

CINEMA, ADVOCACY, AND REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS: EXAMINING NADINE LABAKI'S CAPERNAUM AND GONG JI-YOUNG'S SILENCED

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the politics of representation and digital cinema narratives in the films Capernaum and Silenced using Stuart Hall's Representation Theory as a framework. Digital cinema has revolutionized modern filmmaking by facilitating authentic narratives, improved visual artistry, and greater accessibility for marginalized perspectives. Both films utilize digital cinematic techniques to create compelling narratives focused on social injustice, institutional oppression, and the experiences of marginalized individuals. This study examines how the two films generate meaning through visuals, narratives, and character representations, based on Hall's assertion that representation is a process of meaning production and circulation within culture. Capernaum illustrates the challenges faced by destitute and undocumented children in Lebanon, highlighting topics of poverty, migration, and child maltreatment. Likewise, Silenced illustrates the mistreatment of hearing-impaired youngsters in a school setting, exposing the inadequacies of legal and social systems in safeguarding marginalized populations. Utilizing realistic visual aesthetics, emotionally resonant tales, and socially aware storytelling, both films interrogate prevailing views and prompt audiences to scrutinize established power dynamics. The paper contends that digital cinema operates not just as a medium of enjoyment but also as a vehicle for social representation and political engagement. Utilizing Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, the research illustrates how Capernaum and Silenced create alternative portrayals of marginalized populations, thereby amplifying voices frequently omitted from mainstream discourse. These films demonstrate the ability of digital cinema to shape public consciousness, foster empathy, and engage in wider dialogues around social justice, human rights, and representation politics.

Keywords:

Digital cinema, Media Representation, poverty and social exclusion, Representation Theory, Institutional violence, Marginalised Community, social justice, power and Ideology.

Introduction:

Digital cinema has revolutionized modern filmmaking by allowing filmmakers to produce authentic, socially relevant, and politically aware narratives that contest prevailing societal stereotypes. Digital technologies have transformed film into a potent medium for expressing marginalized voices, illuminating social injustices, and challenging established power systems. The films Capernaum and Silenced exemplify how digital cinema narratives can operate as platforms for political expression and social intervention.

According to Stuart Hall, representation transcends mere reflection of reality; it is the mechanism through which meaning is generated and conveyed within a society. Hall contends that media texts actively create meanings using language, images, and symbols, influencing audience perceptions of social groups and identities. His theory underscores the profound relationship between representation, power, ideology, and discourse, affecting who is represented, the manner of representation, and whose voices are marginalized or silenced. Utilizing Hall's methodology to analyze Capernaum and Silenced demonstrates how both films contest prevailing narratives by emphasizing the experiences of socially marginalized persons and highlighting institutional shortcomings.

Capernaum (2018), directed by Nadine Labaki, narrates the tale of Zain, a young child enduring severe poverty in Beirut, who litigates against his parents for subjecting him to a life of anguish. The film utilizes a documentary-style realism, featuring non-professional performers and digital cinematography to authentically depict child poverty, migration, statelessness, and social isolation. The novel, from Zain's perspective, reveals the systemic injustices that render marginalized children invisible in society. The film depicts poverty not as an individual shortcoming, but as a result of overarching socio-political structures that disregard at-risk communities. Likewise, *Silenced* (2011), directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, is inspired on actual occurrences of sexual assault against deaf pupils in a special education facility in South Korea. The film employs digital cinematic realism to illustrate the inadequacies of educational, legal, and social institutions in safeguarding vulnerable children. By concentrating on disabled students whose perspectives have been systematically overlooked, *Silenced* confronts prevailing power systems and reveals the politics of silence pertaining to abuse and institutional malfeasance. The film's influence transcended the realm of cinema, inciting public indignation and prompting legal revisions in South Korea.

From Stuart Hall's perspective, both films participate in counter-representation. Rather than perpetuating clichéd representations of impoverished children, refugees, individuals with disabilities, or victims of abuse, they offer nuanced and humanized depictions that challenge prevailing cultural stereotypes. Utilizing digital storytelling techniques, close-up cinematography, emotional realism, and immersive tales, these films urge spectators to reevaluate their perceptions of marginalized communities. Representation in these films constitutes a political act that confronts societal invisibility and amplifies the voices of individuals frequently marginalized in popular discourse. An examination of *Capernaum* and *Silenced* through Stuart Hall's Representation Theory reveals that digital film narratives serve as potent instruments for social critique and political involvement. Both films demonstrate that representation transcends mere depiction of truth; it involves the construction of meanings that shape public comprehension, social consciousness, and political engagement. These videos illustrate the revolutionary potential of digital cinema in contemporary society by highlighting marginalized experiences in the public sphere.

Objectives:

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To analyse the digital cinema narratives employed in *Capernaum* and *Silenced* and their role in portraying social realities.
2. To explore the politics of representation concerning poverty, childhood, disability, abuse, and social exclusion depicted in the films.
3. To compare the representational strategies used in *Capernaum* and *Silenced* in addressing issues of human rights and social justice.

Review of Literature:

The notion of representation has emerged as a fundamental focus in film and media studies, especially in analyzing how cinema formulates interpretations of identity, culture, and power. Stuart Hall contends that representation is not simply a reflection of reality, but rather a process through which meaning is generated and disseminated throughout a culture. His theory posits that media texts actively influence societal perceptions through language, imagery, and discourse. Hall's scholarship has profoundly impacted cultural studies and film critique by illustrating the connection between media representations and ideology, power, and social frameworks. Researchers examining Hall's cultural theory emphasize that representation functions through systems of signs and discourses that shape social reality. Hall's encoding-decoding approach elucidates how audiences understand media messages variably based on their social and cultural contexts. His methodology has been extensively utilized in cinema to examine matters of race, class, identity, marginalization, and resistance.

Studies on cinema and representation indicate that films operate as cultural texts in which social meanings are contested. Hall's theories on identity, difference, stereotyping, and representation have significantly impacted film studies. Academics contend that cinema possesses the capacity to contest prevailing ideas by illuminating marginalized populations and offering alternative narratives of social reality. Research on Capernaum has concentrated on its depiction of poverty, child neglect, migration, and social isolation. The video utilizes a realism narrative approach and documentary aesthetics to portray the severe reality encountered by youngsters in marginalized settings in Lebanon. Research utilizing semiotic and representational methodologies reveals that the character Zain epitomizes the inadequacy of social institutions in safeguarding children's rights. The video creates compelling visuals of destitution and injustice, prompting viewers to thoughtfully consider systemic disparities.

Current scholarship emphasizes Nadine Labaki's employment of non-professional performers and real-life situations to foster authenticity and emotional resonance. Capernaum employs digital cinematic methods and realistic narrative to convert personal anguish into a comprehensive indictment of social, political, and economic systems. The film exemplifies representation politics in modern digital cinema. Likewise, research on Silenced explores its portrayal of disability, institutional maltreatment, and societal inequity. The film, grounded in actual events, reveals the physical and sexual abuse endured by deaf children in an educational setting. Academics observe that the story contests prevailing power structures by exposing the inadequacies of legal, educational, and communal institutions in safeguarding vulnerable individuals. The film's authentic portrayal of abuse and its repercussions enhances public awareness and social activism.

Critical analyses of Silenced further underscore its function in revealing corruption, institutional silence, and the marginalization of disabled individuals. The film portrays deaf youngsters not as passive victims but as individuals whose experiences illuminate wider societal and political shortcomings. These representations strongly accord with Hall's conception of media as a domain where power dynamics and social significances are debated. While prior studies have investigated Capernaum and Silenced separately using lenses such as realism, semiotics, social justice, and human rights, there is a paucity of study that comparatively analyzes both films using Stuart Hall's Representation Theory. A substantial gap persists in comprehending how digital cinema narratives in these films generate meanings about children, disability, poverty, and social exclusion, while concurrently contesting prevailing ideological frameworks. This study aims to address this gap by examining the representation politics inherent in Capernaum and Silenced using Stuart Hall's theoretical framework.

Analysis:

Digital film has arisen as a potent platform for articulating marginalized voices and contesting prevailing societal narratives. Nadine Labaki's Capernaum (2018) and Hwang Dong-hyuk's Silenced (2011) exemplify socially active cinema that reveals structural injustice through authentic narrative techniques. This analysis employs Stuart Hall's Representation Theory to investigate how both films create meanings regarding poverty, childhood, disability, abuse, and institutional failure. Hall contends that representation is not a mere projection of reality but a mechanism through which meaning is generated and disseminated throughout society. Media texts thus serve as arenas for the negotiation of power relations, identities, and ideologies. Hall posits that representation is a cultural process wherein meaning is formed through words, images, symbols, and signs. Media does not merely reflect reality; it actively constructs and organizes interpretations of the world. Hall's constructivist framework posits that representations are molded by social and ideological influences, hence affecting audience perceptions of individuals, events, and identities.

Capernaum focuses on Zain, a little boy residing in abject poverty in Beirut. Utilizing Hall's structure, Zain transcends the role of an individual character, embodying the plight of countless neglected children who endure poverty, exploitation, and societal invisibility. The video consistently portrays congested neighborhoods, child labor, educational deprivation, and insufficient governmental assistance. These visual indicators frame poverty as a systemic problem rather than an individual shortcoming. Hall contends that meaning is generated by the repetition of signs and pictures; hence, the film's persistent depiction of scarcity prompts audiences to perceive poverty as a result of social and political inequity. The film criticizes prevailing depictions that frequently characterize impoverished youngsters as passive victims. Zain is shown as a defiant and eloquent individual who challenges injustice by metaphorically litigating against his parents for subjecting him to a life of agony.

This narrative contradicts dominant ideologies of family, childhood, and social obligation. Hall observes that representation acquires a political dimension when it challenges prevailing interpretations. The judicial issue in Capernaum serves as a symbolic indictment of society neglect and state inadequacy. Labaki utilizes documentary-style cinematography, handheld camera techniques, natural illumination, and non-professional performers. These digital cinematic methods engender a perception of realism and authenticity.

According to Hall, these artistic decisions facilitate the encoding of the film as an authentic depiction of marginalized realities. The audience is urged to see the narrative as social reality instead of fiction. The video thus serves as a medium of visual advocacy aimed at fostering empathy and awareness. The film places children's rights at the core of its narrative. Hall's idea posits that the depiction of suffering children serves as a political commentary on human rights abuses. Poverty, child marriage, undocumented migration, and educational deprivation are shown as systemic failures of societal institutions rather than individual issues.

Silenced centers on deaf youngsters subjected to physical and sexual abuse at a specialized educational facility. Conventional media frequently depicts those with disabilities as reliant or impotent. Nevertheless, the video challenges these clichés by emphasizing the experiences and emotional realities of deaf children. Hall posits that representation shapes societal perceptions of specific populations. The video illuminates children's perspectives, contesting prevailing cultural assumptions around disability and societal value.

A significant theme of Silenced is the exploitation of institutional authority. The film depicts not just abusive educators but also the complicity of legal authorities, educational institutions, religious organizations, and local elites.

Hall contends that ideology functions via institutions that normalize power dynamics. The film reveals how powerful organizations shield offenders while suppressing victims. This depiction elucidates the dynamics of power in society and critiques systems that prioritize authority over fairness. The title itself represents the overarching politics of suppressing marginalized perspectives. The deaf children experience dual marginalization: firstly due to their handicap and secondly as a result of institutional oppression. Within Hall's theory, silence functions as a representational method. The failure of victims to be acknowledged reflects the wider social marginalization faced by vulnerable groups. The film confronts this silence by rendering concealed violence apparent to public audiences. In contrast to several films that just portray social issues, Silenced actively engaged in public discourse and revitalized focus on the actual abuse case that inspired it. The film illustrates Hall's assertion that media representations contribute to the formation of social knowledge and can affect political debate.

Capernaum and Silenced exemplify representation politics in digital cinema through Stuart Hall's Representation Theory. Both films create interpretations that contest prevailing narratives regarding poverty, childhood, disability, and institutional power. Instead of merely depicting reality, they

actively generate cultural significances that reveal socioeconomic disparities and promote human rights. Capernaum illustrates the plight of marginalized children amid poverty and neglect, whilst Silenced reveals the subjugation of deaf children under corrupt institutional frameworks. Utilizing authentic digital cinematic techniques, both films convert personal narratives into overarching criticisms of systemic injustice. Thus, they illustrate the ability of digital cinema to serve as a cultural, political, and ethical medium that transforms public perception and fosters social change.

Discussion:

Digital cinema has revolutionized the production, distribution, and consumption of narratives, allowing filmmakers to portray marginalized voices and social realities with enhanced immediacy and realism. The Lebanese film Capernaum and the South Korean film Silenced utilize digital cinematic techniques to reveal societal inequities and confront prevailing ideological frameworks. Utilizing Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, these films can be seen as cultural texts that generate meanings around poverty, children, disability, power, and institutional brutality. Hall contends that representation transcends the mere mirror of reality, serving as the active creation of meaning via language, imagery, and cultural practices (Hall, 1997). Consequently, both films engage in representation politics by influencing audience perceptions of marginalized communities and structural injustice. Both films prominently feature socially marginalized individuals whose experiences are frequently omitted from dominant narratives. In Capernaum, the protagonist Zain, a boy enduring severe poverty, symbolizes other undocumented and overlooked children in Lebanon. The film employs handheld digital photography, natural lighting, and location-based shooting to establish a realism that obscures the distinction between fiction and documentary. Hall's analytical approach to representation posits that media can reflect social reality; nevertheless, he also underscores that representations are manufactured. Labaki deliberately portrays Zain's anguish to evoke empathy and expose systemic injustices. Thus, the film not only portrays poverty but also frames it as a political concern necessitating societal acknowledgment. Likewise, Silenced portrays disabled children as victims of systemic maltreatment within educational establishments. The film reveals the mechanisms of power within educational institutions, religious organizations, and judicial systems. Hall's constructionist framework is especially pertinent in this context, as the film deliberately manufactures meanings related to disability and institutional brutality. Instead of depicting disabled individuals as passive subjects, Silenced portrays them as survivors whose experiences confront social silence and complicity. Consequently, both films participate in counter-representation by contesting prevailing stereotypes and including marginalized voices into public conversation.

Digital cinema technologies substantially influence the representational politics of these films. The utilization of digital cameras facilitates enhanced mobility, realistic aesthetics, and personal storytelling. In Capernaum, close-up images, erratic camera movements, and congested urban environments engage viewers in Zain's experiences. The digital style fosters emotional closeness, prompting fans to empathize with the protagonist's challenges. Hall contends that meaning arises from representational practices; hence, the film's visual style serves as a conduit for encoding poverty as a social and political reality. Similarly, Silenced employs muted color schemes, authentic environments, and emotionally restrained portrayals to depict trauma. The film refrains from sensationalizing violence and instead emphasizes the structural structures that sustain abuse. Digital storytelling tools transform the audience into witnesses of injustice rather than simple spectators.

The digital narrative frameworks of both films augment authenticity while concurrently serving as political interventions. Their realism enables listeners to perceive societal concerns as structural rather than individual challenges.

Hall's Representation Theory underscores the connection between representation and authority. Media texts serve as arenas for the negotiation, contestation, and reproduction of meanings.

In Capernaum, disparities in power are illustrated through the relationships of children, parents, employers, and state institutions. Zain's litigation against his parents symbolically contradicts the ideological presumption that adults inherently hold power over children. The novel examines economic systems that normalize child labor, undocumented status, and social discrimination. Hall contends that representation engages in ideological conflicts by delineating what is deemed normal or aberrant. Capernaum challenges prevailing notions by revealing the shortcomings of social and governmental structures. Likewise, Silenced illustrates the manner in which institutions wield authority to stifle truth. The offenders sustain power via social standing, economic leverage, and legal immunity. Hall's concept that representation is intrinsically connected to power is illustrated as the film demonstrates how institutions manipulate narratives and marginalize victims. The title itself signifies the politics of representation: which voices are acknowledged and which are marginalized. Both films consequently contest hegemonic discourses by illuminating the experiences of persons who are usually marginalized within prevailing social narratives. The political importance of both films resides in their representations and the manner in which viewers interpret and react to those images.

Hall's approach emphasizes the significance of counter-hegemonic representations that contest prevailing cultural interpretations. Capernaum and Silenced serve as counter-hegemonic books. Capernaum challenges idealized portrayals of childhood by depicting children as victims of systemic violence and economic exploitation. The video compels global audiences to reevaluate their ideas regarding poverty, migration, and citizenship. Likewise, Silenced addresses cultural inclinations to safeguard institutions over victims. By emphasizing the experiences of disadvantaged children, the video challenges prevailing narratives that marginalize vulnerable groups. Both films utilize digital storytelling to establish new realms of representation, rendering previously suppressed experiences perceptible. Their narratives compel viewers to interrogate prevailing social systems and engage critically with matters of justice and human rights.

Analyzed through Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, Capernaum and Silenced illustrate the efficacy of digital cinema as a potent vehicle for representation politics. Both films articulate themes of marginalization, poverty, disability, and institutional violence, while interrogating prevailing ideological constructs. Their digital aesthetics augment realism and emotional involvement, allowing spectators to observe social injustices from the viewpoints of those most impacted. Moreover, by generating counter-hegemonic representations, the films enhance wider societal dialogues regarding power, human rights, and social transformation. These films ultimately illustrate Hall's assertion that representation is not a mere projection of reality but a cultural process through which meanings, identities, and political conflicts are generated and disputed.

Summation:

The examination of Capernaum and Silenced via the framework of Stuart Hall's Representation Theory illustrates how digital cinema serves as a potent medium for the construction, negotiation, and contestation of social meanings. Hall contends that representation is not simply a mirror of reality but an active mechanism through which meaning is generated and disseminated within society. Both films illustrate this phenomenon by showcasing marginalized voices frequently omitted from prevailing media narratives. Capernaum depicts poverty, childhood pain, migration, and social marginalization through realistic digital cinematography and documentary-style narration. The film reveals the systemic disparities that influence the lives of at-risk children and prompts viewers to reevaluate prevailing beliefs regarding poverty and accountability. The character of Zain in the film renders an unseen socioeconomic issue into a prominent political matter, highlighting the interplay between power, ideology, and representation. Similarly, Silenced reveals institutional violence, power abuse, and systematic inequality inside educational and legal frameworks. The film portrays the experiences of hearing-impaired children who endure abuse, thereby contesting dominant structures that mute marginalized communities. The narrative demonstrates how prevailing institutions sustain power by

ideological manipulation and societal disregard, while simultaneously highlighting the capacity of media representation to foster public awareness and catalyze social reform. According to Hall, both films participate in representational politics by challenging prevailing interpretations and fostering opportunities for alternate perspectives. Their digital cinematic narratives not only portray social realities but also engage in the contestation of meaning, identity, and power. Capernaum and Silenced exemplify how digital film, through realistic aesthetics, emotional storytelling, and socially relevant narratives, may serve as a platform for resistance against oppression and a catalyst for social justice.

The study suggests that digital cinema significantly exposes socioeconomic disparities, represents marginalized communities, and challenges prevailing beliefs. The films emphasize issues of poverty, violence, childhood vulnerability, institutional authority, and social justice, so demonstrating the transformative capacity of media representation in influencing public awareness and promoting social change. Stuart Hall's Representation Theory posits that these films serve as critical cultural texts that elucidate the impact of representation on the comprehension of reality, identity, and power dynamics in modern society.

Declaration:

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this Research paper. To the best of my knowledge this paper contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This paper has been done with proper citing and the ethicality of the research is followed. I acknowledge that I haven't presented or published the work elsewhere.

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