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Cues: Exploring The Cinematic Language in Capernaum (2018) and It Must Be Heaven (2019)

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Cinematic Response Through Visual Cues: Exploring The Cinematic Language in *Capernaum* (2018) and *It Must Be Heaven* (2019)

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**Réponse Cinématographique à Travers les Repères
Visuels : Exploration du Langage Cinématographique dans
Capernaïm (2018) et *C'est ça le Paradis* (2019)**

ZAKIA YOUSFI

جامعة الجزائر 2

Introduction

Art, as elusive and free as it can be, as it can get, is meant to provoke, disturb, and unsettle the viewer. It comes as a means of expression, a therapeutic tool, and an entertaining source, before uncovering its political utility and indoctrination ability. The cinematic art has been used to entertain, educate, document, manipulate, mobilize, and provoke. This cinematic plasticity, and quasi-fictional quality grant the films some of their multitude.

Films can be regarded as framed realities; realities of past times, present times, and all too often, times yet to come. Films come as vera icons due to the medium's observational qualities and realistic presentation of all that they capture. This cinematic potential has been fully exploited by Arab directors such as Nadine Labaki and Elia Suleiman, whose cinematic language in films such as *Capernaum* (2018) and *It Must Be Heaven* (2019), respectively, is a bearer of truth, and a carrier of meaning.

The need for confrontational cinema comes from social, political, and historical despair which seems to call for a response that is loud enough for the world to hear, visible enough for the world to see, and confrontational enough for the world to act. Both fiction and nonfiction films, have been made to serve different purposes, blurring the line between sheer entertainment and oppositional, confrontational, political agendas, and propaganda. This blur can sometimes be achieved through animation, granting the toons an innocent appeal that live-action can jeopardize, such as Disney's didactic and politically packed animated short features *Education for Death* (1943) and *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943).

Framing the Arab struggles with war and displacement, and their implications, along with poverty and social determinism, have become an artistic necessity, a habit that can only be justified by the unbreakable bond between the artist, the art, and the context. This cinematic and social tendency in Arab cinema is almost unavoidable, forced, and oriented by an inescapable reality that filmic ideas, language, and vision, are soaked in.

1. The Cinematic Visual Language

The optical expressiveness of the films comes from cinematography which can be regarded as a sister concept to the *mise-en-scène* that stimulates the eye to trigger picturing. This visual stimulation communicates ideas, articulates themes, and expresses emotions. American film scholar Ed Sikov defines the *mise-en-scène* as ‘all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: settings, props, lighting, costumes, makeup, and figure behavior...it is the totality of expressive content within the image’ (Sikov 5-6). In other words, the *mise-en-scène* is inclusive of all meaning-makers in films.

However, the cinematic language, which is initially nonverbal and solely visual, welcomes sound which film theorist Michel Chion believes to be inevitably associated with picturing, he explained, ‘since the very dawn of time, voices have presented images, made order of things in the world, brought things to life and named them.’ (Chion 49), it is what French film theorist Christian Metz discussed in his book *Film Language*, approaching the cinematic and filmic codes as an ensemble which constructs meaning and emotion. The totality that makes up the cinematic language is viewed by American theorist Rick Altman’s model as film semiotics which articulate a multitude of narrative aspects needed for a better understanding of the story.

The cinematic language can be exclusive to certain filmic genres, but it can always transcend that mold of expectations for a flexible usage to convey meaning. Cinematic storytelling is highly reliant on the visual language as an act of speech that is inclusive of costumes, makeup, color coding, props, and figure behavior, whose connotative qualities breed the narrative multitude. However, this visual dialogue remains invisible without the cultural awareness that should accompany the reception for a valid visual perception (Eriksson and Göthlund).

2. Displacement and Social Crisis in *Capernaum* (2018): Hues and Visual Cues

Lebanese cinema is embedded in Lebanon's history, just like Lebanon's history is embedded in its cinema. The imprint of the Civil War in 1975 is either voiced or echoed in many Lebanese films. Nadine Labaki is a Lebanese filmmaker whose art has always remained true to its mimetic function, typified by the social and political environment molding her films. *Capernaum* is a film that tells the story of Zain, a Lebanese boy who bears witness to unbearable conditions and a brutal reality of exploitation, abuse, poverty, drug dealing, and imprisonment. Zain's brotherly protective nature and moral code urges him to protect his sister Sahar from being sold into marriage for financial support and rent relief, however, as escaping brutality is fraught with inescapable atrocities, Zain embarks on an escapist journey, alone in a cruel world that brings him together with Rahil, also known as Tigest, an Ethiopian illegal immigrant who is also fighting her own battle, trying to fend for her child Yonas.

Things deteriorate when Rahil is arrested by the illegal immigration authorities, and Zain is trapped in this social determinism pushing him to turn into his own mother, selling opioids in order to survive, seeking Syrian refugees aid agencies trying to fend for himself and Yonas, before he eventually gives him up forcefully. One of the film's most powerful commentaries is presented when Zain seeks vengeance for his sister Sahar's death due to early childbearing. Under arrest, in court, Zain decides to sue his parents for bringing him into the world of injustice and cruelty, suing and accusing everyone, for turning a blind eye to injustice or choosing to remain a witness, and never a participant standing against it.

Labaki sheds light on poverty and displacement via Zain, Rahil, and Maysoun; the Syrian girl. The title *Capernaum* connotes displacement due to its history, depopulated from its Palestinian inhabitants between 1946 and 1949, located in north Palestine not far from Lebanon and Syria, all of which have witnessed drastic changes due to the wars. This title, this place, welcomes Rahil; the Ethiopian illegal immigrant struggling to survive, along with her child Yonas, via impersonation in a country burdened by its economic and political crises, Maysoun, the Syrian refugee who stands for every Syrian child who dreams of a better future, a safer future that is less dark and more colorful, and Zain; the Lebanese boy whose sense of displacement is an outcome of his social conditions depriving him from all that a child must have. Three representatives trying to flee different forms of brutality (figure 1).

Figure 1 Zain, Maysoun, and Yonas first conversation



Labaki communicates this loss of belongingness and social alienation through color. According to Aaron Fine, one of the critical principles of color is that it is ‘always new and never wholly separable from a given experience.’ (Fine 4), i.e., color cannot be uprooted from its context, from the narrative, and the storyteller, an idea that is also approved by American film critic Charles Bramesco for whom colors can mean whatever we want them to. As a character, Zain is associated with blue, a color that connotes isolation and the coldness of Zain’s social environment and unloving family which breed his sense of alienation and feeling of rejection. However, the cool blue is often paired with red in many scenes, red color can be associated with love and passion, if not danger and violence, both functions are valid in this case mainly because red can outline the love he lacks, and the love he feels and gives to baby Yonas who tends to wear a red shirt, just like it echoes the violent context that Zain is exposed to (figure 1).

Color has always been part of the filmic text, encoding and unfolding different meaning with every narrative (Brown et al.) that is embedded in the context, hence the historical, social and political overtones which turn colors into cultural signifiers (Fine). In *Capernaum*, the superhero, as a concept is associated with Zain whose pants show a print of Marvel’s superhero Captain America’s shield logo with the red and blue scheme which connotes Americanism that Jack Kirby associated Captain America’s character and shield with, as an allegorical embodiment of all that recalls an allegedly American anti-aggression rhetoric (figure 2). Another marvel superhero reference was Cockroach-Man; ‘Spider-Man’s cousin’ (00:34:10 - 00:34:12) also associated with red and blue which connote patriotic sentiments. Such heroic cues resonate with Zain who stands as both the hero he needs, and the hero he is, due to his generically distinct character defying the brutality of his environment which lacks that heroic protective figure, fueling vengeance against aggressors.

Figure 2: Zain finds a piece of paper with Aspro's number on it that Maysoun gave to him

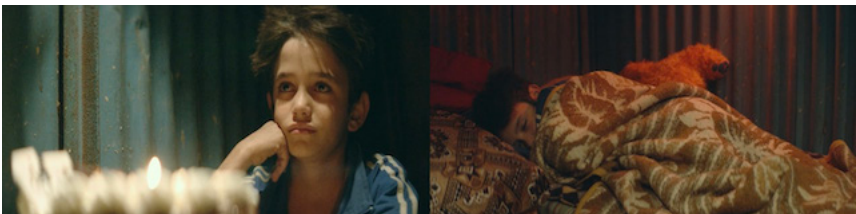


Labaki used opponent color hues; blue and orange, to recall contrast and conflict. In the amusement park, Zain takes a ride on the Ferris wheel. In this ride, the colors change from blue to orange as he reaches the top, symbolizing his aspirations to have a loving family and a beautiful life, before the wheel makes a complete rotation and the color switches back to blue, as Zain returns to the ground, to reality, thereby accentuating the warmth of family and of dreams, and the cold of the environment (figure 3).

Figure 3 Zain Ferris Wheel drive

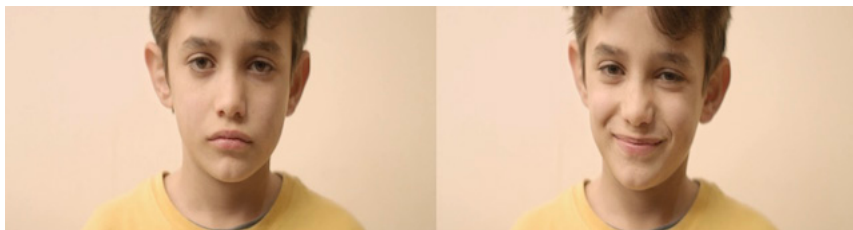


Figure 4 : Zain at Rahil's house



Unlike blue, orange is a warm color, associated with Rahil, as if to enhance the warmth Zain feels in her presence and house which becomes a home for Zain, and his idea of what a family should be like, for Rahil is the mother figure displaying loving and selfless traits (figure 4). In the last scene of *Capernaum*, Zain's associated color changes from blue to yellow (figure 5). This shift in color indicates the character's transformation which is supported by figure behavior, Zain's smile, which is a facial expression he rarely displays throughout the film. Zain's figure behavior is constantly communicating moments of despair and desperation, even as he gets his passport photo taken 'Smile! It's a passport photo, not a death certificate' (01:56:20 – 01:56:28) therefore, his smile, along with the change of color, symbolizes Zain's rebirth and resurrection of hope, all while foreshadowing a leap into the unknown.

Figure 5 Zain getting photographed for his passport.



3. *It Must Be Heaven* (2019): Attachment in Detachment

Lebanese film critic Nadim Jarjoura regards Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman as 'the undisputed master of the art of transforming an individual story (conveyed in a beautiful, pure, skillful cinematic language) into a mirror of an environment, a society and a community, beyond heretical communal dialogue and major issues.' (Jarjoura 216). Known for his interest in capturing the lives of Palestinians in occupied Palestinian land, Elia Suleiman was committed to his autobiographical trilogy which tells the story of Elia, the Palestinian filmmaker, in three different instalments *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996), *Divine Intervention* (2002), and *The Time That Remains* (2009), before making *It Must Be Heaven* (2018).

According to Elia Suleiman, the world is a bigger Palestine, for the struggles have always been distinctively common. *It Must Be Heaven* is a melancholic comedy about a Palestinian filmmaker who moves from Nazareth in Palestine, to Paris, to New York, looking for a producer who is willing to see what Elia sees, and produce his film which does not seem Palestinian enough for the world to welcome since the alienated, displaced, and exilic sentiment has

become a Palestinian stereotype for the west in denial, although it is a shared sentiment that the film's monotony can only demonstrate.

In his film *It Must be Heaven*, Elia Suleiman stands as an observer of the world, a citizen of the world who delivers a tapestry of visual cues mixed with his sarcastic tone and comical tendencies whilst delivering powerful topographies, moving from a mere observer of the world, a taker of photographs, to a maker of photographs. *It Must be Heaven* is a celebration of silent cinema and its techniques; silent as the world tends to be whenever the Palestinian cause is discussed. Elia remains silent in the film, observant, becoming a spectator rather than a participant, evoking a verbose cinematic language and accentuating the silent film suggestive power, as if 'to exclude the verbal conflict present in the talkies which [Russian film theoretician Viktor Shklovsky] regards as a commentary on action.' (Yousfi 21). Furthermore, Elia Suleiman pays tribute to the talkies, for his sonic eruption of serene scenes by tanks, helicopters, and police cars, serves as a reference to the hovering global violence.

The story of *It Must Be Heaven* starts in Nazareth, Palestine, where the warm color palette communicates a certain sentimentality attached to the land Elia would not call Palestine but still identifies as Palestinian, for he defies national borders and the specificities of a bordered nation. The scenes in Palestine are heavily reliant on naturally analogous warm green and yellow schemes, as the setting shifts to Paris, France, color red becomes more pronounced to accentuate the redness of Paris, that of love and war, before moving to New York, United States of America, where everyone, young and old, is armed, connoting America's violent history, the myth of exceptionalism and peace. In New York, the earth color scheme is more pronounced recalling a reminiscence of Palestine which is embodied in a female protester with angel wings, draped in a white gown; innocent and pure, surrounded by nature, protected by nature, but besieged by an industrial fence. The protestor uncovers a fierce look beneath that violated innocence; with the Palestinian flag painted on her chest before she is chased by six police officers. This scene shows the protester as she attempts an escape before disappearing in a surrealistic manner leaving her wings cut and caught as an allegory of the systematic oppression of Palestinians in occupied Palestine (figure 6). The protester is an embodiment of Palestinian resistance and freedom echoed through this character's loose essence defying captivity, serving as a haunted figure while fueling haunting features as it reappears in another scene accentuating the Palestinian rooted nature (figure 7).

Figure 6 Six American police officers trying to arrest the protestor before she disappears.



Figure 7 The protestor's reappearance.



Conclusion

Cinema is about bridging and creating worlds, sometimes different from our realities, offering a cinema of alienation, escapism, and deliberate detachment. Ironically, what those filmmakers end up making are films about worlds made of the broken pieces they have taken from their broken worlds, those same realities they want to escape. Therefore, cinema becomes expository, confrontational, responsive, and verbose.

War is the prolific father of all evil in the Middle East. Be it in Lebanon or Palestine, the poverty, the trauma, and the displacement which result from such ugliness is almost inevitable, leading to ‘a world with a hundred kinds of home’, that essayist Pico Iyer believes, will ‘accommodate a thousand kinds of homesickness.’ (93). Elia Suleiman debunks the heavenly western mythos while Nadine Labaki carefully examines the wounds of the East which became synonymous with all antonyms of peace. So, has the idea of peace in the Middle East become impossible and unattainable that it is ridiculed? An idea that some kill for, while others die for ...

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Abstract

Film is a cultural form with natural quasi-fictional qualities. The observational quality of visual arts, such as photography and cinema, grants them a sense of credibility. Films are meant to provoke, to expose, and investigate. No matter the genre, films have a propensity for recreating realities and framing the struggles of the people. Arab cinema seems to carry a militant essence due to the mold it was forged in. Lebanese and Palestinian filmmakers tend to use the cinematic medium to incarnate the past, the present and times yet to come. Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* (2018), and Elia Suleiman's *It Must Be Heaven* (2019) offer visually rich cinematic fabrics as a response to middle eastern crises and their transcendence. The cinematic language in both films artfully articulates the central themes, from societal concerns tackled in *Capernaum* which serves as a commentary on a brutal reality, to *It Must Be Heaven* which raises questions about displacement, attachment, and belongingness. An eclectic shot-by-shot analysis aims to assess the extent to which the cinematic language in both films has carefully orchestrated an expressive content that is efficiently verbose.

Keywords

Film, Cinematic Language, *Capernaum*, *It Must Be Heaven*, Response, Transcendence

مستخلص

الفيلم هو شكل ثقافي ذو صفات طبيعية شبه خيالية. إن جودة الملاحظة للفنون البصرية، مثل التصوير الفوتوغرافي والسينما، تمنحهم مصداقية. تهدف الأفلام إلى الاستفزاز والكشف

والتحقيق. بغض النظر عن النوع، تميل الأفلام إلى إعادة انشاء الحقائق وتأطير كفاح الناس. السينما العربية تحمل جوهرًا نضاليًا بسبب القالب الذي تشكلت فيه. يميل المخرجون اللبنانيون والفلسطينيون إلى استخدام الوسيط السينمائي لتجسيد الماضي والحاضر والأزمنة القادمة. يقدم فيلم « كفرناحوم » (2018) لنادين لبكي، و« إن شئت كما في السماء » (2019) لإيليا سليمان، أنسجة سينمائية غنية بصريًا كرد فعل على أزمات الشرق الأوسط وتجاوزها محيطها. تعبر اللغة السينمائية في كلا الفيلمين ببراعة عن المواضيع الرئيسية، بدءًا من الاهتمامات المجتمعية التي تم تناولها في « كفرناحوم » والتي تعد بمثابة تعليق على واقع وحشي، إلى « إن شئت كما في السماء » التي تثير أسئلة حول الزواج والارتباط والانتماء. يهدف التحليل الانتقائي للقطعة تلو الأخرى إلى تقييم مدى تنسيق اللغة السينمائية في كلا الفيلمين بعناية لمحتوى تعبيرى فعال.

كلمات مفتاحية

فيلم، لغة سينمائية، كفرناحوم، إن شئت كما في السماء، الاستجابة، التجاوز

Résumé

Le cinéma est une forme culturelle dotée de qualités naturelles quasi-fictionnelles. La qualité d'observation des arts visuels, comme la photographie et le cinéma, leur confère un sentiment de crédibilité. Les films sont censés provoquer, exposer et enquêter. Quel que soit le genre, les films ont tendance à recréer des réalités et à retracer les luttes des peuples. Le cinéma arabe semble porteur d'une essence militante en raison du moule dans lequel il a été forgé. Les cinéastes libanais et palestiniens ont tendance à utiliser le médium cinématographique pour incarner le passé, le présent et les temps à venir. *Capharnaïm* (2018) de Nadine Labaki, et *C'est ça le Paradis* (2019) d'Elia Suleiman offrent des tissus cinématographiques visuellement riches en réponse aux crises du Moyen-Orient et à leur transcendance. Le langage cinématographique des deux films articule astucieusement les thèmes centraux, depuis les préoccupations sociétales abordées dans *Capharnaïm* qui sert de commentaire sur une réalité brutale, jusqu'à *C'est ça le Paradis* qui soulève des questions sur le déplacement, l'attachement et l'appartenance. Une analyse éclectique plan par plan vise à évaluer dans quelle mesure le langage cinématographique des deux films a soigneusement orchestré un contenu expressif qui est efficacement verbeux.

Mots-clés

Film, Langage Cinématographique, *Capharnaïm*, *C'est ça le Paradis*, Réponse, Transcendance