

The Stranger Child: Belonging, Statelessness, and Exclusion in Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum*

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Abstract

This study examines the sense of social alienation experienced by the character Zain in Nadine Labaki's 2018 film *Capernaum* within the framework of Georg Simmel's concept of "the stranger" and Zygmunt Bauman's ideas on migration and exclusion in modern society. The aim of the study is to reveal how the exclusion and statelessness experienced by individuals living on the margins of modern society are represented through cinematic language, narrative structure, and thematic elements. The study was conducted using a qualitative research method; the characters' crises of social belonging, migration experiences, processes of identity loss, and themes of alienation were examined using thematic analysis. In addition, cinematographic elements such as the film's visual language, camera use, choice of locations, and colour palette were evaluated in terms of their function in conveying these representations. In line with the findings, the film *Capernaum* strongly reflects Simmel's definition of the "stranger who belongs to the group but is not fully part of it" and Bauman's conceptualisation of the "waste human" or the phenomenon of the migrant individual who remains outside the system. The characters' experience of exclusion and invisibility in the film is evaluated not only as an individual but also as a structural and political issue expressed cinematically.

Keywords: Child Refugees; Belonging; Statelessness; Exclusion; Cinematic Representation; Ethical Witnessing; *Capernaum*.

Introduction

In the 21st century, migration, identity and social exclusion have become one of the most important social issues on a global scale. Wars, economic inequalities, political crises, and environmental disasters have displaced millions of people, bringing the experiences of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees to the centre of modern societies (Castles & Miller, 2009; Cohen, 2006). According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), more than 110 million people have been forcibly displaced. This dramatic increase has transformed migration from a purely demographic issue into one of the fundamental crises of the contemporary world, with cultural, social and political dimensions. The multi-layered problems created by global migration have become a subject of interest not only for political science or sociology, but also for art and media studies. Cinema, thanks to its capacity to make the individual and social consequences of migration visible, is at the centre

of these discussions (Naficy, 2001; Ezra & Rowden, 2006). Migration films open up aesthetic discussions about representations of the ‘other’, crises of belonging, and experiences of invisibility, while also serving as a mirror reflecting society’s view of migrants. Berghahn and Sternberg (2010) evaluate migration cinema as texts that reveal modern Europe’s test of pluralism, while Higbee and Lim (2010) emphasise that migrant films express new identity experiences that transcend national borders through the concept of transnational cinema.

Children constitute one of the most vulnerable dimensions of migrant representations. According to a UNICEF (2022) report, more than 36 million children worldwide are displaced. These children are deprived of education, healthcare and basic rights; they live in a vulnerable position, caught between “childhood” and “adulthood”. This situation, explained by Alcinda Honwana (2012) with the concept of “waithood,” refers to an intermediate period in which children are forced to take on responsibilities at an early age and live in uncertainty about the future. The film *Capernaum* presents a cinematic representation of this uncertainty and lack of belonging through the story of Zain, a young child who does not even have an identity.

The fact that the film was shot in the context of Lebanon adds a unique dimension to discussions of migration and exclusion. Lebanon is one of the most fragile countries in the Middle East, both due to its own internal political instability and the waves of migration resulting from the Syrian civil war (Chalcraft, 2009). Therefore, Labaki’s film is not merely an individual story; it is also a symbolic expression of a regional and global migration crisis. Zain’s lack of identity, his sister’s child marriage, and his relationship of solidarity with the African migrant Rahil strikingly reflect the structural exclusion produced by modern societies. From a theoretical perspective, this study analyses the film *Capernaum* through Georg Simmel’s concept of the “stranger” (2009) and Zygmunt Bauman’s discussions of “disposable humans” and “liquid modernity” (2000; 2018). Simmel defines the individual who, despite being part of the group, does not fully belong to it as a “stranger”; Bauman characterises the migrants and refugees produced by modern societies as “waste lives”. These concepts find a powerful resonance in Zain’s life experience. However, the article is not limited to these two theoretical frameworks; Naficy’s (2001) “accented cinema” approach, Berghahn & Sternberg’s (2010) studies on migration cinema, and Papastergiadis’ (2000) analyses of cultural migration are also included in the discussion.

In this context, the main research question is formulated as follows: How does the film *Capernaum* cinematographically represent the experiences of exclusion, statelessness, and invisibility of child refugees living on the margins of modern society? This article aims to reinterpret the classical concepts of Simmel and Bauman in the context of contemporary migration cinema, while also offering an interdisciplinary contribution to the literature on the invisibility of child refugees. It thus provides a new perspective on both cinema studies and debates on migration and identity.

Literature Review

The Concept of Strangeness: From Simmel to the Present

The concept of the “stranger” developed by Georg Simmel is one of the most frequently referenced types in sociology. According to Simmel, the stranger is someone who “arrives

today and stays tomorrow,” someone who is physically present within a group but cannot put down roots in that group (Simmel, 2009). This typology represents the outside within modern societies, that is, existing on the border between belonging and exclusion.

This concept remains relevant today in migration and identity studies. Neal (2021) analyses “stranger” encounters in everyday life in modern cities, demonstrating that Simmel’s concept is still valid at the micro level, particularly in urban spaces. Similarly, Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2022) discuss foreignness in the context of mobility theory through temporary affiliations and mobile identities, arguing that in the age of globalisation, the foreigner has become not only a spatial but also a temporal figure.

Simmel’s concept of the foreigner has also been revisited in the context of migration sociology. Eisenstadt and Oğuz (2020), in analysing migrants’ social acceptance processes, reinterpret the foreigner as a figure who is “neither entirely inside nor entirely outside”. This explains how refugees participate in the daily life of society while simultaneously being excluded legally and culturally. In the Turkish context, Çetin (2023) examines migrants’ experiences of foreignness using Simmel’s typology, illustrating how migrants are rendered invisible in the process of social acceptance.

From a theoretical perspective, Simmel’s typology of the foreigner is not merely a classical sociological category; it is also a dynamic framework that illuminates contemporary debates on migration, belonging, and exclusion. Susen (2020) emphasises that Simmel’s sociology still plays a foundational role in contemporary social theory and that the concept of the foreigner is critically important in understanding contemporary social conflicts.

- **Migration, Identity, and the Global Context**

The relationship between migration and identity is increasingly debated in contemporary literature. Paparusso and Wihtol de Wenden (2025) argue that migration transforms the understanding of citizenship, suggesting that the concept of national citizenship is being replaced by forms of transnational belonging. In this context, migrants develop new forms of identity not only through spatial mobility but also through practices of political and cultural participation. The individual identity construction processes of migrants are at the centre of these debates. Barua and Maheshwari (2025) reveal the dynamic interaction between migration and self-identity through a bibliometric analysis, showing that identity conflicts, searches for belonging, and psychological adjustment problems are fundamental dimensions of the migrant experience. Similarly, Schiefer (2025) examines the experiences of discrimination faced by individuals with dual (binational) identities, drawing attention to the tensions that migration creates on multiple affiliations. The cultural identity perspective also occupies an important place in migration literature. Popescu (2024) relates migrants’ intercultural and linguistic bridging skills to cultural identity, revealing that intergenerational differences are decisive in this process. Enwerem (2024), in his study on Nigerian Igbo communities, demonstrates that national and transnational migration accelerates the formation of hybrid identities and creates new challenges in integration processes. The effects of migration in the context of crisis add a separate dimension to identity debates. The article titled *Crisis Migration and Identity Disruption* (2025) reveals how crisis conditions fragment migrants’ perceptions of identity and

trigger reconstruction processes. These findings show that migrants undergo not only the experience of displacement but also profound identity disruptions.

The literature continues to address migrant identity in its various dimensions. Gamsakhurdia (2025) argues that migrant identities are restructured under socio-political conditions, while Maehler (2024, 2025) uses psychometric methods to examine the cultural identity development of first-generation migrants, demonstrating that belonging is a measurable process. Porobić (2025) discusses the transformative effect of memory on migrant identity, arguing that identity construction is shaped not only by connections to the present but also to the past. Brance (2024) notes that social identity continuity is a strong protective factor in migrants' mental health and social integration processes, while Carter (2025) shows that the acceptance of multiple identities after migration plays a transformative role in individuals' self-reconstruction.

Migrants' preferences are also becoming decisive in debates on belonging and citizenship. Barbiano di Belgiojoso (2025) analyses migrants' tendency to renounce the citizenship of their country of birth, revealing the tension between identity and belonging. Dean (2024) reveals the impact of migrants' emotional ties to their place of residence on life satisfaction and well-being. Rafiq and colleagues (2024) empirically analyse migrants' identity crises, revealing the psychosocial consequences of this process at the individual and societal levels. Finally, Verkuyten (2024) examines the integration paradox through social comparisons and relates migrants' psychological adaptation processes to social norms.

These recent studies demonstrate the need to address the relationship between migration and identity not only through classical sociological approaches but also through psychological, cultural, and political dimensions. This perspective provides a theoretical basis for understanding the themes of statelessness, the search for belonging, and cultural rupture explored in the film *Capernaum*.

- **Migration and Alienation in Cinema**

Representations of migration in cinema are being re-examined within the framework of transnational aesthetics, production and distribution networks, transcending the boundaries of national cinema. Recent studies show that migration films build cultural bridges through their hybrid narrative structures, co-production ecosystems, and the influence of global platforms; they also weave the ghostly traces of migration into the fabric of contemporary cinema (Al-Maliki, 2025; Toffano, 2025). These discussions point to a new understanding of cinema enriched by concepts of hybridity, collaborative production, and the nomadic gaze (Trandafoiu, 2024).

One of the key issues in migration cinema is visibility and ethical representation. New documentary works are re-establishing the camera's position, the direction of the gaze, and the relationship with the audience to avoid falling into shock aesthetics while documenting Mediterranean crossings (Duarte, 2024). This approach opens up a discussion on the limits of testimony while also bringing to the fore the concept of the "cinematic right to opacity," which objects to forcing the migrant subject into complete transparency (Denić, 2025).

Another current debate is the paradox of hyper-visibility and invisibility. While migrants become hyper-visible in certain contexts, such as the media and festivals, the structural dimensions of their experiences become obscured. Visual studies reveal how emotional

responses are produced in chains of representation ranging from film posters to feature films (Borchert, 2025; Schindel, 2024). Digital narratives and interactive interfaces raise ethical dilemmas regarding audience participation in refugee stories, opening up discussions on the “world-building” modes of displacement narratives (Moura, 2024).

Analyses of recent films also show that the experience of migration is represented in different ways. Studies on *Io Capitano* (2023) reveal how deterrence policies and the “economy of suffering” intersect with cinematic narrative (Toffano, 2025). *Green Border* (2023) is read through the lens of the economy of empathy and the staging of the border at the Belarus-Poland border (Narvselius, 2024). *The Quiet Migration* (2023) discusses the boundaries of belonging through rural spaces, adoption, and river landscapes (Šolić, 2025). These readings offer a rich representational universe where realism intersects with allegory, and storytelling with political sensitivity.

Institutionally and in terms of circulation, migration-focused film festivals are gaining increasing importance; studies in the Mediterranean context bring migrant labour, coastal regimes, and fishing narratives to the fore in Italian and Maltese cinema (Baracco, 2024; Nicosia, 2024). In the Arab world, *The Last of Us* film offers a unique form of representation through the gestures of rejection and suspension of the migrant subject (Lippard, 2024). All this literature provides a strong background for establishing the connection between the themes of childhood, statelessness and lack of identity in the film *Capernaum* and current discussions on migration cinema (Belazouz, 2024; Sándor, 2024).

- **Child Refugees and the Crisis of Belonging**

Belonging is a decisive protective factor in the education, mental health, and social participation of child refugees. Recent reviews and field studies show that the sense of belonging is intertwined with multi-level variables such as language proficiency, school climate, peer relationships, and exposure to discrimination (Shahimi, 2024; Martin, 2024; Abdulhamed, 2024). These studies reveal that belonging is not merely a matter of “feeling at home”; it is a process closely linked to the continuity of identity, a sense of security, and visions of the future. Educational environments are the areas where belonging is most strongly established. Research conducted in different contexts, including Turkey and Ireland, shows that mother tongue support, teachers’ inclusive pedagogies, and peer support increase school belonging, while discrimination and an exclusionary classroom climate trigger feelings of “not belonging” (Mammadova & Aypay, 2023; Martin, 2024; Anderson, 2024). School attachment and belonging act as a “bridge variable” that supports emotional well-being as well as academic achievement (McCabe, 2024; Thomson, 2024).

Qualitative studies on identity and belonging show that young refugees negotiate their multiple belongings (both to their society of origin and to their host society) and that this negotiation is embodied in daily practices, rituals, and peer interactions (Khawaja, 2024; Ögtem-Young, 2024; Cha, 2024). Contexts beyond the school setting, including recreational spaces and arts-based activities, enable the ‘art of belonging’ and strengthen children’s subjectification processes (Alqawasma, 2025; McIntyre, 2025).

Unaccompanied minors (URMs) are a more vulnerable group in terms of belonging due to status uncertainty, care arrangements, and accumulated trauma. Systematic reviews and

comparative studies show that factors such as secure care, predictable routines, cultural continuity, and a trusting relationship with the caregiver increase belonging and resilience, while bureaucratic uncertainty and discrimination deepen alienation (Winkens, 2023; Heimli, 2024; Jarlby, 2025). The nature of encounters in health and social services also directly affects the sense of belonging (Moe, 2025; Taha, 2024). The link between mental health and belonging is bidirectional. Depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms are common among children who have experienced war and displacement; a supportive school climate and peer belonging reduce these risks (Khosravi, 2024; Andersson, 2025; McCabe, 2024). Barriers such as lack of information, language barriers, and status uncertainty persist in accessing mental health services for forcibly displaced children; these barriers also weaken their sense of belonging (Yilmaz, 2025).

Narrative and agency-focused new studies emphasise the centrality of children's own words: research highlighting the "voice of the child" demonstrates that belonging is a relational process that is re-d over time, materialising through young people's practices of post-traumatic reconstruction and meaning-making (Binder, 2025; Trotter, 2025). In long-term displacement, belonging is strengthened by the coexistence of cultural knowledge, fluency in the mother tongue, and educational opportunities (Cha, 2024). Finally, current recommendations regarding the conceptual framework show that trauma-informed and culturally sensitive interventions at school and community levels increase belonging through the "relational refugee child" approach; multi-level (individual-family-school-community) programmes are more effective (Boukhari, 2025; Rabiah-Mohammed, 2025). In parallel, reducing discrimination and promoting inclusive pedagogy in schools makes children's sense of "belonging" permanent (Abdulhamed, 2024; Martin, 2024).

- **The Middle East and Lebanon Context**

The Middle East is historically one of the regions with the most intense migration movements. Political crises that emerged after the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war have displaced millions of people. In this context, Lebanon has been one of the countries receiving the most migration due to both its geographical proximity and historical ties. Studies conducted specifically on Lebanon reveal that the presence of Syrian refugees has profoundly affected the country's socio-economic structure. Chalcraft (2009) shows that Syrian workers in Lebanon are excluded from the social system as an "invisible" labour force. Similarly, Fawaz (2017) emphasises that the presence of refugees in urban spaces creates both spatial congestion and social segregation. Knudsen (2017) documents the difficulties Syrian refugees face in integrating into Lebanese society in many areas, from education to employment.

According to UNHCR data, Lebanon is one of the countries hosting the highest number of refugees relative to its population (UNHCR, 2023). Yahya's (2018) study reveals that this situation has created not only a social but also a political crisis, with refugees being viewed as "temporary" in Lebanese politics, thus delaying structural solutions. Fakhoury (2017) details the economic and cultural exclusion refugees face in their daily lives. In this context, Nadine Labaki's film *Capernaum* is not merely an individual story; it also makes Lebanon's structural migration crisis visible on a cinematic plane. In the film, Zain's lack of identity, his sister's child marriage, and his solidarity with the African migrant Rahil can be seen as cinematic

representations of the structural exclusion processes discussed in the literature (Işık & Özdemir, 2020). Therefore, the film is positioned at the intersection of individual drama and regional crisis.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study is designed as a qualitative, single-case (intrinsic) case study that examines the film *Capernaum* (2018) in depth (Yin, 2014). Within an interpretive and critical framework, a multi-method approach was adopted, integrating reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) with cinematographic analysis (mise-en-scène, narrative, and audiovisual elements). The aim is to reveal how the themes of migration, social exclusion, and statelessness are represented in the film and where these representations intersect with current literature. This single-text design presents a theoretically productive ‘case’ due to the narrative structure where the child’s subjectification, statelessness, and neglect intersect; the Middle East/Lebanon context; and the tight connection between formal choices (framing, light/colour, rhythm, sound) and themes (Patton, 2015).

Data, Sample, and Analytical Process

The sample was selected for this purpose and focused on a single film. The researcher watched the film at least three times; during the second and third viewings, detailed scene breakdowns, dialogue notes, and audiovisual indicators (scale, camera movement, colour/lighting, sound/music, editing rhythm) were systematically recorded (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Rose, 2016). Dialogue quotations were taken from the original language or official subtitles, and a code book was created throughout the process, along with analytical memos (reflective notes). A total of eighteen core scenes form the primary analytical universe in the study; other scenes were used as contextual data and annotated to support the scene-theme relationship. RTA advanced the steps of data familiarity, open coding, candidate theme construction, theme review, naming-definition, and reporting around the scene-theme matrix. In this matrix, the overarching themes of “belonging and statelessness,” “care regimes,” “survival economy,” “borders and mobility,” “institutional encounter/criminalisation,” and “witnessing and ethics” were matched with both narrative indicators and formal preferences. Film theory was utilised at every stage of the RTA; in particular, inferences regarding narrative causality, character agency, and audience positioning were made using the conceptual repertoire proposed by Monaco (2009), Plantinga (2009), and Bordwell and Thompson (2013). The coding process was conducted using NVivo; a code-theme dictionary, version history, analytical memos, and decision log were regularly archived to create an auditable trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

Reliability, Validity, and Ethics

The RTA approach emphasises the transparency of the research process and the researcher’s self-reflection rather than relying on inter-coder agreement for reliability assessment (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Accordingly, multiple monitoring, search for contrary/negative examples, and limited peer review were implemented in the study; transferability was supported by “thick description” and consistency by process documentation, while confirmability was supported

by reflective journals and auditable trails (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017). As the study's data is a publicly accessible film, it does not require human subjects; however, due to the sensitive nature of the representation, contextual accuracy was ensured in quotations and scene descriptions, and the "shock aesthetic" was avoided in representations of children and refugees. Where visual material was necessary, copyright and fair use principles were considered, and descriptive quotations were preferred whenever possible (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Limitations and Transferability

Based on a close reading of a single film, this research does not claim statistical generalisation; its contribution is at the level of analytical generalisation (Yin, 2014). The interpretive approach inherently involves the researcher's position; this has been balanced by reflexive journaling and peer review. The inability to always access production notes, script drafts, and creative team interviews limits the scope of interpretations regarding the production context. Furthermore, as possible differences between dialogue translations could lead to shifts in meaning, critical quotations have been cross-checked using the principle of bilingualism. Nevertheless, detailed scene breakdowns, theme-style pairings, and a verifiable trail strengthen the reproducibility of the work and its transferability to other contexts.

Analysis Stages

The analysis of the work was structured in a sequential flow that allowed for backward iterations when necessary. First, the analysis universe was limited to the eighteen core scenes defined in Appendix 1: opening scenes of imprisonment/escape imagery, Sahar's marriage, Zain's attempts to survive on the streets after leaving home, the temporary care relationship with Rahil, Rahil's detention scene, the loss of Yonas, the court sequence, and the final identity/portrait moment formed the backbone of this core. This limitation clarified the narrative axes and allowed secondary scenes to be evaluated as contextual data.

Primary coding was performed on this universe; codes such as "foreignness", "belonging/identitylessness", "care regimes and neglect", "borders and mobility", "institutional encounter/criminalisation", "spatial- e exclusion" and "witnessing and ethics" were assigned based on both narrative content and audiovisual indicators. Subsequently, in the reflexive thematic analysis steps, the codes were clustered into overarching themes; deviant examples were specifically sought, and the consistency of scene-theme matches was verified. This thematic axis was linked to formal preferences through simultaneous cinematographic matching: framing and scale, light/colour, camera movement, editing rhythm, and sound design were related on a theme-style matrix. For example, "identity crisis/crisis of belonging" was matched with wide framing and cold lighting in official spaces; "neglect" with handheld camera and shaky close-ups; "borders and mobility" with frame-within-frame and grid/wire motifs.

Thematic and formal findings were deepened through theoretical bridges: Simmel's concept of the "stranger" was transposed to the contemporary context (Simmel, 1950), while Bauman's notion of liquid modernity and "surplus lives" was employed to explain the persistence of exclusion (Bauman, 2000/2004). The mobility literature provided a reference framework for understanding how temporary affiliations and micro-borders manifest in everyday practices

(Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006). At the regional context level, scenes were linked to the literature on informality, precarious housing, and statelessness in Lebanon/the Middle East (Fawaz, 2017; Chalcraft, 2009; Yahya, 2018; UNHCR, 2023). The ethical and testimonial debate adopted an approach mindful of the limits of representation: the risks of subjecting the subject to excessive transparency were discussed with an emphasis on the “right to cinematic opacity” (Denić, 2025), and strategies that displace the gaze were evaluated in terms of how they might transform testimony (Duarte, 2024).

In the final stage, the findings were synthesised, revealing the levels at which the film’s logic of representation intersects with regimes of social exclusion, and these results were carried over to the discussion and conclusion sections. Thus, the analysis was completed as a coherent line, starting from individual scenes, moving on to theme-style matches, and then to theoretical and contextual discussion.

Issues of Foreignness, Belonging, and Exclusion in the Light of the Film Capernaum The Construction of the Foreigner Figure

In Capernaum, the figure of the “stranger” is established as a contemporary variant of the position described by Simmel’s proximity-distance dialectic: Zain is “included” in both the family and the city, but he is a subject who cannot put down roots and is constantly pushed to the threshold. The images of imprisonment/escape at the beginning (S01) and the identity photograph at the end (S18) visually reinforce this state of limbo; the fixed close-up and cold palette emphasise the subject’s reduction to a “face under surveillance”. Here, foreignness is not reduced to a mere lack of status; it is intertwined with the simultaneous collapse of networks of belonging, care and recognition. The growing literature on the relationship between identity and migration over the past three years has particularly highlighted these plural and layered forms of subjectivity: that migration transforms notions of citizenship (Paparusso & Wihtol de Wenden, 2025), that selfhood is a process negotiated alongside migration (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025), and that cultural identity follows measurably different developmental paths among first-generation migrants (Maehler, 2024). Porobić’s (2025) study discussing the memory-migration-identity triangle helps us understand how micro-rituals in the film (e.g., sibling solidarity in S03; temporary family routine in S08-S09) create “temporary roots” through connections to the past. Brance (2024) points to the protective effect of social identity continuity on mental health; this finding explains Zain’s creation of a shred of belonging by taking on the role of caretaker (S08-S11). In short, the film portrays foreignness not as a singular label or external reference, but as a position reproduced within everyday actions and regimes of gaze; thus, the “foreigner” becomes not only an externally perceived but also an internally felt existence.

Belonging and Statelessness

Belonging is constantly negotiated throughout the film at the intersection of legal status, social recognition, and emotional security. Zain’s lack of identity documents (S14) reveals more than just a “paper” problem; it exposes a problem of recognition. New debates in the migration-citizenship literature show that belonging can no longer be confined to a single-centred national framework; transnational ties, multiple citizenships and forms of de facto membership are

coming to the fore (Paparusso & Wihtol de Wenden, 2025). Barbiano di Belgiojoso (2025) examines migrants' tendency to renounce citizenship acquired by birth, revealing the strategic and multi-layered nature of belonging; this approach contextualises the legal/economic manoeuvres of the parents and Rahil in the film (S10-S12). Enwerem (2024) discusses how national-transnational migration accelerates hybrid identities, while Porobić (2025) discusses how memory ties this hybridity into a coherent narrative. Brance (2024) and Dean (2024) emphasise the conjunction of belonging with psychosocial and spatial well-being: in *Capernaum*, temporary shelters and crowded markets (S06-S07) both render "feeling at home" impossible and partially possible through micro-alliances. When it comes to the child subject, the literature underscores the concepts of "waithood" and fragile belonging; in this film, these find visual expression through Zain's "premature adulthood" (S08-S11) and the final portrait (S18). Thus, the opposition between belonging and identitylessness becomes a spectrum extending from legal status to emotion; the film concretises this spectrum in the triad of scene-space-body.

The Spatial Regime of Exclusion

Exclusion speaks through space in the film. The fabric of shanty towns, narrow passageways, barred doors, crowded markets and corridors; all are visual translations of invisible rules that determine "who can enter where". The camera frequently narrows the frame with frames-within-frames; wire fences and turnstiles transform spatial constraints into a physical experience (S06-S07-S10-S12). In the Middle East/Lebanon context, urban informality demonstrates that borders are produced not only at the national level but also at the urban scale; the literature has long debated this tension (Fawaz; Chalcraft). Over the past three years, the dimensions of the space-belonging relationship related to "being at home" have been emphasised more (Dean, 2024). Recent studies examining Mediterranean/Italian-Maltese cinema show how coastal regimes and narratives of migrant labour are intertwined (Baracco, 2024; Nicosia, 2024). Šolić (2025) notes that inter-nature spaces such as rivers/riverbanks reinforce the feeling of being "neither here nor there"; the transition corridors and liminal spaces in the film correspond to this "liminal" feeling on an urban scale. Schindel's (2024) discussion of the "migrant's gaze," combined with the camera's eye level and close positioning to the body, creates an "insider-outsider" perspective that makes the viewer feel the pressure of the space. Thus, *Capernaum* stages exclusion not as a discourse but as a spatial regime operating through framing/lighting/rhythm; the organisation of space becomes the main stage for negotiations of status and belonging.

Institutional Encounter and Criminalisation

Zain's contact with the court and the administration (S10-S12-S14-S17) shows that undocumented status is not a mere bureaucratic deficiency but a threshold linked to the mechanism of criminalisation. Cinematographic choices such as high angles, table divisions, and cold colour palettes visualise hierarchy; waiting benches and stamping sounds reinforce the feeling of "time being suspended". Current literature explains the integration paradox—the persistence of psychological exclusion despite increased structural participation—through social comparisons (Verkuyten, 2024). Rafiq and colleagues (2024) interpret the cycles of anxiety and anger seen in the film's institutional scenes, supporting the reflections of the

identity crisis at the individual/societal level with quantitative data. Maehler (2025) emphasises the importance of “recognition” with psychometric evidence regarding the identity development of forced migrant adults; this allows us to read Zain’s attempt to establish his name and claim of rights in court (S14) as a political-psychological gesture. Schindel (2024) proposes three approaches in the debate on the migrant gaze in European cinema; the film, favouring the line that centres testimony among these approaches, renders the ethical consequences of institutional contact visible. Ultimately, institutions are not merely decision-making mechanisms; they are performative scenes that condition belonging and reproduce foreignness. *Capernaum* dramatises this performativity *through* every day waiting, the demand for the paper, and gestures of refusal; it exposes the ‘normalised’ rituals of criminalisation.

Ethical Witnessing and the Limits of the Image

The ethical issue in the production of images of migration has been intensely debated, particularly in recent years. Denić (2025) defends the “right to cinematic opacity,” objecting to the migrant subject being forced into complete transparency; this approach is consistent with the camera fixed at eye level in the film’s portraits and courtroom scenes (S15-S18). Duarte (2024) proposes rethinking the limits of testimony through strategies that displace the gaze, such as “putting the camera in water” in documentary cinema; in *Capernaum*, handheld cameras and shaky close-ups establish a physical-auditory intimacy rather than exposing pain. Borchert (2025) draws attention to the paradox of “hyper-visibility/invisibility” in the visual narration of displacement; the film avoids this paradox by centring Zain’s face while signalling the structural reasons (documentation-shelter-care) through the scene-space organisation. Toffano (2025) and Lippard (2024) demonstrate that gestures of “rejection/suspension” (e.g., readings of *The Last of Us*) in contemporary migration cinema construct an ethical distance; a similar distance is established in the film to manage the emotional response in scenes such as Rahil’s detention and Yonas’s loss (S10-S13). Ultimately, *Capernaum* calls the viewer not to passive viewing but to responsible witnessing: the image is used not for the spectacular consumption of victimhood but for the joint consideration of context—legal status, care regimes, spatial regimes. This choice, in line with current ethical debates, clarifies the limits of representation and opens space for political reasoning.

Discussion

The film’s findings update Simmel’s concept of the “stranger” (1950) through the child subject, concretising the dialectic of inside-outside: Zain is both part of the family and the city, but remains a subject “on the threshold” who cannot put down permanent roots. This position translates Bauman’s depiction of lives that can rapidly become “surplus” in liquid modernity to the scale of the stage (2000; 2004). The trajectories of early adulthood and “waithood” in our findings show identity oscillating between continuity and rupture; this aligns with findings in migration-identity literature that identity is a negotiated, multi-layered process (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025; Maehler, 2024). Our findings regarding the protective effect of identity continuity (e.g., Zain taking on the caregiving role) support recent psychological studies emphasising the association between social identity continuity and mental health (Brance,

2024). In short, the film constructs foreignness not as a fixed label but as a position constantly reproduced through regimes of care, recognition, and documentation.

On the other hand, the analysis showed that equating belonging solely with citizenship is insufficient. Zain's scenes of document deprivation (S14-S17) reveal a broader problem concerning recognition and access to rights. The literature also emphasises that belonging is reshaped by transnational ties, multiple citizenships, and practices of de facto membership (Paparusso & Wihtol de Wenden, 2025). Our findings on the "strategic use of belonging" align with studies showing that migrants can flexibly assess their citizenship statuses (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2025). The film's scenes of temporary kinship and micro-solidarity parallel observations on how memory and relational ties can bind hybrid identities into a coherent narrative (Porobić, 2025; Enwerem, 2024). Furthermore, the emotional relationship established with the space (insecurity of shelter, market and corridors) yields results consistent with the literature on "well-being in place": spatial instability erodes the sense of belonging (Dean, 2024). Thus, the film extends the opposition of belonging/displacement beyond legal status to affect and everyday practices. Formal choices -close-up faces, handheld camera shakes, eye-level framing- emerged as tools for creating ethical witnessing in our findings. While attempting to avoid the excessive visibility that aestheticises victimhood, the film also establishes a distance that protects the subject's right to opacity (Denić, 2025). This is consistent with current strategies that navigate between documentary and fiction (Duarte, 2024). On the other hand, the ethical distance established through gestures of refusal/suspension (Lippard, 2024; Toffano, 2025) is functional in managing affect in the film: the viewer is invited not only to "watch" the pain, but to consider its contextual causes (documentation, care, shelter) together. These findings are consistent with the literature on holding the viewer accountable and opening space for political reasoning in representations of migration.

The theoretical contribution of the study is to combine Simmel's (1950) concept of the foreign type with Bauman's (2000; 2004) reading of liquid modernity, redefining it as outsidership from within through the child subject. The methodological contribution is the presentation of a hybrid analysis scheme that systematically matches thematic codes with cinematographic signs (Appendix 1). This scheme brings together the "narrative" and "form" planes, which are often treated separately in migration cinema studies, on the same matrix, enabling repeatable analysis. The simultaneous dialogue between the findings and the literature on migration studies (identity development, belonging strategies, settling in) and film studies (the migrant's gaze, ethical distance) builds an interdisciplinary bridge (Paparusso & Wihtol de Wenden, 2025; Maehler, 2024/2025; Dean, 2024; Schindel, 2024; Denić, 2025; Duarte, 2024).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how the figure of the "foreigner" is reconstituted through the child's body under current migration regimes by reading Capernaum alongside the literature on migration, belonging, and exclusion. Our approach, combining reflexive thematic analysis with cinematographic analysis, focused not only on what the film "tells" but also on how it tells it; it revealed that exclusion's spatial and institutional regimes are conveyed to the viewer

as an embodied experience through framing, lighting, rhythm, and sound choices. The findings show that foreignness cannot be reduced to a single legal status deficiency; it is a multi-layered process woven with everyday practices such as recognition, care, and shelter, reproduced anew every day.

The primary finding of the study is that belonging transcends the narrow framework defined by “documentation” and is understood as a spectrum negotiated along the axis of affect-space-relationality. In the film, Zain’s early adulthood, temporary family ties and micro-solidarity practices reveal the oscillation between identity continuity and fragility. Secondly, it has been determined that exclusion operates not only at the discursive level but also through concrete spatial/institutional devices such as urban interstitial spaces, barred passageways, waiting benches, and institutional doors; frame-within-frame and obstructive framing choices translate these devices into a visual regime. Thirdly, it has been determined that the film establishes ethical witnessing by avoiding excessive visibility and observing the “right to opacity”; thus, it opens space for contextual reasoning rather than the spectacular consumption of victimhood. Our theoretical contribution invites us to rethink the position of outsider-in through the child subject, linking Simmel’s “stranger” type with the regimes of surplus and waithood produced by fluid modernity. Our methodological contribution is to propose a transferable framework that systematically matches thematic codes with cinematographic signs on a scene-theme matrix. The reading conducted through the Lebanese/Middle Eastern context has brought together cinema studies and migration studies on an interdisciplinary track by making visible the bridges between micro-narratives and regional structural dynamics.

The implications at the application and policy levels are clear: (i) Administrative regulations that accelerate children’s access to identity/documentation processes and procedures that reduce waiting/rejection rituals; (ii) local solidarity networks that alleviate fragility in care regimes and social/educational interventions that prevent early adultification; (iii) ethical guidelines that embrace the right to opacity and the principle of responsible witnessing in media and artistic representations. These three levels point to a solution-oriented reorganisation of the structural links (documentation-care-housing) displayed in the film.

The limitation of the study is that it is based on a close reading of a single film and does not directly include reception data; therefore, the findings should be evaluated at the level of analytical generalisation. We propose two directions for future research: (i) a methodological triad with comparative corpus studies in the Eastern Mediterranean-Mediterranean region; (ii) empirical testing of ethical/emotional effects through audience research (surveys/focus groups) and creative team interviews. Furthermore, the scene-theme-style matrix we propose can be tested across different genres and aesthetics to enhance the robustness of the method.

Ultimately, *Capernaum* transcends individual drama to reveal the multi-layered nature of belonging and the spatial and institutional organisation of exclusion. The film invites the viewer not only to empathise but also to consider the context together, thus opening a line from affect to political reasoning in representations of migration. This line provides a guiding framework for both academic discussion and policy/practice.

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Appendix 1A. Code Book

Theme	Definition	Coding Criteria (Include)	Exclusion	Subcodes	Indicators (Narrative/Style)	Example Scene	Example Expression (approximate)
Belonging and Lack of Identity	The individual's lack of formal/emotional belonging; lack of identity documents and feeling 'outside'.	Absence of identity/paper/document; questioning 'who am I/where am I from'; narratives of exclusion.	Scenes that only address spatial alienation (touristic/temporary) and do not mention lack of documentation.	Lack of identity documents; erasure of name/family ties; discourse of belonging.	Wide shots in official settings; cold lighting; long waiting shots; court/petition footage.	S14 Court : Zain's identity issue.	"I have no papers. .. There is nothing to prove I was born."
Care Regimes and Neglect	Disruption of parental and institutional care; failure to meet the child's security/love needs.	Neglect, abandonment, transfer of care; the child assuming adult responsibilities.	Ordinary conflicts; scenes that do not involve care violations.	Parental violation; institutional violation; sibling responsibility.	Handheld camera; shaky close-up; low light; cluttered background.	S05 Sahar's wedding.	"I couldn't protect my brother."
The Economy of Survival	Daily subsistence, informal work, bartering, and sustaining life through	Livelihood strategy; informal labour; child labour.	Socio-emotional scenes (if there is no emphasis on livelihood).	Informal labour; street economy; borrowing.	Market/crowd noise; fast editing; close-ups of hands/objects.	S07 Being alone in the market and on the	"I need to find something today."

	informal networks.					street .	
Boundaries and Mobility	Encountering and crossing physical/symbolic borders.	Transition/obstacle; door, turnstile; fear of being caught.	Domestic scenes that do not contain boundary metaphors .	Symbolic boundary; institutional boundary; micro-boundaries within the city.	Frame-within-frame; wire/mesh; sharp cuts.	S10 Rahil's arrest .	"You can't pass through here, you don't have your documents."
Institutional Encounter and Criminalisation	Stigmatisation/criminalisation in institutions such as the police, courts, and immigration authorities.	Interrogation, trial, detention, officer-client hierarchy.	Scenes without institutional contact.	Document checks; trials; threats.	High angle; desk separation; cold palette.	S14 Court ; S11 Detention corridor.	"If you don't have identification, you can't stay here."
Childhood and 'Waithood'	The suspension of childhood; early adulthood.	The child's adult role; uncertainty about the future.	Play/free time-focused scenes.	Early responsibility; anxiety about the future; disengagement from education.	Long-take waiting; silence; slow pace.	S08 Zain-Yona's care scenes.	"I have to grow up."
Solidarity and Temporary Family	Non-blood-related care/protection relationships	Temporary parenting; neighbourly assistance;	One-way assistance and relationships of	Care rotation; neighbour/friend	Warm light; shoulder-to-shoulder	S09 Zain-Rahil - Yona	"We can look out for

Relations hips	and horizontal solidarity.	collective solutions.	mutual benefit.	nd networ ks.	r framing ; close- up contact.	s toget herne ss.	each other.”
Spatial Exclusion	Squatter settlements, back streets, in-between spaces and housing insecurity.	Loss of shelter; temporary shelter; threatening spaces.	Safe/stabl e domestic scenes.	Street/r uins; crowde d market; locked doors.	Tight framing ; obstruct ing element s; noise.	S06 Zain’ s depar ture from home .	“I have nowher e to stay.”
Witnessin g and Ethics	The relationship of witnessing established between the narrative and the viewer, and ethical boundaries.	The ethical debate raised by the camera’s approach to the subject.	Ordinary dramatic close-ups (if there is no ethical debate).	The right to opacity ; shifting perspec tives; silence.	Eye level; fragile close- up; silence.	S15 Court testi mony .	“Can you hear me?”
Legal Status/Do cumentati on Issue	Absence of status such as citizenship/re sidence/work permit.	Document request; informality ; rejection.	Scenes without emphasis on document ation/ident ity.	Identit y verifica tion; legal contact ; bureau cracy.	Forms; stamps; waiting benches ; queue sounds.	S11 Deten tion and docu ment inquir y.	“I cannot process your request withou t docum entatio n.”

Appendix 1B. Scene List (18 core scenes)

Scene ID	Short Name	Location	Characters	Summary Event	Primary Themes	Style Note
S01	Opening: Prison/Escape	Prison/Roof	Zain	Opening with images of Zain's imprisonment and escape.	Belonging and Displacement; Testimony and Ethics	Cold palette; wide general shots; sharp editing.
S02	Domestic Tension	Family home	Zain, Parents, Siblings	Clues of neglect in a crowded home.	Care Regimes and Neglect; Spatial Exclusion	Close-up; low light.
S03	Closeness with Sahar	Home/Market	Zain, Sahar	Sibling solidarity.	Solidarity and Temporary Family	Warm light; shoulder-to-shoulder framing.
S04	Sahar's Period and Panic	Home	Sahar, Zain	The threat of early marriage looms.	Childhood and 'Waithood'	Close-up hands; moments of silence.
S05	Sahar's Marriage	The Neighbourhood	Sahar, Family, Neighbours	Forced marriage.	Care regimes and neglect; institutional encounter/criminalisation	Crowded scene; jostling; handheld camera.
S06	Zain Leaves Home	Street	Zain	Zain runs away from home; housing insecurity begins.	Spatial Exclusion; Survival Economy	Wide outdoor space; sound of the wind.
S07	Market and Job Search	Market/Street	Zain	Daily livelihood strategies.	Survival Economy	Fast editing; close-ups of

						hands/objects.
S08	Meeting Rahil and Yonas	Squatter settlement/Temporary housing	Zain, Rahil, Yonas	A temporary caregiving relationship is established.	Solidarity and Temporary Familyhood; Childhood and 'Waithood'	Warm light; close-up contact.
S09	Temporary Family Routine	Temporary accommodation	Zain, Rahil, Yonas	The routines of living together are established.	Solidarity and Temporary Familyhood	Soft narration; domestic sounds.
S10	Rahil Under Arrest	Street/Administration	Rahil, Police	Detention due to lack of documentation.	Borders and Mobility; Legal Status/Documentation	Wire/fence; high angle.
S11	Zain and Yonas' Crisis	Street/Market	Zain, Yonas	Increased burden of care; risk of loss.	Care Regimes and Neglect; Survival Economy	Shaky handheld camera; crowd noise.
S12	Shelter/Identity Search	Shelter/Office	Zain	Barriers to seeking official assistance.	Legal Status/Documentation; Institutional Encounter	Counter/table separation; cold light.
S13	The Disappearance of Yonas	Street	Zain, Yonas (indirect)	The breaking point of the care crisis.	Childhood and 'Waithood'; Spatial Exclusion	Long-term surveillance plan; silence.
S14	Court: Testimony	Court	Zain, Judge, Lawyer	Zain suing his parents; identity dispute.	Belonging and Identitylessness; Institutional Encounter	Static camera; wide shot; echoing sound.
S15	Media/Social Testimony	Courtroom/Media corridor	Zain, Journalists	The publicisation of testimony.	Testimony and Ethics; Belonging and Statelessness	Flash; overlapping voices; close-up face.

S16	Confronting Parents	Courtroom/Bakstage	Zain, Parents	Confrontation over neglect.	Care Regimes and Neglect	Mutual shoulder plan; low saturation.
S17	Decision and Future	Court/Office	Judge, Officials, Zain	Signs of progress in terms of status/identity.	Legal Status/Document; Affiliation	Documents/seal; fixed frame.
S18	Final: Portrait	Studio/Office	Zain	Identity photograph/portrait; threshold of belonging.	Belonging and Displacement; Testimony and Ethics	Fixed close-up; direct gaze.