a place where women feel comfortable, since they are hidden from men's eyes, and as such, it is easier for them to share secrets during the caramel waxing ritual. The film revolves around the lives of five Lebanese women who, over the course of the movie, will get to know each other more closely as they liberate themselves from societal pressures. Layale (Nadine Labaki) is the owner of the beauty salon and works alongside Nisrine and Rima; she is caught in a deadlock relationship with a married man. At the beginning of the movie, the watcher oversees Layale responding to "the horn," her married lover's mating call, which she guiltily responds to as the activity in her salon continues. As she walks to her car, Layale comes across a mentally ill woman named Lily collecting paper to give to her sister Rose, a neighboring seamstress. Layale also catches the attention of Youssef (Adel Karam), a cop who pulls her over for a seat belt violation but does not fine her.

The movie also introduces Nisrine, who keeps the fact that she is no longer a virgin a secret due to the Lebanese conservative culture. Nevertheless, Nisrine confides in her colleagues in a hotel room before her marriage. In contrast to the two previous women, Rima is presented as the kind of woman who is constantly wearing masculine clothes, such as pants, which her colleagues remark on, as Nisrine confesses she "wishes to see Rima in a skirt one day" (Labaki, Caramel, 2007). Rima is also drawn to Siham, (a regular to Layale's beauty institute). Meanwhile, Jamale, a frequent customer and an aspiring actress, is concerned about getting old.

Via these related stories, Labaki invites the watchers to explore the different types of pressures on women, amongst which is the pressure of being beautiful and constantly

fit the image of society. These oppressive tensions stem not only from the women's societal environment but also from their close circles, such as their families and friends. The boiling caramel at the start of the film represents this emotional turmoil; namely, the repression of female lust and desire, whereas the ingestion of the sweet represents the actual sexual activity and the enjoyment derived from it. The sugar is also symbolic, for it is a sweet treat that simultaneously hurts the women while removing unwanted aspects of their lives. Sugar is bittersweet, and thus, suggests the non-ending quest for beauty imposed on women by the patriarchal society, the origin of their pain.

The film develops the story of each woman introduced above until the final wedding scene; the movie concludes with a traditional wedding, indicating the inexorability of life, which continues its flow despite how some women still suffer under societal oppression, while others have liberated themselves from it. The film projects the moments and feelings of these women's lives as it progresses.

In contrast to the salon, which appears to be a domain of feminine space, the girls face their existential dilemmas in the brothel room while trying to support Layale in her heartbroken relationship. Throughout the movie, Layale must navigate public areas that expose her to heteropatriarchy and regulatory gaze when meeting with her lover. This hotel chamber became more of a confession room for the women to reveal their secrets. For instance, Layale explains to her friends that she has spent her day vigorously cleaning the room, lamenting how she accepted to be among prostitutes just for the sake of meeting her lover, while he, in return, did not show up to their rendezvous or even called. Afterward, Layale confides in her friends, exclaiming: "What kills me is how stupid I am" (Labaki, Caramel, 2007). She then laments how she has spent her life waiting for the

car horn, declaring: "I am still lying to myself thinking that he's going to leave her." (Labaki, Caramel, 2007). At this stage of the movie, Layale realizes that she has been living a fictional life and that she has been naïve, thinking that her lover would leave his wife and daughter and be with her. Jamale is also striving for a goal she cannot achieve, a fictional life; despite her age, she still seeks to remain beautiful and to be recognized as a young woman. Nisrine's attempt at hiding her sexual history also maintains the fact that she is living a distorted life. Furthermore, this pattern can be applied to Rima and Lily; for instance, Rima, as a closeted person, is trying to hide her sexuality. While the movie does not tackle the issue of homosexuality directly, it discusses the length and the reason why these women would choose to cope with their problems in secret, which includes Rima's struggles.

Similarly, Rose feels trapped caring for her sister Lily. Rose encounters a French client named Charles who enters her shop to shorten his pants. She feels that this man will fill the gap and compensate for the lack of stability and love she has experienced in her life. Unfortunately, she realizes that her sister has fallen in love with the same man, and she is thus faced with a dilemma: Should she marry the man she has fallen in love with and risk losing her sister, or should she stay with her sister, who has no one to look after her?

The film draws attention to feminist issues and offers an alternative perspective than previous cinema history, therefore showcasing an image truer to the lives of real women. The film's narrative centers around these women, rotating between their specific situations, and focusing on their development as they liberate themselves from their lives. full of societal pressure. For instance, at one point in the movie, Layale refuses to answer

the call of her lover after visiting his wife and discovering that he has a daughter. At the end of the movie, she moves on and accepts the possibility of a new relationship with the cop. Similarly, Rima develops from being a shy, introverted person to an accepting woman and embracing Siham, the woman she fell in love with. Paralleling Rima, Siham was also afraid at the beginning to cut her hair short, afraid of how society would receive her new hairstyle. This scene is contrasted with the one at the end of the movie, as she is seen enjoying her new short hairstyle and smiling at her reflection in the window store, the film ending with her frozen image. The narrative of the movie stresses the importance of liberation and how to forge one's own identity.

However, while Rima and Layale succeed in liberating themselves, Nisrine and Jamale do not. For example, Nisrine succumbs to the societal rules of the traditional society by hiding her virginity. Meanwhile, Jamale, a divorced middle-aged woman whose husband has left her for a younger woman and the sole caretaker of her two kids, is seen at Nisrine's wedding leaving the crowd to use the restroom. The movie uses parallel editing between the wedding scene and Jamale to demonstrate how she is still caught in her predicament and her existential dilemma. She comes across a few young ladies who are waiting their turn and grabs their attention by asking if she can enter first. They agree, and when she enters, she pulls out a piece of tissue and dyes it red in an attempt to imitate menstruation. This situation reveals the complete rejection of her reality. She yearns to be young, beautiful, and in the prime of her life once more. At the same time, it critiques Nisrine's situation, who might face the same situation as Jamale later on in her marriage.

Rose's narrative focuses on her momentary liberation when she leaves, intending to visit Charles. However, she intentionally misses her rendezvous later, accepting her situation as a woman who must take care of her sister. Thus, the film features the struggles of women, which include the fear of growing up, the abandonment of familial obligations, homosexuality, and having an affair with a married man. All these struggles are seen in the narrative of the film structure from the women's point of view.

In this Lebanese romantic comedy, the beauty salon name "Si Belle" plays an important tool in the discussion and analysis. The nameplate "Si Belle" in the film shows that the letter "B" is broken; what remains from the nameplate is "Si Elle," meaning "yes Her," which links the ending of the movie with the soundtrack of "My Mirror, Oh My Mirror." The song lyrics express how a woman feels when she sees her image in the mirror.

"My Mirror, Oh My Mirror" Arabic lyrics:

مرايتي يا مرايتي   راح أحكيلك حكايتي
قوليلي أنا مين   أنت أنا، وأنا أنت
مهما كبرتي وتغيرتي   بعيوني أنت صبتي يا مرايتي
راح أحكيلك حكايتي   قوليلي أنو أنا
أحلى وحدة فيهن   أنعم وحدة فيهن
شوفيني وما تشوفيهن   يا مرايتي
راح أحكيلك حكايتي   قوليلي أنا لي
شعري منو أشقر   خصري منو أصغر
وتمي منو أكبر   يا مرايتي
راح أحكيلك حكايتي   قوليلي أنا كيف
بدها قص الغرة   قواليك حلوة الحمراء
مع فستان السهرة   يا مرايتي

(Saleh, Caramel, 2007)

"My Mirror, Oh My Mirror" translated English lyrics:

My mirror, oh my mirror, I will tell you my story
tell me who I am
you are me, and I am you, no matter how much you've grown and how much you've changed

in my eyes you are still six, oh my mirror
I'm going to tell you my story
tell me I am the fairest of them all
and the most delicate of them all
look at me and not at them, oh my mirror
I'm going to tell you my story
tell me why
is my hair not blond
are my hips not smaller
and my lips are not fuller, oh my mirror
I will tell you my story
tell me how
I should cut my bangs
is this lipstick pretty
with this party dress, oh my mirror

The last scene of the movie focuses on Siham looking at her reflection and asking the mirror if she is beautiful: "Tell me I am the fairest of them all and the most feminine of them all" (Labaki, Caramel, 2007). The song lyrics depict the importance of accepting one's self, despite one's flaws, thus tracing the development from the woman who is pressured to be beautiful for society to a woman who accepts her identity, her sense of self, and her image; the woman who moves from "Si Belle" to "Si Elle." The idea of identity is manifested through the words "tell me who I am," indicating the woman who is searching for her identity, an act that will liberate her. The feminist narrative of the movie reflects women evolving from being an object for society to creating, acknowledging, and accepting their image and identity, no matter its diversity: whether she is a lesbian, a future wife, going through menopause, or even caring for her sister. the beauty salon in Beirut serves as a haven for five women. These women seek answers to questions about life, love, and happiness.

Labaki's narrative orchestrates the interaction of these five women and their responses to men, sex, relationships, and their bodies. In addition to linguistic and cinematic visual metaphors, Labaki uses editing as a tool to direct her narrative and to send clear messages. For example, she utilizes sewing as a metaphor to subtly discuss virginity: while Nisrine never overtly mentions sex or hymens, the meaning is built by the viewer, who decodes the metaphors of the hymen reconstruction procedure. A long close-up of Nisrine's face cuts with views of the seamstress' hands using the sewing machine, which symbolizes the hymen reconstruction surgery, as if a woman can suture her virginity similarly to how Rose sutures clothes.

Labaki's frequent narrative employment of comedy softens the edges of otherwise delicate and frequently taboo issues. Another tool Labaki uses in the narrative to give significance is through filmmaking techniques; this can be seen in the Virgin Mary procession scene in which a delegation of worshipers enters the beauty salon "Si Belle," and the characters start praying as a single continuous frame shot proceeds. There is a rack focus changing the camera focus in the frame from Nisrine to the statue of the Virgin Mary, highlighting Nisrine's torment regarding her virginity, despite knowing that Nisrine is not a Christian.

The narrative also depicts the social and religious pressures that trigger stress, guilt, and fear in the women's daily lives as they strive to find their happiness. Thus, Labaki sparks an unprecedented image regarding Lebanese women's identity by projecting the daily trials and tribulations of life and romance as told by five Lebanese women from various backgrounds. These trials often include the women switching between patriarchal and self-representation: at times, the women seem to be trapped by

the male gaze, the appearance myth, and the patriarchal norms, while at other times they seem to break free and construct their self-representations.

Hilary Radner (2010) who is an author focused on feminist content in contemporary cinema and consumer culture posited that films marketed for women underline the relation to a feminine ideal that is represented through "girlishness" as a mode of appearance and set of character traits that are not necessarily linked to biological age. She also examined their narrative style, which revolves around the tale of an ambitious single woman who defines herself through consumer culture as much as through work or romance. Examining *Caramel's* narrative draws the viewer's attention to recurring themes including girlishness, and the stories of ambitious women about their romantic relationships, and how they are presented by Labaki by being modern and independent. Labaki succeeds in illustrating the world of feminism, in this film through presenting women as they are lucrative and decisive. *Caramel* let the audience think about how women in Lebanon navigate on a daily basis.

Caramel's narrative reflects the social tensions surrounding feminine gender identity and actions, as well as the culture of secrecy that results from the inability to conform. The film projects the problems these five women face living in Lebanon that are global in nature but specific to Lebanese women's fears and image. Virginity, sex, homosexuality, are all taboos that Lebanese women face might seem for other countries or western countries a little bit ridiculous or things that they don't even think about but in Lebanon, women still do think about them.

The fact that the narrative urges the five women to reveal their secrets is of importance: Their dilemmas and secrets need to be spoken, externalized and acknowledged so that the characters can move to a new stage in their lives.

The narrative enables the viewer to examine how normative family standards and norms shape and circumscribe women's identities in private and public, and how social norms control women's sexualities through moments of self-hiding and disguise. Therefore, *Caramel* is primarily about women's issues; whereas the male narrative reduces women to prototypical figures that are passive, in need to be either saved, punished or sacrificed, the female narrative attempts to represent the progressive and modern figures of women that are not stereotypical female figures.

Women in *Caramel* drive the plot forward, which doesn't go in favor of what Mulvey has been saying concerning the male narrative. The narrative for all these women moves from a social understanding of being beautiful or remaining beautiful, paralleling the name of the beauty salon "Si Belle," to accepting their own identity as the mirror reflects their image, thus becoming "Si Elle."

Characters

Throughout film history, many female figures have been portrayed as inactive, ineffective, and impotent no matter the culture, including animated women, such as Disney movies. For example, in the animation movie *Sleeping Beauty*, the prince is the active party, while the princess is portrayed as inactive, as she is the passive female figure who awaits the prince to save her. Feminist film theory focuses on changing this illustration and the utilization of the women figure. In this sense, the representation of women in *Caramel* falls under the feminist film theory's ideology.

The film follows the interrelated lives of five women in and around a beauty salon in Beirut, tracing their difficult relationship with their desires, bodies, familial and sexual bonds. Layale (Nadine Labaki), the salon's owner, is in her late twenties or early thirties and still lives with her parents and teenage brother, who has her own business. She is portrayed as young and beautiful, which she accentuates by wearing flowery dresses that enhance her femininity and her sensuality. She is independent, autonomous, and lucrative. She opposes traditional social norms and taboos by seeing a married man, though she still fears society's opinion of her, as she cannot speak to him in front of her parents and always hides whenever he calls her. Her lover's identity, however, is not shown, thus highlighting his significance as a masculine presence rather than an active character.

Layale strives to secure privacy whether at home or work when she is talking with her lover on the phone, and even when she is trying to meet him.

Nevertheless, Layale is persistent in her attempts to meet him; for instance, in one major scene of the movie, she frantically searches for a hotel room, trying to book one without providing her identity card or marriage certificate to celebrate her lover's birthday with him in private. Layale tries to pass herself off as a married woman, though she has no proof; as such, she is forced to settle for a run-down motel, agreeing to "share the stairs with whores," (Labaki, Caramel, 2007) which she sees as a humiliation. However, while her status as a lucrative and independent woman enables her a certain economic power, it is undermined by emotional weakness. Said weakness is shown when she starts crying in front of her friends, who have just arrived at her door, offering emotional support as she

laments her relationship. Guilty of lying to her parents, she confesses to her friends, succumbing to societal pressure for the sake of a lover that rarely supports her.

Layale is presented as a contradicted character at first, caught between her desire and her conscience, as she declares: "I am stupid because I am believing that he is going to leave his wife for me" (Labaki, Caramel, 2007). Nevertheless, her change of character occurs when she visits her lover's house, thus acknowledging the gravity of her relationship as she discovers that it might be destructive for a family nucleus. After this scene, Layale brings her relationship under scrutiny, speculating its end. It is this decisive moment that pushes her to ignore her lovers' phone calls and their shared signal, the car horn. The frustration this decision brings can be seen when she is waxing Rima's legs, intending to release her tension, as Jamale informs her: "Come on darling let it out" (Labaki, Caramel, 2007). Despite this frustration, her decision liberates her, as she prioritizes herself and her conscience over her desire for her lover.

Similarly, Rima goes through a character development that liberates her: Rima is presented as the salon's masculine-looking hair washer and a closeted lesbian, who develops feelings for Siham, the new customer. She is portrayed by Labaki as a character who shows her sexuality by refusing to wear skirts and opting for a tomboyish appearance and style—in this sense, she uses the connection between dress and identity to symbolize her lesbian character. Rima's attitude is extremely masculine; from the way she speaks to her style of clothing and her mannerisms. For instance, she is always the one that operates the generator during power outages and rolls down the iron door of the shop at the end of each day, roles traditionally performed by men. A major plot point in the movie is Rima's sexuality, as the viewer catches onto her sexual orientation from the

beginning of the movie when she rides the bus and stares at a girl sitting next to her. Later on, Rima is fascinated when she encounters Siham for the first time, a regular at the salon. Rima is unable to communicate her desire publicly, and thus, she expresses her affections through limited ways, such as being close to Siham while she washes her hair. In another instance, in the brothel room scene when all the girls gather to support Layal when her lover does not show up at the motel, Nisrine, Jamale, and Layale sit next to each other along sharing their stories except Rima, who sits away from them, tasting the cake and showing no interest in the conversation, not identifying with them.

Nothing of importance is revealed about Siham, Rima's love interest, throughout the movie, except the fact that she exchanges eye contact with Rima while getting her washed. However, throughout the film, Rima tries to convince Siham to cut her hair short, exclaiming: "Short hair would suit you since you have a beautiful face" (Labaki, Caramel, 2007). Siham's hesitance is rooted in her fear of societal retribution and her family's opinion of her; nevertheless, Rima succeeds in convincing Siham at the end of the movie, as the last shot is centered on Siham and her short hair. At the end of the film, the viewer can conclude that Siham decided to liberate herself by overcoming her fear.

Paralleling the other characters is Nisrine, who is a Muslim hairstylist working happily alongside Layale and Rima. Nisrine does not wear a hijab, unlike her own and her fiancé's family. Nisrine has previously hidden the fact that she was not virgin from her friends, though she confesses that she is about to marry a man who is unaware that she is no longer a virgin at the brothel room scene, divulging the fact that her fiancé, Bassam, "will not be the first one." This confession showcases Nisrine's courage, who, despite her issue with her feminine sexuality, still decides to confide in her friends. Later

in the film, however, Nisrine decides to pursue hymen reconstruction surgery to keep her pre-marital sexual history hidden from her upcoming spouse. Consequently, the viewer learns that Nisrine is imprisoned in a society that shames single women who are not virgins on their wedding night. However, despite Nisrine's decision to conform to this society's wishes and undergo the hymen reconstruction surgery, her decision to change her situation highlights her progressiveness and resourcefulness.

Jamale's name is Arabic translates to "beauty," and as her name suggests, she is a character that is constantly preoccupied with remaining young and beautiful. She is a regular customer and friend of the characters at the "Si Belle" beauty salon and a divorced mother of two Jamale is going through menopause; a fact that she worries over, as she is seen frantically attempting to retain a younger image of herself. She is one of the characters that does not progress throughout the movie, as she is always attempting to hide her age through hairstyle and strategically hidden Scotch tape that allows for an eye lift. From the start of *Caramel* until its end, Jamale still chooses to fake her menstrual cycle, thus deceiving herself and others by not accepting her age. Whereas Layale, Rima, and Siham develop throughout the movie, Jamale remains in the vicious cycle of attempting to maintain her eternal youth and womanhood, as she still attends casting calls and competes with other younger girls to prove to society that she is still young, beautiful, attractive, and suitable for the media.

Finally, Rose is a 65-year-old seamstress who lives across the street from the salon with her senile older sister Lily, whom she looks after. Rose falls in love at an older stage in life with a French client named Charles. She accepts Charles' invitation to supper at his place and is then delighted when he invites her out again at a café. She goes to "Si

Belle" to have her hair dyed and styled, and then stylishly applies make-up in front of her mirror at home. However, she ultimately chooses to cancel her date and removes her makeup, because she feels she is the only one responsible for her older sister.

In the end, you may say that all women are progressive, due to the willing choices they take through the movie, showcasing their agency. Thus, *Caramel* is by itself a movie about choices: Layale chooses to end her relationship with her lover, Rima to come out of the closet, Siham to cut her hair, Nisrine to have her hymen reconstruction surgery, Jamale to continue faking her menstrual cycle, and Rose to choose her sister over Charles.

Form – Cinematic écriture

Caramel has a classical film structure; the term itself, "classical cinema," was originally introduced by Bazin, though it was broadened afterward to refer to a set of formal parameters involving editing, camera work, and sound (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). Classical cinema suggests the re-creation of a fictitious universe marked by internal coherence, reasonable and linear causality, psychological realism, and the appearance of spatial and temporal continuity (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). In the classic period of Hollywood film, this continuity was established through an etiquette for introducing new scenes as planned movements, from establishing shot to medium shot to close shot. A classic realist text is a literary or cinematic work in which the discourses that make up the text are organized in a clear hierarchy, which is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, New Vocabularies in Film semiotics, 1992).

Although *Caramel* is a classic film that follows a linear chronological order, its major difference is that the camera is voyeuristic. Laura Mulvey urges for an interpretive use of psychoanalysis that will uncover how every cinematic operation (particularly those linked with gaze identification, voyeurism, and fetishism) reinscribes patriarchal subjective structures (Mulvey, 1975). The camera is utilized in movies as a device connecting the viewer to the film storyline; the male protagonist observes the female, and the spectator thus assumes the voyeuristic gaze in the film. The camera is looking at the women and directing the viewer's objectifying gaze; in other words, the film is constructed in a way that women are meant to be looked at. Mulvey argues that the voyeuristic camera is related to Sigmund Freud's primal scene and the keyhole effect, whereby the male child looks at parental intercourse. It is deemed as voyeuristic because it positions a male spectator looking at a female object of desire from a voyeuristic position, as adopted in cinema via the point of view shot and the shot-reverse shot.
The first shot in *Caramel* shows the camera penetrating slowly over the river of sweetness. Then, the camera zooms in slowly to the curtain where the viewer hears a woman screaming as if she is getting injured (figure 2). Afterward, Layale opens the curtain, revealing that she is waxing the customer's legs. It is a voyeuristic image, the camera tracks in slowly behind the curtain and stops when Layale opens the curtain leaving the spectator spying on these two women during the hair removal process. The narrative film structure, the gaze, is presented as masculine, as the women are portrayed as the object of the gaze and not its bearers.

In this scene (figure 3), a little boy is sitting under the table at Bassam's—Nisrine's fiancé's—house, where she is having dinner with his family. This little boy

elevates Nisrine's skirt and gazes at her thighs and underwear. This scene is a classical keyhole effect and can be decoded as a primal scene as well. The first and maybe most immediate way to examine the gaze in cinema is via the primal scene concept. As stated in the theoretical framework, the primal scene in the psychoanalytic theory denotes a traumatic infantile experience, a visionary scenario involving the child's sight of parental intercourse.

Another scene that shows the voyeuristic position of the camera is the instance where Rima is washing Siham's hair (figure 4). The camera is positioned from behind the door as illustrated in the screenshot above; thus, it resembles the keyhole effect of voyeurism. Nadine Labaki sets the scene in the salon's treatment area, where characters have privacy and are not visible to others, to depict the two women's attraction by having them exchange looks and smiles while Rima tenderly cleanses Siham's hair. The perspective of the camera, the female characters inside the frame, and the viewers are all parts of the male gaze. Hence, the camera is voyeuristic, equating the spectator with the voyeur, a claim that is tackled in the enunciation part under the literature review section.

The director's use of close-up shots and tight camera angles creates intimacy in the interaction between the two women. The gaze in movies is understood according to the point of view and shot-reverse-shot which is the case in this scene. These imaginary gazes take into consideration the absent presence of a spectator as the center of the image; a spectator that occupies an omniscient and omnipresent position. The shot-reverse shot is utilized to help the audience relate with the characters and learn about their experiences and emotions.

In this scene, the police officer is spying on Layale; where Layal is seen via the eyes of a police officer, as in figure 8, the masculine voyeurism is more forceful because the object of the gaze is unaware of the stare. The point of view of the cop shows Layale talking to her lover without knowing that the police officer Yusuf is surveying her from his office. The cop is staring at Layale, pretending to be speaking to her: Yusuf imagines her on the phone with him and fantasizes that she returns his feelings. This scene not also denotes the voyeur and the object of its desire but also constructs a phantasmatic scene, as Labaki creates a kind of virtual phantasmatic imaginary conversation between the two characters since she substitutes his speech with her conversation. While Nadine is talking to someone else on the phone, the cop is creating this imaginary phantasmatic connection between the voyeur and the object of his desire. Additionally, Labaki incites voyeurism in the editing by creating a semblance in which both shots are connected, as if they are related in one piece. Labaki constructs the scene according to the voyeuristic shot in which we have a voyeur who is looking but also constructs the scene as an imaginary phantasmatic scene by a false natural conversation between the two as he projects his voice over the voice of the lover as if talking to one another.

At the run-down motel scene, Layale is seeking privacy; the viewer surveys her fetishized image, which reminisces Mulvey, who explains that the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and is constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, a fact that is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies (Mulvey, 1975). In other words, the male viewer is often the target audience of cinematographic works, and therefore, their needs are met first. The spectator takes physical visual pleasure while watching the feet and the thighs of Layale while she is preparing herself to meet her

lover. Layale's image is frequently fetishized by lengthy close-ups while applying nail polish to her toenails that depict women as a pleasure for the male audience.

In another scene, Layale wakes up and sees that her mother is sitting with other women who might be her friends or neighbors for morning coffee in the kitchen. The women decide to fortune tell Layale about her future love life by interpreting her coffee ground from her cup. The camera is positioned from behind the door, implicating that someone is spying on these women. This type of framing has been repeated in multiple scenes where the camera is always from behind of a curtain, door, or window. This cinematic écriture is a voyeuristic type of form, as the spectator is engaged in spying on other people's personal affairs and lifestyles.

This scene depicts Christine, the wife of Rabih and Layale's lover, coming to wax her body at the "Si Belle" salon. It is a lengthy scene where the viewer accompanies her from the moment she undresses her clothing until the hurtful waxing process where the spectator will be able to gaze closely at the client's thighs and face. The camera takes the same position as the opening scene of the movie where a client is waxing her body and the director opens the curtain proclaiming the start of the movie. This scene is a voyeuristic masculine gaze where the woman is exhibited and gazed upon by the audience; as Mulvey argues that because of this perspective the camera is taking a masculine point of view. In other words, the audience is going to view women from that male perspective, and so they are presented with shots that emphasize the curves of the female body, thus reducing them to no more than objects of visual pleasure for the heterosexual male audience. This highlights the second gaze, that of the primal desire to

just look at the human body, which links to Freud's work on scopophilia—the act of getting sexual pleasure from looking at naked bodies.

This scene depicts Yusif the cop accepting the invitation from Nisrine to visit the salon. When Layale is waxing the cop, she is framed in a top shot image revealing her breasts as shown in figure 14. Afterward, the viewer sees Yusuf looking at Layale's body and holds her hand, gazing upon it, thus symbolizing the patriarchal system (figure 16). This scene overlays the male gaze of characters within the text and the gaze of the audience simultaneously. As Mulvey explains, female characters are present in cinema to be looked at by male characters, which may be an attempt to draw the audience's attention to the women's bodies. Mulvey declares that the structure of the act of looking in classical films encourages the spectator to objectify women with their gaze; which is demonstrated in this scene via Yusuf, who is looking at Layale, while the protagonist is not looking back at him, highlighting the difference in the level of power between the female and male characters.

In the frame above (figure 17), the audience surveys Rima screaming from pain as her friends force her to get her legs waxed before Nisrine's wedding. The way Rima is sitting, as well as the level of the camera, drives the male gaze. This frame offers the opportunity for the audience to act voyeuristically by having a medium that views women from a man's perspective.

What can be deduced after analyzing the cinematic écriture of *Caramel* is that Mulvey's theory on how women are portrayed in film and the media is just as problematic today as it was in 1975. Mulvey's main argument in visual pleasure and narrative cinema is that Hollywood narrative films use women to provide a pleasurable

visual experience for men. *Caramel*'s narrative structures its gaze as masculine, where women are always the object of the gaze and not the bearer of it.

VIII.2 Where Do We Go Now? (2011)

Narrative

After *Caramel*, Nadine Labaki released her second feature film *Where Do We Go Now?* in 2011. Labaki's films unfold in a distinctly feminine space: The plot of the film is about Muslim and Christian women of a small, isolated Lebanese village uniting to bring peace and to prevent their hotheaded men from engulfing their community in yet another war. The remote village, located in Lebanon, is accessed through a narrow and dangerous mountain road, with warning signs informing the viewer of the presence of explosive mines, remnants of the Lebanese war found along its road and hills. These warning signs are repeated in multiple scenes to give the viewer a suggestion that this village is at risk of a sectarian explosion soon.

The movie starts with Christians and Muslims congregating at Amale's café, which also serves as the hub of the town's feminine circle. Amale, played by Labaki, is a Christian woman in love with a Muslim man. The movie includes a lot of musical and choreographed dancing scenes, giving it a type of musical genre. In addition to the film's opening musical scene, that of a funerary march of women dressed in black.

Where Do We Go Now? starts with a poetic voice-over that creates the path of the film and provides background information about previous incidents that connect to the current situation in the village. The voice-over depicts the story of "women dressed in

black driven by destiny to demonstrate their bravery" (Labaki, 2011) as said by Amale in the introductory scene.

> حكايتي وبحكيها، ولمين ما كان بهديها ... عن ناس بتصوم، وعن ناس بتصلي ... عن ضيعة علقانة،
> بالحرب على التلة ... وعلقت ما بعرف وين، وضاعت ما بين حربين ... عن ناس صفيت قلوبهم،
> وشمسهم صارت فَي ... وبَيقيوا يصّفوها، تاصار دمهم مَي ... عن ضيعَة معزولة، ومتفقة على السلام ...
> وقصّتها مغزولِة، على شرايط الألغام ... حكايتي وما فيها، خيالات سحرة سود ... لا هنن أقمار، ولا هنن
> ورود ... عيونهن كحلا رماد ... وتايكبروا الأولاد، حكم عليهم الزمان ، تايلبسوا ثياب سود...
>
> (Labaki, Where Do We Go Now?, 2011)

Translated Introductory voice over:

> The story I tell here is for all who want to hear. A tale of those who fast, a tale of those who pray. A tale of lovely town mines scattered all around. Caught up in war split to its very core. Two clans with broken hearts under a burning sun. their hands stained with blood in the name of a cross or a crescent. From this lonely place which has chosen peace. Whose history is spun of barbed wire and guns. It's a long tale of women dressed in black. No glittering stars, no dazzling flowers. Their ash-blackened eyes. Women driven by destiny to demonstrate their bravery… (Labaki, Where Do We Go Now?, 2011)

The plot is introduced by Amale, the narrator, and the chorus enters in an expressive dance set to a march rhythm. The chorus in classical tragedy largely reflects the feelings of the people, which symbolizes the feelings of the women in this movie. Amale speaks with a single voice tone and represents the popular opinion of the women in the village. The women in this quiet village are Christian and Muslim friends, trying to prevent the renewal of war in their village because "they hated the black dress of mourning" (Labaki,

2011). All the roles that the women of the village will play in the film are foretold by Labaki's use of these classical dramatic words that Amale chose at the beginning of the film.

The dance scene consists of the village women, united, and marching towards the cemetery. It is displayed as a sad dance, and as soon as the women reach the cemetery, they disperse as Christian women go on one side and Muslims on the other, indicating a state of separation despite the apparent unity. They all have lost their sons or husbands in national wars, a statement reflected by the pictures of the martyrs placed on the graves. All of the pictures depict men and young people, contextualizing the film, which emphasizes the role of the mother, sister, and wife in preventing sectarian fighting which results in the death of their children, siblings, and husbands.

The narrative of *Where Do We Go Now?* raises a sensitive topic in Lebanese society, which is the conflict between groups according to their sectarian affiliation. While the topic is political in nature, Labaki addresses it from a private perspective, specifically from a woman's point of view, as she and her children are the first victims of wars. Thus, the women of the village give the viewer a lesson in "coexistence," albeit presented in the traditional way, which makes the treatment of public issues exclusive to men. For a woman to address a public issue, she must silence the man. Labaki decides to portray the man as a wrathful individual, as such, there is no logical dialogue between men except for the conversations between the two clerics (the priest and the Sheikh). Women in the film enter to fill this void and to bring peace, fearing that they would lose other family members.

As cited by an article in the *Washington Post*, the movie reveals itself as easy feminism: "In both films, Labaki uses a combination of whimsy, sharply observed satire, and easygoing feminism to engage potentially explosive issues, from sexual repression to the limits of male aggression and tribalism." (Hornaday, 2012) However, unlike the women, who march together to the cemetery before splitting up to mourn, the men are prone to outbursts of anger, which intensify religious tensions. The problems begin in the village when its mayor brings a television set for the first time. While the residents gather in a small celebration and watch the news, the women shout to distract their husbands, preventing them from hearing the news.

This marks the beginning of the tensions between the women and their husbands, The men living in the village seem to be provoked by a prankster who pours blood into the water font near the entrance of the church and opens the mosque door to let the goats in. Women join together and plan to take action to deceive their men into calming down and coexisting peacefully: They cut the wires of the television shared among the villagers to block the news, disconnect the radio, make hash-baked goods, and even pay a group of Ukrainian girls for a week to pretend to be stuck to distract their husbands. Nevertheless, these attempts were temporary solutions, albeit ones that invoked funny comedic scenes. The matter reaches a dangerous climax when the men of each sect meet secretly to agree to bring weapons and join the fight. The decision forced the women to move quickly, and as such, they stole and hid the weapons.

While sectarian tension escalates between men, resulting in violence, women are more tolerant of differences, have a sense of responsibility, and are more eager to protect national unity. This is shown when Takla, the Christian mother, hides the body of her son

Nassim who was killed by a sniper in Beirut while he was there to sell the crops of the village, for fear that the men would explain that he was killed at the hands of the Muslims, which would lead to a civil war in the village. However, the older brother of the murdered young man discovers the truth, sparking his anger and his decision to avenge his brother by killing people from the other sect, the Muslims. This reaction forces his mother to retaliate, and thus, she shot him in the foot to paralyze him, tied him up, and locked him in the room. In this scene, the mother realizes that any sectarian war in the village would lead to the death of her only remaining son.

Consequently, *Where Do We Go Now?* is a projection of the role of women in wars created by men; more specifically, it is the narratives of women who go to great lengths to avoid the war men tend to cause. The film tackles this problem in a tragicomic way, seeing as the women are both the consciousness of the village and the ones who sacrifice for its sake. Takla represents this ideology: while her younger son is killed by a stray bullet outside of the village, she willingly hides her eldest for the sake of the peace in the village.

The attributes of feminism appeared even in the film's music and songs, especially the song "Hashisheht Qalbi." Music and songs are the first things that a miserable and tormented person resort to comfort him/her, to entertain him/her, or to feel that he/she is not alone in a crisis experienced by an entire society, and the music of the film and its songs have affected joy, love, sadness, and pain that the performance of the actors brings us, between the scenes. "Hashishet Qalbi" is a comical praise to the effectiveness of hash in nonviolent stress-coping among people of various religions. While "hashishet albi" literally means "the hash of my heart," it is also a Lebanese term

of endearment that means "the love of my life." Since the song praises hash, it is provocative for women to sing it, especially in an Arab country like Lebanon. The men are secretly given meals containing cannabis and sedatives; this is the first time in Lebanese cinema that the viewer sees women of different ages gather privately to prepare hash-baked goods to drug their husbands and sons so that they forget the war, as the song says, "give him the finest hash, he'll still be stoned." (Labaki, 2011)

"Hashishet Albi" song Lyrics:

> قصّيلو فرميلو طحنيلو كسريلو نعّميلو وكتّريلو ولغميلو يللا نقّي بضاعة طازة شقفة بتسوى ألمازه
>
> شقرا أو سمرا كلو ماشي يللا حطّي وزيدي وما تخبي هيدا حشيشة قلبي غرقان وبدو فوّاشه رقّيها
>
> وعجنيها فرديها وشطحيها فتليها وبرميها وخبزيها على نار ...هيدا حشيشة قلبي... غرقان وبدو
>
> فوّاشه ...هيدا حشيشة قلبي... زهقان وبدو خشخاشه خلينا ننسى عنو ونخلص منو وننسى همّو
>
> بركي بيفتح راسو وبركي بيفرد وجّو بيضحك تمّو ...هيدا حشيشة قلبي... نعسان وبدو دشداشه
>
> (Saleh, 2011)

English lyrics song:

> Cut, chop, crush, smash, grind it fine, don't hold back mix it all together. Take the finest ash, worth its weight in gold. Yellow or brown it makes no difference. Add some more, don't be shy. This hashish comes from my heart. He's drowning, throw him a ring. Roll it, knead it, mix it, stretch it, plait it, turn it, bake it nice and slow. Yellow or red, he'll still be stoned. He's bored and needs some fun. Forget his silliness, good riddance to his problems. Perhaps now he'll understand, and we might see him smile again.

Some important issues emerge from the narrative of the film, such as the pressure on the young widow Amale who is looking for love, due to the attitude of the villagers to what is happening, which affects the element of safety in the lives of men in it. It is how to protect herself, her son, and the children of her neighbors from these negative pressures and influences. Labaki wrote the script of the film when she was pregnant with her son, as she states in many interviews:

> On May 7th, 2008, fighting broke out between two opposing parties, Beirut turned into a war zone in a matter of hours. We were stuck at home; the roads were blocked. I was watching TV and saw people with masks, weapons, and grenades. I thought, 'Is that really possible? Could we be here yet again? And go into civil war one more time?' I thought if my son was now eighteen years old and he was tempted to join the fight and take the burden of protecting his family—because it's always tempting especially for young men—what would I do as a mother to stop him? (Sharma, 2020)

The film, therefore, is primarily written from a mother's perspective and her narration is dedicated to "our mothers" (Labaki, Where Do We Go Now?, 2011) as well, as written at the end of the film.

The film ends with the mutual religious conversion of the women's village from Christianity to Islam and vice versa, which revolves around their inventive attempts to pacify and distract the men in order to prevent them from participating in violent acts. The feminist narrative is also clearly present in the last act of the movie when the women exchange roles. This religious transition reveals the development and the embracement of the feminist position. The woman does not only understand the other women or the

"other", but she becomes the other. Christian women started wearing the hijab and covering themselves and praying "Allahu Akbar" and prostrate, while Muslim women removed their hijab and the gospel became their holy book to pray from.

The feminist gesture is found in the last scene when the women of the village were marching towards the cemetery to bury Nassim Takla's son. While the women were marching together in synchronization similar to the opening scene, the difference becomes clear when they are confused about which side they should bury the body. This signifies that they are still in becoming, in development, and in search for. As such, when the men ask "where do we go now?" while holding the coffin, the women look at the camera in hesitation without knowing the answer. Although they have achieved progress with the exchange, there is still some development that is lacking, thus signifying the open ending of the film.

In conclusion, the movie's narrative describes a purely feminist story in which women are placed in controlling, creative, leading roles, opposing men. The women are the ones who drive the narrative forward, a statement that is demonstrated even more clearly when the Imam and the priest meet in the confessional cabinet in the church to discuss the current situation in the village that is becoming out of control. The Imam declares to the priest: "You see those women? If we go with them and do what they want, a thousand paradises await us." (Labaki, Where Do We Go Now?, 2011) This confirmation, coming from two men, contradicts the classic male narrative films which place the male as the hero and the women as passive figures that need to be saved or punished. The roles are reversed: The women in this film are saving the whole village, while the men are destructive forces, as they intend to fight and kill each other.

Labaki tries to highlight the female element in her films as the center of the action, inviting the spectator to witness the women's eagerness to collaborate in order to create a better world for the village residents. It is a message of empowerment to women who aim for peace.

Characters

When viewing *Where Do We Go Now?* the spectator sees and feels the environment formed by the women and the sense of sisterhood they foster. These women play an important role in protecting the village, solving issues, and alleviating residents' concerns and sectarian tensions. When comparing this movie to other classical films, one can note that women are not depicted as defenseless or under the influence of men. Instead, men are being dominated by women, not the other way around. Nadine Labaki focuses on the power of motherhood; the women that protect the village from upcoming conflicts symbolize the same act that mothers do to protect their children. *Where Do We Go Now?* is a feminist movie whose female characters are progressive and not just classical prototypical mother figures that need to receive their orders from their husbands or men living around them. The movie is a multi-character study set in a rural, religiously diverse village.

Amale is a character that Labaki plays in the movie: She is a Christian coffee shop owner in the village and is drawn to Rabih, the Muslim handyman who is painting the wall of her cafe. Amale's café is the center of the town's feminine circle, where women of the village come to gossip and plan to keep the men out of religious tensions. Amale is also a widow, experiencing the loss of a loved one due to sectarian quarrels.

Nevertheless, she is still a passionate person, as she dreams of a dance that brings her together with Rabih, who exchanges her feelings.

Amale's intense and furious monologue, delivered to an all-male audience in her café, best captures Labaki's authoritarian tone and character. This scene is a turning point for the character, as Amale enters the café to break up a fight among the village's men. She stands in the center, surrounded by men, and reprimands them in a futile attempt to reveal the senselessness of endless violence. She yells: "You think we're just here to mourn you? […] To wear black all the time?" (Labaki, 2011) This speech reminisces the introductory voice-over at the first scene in the movie where she reveals: "It's a long tale of women dressed in black […] their ash-blackened eyes." (Labaki, 2011). Both monologues represent the bravery of Amale, driven by her decision to stop the fight, fearing for the men's safety and wishing to spare the women of the village any more losses. Consequently, Amale is portrayed as a progressive character, always searching for ways among other women to stop the sectarian violence in the village, as seen in the scene at the café where she argued with the men all the while holding her only son.

Takla is a widowed mother of two who lost her husband in the sectarian conflict and her youngest son to a stray bullet outside the village. She is seen as one of the most tragic characters, as portrayed through a scene where she runs late in the night into the church of the village to confront Mary's statue, mourning her lack of protection of her son: "Are you not a mother? Why didn't you protect him? What were you doing?" (Labaki, 2011). Takla's sacrificial tendencies are highlighted in another scene, where she hides her son's death from the women of the village, wanting to bury him without anyone seeing to keep civil peace in the village. She does not even mourn; unable to grief and

lament her loss, she lies to explain the absence of her son by convincing others that her child is ill and needs to rest. Angry upon discovering the truth, her oldest son picks up his gun and vows to avenge his brother's death, ignoring his mother's pleas for peace. Consequently, Takla takes up a rifle and shoots her son in the foot in a final effort to prevent him from beginning what seemed to be an unavoidable battle that might result in further deaths.

This scene is particularly important, as it highlights how women go to extreme cases to protect their country, just as they would go to great lengths to protect their children. Additionally, Takla's character can be deemed as eccentric; the fact that she shoots her eldest son on the foot symbolizes women castrating men, thus usurping the male's role. Although she is very sacrificial, she sacrifices herself, her pain, and her sadness for the good of the society, but the sacrifice is for the good of the male patriarchal masculine society.

Yvonne, the wife of the village mayor, aims along with the other women to hide any information about flaring hostilities elsewhere. To divert the men's attention, Yvonne stages a fake visit from the Virgin Mary in the church of the village. All men and women from diverse religions come up and gather in the church and listen to what Virgin Mary is saying via Yvonne, and a humorous scene showcasing the sisterhood of women ensues, regardless of their religious beliefs. The symbol of the Virgin Mary can be seen as feminist since it enables women to lead, whereby men are avidly listening to act according to the women's words. Yvonne is also the character that provides the other women with the sedatives—the drugs and the hashish—with the proposition of lacing the men's food with them: "It's all I had with a little hash, it'll knock out a camel." (Labaki,

2011). This is not a prototypical character that men in a patriarchal environment can cope with.

Yvonne and Amale lead the charge by disabling the TV set and burning the newspapers. However, when this attempts and fails and the men begin to plunder one another, the women desperately recruit a group of Ukrainian prostitutes to pose as stranded celebrities in order to distract the men. Those Ukrainian girls are prototypical femme fatale figures. They are represented as "passive objects for the male gaze; their purpose is to seduce the male characters and the audience from the male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975), as explained by the perspective by Laura Mulvey.

Labaki portrays the women of the village as more tranquil, intelligent, and compassionate social actors than men through her representation of motherhood and sisterhood. The female characters portrayed highlights women and mothers' importance, including their dedication to the village's peace. Meanwhile, the village's men have proven powerless to stop the violence in their community, with the Imam and the Priest failing to put an end to it.

While the film is a tragicomedy, it particularly emphasizes mourning. For instance, the opening and closing scenes of the film are the mourning of the women going to the cemetery to bury their loved ones. Another instance is the scene where Takla states her monologue to the statue of the Virgin Mary in the church. Lamentation and mourning are traditionally and generally associated with women's behaviors. Labaki's film seems to fall in the feminist category for both the characters and the narrative structure.
Where Do We Go Now? is thus a film that suggests that if men are the source of these religious disagreements and are unable to reach an agreement, then the women of both

religions can group together and end the hostilities. Labaki's film has a particular place in the feminist film theory, as the female characters are displayed as equal and even more powerful than male characters.

Form – Cinematic écriture

Where Do We Go Now? is a classic film that follows a linear chronological order; however, the main issue is that the camera is voyeuristic as in *Caramel*. The film features two types of voyeuristic shots; the first one calls the attention to themselves, which are purely voyeuristic, such as the case of the placement of the camera behind the door or window, with the spectator sensing the position of the camera. The second type of shot showcases the male character as voyeuristic and gazing at the female character, as described by Mulvey, who states that men are the ones who do the looking, while the women are to be looked at.

In this scene, the villagers are gathered to watch TV, given to them by the mayor's wife, Yvonne. This is the villagers' first opportunity to watch satellite channels, and the shot presents men of different ages amazed by the new set. They are looking at the screen which is showcasing a female weather broadcaster presenting the daily weather wearing progressive clothing, something the traditional villagers are not used to. There are two types of voyeurism in this scene: the one displayed by the male characters watching the TV and the one displayed by the spectator who is watching the film and gazing, like the villagers, at the broadcaster.

In this second scene, Amale is washing the dishes while Rabih is gazing at her; the camera is capturing the point of view of Rabih, rendering it voyeuristic. In the first shot (figure 20), the camera is behind the door in and in the second (figure 21), Rabih is in the background gazing at Amale, which results in a direct voyeuristic gaze. Another approach to defining the gaze in psychoanalytic film theory is through point-of-view and reverse-shot structures, editing figures that interact with the apparatus in the production of the spectator as a phantasmatic creature (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992) Mulvey explains that directors place male desire, voyeurism, fantasy, and eroticization at the center of their work. This scene (figure 22) shows a couple kissing passionately on the TV as the villagers are gathered one more time, observing it, with the male characters gazing at it with awe. The scene comes suddenly in the middle of the movie, leaving the spectator confused until the shot in question (figure 22) helps with the realization that the couples kissing are broadcasted through the satellite channel.

The cinematic gaze is heavily influenced by masculinity, aiming for the identification of the audience with the male hero and enabled by the camera. Sexual pleasure, according to Sigmund Freud, may be achieved by either touching or looking; as such, on a pathological basis, scopophilia can be loosely interpreted as the act of deriving pleasure from looking.

In this scene (figure 23), the village's women are holding binoculars and spying on the Ukrainian girls from the top of the hill. In the second shot (figure 24), the film reveals that the Ukrainian girls are wearing short skirts and descending from the bus. This scene reminisces Alfred Hitchcock in *Rear Window* (1954) film, who portrays voyeurism

through the principal actor, L.B.Jefferies; the latter spends his life watching the neighbors with binoculars while he is in a chair due to a damaged leg. The director, Hitchcock, stresses strongly on the fact that voyeurism is practiced all over the world by people who derive an addictive delight from it (Fawell, 2001). The scene in *Where Do We Go Now?* Parallels Hitchcock's statement, showcasing the women's voyeuristic tendencies as they spy on the Ukrainian girls for the enjoyment of the male spectator.

This scene showcases a traditional voyeuristic approach, as it displays the village's men gathering at the windows of Amale's café to spy on the Ukrainian girls, who just arrived. The voyeuristic male gaze is mobilized into a structure of identity in which the male observer, through identification with the gaze of the male star, looks upon the spectacle of the female body (Allen, 2004).

In this scene (figure 27), three Ukrainian girls wearing bikinis are sitting at the level of the camera after they had sunbathed and their skin got burned, thus revealing an abundant amount of scopophilia pleasure.

Since the camera represents the male perspective, films are shot from a male point of view. As a result, the *male gaze* defines the way the spectator views female characters (Reisinger, 2021), a methodology that is displayed in (figure 28). The way the Ukrainian girls are sitting as well as the level of the camera drive the male gaze. This frame offers the opportunity for the audience to act voyeuristically by having a medium that views women from a man's perspective.

A Ukrainian girl enters the living room full of men (figure 29), who, in return, stop their activities to gaze at her. While sitting in the middle of them, the girl removes her jacket, furthering their fascination. Mulvey affirms that by organizing its three looks

(the camera, the characters, the spectator), cinema produces an eroticized image of the woman, naturalizing the *masculine* position of the onlooker and the pleasure involved. In this way, the modes of cinematic looking and identification force a manly point-of-view on the spectator, while the incredible sensual effect of the exceptionally coded woman's picture indicates "*to-be-looked-at-ness"* (Mulvey, 1975), and cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.

In conclusion, the audience drives pleasure from film through voyeurism, a fact that is displayed in figures 30–32. In this scene, a number of Ukrainian girls wearing belly dancing clothes and start performing in front of the men. The male gaze here is objectified as it emphasizes the gaze of the heterosexual men depicting the women as passive objects of male desire. This typical example of the male gaze includes medium, close-up shots of the Ukrainian girl's behinds, shots that pan and fixate on the women's body. This type of cinematic language shot shows that the male character in the movie is actively observing a passive woman. Consequently, the cinematic gaze gives out a masculine identification produced through the use of the camera.

VIII.3 Capernaum (2018)

Narrative

When watching *Capernaum*, the spectator wonders if he/she is seeing a documentary film that narrates reality and the truth, or a movie that represents it. There is a saying in French: "La verité sort de la bouche des enfants," which translates to "truth comes from the mouth of children." *Capernaum* is the story of the life of an approximately 12 years old boy Zain; the boy's exact age is unknown, as he has never received a birth certificate. After struggling through his young years, Zain chooses to sue

his parents for giving him life; through this act, Zain is suing the government's system and not just his parents, since his parents are also victims of that system that denies individuals their basic fundamental rights. Zain and his parents are victims of a society, community, culture, and system that disregards their existence. Consequently, the film emphasizes the issues of poverty striking children and refugees in Lebanon.

Throughout the film, the spectator follows Zain as he journeys through the slums and desperately clings to life, something he now wishes he never had. Nadine Labaki highlights the hardships of children in Beirut's slums, as well as the situation of those without identification cards. Therefore, the film narrative deals with Zain's existential dilemma, "Who brought me to this world?" (Labaki, 2018) as Zain declares at the beginning of the film in court, "I want to sue my parents because I was born" (Labaki, 2018). This declaration, driven by a tormented childhood, carries a shocking effect, as it was delivered by an especially young child. The existential dilemma is showcased in multiple scenes; for example, in one instance, Zain returns to his family's house in search of any paper that proves his identity after he decided to cross the sea.

Hence, the film portrays Zain as constantly searching for a change in his life; he is particularly concerned with being a good man and he seeks to be respected and loved. This fact is emphasized by the end of the movie while Zain is leaving jail to make a new ID card: "I was expecting to a be good man, respected and loved. But God does not want that" (Labaki, 2018) . While leaving, he is targeted with swear words, such as "fuck off, you son of a bitch" or "piss off, you fucker." (Labaki, 2018). These words are repeatedly uttered by his family as well as by strangers he meets on the streets, which showcases the

movie's choice to keep the dialogue in the common vernacular language, filled with insults, to bring it closer to reality.

As such, due to its complex storyline, *Capernaum* cannot be described as a single case movie; rather, it tackles a number of issues. The narrative of the film depends on several dimensions, though I will refer to the most prominent three: the difficulties faced by refugees and their children, the issue of underage marriage, and the significant problem of human trafficking. The first dimension appears in the court scene when the judge asks Zain why the latter filed a lawsuit against his parents. The boy explains that he wants to punish them for giving birth to him, and for continuing to have children despite the family's circumstances, and for the lack of identification papers for its members. The second dimension, that of underage marriage, is highlighted by the character of Sahar, who is forced to marry a shop owner. The third dimension is human trafficking; through the story of the Ethiopian worker and her son, the movie shows a social outlook highlighting the struggles of the marginalized communities.

Through her films, Labaki directly tackles the issues of women and children in the Middle East where they are suffering because of governmental systems. In *Capernaum,* Zain lives with his parents and has several siblings, though he is particularly close to one of his sisters, Sahar, who is around 11 years old. Zain's everyday routine demonstrates that he is hardworking and wise beyond his years; he makes money by working as a delivery boy at the family's landlord's market throughout the day and by selling juice on the streets at night. This routine is disrupted when his parents sell his adored 11-year-old sister, Sahar, in marriage to their landlord's son. Enraged, Zain boards the bus to another town, where he angrily wanders the filthy streets until he meets an Ethiopian immigrant,

Rahil, in a rundown amusement park. Zain has slept his first night outside his home in the amusement park, looking sorrowfully at happy children riding the different games, suggesting that his childhood has been taken from him. He insists that it is his right to enjoy playing like other children but "life is a dog shot, filthier than the shoes on my feet," (Labaki, 2018) as he states.

Zain forms a connection with the Ethiopian migrant worker Rahil, who provides him with housing and food in exchange for Zain taking care of her young boy Yonas. Rahil is effortlessly motherly as she makes room for Zain in the shabby home she's built for herself and her infant, an affection that Zain has been actively searching for. While Zain cannot escape the poverty that has always afflicted him within these narrow walls, he discovers the love of a caring mother. Consequently, the film projects moments that depict childlike innocence and parental affection through Zain's relationship with Rahil, a connection that he lacked with his own parents. Unlike his parents, Rahil is portrayed as deeply attached to her baby, even during times of deep financial need. After her attempt to borrow money failed, she sold her hair, emphasizing the lengths a loving mother would achieve for the sake of her child. In Rahil's absence, Zain takes on a motherly role, and thus, the movie showcases the parallel: while Yonas does not stop touching Zain's chest in search of a way to breastfeed, Rahil presses her chest against prison walls.

Unlike her previous feminist films, such as *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?*, Labaki's protagonist is male. The narrative centers around Zain as the spectator follows him in his search for compassion, family, and identity. Subsequently, Zain's narrative arose from a patriarchal sociocultural system that reflects social and economic inequalities. Zain cares a lot for his sister, Sahar, and this is shown in several early scenes

at the beginning of the film; however, it becomes clear that Zain's parents only see Sahar as a form of financial gain, as she is sold into marriage to a local grocer. The narrative in this film is not feminist in which we have the boy as the protagonist and the story is told through his eyes and experience.

The narrative deals with aggressive energy that mirrors Zain's emotional rage at being left alone to live the harsh life on the streets. Zain, in light of his presence in the juvenile detention center controlled by the military forces, is a metaphor for his life on the streets, a prison that he is constantly in search of escaping.

Referring to Mulvey the men are responsible for moving the narrative along, which applies here in the narrative of *Capernaum*.

The word *Capernaum* in English means chaos and a place with a "disorderly accumulation of objects." (n.d., 2021) Additionally, Capernaum is a Palestinian village with religious symbolism, whose name was chosen as a symbolic projection because of its connection with the sermon of Jesus Christ, "the Sermon on the Mount." In Latin interpretations, Capernaum signifies chaos and disorder as well. Consequently, the film narrates the story of a chaotic world that is full of contradictions, poverty, ignorance, drugs, underage marriage, exploitation, and human trafficking. Usually, films do not offer a solution; the director leaves the solution open for its spectators instead. In the case of *Capernaum*, however, the responsibility does not lie on individuals but on the government and society instead.

Nevertheless, at the end of the film, when the judge asks Zain what he requests from his parents, the young boy states: "I want them to stop having children" (Labaki, 2018). The film narrative pushes the message that the poor should not have children,

though ignoring the role of the war which contributes to the problems of poverty and the refugees. Later, the spectators see Zain as he is uncuffed and walked out from prison, though whether he gains his liberty is up for debate. The spectators were not able to see any resolution to Zain's problems; though Zain received his ID card, he still lost his sister, Sahar his return to his previous life with his parents symbolizes the return to prison without walls.

Characters

The film *Capernaum* is a mirror of the truth experienced by its characters, as actually lived by the actors in it. Zain, the hero of the tale and its bearer, is a child who appears to be twelve years old according to forensic assessments, but like all children of refugees, he carries between his shoulders tons of worries that he seeks to deal with daily through the state of rebellion that he is trying to highlight under the control of the patriarchal regime. Zain, the Syrian child, appears at the bottom of societal poverty and cruelty, which played a major role in his characterization throughout the film.

At the start of *Capharnaum*, Zain stands in court, demanding recompense from his parents for bringing him into the world. His life has been so dreadful that he seeks restitution for all he has endured. When the movie flashes back a few months, you begin to understand him, and know why he behaves that way.

In the movie, Zain is presented as an individual with a heroic ideology; for instance, when his sister gets her first period, he assists her in hiding it from their parents for fear that she will be married off, as the neighborhood girls have been before her. He steals sanitary pads from the neighborhood grocer for her and instructs her how to cover the marks of her maturing body. Nevertheless, despite his attempts, he still loses his

sister. His devotion to this task—preventing his parents from selling his adored 11-year-old sister as a child bride to an adult male—launches a series of actions that lands him in prison. Another instance of Zain's loyalty is shown when he runs away from his parents and forms a friendship with the Ethiopian single mother and restaurant cleaner Rahil and her young son Yonas, despite all the risks they confront as undocumented migrants.

In the next part of the film, Zain must look after Rahil's son for a lengthy period of time, keeping him safe and fed, which is an exhausting task for a young boy; thus, he is once again relegated to a position as a child caretaker despite being a child himself. However, Zain's quick-witted attitude and his resilience enabled him to persevere. For example, the multitude of scenes that portray Zain dragging Yonas on a skateboard, along with several copper pots, reflects Zain's adaptability and strengths. Zain's relationship with Yonas projects simultaneously the image of a father taking responsibility for his son and the image of a mother feeding her child. In one particular instance, Zain could not find anything to feed Yonas in the absence of Rahil, and thus, he opens the empty fridge and takes ice cubes, sprinkles sugar on their top, and feeds them to Yonas. Zain is also seen imitating his parents: He goes to the pharmacy and steals painkillers, crushes them, and soaks them in water, and goes with Yonas to sell them.

In multiple scenes in the movie, the spectator oversees Zain looking at Rahil while breastfeeding her son; it is the image of unending maternal love that he lacks. This statement is reflected in the scene where Zain goes to a neglected amusement park and rides up to the top of a swing ride to reach the female mannequin, only to peel off her top clothes to show her breast, thus reflecting how the breast, an image of warmth and love, was denied to him by his mother. Consequently, Zain, who has fled his abusive home

searching for a caring and nurturing mother figure, found it through the Ethiopian migrant Rahil.

Classical cinema holds a masculine attitude, in the sense that it features male heroes, male characters, that are trying to save the world. This attitude can be adapted to Zain's character, as the spectator sees him in a savior position, trying to rescue his sister Sahar, Rahil, and Yonas. Zain is depicted as an independent, resourceful, and tireless individual, forced into these traits by his circumstances; these traits also essentially place him in a position of authority in his household, despite his young age.

In the film, Labaki plays the role of Zain's lawyer, placing her as a savior figure offering Zain the salvation he hopes for. Contrary to the other two films, Labaki's appearance in *Capernaum* is minimal.

Souad is Zain's biological mother in the film; she is presented as an abusive mother, physically hurting her children. Souad engages in drug production and utilizes her children to carry her product. In one tense scene, Zain yells, begs, and battles with his mother for the sake of his sister, Sahar. However, Souad's response is to constantly strike him down physically and verbally by insulting him: "Fuck off you little bastard" (Labaki, 2018) Souad's character does not progress in the movie, who never shows tenderness towards her child. Instead, the film's two hours showcase her constantly abusing them physically, by hitting them whenever they disagree with her, or verbally, by hurling vulgar insults at them. Even at the end of the film, Souad meets Zain in prison, in order to tell him: "I am pregnant now and will bring you another sister and you can name her Sahar" (Labaki, 2018). Zain simply informs her: "You have no heart […] your words are

stabbing me in the heart." (Labaki, 2018) Souad's husband equals her in his fierceness; while he is seen lounging on the sofa, he exerts an atmosphere of control and authority.

Contrasted with Zain's parents is Rahil, who is presented as a classical prototypical figure of a mother, albeit not a progressive one. Rahil's character is to substitute Zain's mother, offering a maternal figure where he can find the comfort, the care, and the sacrifice that his biological mother lacks.

Form – Cinematic écriture

Nadine Labaki relies on the method of reality filming and flashbacks in *Capernaum*: the movie starts with the last event and then recounts the events that led to that point, unfolding its ideas, contents, and characters in the process. Zain's point of view guides the eye of the camera, and subsequently, guides the eye of the narrative and the directing as well. In this sense, *Capernaum* is a classical film, similar to Labaki's two previous films. The movie applies classical Hollywood narration, which is a certain set of normalized alternatives for conveying the story and altering style. David Bordwell contends that the classic Hollywood film portrays psychologically defined individuals as its primary causal agents, struggling to solve a clear-cut problem or achieve specific goals, with the story ending with either a resolution of the problem or a clear achievement or non-achievement of the goals (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992).

There are three main points in the classical imaginary gaze: The primal scene, the point of view shot, and the shot-reverse shot. Since Labaki's cinematic language follows classical cinematic rules, the spectator can recognize large shots, medium shots, and shot-reverse shots that incorporate the male gaze. Classic cinematic language is primarily male, and thus, Labaki's cinematic language also takes on masculine properties. There is

no direct voyeurism regarding *Capernaum* film, for the camera itself portrays voyeuristic images; thus, a pronounced object of desire is not needed, as all objects that the camera captures are rendered objects of desire due to its masculine gaze.

For instance, figure 33 depicts a scene where Rahil is breastfeeding her baby at work in the bathroom. The absent presence of the spectator is the center of the image; hence, the spectator takes on an omniscient, omnipresent position.
Figures 34–35 reveal the voyeuristic position of the camera in a scene where Zain is surveying Rahil while breastfeeding her son Yonas. The camera is taking the point of view of Zain, the male child, while gazing at Rahil, thus rendering Zain the voyeur, and the camera as voyeuristic. The voyeurism of the audience is matched by the exhibitionism of the actor.
In another instance, the camera takes the point of view of Zain starring at Rahil while she is hiding her money in her room (figure 36). The camera is placed behind the rope curtains, thus implying a voyeuristic act. As a result, forms of cinematic gazing and identification invariably impose a masculine point of view on the viewer, rendering the spectator an inevitable voyeur.

In figure 37, Rahil presses her breasts in the prison where she is arrested to extract its milk for Yonas while he is away from her. As Bertrand Augst describes it, "The subject-producer must disappear so that the subject spectator can take his place in the production of the filmic discourse" (1979).

In multiple scenes, such as figures 38–40, the spectators see the camera's voyeuristic nature as it shoots behind doors, windows, and prison bars. Through these types of shots, the spectator is in a protected position, hidden behind the camera's lens, thus increasing the sense of voyeurism. In this context, Christian Metz explains that the practice of cinema can only be achieved by perceptive passions: the desire to see (scopic drive, scopophilia, voyeurism) and the desire to hear (this is the invocative drive of the "pulsion"). Laura Mulvey advocates for an interpretive use of psychoanalysis that discloses how every cinematic operation (particularly those linked with gaze identification, voyeurism, and fetishism) reinscribes patriarchal subjective structures.

To summarize, the focus of this study was on three of Labaki's films: *Caramel*, *Where Do We Go Now?*, and *Capernaum*. The discourse analysis of the three movies reports that both *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?* portray feminist characters and narration, while *Capernaum* centers on a male character, Zain, as the spectator follows him in his search for compassion, family, and identity. Thus, the first two films provide a feminine space, defining all points of identification with characters and narration as female, feminine, or feminist, while the third does not.

Nevertheless, despite the feminist themes of *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?*, the cinematic *écriture* that Labaki uses in all three of her films is simultaneously masculine and voyeuristic. Labaki uses point-of-view shots, shot reverse shots, and voyeuristic camera angle shots that depict the female characters in an objectified manner. Since her camera represents the male perspective, the films are shot from a male point of view. As a result, the male gaze is present in these films, through which the viewer perceives female characters.

IX. Interviews

IX.1 Interviewee Summary

The interviewees, Brian Eggert and Dr. Wissam Mouawad agree upon matters—such as the overall feminist tone of Nadine Labaki's narratives, her use of the male gaze, and the voyeuristic quality of the camera—and disagree on others, such as the meaning behind the employment of the male gaze, the progressiveness of characters, and the intersectionality of feminine narratives. For instance, when asked whether Labaki can be considered a feminist director, both Eggert and Dr. Mouawad agree that if feminism was to be defined as a narrative centered around women and their perspectives, then Labaki would indeed be considered a feminist. However, Dr. Mouawad went further by criticizing the definition of feminism, noting how Labaki can more closely align herself with second-wave feminism rather than the current third-wave feminism. Second-wave feminism, by centering the narrative on women, ignores the intersectionality of class and race, a perceived flaw that third-wave feminism sought to rectify. Dr. Mouawad argues that while Labaki gives center-stage to women, she ignores their cultural differences and intersectionality, which brings her feminist quality into question. He insists that modern film analysis cannot reduce a movie to only one kind of criticism; it has to include film analysis within a wider political narrative to enrich the criticism.

Similarly, both interviewees find that that the male gaze is apparent in Labaki's movies. However, Eggert believes that the male gaze is present in some scenes of the movie and dispelled in others. For example, while dancing with Yousef at the wedding, Eggert comments that Layale is portrayed as specifically appealing, attracting the audience. Nevertheless, when Layale waits to catch the bouquet, she misses the flowers and catches

bird excrement instead, dirtying her face and ruining her appeal to the audience. Eggert suggests that the interplay between the absence and presence of the male gaze during the film highlights Labaki's ability to portray multiple perspectives within one movie. Eggert also comments that the voyeuristic quality of the camera invites the viewer to watch feminine interactions that are usually hidden, hence dispelling their taboo. Dr. Mouawad, however, disagrees on the motive behind the usage of the male gaze. In his opinion, the usage of the male gaze in multiple scenes throughout Labaki's movies reiterate the current power structure instead of criticizing them. Therefore, the presence of the male gaze and the voyeuristic camera angles, even if not employed in the entirety of the movie, undermines the feminist narrative by providing visual pleasure and entertainment to an audience that is already used to the male gaze.

Eggert and Dr. Mouawad disagree on the matter of the characters' progressiveness. On the one hand, Eggert suggests that the splitting of narratives between multiple women enables characters that are not usually portrayed on-screen to tell their story and frame women in multiple facets of their lives. Eggert gives the example of Caramel, where the spectator follows the story of a bride-to-be, an adulteress, a lesbian; a middle-aged woman struggling with her body's changes, an older woman rekindling her love life, and an elderly and senile neighbor. On the other hand, Dr. Mouawad frames these characters as new prototypes: the appearance of minority characters, such as the lesbian, the Ukrainian immigrants, or the woman going through menopause, are sometimes subjected to a haughty camera gaze, such as the often comedic scenes these characters are found in or how they are regarded by other characters. He cites another example in the beginning sequence of Capernaum, where the camera starts capturing a view of the skies and then

slowly shifts into desolate streets as if asserting the spectator's superiority over the characters on screen. Seen in this manner, Dr. Mouawad suggests that these characters lose their progressiveness, and embody what he deems as new prototypes currently emerging from modern cinema.

Lastly, Dr. Mouawad insists that modern criticism has to take into account the intersectionality of feminist narratives. He compares Labaki's Where Do We Go Now? to the French-produced La Source des Femmes, and highlights the similarities of the plot, the characters, and the contrast between hard-working women and lazy men. Those two movies, Dr. Mouawad explains, portray Islamic men as barbaric and their women as oppressed; though women are portrayed as holding western values of justice and equality, and thus are deemed redeemable. As such, Dr. Mouawad deems Labaki's Where Do We Go Now? neo-colonialist rather than feminist, with the female native figure as a substitute for white west authority

X. Conclusion

An interest in women filmmakers and a curiosity in how a filmmaker's gender identification affects how women are represented in films led the researcher to write this dissertation. Throughout the study, the researcher delved into the tangled history of women's roles in films; using the principles of the male gaze and feminist film theory, he investigated how the male-dominated cinema industry influences the representation of women on screen. The researcher reasoned that if men develop a distinctly male point of view in their filmmaking, women must construct a female point of view, commonly known as the female gaze. After applying theory into practice to study the films of the Lebanese director Nadine Labaki, he discovered through the study that the presence of men or women in creative production roles, which involves directing, writing, and cinematography, does not cancel the idea of portraying a woman from a male perspective.

Due to the absence of any examinations of this kind for the Lebanese cinema, this research paper attempted to explore these three films written, acted, and directed by Labaki. In other words, this paper attempted to analyze the narrative, the characters, and the cinematic *écriture* of these movies through feminist film theorists' lens by adopting Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory. By employing two methods, discourse analysis, and interviews, the researcher was able to conclude that, although Labaki's *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?* deal with women's issues, obsessions, concerns, and difficulties AS they face patriarchal society, her image, form, narration, and cinematic *écriture* remains male voyeuristic in that regard. In addition, *Capernaum* does not provide the feminine space the other movies do.

The results of the study revealed that *Caramel'*s female characters propel the tale forward, contradicting Mulvey's assertions about the masculine narrative. The storyline for all of these ladies progresses from a social idea of being or remaining beautiful, according to the name of the beauty salon "Si Belle," to accepting their own identity as the mirror reflects their appearance, thus embodying "Si Elle." What can be deduced after analyzing the cinematic *écriture* of *Caramel* is that it structures its gaze as masculine, where women are always the object of the gaze and not the bearer of it.

In her films, Labaki aims to make the female protagonist the center of attention, enabling the audience to observe the women's enthusiasm to collaborate in order to improve the lives of the village people, as seen in *Where Do We Go Now?* It is a message of empowerment for women who want to make the world a better place. The film includes two sorts of voyeuristic shots: the first draws attention to themselves and is purely voyeuristic, such as when the camera is placed behind a door or window and the spectator detects the camera's position. The second style of shot depicts a voyeuristic male character staring at a female figure. This can be related to what Christian Metz stated, as written in the literature review, in which he psychoanalyzes and institutionalizes the three basic origins of cinematic pleasure: Identification (first with the camera, then with the character); voyeurism (observation of others from a safe distance); and fetishism (the play of lack and disavowal). While *Capernaum* resonates with Mulvey's statement—that men are the ones who do the looking, while the women are to be looked at—as Zain's point of view drives the camera's eye, which in turn guides the storyline and directing.

X.1 Limitations and Recommendations

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the findings might not be generalizable to other Lebanese movies that have been produced in the past or might be produced in the future. In fact, the researcher did not use quantitative analysis which limits the validity and reliability of the data. Secondly, the researcher faced difficulties and limitations with the in-depth interviews, as most individuals that were contacted were not familiar with feminist film theory, and especially the parts concerning feminist film *écriture* and aesthetics.

Moreover, the resources and references that study this kind of films from a feminist perspective and their cinematic form are scarce. At the current moment, there are no formal studies that treat these issues. What the researcher was arguing in his study was found mainly in the books of the film theorist Robert Stam, which works mainly on film semiotics. Thirdly, the researcher studied only one sample reflecting the work of one Lebanese director in which it doesn't represent all Lebanese cinema, and it is studied from one lens (The Mulvey theory) and not from different perspectives.

This paper will open doors for researchers who are interested in studying feminism and the cinematic form in Lebanese cinema. Perhaps future research might complement the present one by enlarging the sample of Lebanese movies to be studied, or maybe by conducting a comparative study between Lebanese and international films to study feminism and the male perspective form. This topic can also be approached from other lenses, such as Dr. Wissam Mouawad, suggested, via adopting a colonialist and social realist perspective, since most of Labaki's films deal with the current social reality of Lebanon.

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XII. Appendices

Appendix A

Interviews

Mr. Brian Eggert Film Critic expert in Hollywood Cinema

Elie Harfouche **(EH):** Do you consider Nadine Labaki a feminist director?
Brian Eggert **(BE):**

a) In the sense that she tells stories that place women at the center, yes. Especially because she is telling women-centric stories in a country where women-centric films are less common. By focusing on women, she elevates women in the cultural conversation and reframes the culture through them going from "one stage to another," (as they say in Caramel). That approach is by definition feminist.
b) Caramel, for instance, deals with the multifaceted perspectives of women at various stages in life: the bride to be; the woman having an affair; the lesbian; the middle-aged woman struggling to maintain her appeal; the older woman realizing she's not too old for romance; the elderly and senile neighbor on the periphery.

EH: Do you see feminism in the narration and the characters in Caramel (2007) and in Where Do We Go Now (2011)?

BE: Yes, in the scenes that involve women's subjectivity, which is predominant in her features. But in both films, she fluidly alternates subjectivity depending on the demands of the scene or sequence. For instance, in Caramel she switches from Layale preparing herself for a rendezvous, looking through the blinds, and searching for her lover, in one scene; in the same sequence, she switches to Youssef, who looks across the way and voyeuristically watches her and play-acts talking to her. Labaki deals primarily with women's issues and perspectives in the film, but she's not above avoiding the male gaze at times. For this reason, I think that while she's a feminist, she's also someone who's a humanist and willing to change her film's subjectivity to align with the character. This sometimes creates a sense of perspective conflict. The point she hopes to make, I believe, is that everyone has a perspective.

EH: The main characters are female in her first two films but are they cliché, prototypical female figures or are they progressive, in development, moving, searching figures?

BE: They are progressive characters in some cases; in other cases, Labaki views those who are not searching as worthy of our attention. Women who might not be the lead of a film nonetheless receive more attention than they would in another film. The actress

character in Caramel, for instance, doesn't have a dramatic arc that fills an entire movie. But the attention Labaki brings to her shows, the dimensionality of that character and other women in her films who might otherwise be marginalized in both cinema and their culture. That attention, and where Labaki decides to point her camera, are what matter most in her use of character.

EH: Does Nadine Labaki have a voyeuristic image?
BE:

a) At times, yes. There are moments where her characters regard one another and the camera occupies a desirous gaze, but it's not exclusively a male or female gaze. While predominantly told from a female perspective, she seems capable of shifting the gaze to suit the desires and desirability of her characters. She sees the appeal of her characters, and she wants to place us in a position to see their humanity and desirability too.
b) Formally, Labaki uses lots of frames (looking at her characters through mirrors or through various obstructions that block out much of the image), which gives the impression of a voyeur. Sometimes this is because Youssef is watching Layale from across a room in Caramel; sometimes this is because Labaki seems to be showing us the secret life of women that we rarely see.

EH: Are the different factors of the male gaze theory evident in Nadine Labaki's films?
BE:

a) There are examples, yes. Her perspective usually inhabits the heterosexual female gaze, sometimes a queer-female subjectivity. But it also shifts perspective to the male gaze at times too. In Caramel, when Layale is preparing for her rendezvous with her lover, or when she dances with Youssef at the wedding, the camera does make her look appealing. She's also quick to comment on or dispel the male gaze, as when Layale waits to catch the bouquet but instead catches bird poop in her face.
b) I find that her framing could be seen as a case of framing beauty rather than employing the gaze (and heteronormative perspectives could be assigning the label of male gaze out of a personal inclination). But it seems evident to me that she loves her characters and wants to see the beauty and humanity in each of them, regardless of gender or sexuality, and doesn't actively employ the male gaze on a regular basis unless she intends to comment on its traditional place in a patriarchal culture.

EH: Does Nadine Labaki have a male cinematic écriture according to the feminist film theory?

BE: I think she employs aspects of what you call "male cinematic écriture" to comment on them from a feminist perspective. It's a form of postmodern rethinking and revision. She's using traditional motifs not to embrace tradition but to reframe the perspective away from the usual patriarchal, male-centric storytelling.

EH: Does the feminist écriture liberates the gaze from any gender orientation?
BE:

a) Not entirely, as I think the history of male-dominated filmmaking has made it difficult for women filmmakers to avoid the techniques used by men. See my examples above about how Labaki cannot help but make her character look appealing to Youssef. Labaki uses various gazes all of the time, and she seems to have a good grasp on when and how to alternate between the male and female gaze.
b) Labaki's perspective is certainly feminist, but I don't think it's possible to liberate the gaze from any gender orientation because, as viewers, we project our genders and desires onto the events on the screen. For example, a viewer may be biased in their interpretation of Labaki's use of the male gaze when she's onscreen because they find her attractive. The viewer plays a crucial role in defining what's happening in a movie, regardless of how the filmmaker tries to direct them.
c) Filmmakers could certainly try to liberate the gaze from any gender orientation. Direct Cinema techniques attempt this through fly-on-the-wall observation. But I don't think feminist filmmakers are going for non-gender-specific perspectives.
d) Moreover, I think it's a slippery slope to make generalizations about what men or women do when they're making films. Not all men do X and not all women do Y. It's best to look at specific examples and try to identify what's happening in a specific film. When we try to make broad, sweeping claims about patterns among male or female filmmakers, we lessen our understanding of them and overlook the exceptions to the rule—and the exceptions, in my view, are the most interesting parts.

Transcription: Dr. Wissam Mouawad Interview

- Interview conducted by: Elie Harfouche through Zoom

- Date: June 10, 2021

- Individuals present: Elie Harfouche, Pamela Nassour, Dr. Wissam Mouawad

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EH: Do you consider Nadine Labaki a feminist director?

WM: I don't know how to define a feminist director, as it depends on which version of feminism to employ. If feminism is taken to be the demand for women's rights, then yes, Labaki is a feminist. But if feminism is taken to be the complete restructure of how women are viewed, in the gender power-relations, then no, she is not. I believe that Zeina Daccache to more of a feminist director than Labaki, as she is voicing the needs of those who do not have voices. Labaki reiterates the same power structures. Gilles Deleuze's metaphor, that right-wings think in a centrifugal manner, from a center-to-margin motion, while left-wings think in a centripetal manner, from a margin-to-center motion. When Labaki, in front and behind the camera, makes sure to beautify herself compared to the background characters, this fits the definition of centrifugation.

EH: Do you see feminism in the narration and the characters in *Caramel* (2007) and *Where Do We Go Now* (2011)?

WM: *Where Do We Go Now?* cannot be taken out of context. This film, a French-funded and directed movie, has been heavily influenced by the Arab Spring. *La Source des Femmes*, another French movie which resembles, tackles a Turkish community where men are portrayed as barbaric and lazy while the women are represented as hard-working. This village has been cut off from water, so the women are the ones who bring water. In a protest, the women decide to stop having sex with their men. The leader of these women, who resembles Labaki, is attracted to a school teacher, who is portrayed wearing western clothes, and who also resembles Labaki's main love interest in the movie. Those two movies portray Islamic men as barbaric and their women as oppressed; though women are portrayed as holding western values of justice and equality. These stereotypes are often portrayed by the Arab spring, an orientalist perspective that Edward Said described. I consider this to be a neo-orientalist matter, where a local, native individual portrays the values of the west.

EH: The main characters are female in her first two films but are they cliché, prototypical female figures or are they progressive, in development, moving, searching figures?

WM invites Pamela Nassour (**PN**) to answer the question.

PN: some of Caramel's characters are progressing, but they seem like minority roles used for comedic purposes. These characters, while valid in their presence in the film, are twisted in the comedic scenes they are employed, as they portray women whose actions are dictated by credible reasons that are not meant to be laughed at.

WM: the main character's goal is to get married and live a happy-ever-after. Secondly, there is a haughty gaze at work; in the first sequence of the movie *Capernaum,* there's a drone that captures the scene, setting the tone of the movie. In the same manner, the village's men regard the Ukrainian women in a haughty manner. these characters are as new prototypes dictated by the Arab Spring. The question poses itself: are these point of views reiterating the current power structures or do they break it down?

EH: Does Nadine Labaki have a voyeuristic image?

WM: Yes. Labaki's scenes are voyeuristic. Cultural studies focus on three aspects of representation: gender, race, and class. These three main parts interlace to make a political narrative. To reduce feminist analyses to gender issues, you are greying out the two other important aspects; Labaki's narrative follows such a notion. Sexualized images can be used in a progressive manner if they are included in an overall progress political narrative, which is not the case with Labaki. I assert that modern critics cannot reduce a movie to only one kind of criticism; they have to include structure, domination, political power relation, etc. The camera movement cannot be criticized if not viewed from the lens of a specific political narrative.

I want to introduce you to Ella Shohat, who writes about the hierarchy of colonial films. Shohat writes that the hierarchy of colonialism subscribes to the following order: white male → white female → black male → black female. In the absence of the white male, the white female fills the role of authoritarian figure; this shift of power, however, does not dictate a feminist motivation, but is still subjected to colonial criticism, for the white women is merely reiterating the power structure already in place. In modern Arab film co-produced with France, the Arab woman is portrayed in a southern European manner, aka, with straight hair and western clothes. This woman is the one who inherited the substitute colonial power. In order for Caramel to be properly feministic, Labaki's character needed to be removed, and the narrative needed to be centered around the other characters. He compares it to *Cléo de 5 à 7*, which tells the story of a woman who leaves her work only to waste her time in the city.

EH: Which category would you qualify the movies for?

WM: I categorize them as neo-colonialist: I see *Caramel* similar to a music video in aesthetic, which is found refreshing. I consider the second movie is neo-colonialist and I refused to watch the third film, considering it as poverty-porn.