

Body and Conflict: The Interplay of Genre, Gender, and Lebanese Realities in Nadine Labaki's Cinema

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The article presents the work of Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki in the context of a woman's vision of a world filled with dichotomies. In all three films discussed – *Caramel* (2007), *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011) and *Capernaum* (2018) – she shares a specific tension, balancing between tenderness and cruelty, between the everyday beauty of life and its unbearable burden. In genre formulas, often seemingly light-hearted, rich in slapstick gags and musical elements, she tells stories from the perspective of mothers, daughters or lovers, presenting their vision of how to maintain hope amid the absolute terror of the outside world. Labaki brings out of this disharmony stories full of empathy, humour and pain, which draw the viewer into an intricate and morally ambiguous world of emotion and reflection. In the article, I will look at the extent to which the director's feminine, subtle sensibility allows her to create cinema that is both commercially acceptable and deeply artistic, and at what points she uses elements of genre cinema (humour, sexuality, eroticism) to speak of the chaos of the world and its injustice.

KEYWORDS: Nadine Labaki, women's cinema, Lebanese cinema, corporeality, genre framework

Stories of bodies – dead, missing, washed ashore; bodies in agony, struggling to survive, fighting, protesting – are the stories that capture attention. Corporeality has become a crucial category in the cinema of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, as it is often the affective images of bodies that direct the Western gaze toward these areas. Bodies, often those of children, demand attention; they evoke emotion and provoke reaction, functioning as iconic images and serving as tools in political discourse – frequently employed by all sides of a given conflict. This was the case with the Syrian two-year-old Alan Kurdi, whose body was washed up on the Mediterranean shore in 2015; the five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, whose dust- and blood-covered face became a symbol of besieged Aleppo after an explosion in 2016; or the seven-year-old Amal Hussain, whose emaciated body succumbed merely a week after her photograph circulated worldwide in 2018, aiming to draw attention to the devastating consequences of the religious civil war in Yemen – a battleground between Iran, supporting the Houthi rebels, and Saudi Arabia, backing Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Among Arab-world filmmakers interested in the body as a medium for conveying suffering, one can point to Nadine Labaki, a Lebanese director, screenwriter, and actress. She gained international recognition primarily through her third feature film – *Capernaum* (2018), a widely discussed work that received a fifteen-minute standing ovation at Cannes and was nominated for numerous awards, including the Academy Award (making her the first Arab woman nominated in this category), the Golden Globes, the BAFTAs, and the Palme d'Or. Her films, in one way or another, centre on the body – both as a vessel of trauma and as an instrument of healing. However, her cinematic approach diverges significantly from the brutal imagery of war often depicted in the press, as the role and impact of cinema differ from that of print media. Labaki is far more subtle, yet – as demonstrated particularly in *Capernaum* – she does not shy away from direct and critical commentary on the conflicts that have plagued her country for decades. In *Capernaum*, the audience encounters the grim realities of refugee children – gaunt, clad in tattered rags, their bodies bearing the marks of hardship. Yet beyond this film, the body remains equally central in her work, though primarily in the form of women's bodies – either veiled beneath chadors and hijabs or revealed in fitted dresses. Crucially, Labaki refrains from valorising either mode of self-presentation or self-determination. She does not construct a dichotomy between sensual, modern, democratic bodies and sombre, shapeless, submissive ones. Instead, she presents Muslim culture with its flaws as well as its deeply rooted traditions, allowing her female protagonists the freedom to make choices without imposing judgment or moral consequence.

Labaki is a filmmaker marked by a fearless engagement with complex social issues, coupled with an unconventional approach to cinematic storytelling. Her work blends disparate styles, genres, and emotional tones, placing her within a rare category in Middle Eastern cinema, an industry still largely dominated by quasi-documentary narratives that, while raw and urgent in content, remain austere in form.[1] All three of the discussed films embody the tension between harmony and discord, unity and fragmentation, hope and despair. Infused with a subtle sensitivity and profound humanism, Labaki's cinema tackles some of the most pressing issues of contemporary society – war, social injustice, child suffering, and patriarchal power structures – presenting them in a manner that consistently surprises through its visual lightness, satirical self-criticism, and capacity to interweave extreme emotions. In addressing some of the most difficult themes imaginable, the Lebanese director employs the conventions of genre cinema, incorporating elements of courtroom drama, comedy, soap opera, and even musical.

[1] Examples of the films, which while poignant and socially engaged, largely retain conventional realist aesthetics without breaching formal boundaries, may include *Wadja* (2012, dir. Haifaa Al-Mansour), *Taxi*

(2015, dir. Jafar Panahi), *Clash* (2016, dir. Mohamed Diab), *Yomeddine* (2018, dir. Abu Bakr Shawky) and many others.

Her films, rich in intrigue, romance, and at times suspense, use these genres as a narrative framework while simultaneously blending multiple aesthetics and conventions without fully committing to any single one. Labaki's three feature films to date – *Caramel* (2007), *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011), and *Capernaum* (2018) – balance delicately on the fine line between aesthetic order and thematic chaos, offering cinema that is at once beautiful and profoundly painful.

This article aims to investigate the central tension in Labaki's work between harmony and disharmony, the various embodiments of the dichotomies – whether social, political, or corporeal. It considers the notion of oppositions on multiple levels – between tradition and modernity, realism and disillusion, visibility and invisibility (in reference to gender and bodies), obedience and defiance, individual and collective. Through the analysis of selected scenes this article will argue that Labaki's work operates in a space of corporeal negotiation of sorts, where the body – particularly the female and child's body – becomes a site of political inscription, empathy, and resistance. The article will also explore how Labaki's formal strategies, including her use of non-professional actors, blending genres, employing meta-filmic devices and non-linear narratives, serve to undermine hegemonic visual regimes, especially the Western male gaze, creating new spaces of visibility and voice for marginalized figures. Additionally, these meta-filmic techniques allow her films to be connected to the real-world dimension of Lebanese socio-political dynamics.

The director was born, a detail of significant importance, in 1974 in a small town 20 kilometres east of Beirut, into a Maronite, and thus Christian, family. Her passion for storytelling was nurtured by her uncle, a local *hakawati*.^[2] Her childhood and adolescence, however, were also marked with sorrow, as Lebanon was mired in a fifteen-year civil war starting in 1975. It is, I believe, imperative to outline the nature and causes of this conflict. This will, naturally, be done in a highly simplified and abbreviated manner, given the scope (and topic) of this text. However, it was a formative experience for Labaki, and constitutes the background in all three of her works, so even a brief understanding of the conflict will be crucial for the subsequent analysis of the director's films.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, no Arab country has recognized its existence. Displaced Palestinians scattered across the surrounding regions. It is estimated that 100,000 of them settled in Lebanon, where they lived in difficult conditions in refugee camps. The young were devoid of hope (and the citizenships of the countries in which they resettled). Left to fend for themselves, they were thus drawn to the heavily nationalist ideals of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), whose base was located in southern Lebanon, on

Childhood and War: The Beginning of the Journey

[2] In the Arabic tradition, a *hakawati* is a master storyteller.

the border with Israel. After the PLO's defeat in Jordan, where they had sought to declare the establishment of a liberated Palestinian territory, they were militarily expelled by the then King of Jordan in 1971. Most Palestinians (around 300,000) resettled in Lebanon. The social moods in the 1970s Lebanon were thus marked by anxiety regarding the growing strength of the PLO and the rise of fundamentalist sentiments in the East (which in 1979 would culminate in the Islamic Revolution in Iran). From 1975 to 1990, Lebanon experienced intermittent internal fighting between various national and religious factions. Additionally, Syria, Israel, and the PLO began to more openly intervene in Lebanese affairs. In June 1982, the second phase of the war, known as "Peace for Galilee", was initiated by Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon, ostensibly to expel the armed Palestinian PLO fighters from the country.[3] The immediate cause was the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom, for which Israel responded by bombing PLO bases in southern Lebanon and then gradually occupying other cities, including Beirut.[4] The Palestinian forces were eliminated in Lebanon, and in June 1985, after three more years of bloodshed, the Israeli army withdrew from Lebanon, leaving behind alarming statistics that starkly demonstrated the senselessness of the war. These statistics revealed that 90% of those killed were civilians. As nature abhors a vacuum, in the wake of the defeated PLO forces, the Shiite Hezbollah soon settled in, initially as an anti-Israeli resistance movement, eventually evolving into a powerful anti-Western terrorist organization and an influential political player in Lebanon.

Adulthood and War: Cinematic Work

The historical context outlined above will serve as a backdrop – though often unspoken – to Nadine Labaki's films. In one of her interviews, she speaks about how surreal it sometimes seemed to dream of working as a director in a country torn by conflict, where the film industry practically did not exist:

Interviewer: It's interesting that you gravitated toward art in the midst of chaos and destruction.

Nadine Labaki: Films can make you dream. They allow you to imagine a different world. It's why I decided to become a filmmaker. I wanted that even though it seemed impossible. In school, they show us how small Lebanon is to the rest of the world. We learn to recognize ourselves as a small dot on a map. You realize that you're coming from a country that's so small, at war, and has no film industry. You don't know how far you can possibly go, and you wonder if your dream is even possible.[5]

[3] On October 1, 2024, Israel once again attacked Lebanon (this action was part of the Israeli-Palestinian war that began in October 2023), marking the start of the Third Lebanese War.

[4] Krzysztof Mroczkowski, *Wojnai "Pokój Dla Galilei": Militarne i polityczne konfrontacje Organizacji*

Wyzwolenia Palestyny i Państwa Izrael na terytorium Libanu w latach 1970–1985, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, Rzeszów 2018.

[5] Nadine Labaki: *Interview With "Where Do We Go Now" Director*, "International Business Times", 11.05.2012.

In 2004, within the framework of the programme “Résidence du Festival de Cannes”,^[6] Labaki wrote the script for *Caramel*, after being selected from a pool of over one hundred candidates. Upon completing the screenplay, she spent a year searching for her protagonists on the streets of Beirut, deliberately avoiding the casting of professional actresses. This decision ultimately shaped the film’s spontaneous and authentic performances, as the non-professional actors did not always adhere to directorial instructions, often opting for improvisation and making independent choices, including costume selection. Filming took place between May and July 2006, concluding just days before the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, also known as the July War. The tensions palpable in the streets were undeniably evident to the director during the production process, and post-production was carried out amid ongoing civil unrest.

Nevertheless, armed conflict does not appear in the film as a theme, nor even as a backdrop to the events. The narrative remains detached from the historical turmoil that have shaped (and continue to shape) the atmosphere and character of the city. *Caramel* is set in a Beirut beauty salon where five friends gather to freely discuss life, religion, and men. Each woman battles her own demons: Layal is engaged in an affair with a married man (whose wife, ironically, is a client of the salon and even earns Layal’s sympathy); Rima is a closeted lesbian; Jamal, a divorced single mother, desperately tries to halt the aging process, striving to compete in acting auditions against younger women with smoother skin; Nisrine, preparing to marry a Muslim man, undergoes hymenoplasty to conceal the fact that she is no longer a virgin; and the eldest of the group, Rose, dismisses the idea of dating, believing it inappropriate for a woman her age. The backdrop to their struggles is a city where different religions coexist harmoniously. Beirut is present from the very first frame, as the film is dedicated “To My Beirut”. This dedication suggests that Labaki’s work functions as a kind of synecdoche – a fragment that represents the whole. On the one hand, it brings together stereotypes about women (and not only women) in Lebanon, yet on the other, the protagonists of *Caramel* confront these societal moulds and rebel against them. They undergo ideological transformations – all the more challenging given that women’s worldviews in Lebanon remain shaped by socio-political realities that are still deeply patriarchal. As stated by Luma Balaa, a lecturer at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Labaki both replicates and subverts the male gaze by centring the women’s corporeality within a space traditionally coded as feminine. The salon becomes a site of layered gazes: the women look at each other, at themselves, and at the spectators, who are drawn into a dichotomous viewing position – invited into intimacy yet denied voyeuristic satisfaction.^[7] This oscillation

[6] An initiative designed to foster young artists by providing a creative environment in which they may develop their projects.

[7] Luma Balaa, *Framed: The Door Swings Both Ways in the Lebanese Movie ‘Caramel’*, “Journal of International Women’s Studies” 2019, no. 20(7), pp. 430–447.

between objectification and subjectivity embodies the very dichotomy Labaki explores: visibility versus agency, surface versus depth, sensuality versus self-determination.

Labaki conceived the idea for her second film *Where Do We Go Now?* in 2008 while she was pregnant, during a period when sectarian conflicts plunged Lebanon into its worst internal tumult in decades. As riots erupted in Beirut, she became increasingly aware of the struggles faced by mothers, who would do anything to prevent their sons from taking part in war. As she recalls:

Unfortunately, the day I learned I was pregnant Beirut had turned into a war zone again because of political differences. There were problems between two political parties, and to solve it people took to the streets with weapons and started killing each other. On TV, there were men with masks holding rifles and grenades, and I thought: This cannot be happening. We've been living peacefully for two decades. We thought that it was behind us. We never thought that civil war was going to become a reality again. You want to know what kind of a world your child is going to be brought into. The situation at that time literally unfolded over a few hours. You suddenly saw neighbors turn into enemies and become violent toward one another. These are people that live in the same place, their children go to the same school, they eat the same food – and they turned into enemies over political and religious differences. It made me think about my child at 18 years old. I wondered if he would be tempted to pick up a weapon because he was determined to protect his family. I wondered what I would do as a mother and how far I would go to stop him. That's how the story started, and it developed into a film about women doing everything possible to stop their husbands from fighting.[8]

To achieve the authenticity she so highly values, Labaki once again chose to forgo professional actors, instead casting individuals from the local Beirut community.

The film is set in a multireligious village surrounded by a minefield, where women of different faiths struggle to curb the testosterone-fuelled impulsiveness of the local men and prevent escalating tensions between Christians and Muslims. To achieve this, they resort to a series of cunning strategies – staging a miracle, disposing of all newspapers to keep the men from reading the latest news, inviting nightclub dancers from a nearby city, drugging the men by crushing sedatives into pastries, and, in a bold act of deception, swapping religious identities overnight. By exchanging their faiths – along with the corresponding household decorations, religious icons, and clothing – they aim to deter their husbands and sons from bloodshed. This ruse also introduces an argument for solidarity: now, the male protagonists have mothers and wives who have “converted”, making it unthinkable to attack their newly shared religious community.

Labaki is calling for a sea change, an overhaul of Lebanese identity. In the end, when the female characters finally discard much of what defines them,

[8] Ibidem.

essentially severing family ties and generations of memory, along with their grief, they commit a revolutionary act.[9]

Despite the undeniable tragedy of the story, the film at times borders on slapstick. Labaki balances difficult social issues – often revolving around trauma, death, and violent relationships, whether within families, romantic partnerships, or society at large – with humour, which lends her films a sense of lightness and subtlety. However, this is far from forced *comic relief*; rather, the humour emerges organically from situational comedy, often reflecting a critical distance from both the conservatism of her home country and the West's oversimplified, orientalist perceptions of the Middle East. Labaki draws from the tradition of Eastern storytelling, a style also evident in Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* or in Marjane Satrapi's nostalgic *Persepolis*, where childhood and adolescence is shaped by stories about the homeland's history, passed down by parents and grandparents. Despite their formal differences, all these three films converge, through their evocation of the *hakawati* tradition, a form of Eastern storytelling that fuses allegory and personal memory. These films resist linear realism in favour of cyclical, emotionally-driven narratives – blurring fact and fiction to articulate collective – not only personal – trauma. While their styles differ (animation versus live-action, autobiographical versus communal), these films share an investment in subjective truth-telling, foregrounding voice, myth, and internal experience over strict realism. The *hakawati* tradition serves here not just as a cultural reference but as an epistemological stance: knowledge is not empirical, but affective; politics is not only external, but internalized in bodies, language, and dreams.

Caramel adopts song, fantasy, and communal female performance as subversive methods of political narration. At the same time, her narrative structure echoes the parable-like quality of biblical storytelling and the classical genre of tragedy, one of the literary pillars of the Western world. The latter inspiration is fully evident in the disillusioning prologue of *Where Do We Go Now?*, where a group of mourners dressed in black emerges from the dust of the desert landscape, swaying to the rhythm of the funeral march *Danse Funèbre* (composed, incidentally, by the director's husband, Khaled Mouzanar, who scored all three of Labaki's films). A constant element of Greek tragedy was the *prologos*, in which an actor delivered a forewarning of the tragedy, and the *parodos* – the entrance of the chorus onto the stage to perform a choral ode. The opening shots of *Where Do We Go Now?*, presenting the village in wide frames along with its desert surroundings filled with warning signs, are accompanied by a narrator's commentary. Labaki's voice introduces the audience to the story. The frame then reveals a group of grieving women shielding themselves from the scorching

[9] Maria Garcia, *WHERE DO WE GO NOW?*, "Film Journal International" 2012, no. 115(5), p. 119.

heat. The chorus of women here serves as a universal synecdoche for all Lebanese women – and beyond – as the context of the Lebanese wars is not directly addressed. Instead, it symbolizes women placed within authoritarian, patriarchal, and internally conflicted social and political systems. The entire narrative structure is shaped in the style of a classical tragedy, including the women's clever schemes to put an end to the violence in the village (subversions based on small deceptions and manipulations in line with the principle that “the end justifies the means”). The presence of an inevitable *fatum* is unmistakable – the sons of the village perish despite efforts to prevent it, and the village continues to repeat its own history.

Her dissent against the cyclical narratives finds its most potent expression in *Capernaum*. The most crucial – and universalizing – artistic choice in the film seems to be the fact that the director herself takes on the role of the lawyer (named Nadine) defending twelve-year-old Zain, who lives in extreme poverty and decides to sue his parents for bringing him into a world filled with misery, poverty, and cruelty. The title of the film comes from the biblical village, a place that, despite witnessing Jesus' miracles, refused to repent and rejected his teachings. *Capernaum* has since become a colloquial synonym for chaos, disorder, and turmoil. At the same time, it was the city where Jesus' mission began, and, considering Labaki's thematic evolution toward increasingly direct social critique, this film may also mark the beginning of her own mission. As Verena H. Dopplinger notes, this reflects Labaki's dual role as both activist and artist:

This points to considerations of a delicate balance between the initial wish for producing a movie that brings the precariousness of life for some parts of Lebanese society to the screens, which can be understood as the activist perspective, as well as the creative outlook and the demands of making it appeal to an international audience in the context of film festivals.^[10]

In the case of Labaki's films, these two functions converge. Thanks to the director's artistic ambitions and interpersonal skills, she reached European festivals and, consequently, an international audience, which allowed her to expand her viewership and express her commitment to social issues concerning Lebanon, refugees, human suffering, and the terror of war – not only in its individual Lebanese dimension but in general. The protagonist of *Capernaum* fights for his rights in the reality of an extremely impoverished yet indifferent Beirut. The courtroom trial in the film serves merely (or perhaps crucially) as a tool to give a voice to the wronged, as the accusations are not legally substantiated. It becomes a contradictory space, where a child denied legal voice becomes the film's most powerful testimony, precisely because it should not have to. There is no existing legal provision, even within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (signed by Lebanon in 1990), under which

[10] Verena H. Dopplinger, *Nadine Labaki's 'Capernaum' and the Human Rights Discourse: An Analysis*

in *Visual History*, “Journal of Media Rights” 2024, no. 2(1), p. 3.

Zain's parents could be convicted. On a metatextual level, *Capernaum* serves a similar role: rather than demanding concrete solutions, it aims to raise awareness of the problem. Nevertheless, Labaki portrays the brutal, dirty (both literally and metaphorically, morally) reality of children struggling to survive with warmth and compassion (and, at times, humour). The courtroom scenes provide the film's structural framework. The viewer thus begins and ends the screening with the child's perspective, which from the outset establishes whose side of the conflict they should take, while also strengthening empathy with the protagonist, and more broadly, with all children from impoverished districts, for whom Zain is the voice Zain becomes, and Labaki the defender. The dichotomy between chaos suggested by the title and a sense of solace structures the film's overarching dramaturgical line. The Lebanese director confronts the viewer with the chaos of the streets: poverty, drugs, petty (as well as more serious) crime. At the same time, she offers a story of small acts of kindness, of care, of warmth found among strangers, of children's games and joys amidst the terror of the world. Much like *cinéma de banlieue* did in the 1990s, *Capernaum* also visually exists on the boundary between beauty and ugliness. The colourful, geometric arrangements of small human figures, seen from a bird's-eye view in an aestheticized, symmetrical frame, upon closer examination, reveal themselves as a brutal depiction of refugee slums – the overcrowded mass of Beirut's shanty towns, makeshift tin houses, children running through labyrinthine spaces they know too well for the viewer to have any doubt that they have ever experienced another kind of life. As the camera moves into closer shots, it unveils to the audience the harsh face of poverty – the cruelty of extreme destitution and the dehumanizing conditions in which the characters exist, left to the mercy of a world that does not see them. Ruthless statistics are immediately illustrated:

The Syrian civil war has resulted in one in four residents of Lebanon being a refugee. Before 2011, the country had a population of 4.5 million, yet it has taken in one million refugees. On top of that, there are also half a million Palestinian refugees who have been living in camps for years and are not subject to Lebanese law. Unfortunately, Lebanon's internal situation continues to deteriorate, and the needs keep growing. The current economic crisis in the country is one of the most severe in the world in the past century.[11]

The protagonist's story is set in the migration crisis, which has nearly doubled the city's population. The boy is the son of petty criminals, and together with his sister, he is forced to help his mother sell opioids on the streets of Beirut. When the girl is married off to an older man as part of a transaction to cancel their rent and provide a few chickens,

[11] "Liczba osób dotkniętych ubóstwem wzrosła do 80 proc.". *Wojtek Wilk o sytuacji w Libanie*, Fundacja Polskie Centrum Pomocy Międzynarodowej, 22.01.2024,

<https://pcpm.org.pl/liczba-osob-dotknietych-ubostwem-wzroslo-do-80-proc-wojtek-wilk-o-sytuacji-w-libanie/> (accessed: 28.12.2024), trans. – A.W.

Zain, in an act of rebellion, runs away from home. He is forced to fight for survival on the streets. He is helped by Rahil, an Ethiopian refugee living in Lebanon under the kafala system,[12] taking care of her several-month-old son, Yonas. Together, they begin to form something resembling a chosen family. However, their relative happiness does not last long, as Rahil is arrested, and Zain, along with the infant, must flee. In one of the scenes that follow, he pretends to be a Syrian refugee in order to get baby formula. This illustrates a kind of unofficial hierarchy among migrants, with Syrians at the top (though this is a dubious privilege),[13] around whom the greatest international media attention has been focused, starting with the case of two-year-old refugee Alan Kurdi, whose lifeless body washed up on the shore after an unsuccessful attempt to reach Europe and was photographed on a beach in Bodrum by Turkish photojournalist Nilüfer Demir in 2015. Labaki, once again, chooses to feature non-professional actors from the streets of Beirut and surrounding refugee camps, which not only gives the film the feel of unscripted reality but also introduces a storyline that correlates with the off-screen reality. In fact, Zain Al Rafeea (the boy playing Zain) is a Syrian refugee who, during the filming, had been living in Lebanon under difficult conditions for eight years[14]:

Zain has grown up on the streets, so he knows the violence of the streets. He's never been to school; he worked from time to time, like, small jobs. The difference is that he has loving parents. [...] I truly believe in the power of Cinema. I truly believe that cinema can actually humanize the problem. Sometimes we can talk about a certain problem in an abstract way. We talk about it in numbers, in figures... It's somehow an abstract problem that we don't really comprehend, so we're not really involved in it, we don't identify with it. But when you see it, when you give it a face in a film – you see the

[12] The kafala system is one of the ways of legal immigration to Lebanon. A migrant lives under the sponsorship of an individual or a company, for whom they work. This system often leads to abuses and the exploitation of cheap labour, and the strictly hierarchical relationship allows the sponsor to terminate the employment at any moment, as a consequence immediately stripping the migrant of their legal status.

[13] As Krzysztof Traba writes: "Categorizations defining the shape of international migration policy meant that financial support from the UN and the countries of the Global North was directed exclusively towards Syrian refugees, neglecting other groups in need of assistance. For these reasons, protests have been taking place for years in Jordan and Lebanon, where citizens of both countries criticize the neoliberal principles governing their national economies and demand the same rights as refugees. This applies, for example, to healthcare, which in Lebanon is private,

making it impossible for most citizens to access medical care; it is only available for free to Syrian refugees. While the focus of social criticism is primarily directed against the corrupt authorities, who often mismanaged international grants, anti-Syrian sentiment is clearly present among Jordanian and Lebanese citizens, manifesting in the blaming of refugees for existing social and infrastructural problems"; Krzysztof Traba, *Poza "kryzysem granic"*, cz. 3: *Syria i syryjscy uchodźcy w Libanie i Jordanii*, *Badaczki i Badacze na Granicy*, n.d., <https://www.bbn.org/poza-kryzysem-granic-cz-3> (accessed: 23.12.2024).

[14] The difficulties outside of the film also affected the actress playing the role of Rahil, who, during the filming, was arrested – just like her character – due to lack of documentation legalizing her stay. The same happened to the real-life parents of her on-screen daughter. As a result, the little girl spent several months under the full care of the film crew.

struggle, you see real people struggling, you see real people suffering from their situation – it's a completely different approach.[15]

In *Capernaum*, the child's body becomes the ultimate site of political contestation, bearing the full weight of systemic neglect, legal invisibility, and social marginalization. Zain's physical presence – his small stature navigating chaotic streets, his fragile shape standing trial not as a witness but as an accuser – embodies a radical confrontation with structures that routinely erase the agency of the most vulnerable. Through Labaki's lens, the child's body is no longer symbolic or metaphorical; it is instead material, politicized, and exposed. The corporeal suffering of children in the film is neither aestheticized for pity nor abstracted into mere statistics – it is viscerally present, manifested through bruised feet, sleepless eyes, and silent resilience. Labaki's formal strategies – alternating between poetic aerial shots and close-ups that refuse to look away – further reinforce this politicization of the body. As Zain moves through slums, prisons, and institutional gaps, his body absorbs not only personal trauma but collective indictment. In this way, *Capernaum* is a cinema of embodied resistance, where Zain's physicality is both subject and battleground in a world that denies him the right to exist with dignity.

One of the most compelling features of Nadine Labaki's cinematic style is her affective use of the female body as a narrative (telling stories of trauma) and political agent (acting as a symbol of oppression). In all three of her films, corporeality functions not only as a site of visual focus but also as a battleground of identity, shame, strength, and social transformation.

The central element in Labaki's films is an incredibly feminine perspective and gentleness, which introduces a unique tone in the narrative about war – both the literal one, as in *Where Do We Go Now?*, and the symbolic, internal one, fought by the protagonists of *Caramel* and *Capernaum*. She herself admits that this feminine perspective allows her to make films “differently”, and therefore, she does not perceive the term “women's cinema” as pejorative. As she states, speaking about *Capernaum*: “I don't think I would have done the same film if I was not at that moment in my life a mother breastfeeding a child exactly the same age. It's good to have a woman's experience in a film, a woman's perspective on things.”[16] The director portrays a shattered and cruel world, yet she does not give up on hope. In the first of the aforementioned films, she finds it in close relationships between friends, filled with respect and understanding, in solidarity, which becomes a temporary shelter from the patriarchal world. In *Where Do We Go Now?*, she balances between

Feminine Perspective and War: Corporeality and Women's Voice of Resistance

[15] Gutek Film, *Nadine Labaki o filmie Kafarnaum (2018)*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoNkjiswcTs> (accessed: 1.01.2025).

[16] Rebecca Davis, *Nadine Labaki Says She's Working on a 'Capernaum' Documentary*, *Variety*, 16.05.2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/news/nadine-labaki-capernaum-documentary-kering-talk-1203217040> (accessed: 29.12.2024).

grotesque and tragedy to tell the story of the desperate attempts of women from a small village to prevent the escalation of religious conflicts. *Capernaum*, on the other hand, is the most brutal and direct of her works, telling the story of a child trapped in the mechanisms of social injustice, systemic heartlessness, and cruelty, where the chaos of reality seems completely overwhelming. Nevertheless, the protagonist fights for dignity and survival, suing his parents for bringing him into the world. In that film, Labaki, playing the boy's lawyer, acts as a sort of *pars pro toto*, giving Zain a voice and bringing a lawsuit against the whole world, which has grown indifferent to suffering, including the suffering of children. In the 2018 film, the female perspective is realized somewhat differently than in the previous works, as the protagonist is a boy. Labaki plays a supporting, though by no means marginal, role as the boy's lawyer, and her gender does not play a significant role here. In this film, the narrative is not organized around women, but undoubtedly, it is a story – like *Where Do We Go Now?* – told from a woman's perspective – that of a mother. All mothers. In this context, however, it is worth focusing primarily on the first two films of the Lebanese artist.

The female perspective is already visible in *Caramel*, the Lebanese interpretation of Herbert Ross's *Steel Magnolias* (1989), which itself is an adaptation of Robert Harling's Broadway play. In *Caramel* (2007), the female body is foregrounded in a hyper-visualized yet quotidian space – a beauty salon – where hair removal, skin bleaching, and bodily confessions form the routine of daily life. The title refers to a popular method of hair removal in the Middle East using caramelized sugar. It is a ritual that takes place away from men, where women share their secrets. The director, comparing Lebanon to the titular caramel, said in an interview: "Caramel is sweet, but it burns the skin. I wanted to uncover the human side of life in Lebanon and show what a typical day looks like here, how we, Muslims, Christians, and Druze, live together."^[17] The film is a celebration of femininity and the friendship between women. The protagonists do not plot against each other; instead, they support and cheer each other on, even though each one faces different struggles. Together, they confront insecurities, prejudices, and challenges related to aging, discrimination, and social scrutiny. This scrutiny exists outside the beauty salon space, whose sign – as Marlé Hammond writes, quoting Patricia White – carries a double coding:

The allegorical dimension manifests itself most clearly in the hair salon's sign. The salon is called 'Si Belle' (French for 'so beautiful'), and yet, as Patricia White has observed, the sign is damaged, and the letter b has fallen such that the sign reads 'Si elle' or 'If she'. It is as if, with the b in belle removed, we are left not with a feminine descriptor but rather with a feminine subject, for whom any predicate is possible.^[18]

[17] Pat Twair, Samir Twair, L.A. Welcomes Lebanese Filmmaker Nadine Labaki, Who Wrote, Stars in "Caramel", "Washington Report on Middle East Affairs" 2008, no. 27(3), pp. 48–49.

[18] Marlé Hammond, *Arab World Cinemas: A Reader and Guide*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2024, p. 198.

The salon, considering the above, appears as a space full of possibilities, hypothetical scenarios – what if she rebelled? What if she left? What if she freed herself? Inside, a safe haven awaits, where these possibilities are carefully considered. Outside, however, the protagonists will face disappointment (Jamal being rejected during castings in favour of younger colleagues), pain (Layal and her unsatisfying romantic arrangement with a married man), mockery (Rose, full of fears and patriarchal beliefs regarding dating in older age), and danger (Rima, whose orientation remains not only a moral taboo but a real threat in the Arab world). The backdrop for the development of the protagonists is not war, but rather a patriarchal society full of conventions. The film eschews eroticized representations and instead presents corporeality as familiar, humorous, and sensuous, while avoiding overt sexualization.

The women undergo transformations together – physical and ideological, as well as emotional. In *Caramel*, the body is subjected to the regime of beauty – it must be smooth, moisturized, and hairless. The homosexual character, Rima, although she (stereo)typically suggests her orientation through her shapeless sporty clothing, is nevertheless subject to the scrutiny of the public eye at a friend's wedding, where she is forced to wear a dress and shave her legs to avoid causing controversy. Jamal tapes her forehead to get rid of wrinkles. Nisrine undergoes a hymen reconstruction procedure (in this scene, thanks to humorous relief, Labaki manages not to overwhelm the topic with gravity: before entering the treatment room, the character asks her friends to tell her fiancé, if he calls, that she is at the tailor's). Siham, persuaded by Rima, cuts her hair, thus renouncing the stereotypical attribute of femininity. This marks a symbolic coming-out for the character, after which – previously shy and living in fear of her family's judgment – she gains joy and control over her life. Layal ultimately ends her relationship with her married lover, whom, interestingly, we never actually meet (we only see a shadowy silhouette and his car). Instead, we meet his wife and daughter, who are partially the reason for Layal deciding to end the relationship. In a scene of washing Siham's hair by Rima, which carries a subtle erotic undertone, sexual tension between the women is suggested. Desire does not find total fulfilment here, as homosexuality is still a taboo subject in Lebanon, forbidden in cinema, and Lebanese law still considers homosexual acts unnatural and punishable. The head massage, combined with a citywide power outage, takes place partly in darkness and serves as a substitute for sex between the characters. Luma Balaa examines *Caramel* in depth, considering its position relative to Western film theories, particularly those in the fields of feminism, gender, and queer studies, noting that Labaki reverses the traditional roles of the male gaze:

In addition to the female gaze, this film, in contrast to patriarchal heterosexual framings, introduces a "lesbian look". [...] one technique to upset

the positioning of women as objects of the male gaze through the keyhole is to place women on both sides of the keyhole.[19]

This is even more of a revolutionary act considering that the director was raised and creates in an Arab country with deeply patriarchal realities. The heroines perform beauty rituals while transgressing moral codes. However, their desire-driven choices are not punished, but rather humanized. In *Caramel*, women are portrayed both as victims and as rebels, and the reduced male presence (we also never meet Jamal's ex-husband, whom she only speaks to on the phone) further emphasizes that it is the opposite gender that lies at the centre of the narrative. It is a film that, while stylistically glossy and narratively light, contains undercurrents of resistance to dominant norms. The women portrayed do not rebel overtly, but their bodily autonomy, their laughter, their affection towards each other, and their pain are brought to the forefront.

Labaki's own presence in the film, and her directorial gaze, also complicates the dominant logic of objectification. The classical alignment of viewer and male subject through the objectification of the female body[20] is subverted. The camera lingers on bodies in intimate, empathetic ways, depriving the images of voyeuristic inclinations and offering shared embodiment instead: a female-authored way of seeing and being seen. The viewer is invited to inhabit a female gaze, one that neither fetishizes nor hides the body, but instead engages with its materiality as lived experience. By that Labaki seems to try and reclaim the concept of the body itself from both orientalist and patriarchal perspective, detaching it from theoretical discourse and integrating it into everyday, politicized presence rather than making it a spectacle or a discussion subject matter.

Related to this materiality of the body is another form of resistance against the male gaze: the detailed portrayal of everyday grooming rituals – hair washing, cosmetic treatments, and leg waxing. This not only creates a safe, tolerant haven within the narrative, free from shame or concerns about criticism, but also, on a metatextual level, strips away the images desired by the male fantasy. It is the outcome of all the beauty treatments that the projected viewer wants to see, not the process, often painful, ungraceful, and devoid of eroticism. However, when it comes to the latter, a certain reservation must be made: these processes are indeed devoid of eroticism as long as we talk about eroticism imposed by the external world on passive, objectified women. The situation changes, however, in the scene between Siham and Rima, where an unspoken flirtation unfolds above the hairdresser's sink, conveyed only through their glances. In this case, the protagonists are no longer passive; they resist their societal roles without words, only through lingering stares and the seemingly routine act of massaging the head. Another scene,

[19] Luma Balaa, op. cit., p. 443.

[20] An approach described with details and critiqued by feminist theorist such as Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Laurentis, Ann Kaplann and others.

although falling within the framework of heteronormative tension, features the young policeman Youssuf, who is in love with Layal, undergoing grooming treatments at the hands of the women in the salon. Here, it is the women who are the subjects of the gaze, who have control over the situation, who give pleasure and inflict pain. When he enters the salon, the women initially neither notice nor hear him. It is only when he raises his voice that they pay attention to him. Both visually and audibly, it is emphasized that the space does not belong to him, that he is but a guest in it. He is framed in a full shot, appearing lost and intimidated. When he raises his voice, all the eyes of the female clients in the salon turn toward him. He is now the object of their gaze. Youssuf's character seems to be the brightest star in the male world of this film. The women shave his moustache, thus stripping him of the attribute of traditionally perceived masculinity, and he leaves the salon happy, unrestrained, as if liberated from the shackles of a culture that demands he be a threatening, serious policeman.

Women are also main protagonists in *Where Do We Go Now?*, a film dedicated to "Our Mothers", which touches on the theme of a women's community beyond divisions, and admires their wit, wisdom, and emotional strength. In this film, the space for femininity becomes the religiously conflicted village and its centre, a café owned by Amale (played by Labaki). The work contrasts not religions (though they are the declared cause of the mutual hostility between neighbours), but genders: while the women unite, sharing meals, sewing, gossiping, and cleaning the devastated local mosque, the men are occupied with plotting revenge and devising further steps to escalate the conflict.

The female perspective on war in *Where Do We Go Now?* is characterized by the portrayal of tragedy, rather than the heroism of death. One of the stories will involve the dramatic thread of Takla, whose teenage son dies an unnecessary and accidental death in an incident unrelated to the villagers' conflict. Foreseeing the impulsive reaction of the men, the mother hides his body in a well to stop the endless cycle of revenge. "Do you think we are here just to mourn you? To always wear black?" Amale shouts while breaking up a fight in her café, thus summing up the pain and frustration of all the women, whose endless mourning bookends the film (though in the end, they are accompanied by a funeral procession) and expressing the timeless tragedy of war – everywhere in the world, women are left behind. They mourn their fathers, sons, husbands, lovers, knowing that this cycle continues, regardless of any actions taken. Even in this poignant conclusion, the director manages to insert a comedic element: when carrying the coffin with Takla's son, they stop at a certain moment, perplexed. On their right side, there are Muslim gravestones, and on their left, Christian tombstones. They turn to the funeral procession, asking the titular question (in relation to the recent religious conversion of the boy's mother).

Much like *Caramel*, *Where Do We Go Now?* aligns with theories of corporeality and politicized embodiment. As Müge Turan points

out, “[...] Dressing the Ukrainian women in oriental harem clothes for their performance, the village women hilariously reverse the orientalist gaze.”[21] The scene where Ukrainian exotic dancers are invited to perform for the men in the village is an act of radical reversal of the stereotypical norms and roles assigned to women from the Middle East, challenging the belief that “an Arab and Muslim female political agency... [is] only possible as explicitly Westernized.”[22] In Labaki’s film, Arab women neither conform to the passivity imposed on them nor do they oppose it in an overtly defiant or provocative manner. Labaki avoids provocation by mediating the erotic dance; the women of the village control the event, joyfully hosting the newly arrived tourists, teaching them local customs, integrating them into village life, and utilizing their skills – and bodies – to restore harmony in the village. The bodies, therefore, serve not only as entertainment and a means to satisfy male desires but also as a tool to unite the divided village and liberate Arab women from the shackles of stereotypes about passivity and subjugation:

Where Do We Go Now? closes with choreography that mirrors its opening – but this time the village women have swapped religions, calling attention to the artificial binary that allocates Islam to the Middle East and Christianity to Europe. Labaki found further proof of Christians’ integral presence within the Middle East’s diverse ethnoreligious fabric in the real village that served as the film’s location: it is a place where a church and mosque stand side by side. Subverting stereotypical representations of veiled women as passive, submissive, and dependent on men [...]. By deciding to use other women’s bodies as exotic erotic objects to satisfy local male desire, the village women negotiate their own restricted gender roles and perform a radical act of social control.[23]

This reclamation of the female body as a site of both resistance and reconciliation resonates with broader feminist critiques emerging from the region. The Lebanese scholar Evelyne Accad, drawing on extensive ethnographic research and interviews conducted among women from rural parts of the Arab world, astutely argues that a lasting resolution to many of the region’s internal military conflicts would require not only political reform, but also – and most fundamentally – a radical reimagining of love, sexuality, and bodily autonomy, including the dismantling of legal and cultural imperatives surrounding female virginity. As she points out in her essay:

It is also evident that sexuality often works together with what may appear as more tangible factors – political, economic, social, and religious choices. It is part of the psychological, physical, and spiritual aspects of human existence. As such, it seems quite obvious that if sexuality is not incorporated into the main feminist and political agenda, the struggles

[21] Müge Turan, *You Don’t Own This War*, “Film Quarterly” 2019, no. 73(2), p. 89.

[22] Elza Ibroscheva, *The First Ladies and the Arab Spring: A Textual Analysis of the Media Coverage of*

the Female Counterparts of Authoritarian Oppression in the Middle East, “Feminist Media Studies” 2013, no. 13(5), p. 872, quoted in: M. Turan, op. cit., p. 89.

[23] Müge Turan, op. cit., p. 89.

for freedom will remain on a very superficial level. A problem cannot be solved without going to its roots.^[24]

Accad's assertion underscores the urgency of grounding feminist and political movements in the actual realities of those they claim to represent, which is precisely Labaki's goal in her works. The scholar's note that sexuality intersects with broader socio-political structures, while perhaps seemingly self-evident, outlines a crucial framework for understanding Labaki's women – not as abstract symbols, but as complex, embodied subjects balancing faith, tradition, and resistance through their lived, and very much material selves. Bodies – both in *Where Do We Go Now?* and in the earlier *Caramel* – are symbols of religious and moral disputes, sites of political struggles, and fields subjected to constant social control and critique. The women's resistance is not depicted as heroic in the Western feminist sense,^[25] but as communal, maternal, and cunning, rebellious towards both: local patriarchy and global narratives of Middle Eastern victimhood.

In line with the article's objectives, it is evident that Labaki's work navigates the delicate balance between contrasting elements. In all three films, as argued here, we can observe the harmonious intertwining of contrasts related to the coexisting religions in Lebanon, their traditions, and their moral consequences, as well as dichotomies between genres of varying emotional weight (comedy, war film, courtroom drama, musical), and – above all – the consistent draping of morally complex, socially engaged, and philosophically multilayered stories in the garb of sometimes superficial, genre-light narratives (in the case of *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?*), aesthetically vibrant, and always formally conceptualized. These genre juxtapositions form outlines for narratives that in themselves also oscillate between dichotomic themes and impressions: laughter and grief, play and despair, motherhood and mourning.

Furthermore, the female bodies in her films are illustrative of ongoing religious and political struggles, acting as sites of resistance and subversion. In the context of Lebanese cinema, which – much like the country itself – remains deeply rooted in patriarchal structures despite its relatively liberal nature compared to other Arab states, Labaki makes a significant breakthrough. Her films not only place women at the centre of the narrative, but also delve into their psychology, showcasing their motivations in a fully realized manner, avoiding the marginalization of their roles. Labaki does not present her characters as symbols or “types”:

Conclusion

[24] Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and Sexual Politics Conflicts and Contradictions for Contemporary Women in the Middle East*, [in:] *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, Lourdes Torres, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1991, p. 243.

[25] Chandra T. Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, [in:] *Third World Women...*, op. cit., pp. 51–80.

instead, she complicates them through embodied paradoxes. They are both complicit in and resistant to patriarchal expectations. In each of Labaki's films, viewers are presented with a portrait of femininity that is dichotomous: fragmented yet coherent, situated in-between longing and survival. Rather than adhering to a Western feminist paradigm of individual empowerment, Labaki's characters discover freedom and joy within the messy, nuanced and socially and politically contextualized dynamics of the world around them. Rather than chasing abstract ideals, they carve out their autonomy in the everyday life, through the bonds and struggles of communal life.

While the director sometimes plays into stereotypes about women from the Arab world, she – being part of that world herself – engages in subtle self-critique, turning the mirror towards the Western audience, almost asking: “Is this how you see us?” This depiction also reveals a larger dichotomy in Labaki's aesthetic – between the softness of visual tone and the sharpness of socio-political implication, between the harmonious *mise-en-scène* and the disharmony of lived experience. In works such as *Caramel* and *Where Do We Go Now?*, Labaki creates a world in which women are active subjects, making decisions and facing challenges on their own terms. She focuses on their experiences, fears, dreams, and relationships, observing them with empathy and seriousness, yet with a genre lightness often absent in Middle Eastern cinema. Labaki's heroines are not mere backdrops for male stories: they carry their own narratives, full of both beauty and pain. In doing so, the director opens a space for voices that remain underrepresented, both on-screen and beyond.

Across all three works, we also encounter a socially embedded aspect of the body – all carry scars, traumas, pain of loss, and experience of war. Lebanon, regardless of the specific time periods in which the protagonists are born, has almost constantly been a battleground for armed conflicts. Each of the characters has therefore faced various hardships and dilemmas brought about by these conflicts. An important category that serves as a point of intersection for the tension between harmony and disharmony in all the previously mentioned areas (narrative, genre, and formal) is, therefore, the body.

This inclination towards socio-political aspect of bodies is most fully expressed in her latest film, where the director's artistic vision is consolidated. Playing a lawyer, Labaki updates important issues and engages with them, making a very personal and resolute accusation against the cruelty and injustice of the system. Here, corporeality becomes political by default: hunger, abuse, incarceration, and migration are inscribed on the child's malnourished body. The meta-filmic aspect of Labaki's character, weaved into documentary-like style, reinforces a sense of urgency. Yet even here, Labaki introduces aesthetic harmony – lyrical music, poetic visual intercuts of geometric beauty of the slums – that contrast sharply with the content's brutality. The result is yet another key dichotomy: the poetic versus the political, the symbolic

impact of a child's body (often utilized in media for attention-drawing purposes) against the aestheticizing tendencies of film.

In Labaki's films, the female and the child's body become both vessel and weapon – a tool of protest, wrapped in ritual, performance, and care. Labaki offers a model of resistance that contests easy categorization, and that is established by the refusal of both: submissiveness and militant confrontation. Instead, she presents a poetics of embodied, everyday political action. In the context of the Arab world, the body becomes a message, a carrier, a voice of protest, a cry for help. Bodies that cause the Western world to stop, shaking its head in disbelief, holding its breath in indignation for a few seconds, before returning to its morning coffee and croissant. Nadine Labaki's mission, as she frequently emphasizes in her public speeches and interviews, is to react to this emotional dissociation. She seeks to draw attention to the general indifference towards the fates of people from a small and seemingly insignificant country like Lebanon, calling for Beirut to receive the same attention as other capitals entrenched in armed conflict and enduring economic and humanitarian crises.

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