AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

A BOTTOMS-UP APPROACH: STUDYING THE LEBANESE
FILM INDUSTRY THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVES OF ITS
LABORERS

by
TRACY GEORGE MAKHLOUF

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TRACY GEORGE MAKHLOUF

Approved by:

Signature

_____
Dr. Zeina Tarraf, Assistant Professor   Advisor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies

Signature

_____
Dr. Blake Atwood, Associate Professor   Member of Committee

Signature

_____
Dr. Greg Burris, Associate Professor   Member of Committee

Date of thesis defense: January 26, 2022

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ABSTRACT
OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: A Bottoms-Up Approach: Studying the Lebanese Film Industry Through the Perspectives of its Laborers

This thesis explores the Lebanese film industry through the perspectives of its laborers and analyzes these perspectives through Janet Wolff's neo-Marxist analysis on artistic production which positions laborers and recipients as the content producers themselves as well as social arbitrators. The aim of the thesis is to explore how laborers of the film industry in Lebanon navigate the challenges imposed on them, namely the neoliberalist economy, and the volatile socio-political situation in the country. To this end I conduct interviews with several industry workers to portray how they negotiate and mediate the fragile infrastructure of the industry, their working conditions, absence of government support, lack of adequate funds, pressure from international funding agencies, and other day-to-day realities that shape the production process. I also study interviews with two filmmakers about their particular films to explore how cinema is also defined through discourses that surround the films after their release. My intention here is to counteract studies that refute the existence of a Lebanese industry or that impose singular meanings on Lebanese cinema by focusing instead on how industry insiders negotiate the multiple challenges imposed on them. I argue that these multiple challenges and how they are mediated are in fact what define the industry and lend proof to its existence. To this end, I highlight the agency of industry workers and the multiple ways they shape the film industry and the films themselves. The way that laborers of the film industry in Lebanon may express, transfer, and handle from their end macro factors imposed on them is a form of equal and opposing force to larger socio-political and economic components. It is important that we study, and observe the ideas, inputs, and decisions of those who work in the industry to cover all facets of Lebanese film industry as most of the studies already executed focus on top bottom approaches that do not tackle all roots of influence over the industry but rather argue either that the film industry does not exist or is a result of western influence. By materializing and grounding the interrelationship between daily habits, networking, power, and funding with the general economic, political and social issues that underlie them I make a case of change in the industry tangible. Thus, allowing for future discussions on how to find solutions to these problems in the industry rather than seeing them as abridgments that are not attainable or never to be possibly reversed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the past recent years Lebanese cinema has increasingly been receiving international attention and acknowledgment. A number of feature films have received awards by international film festivals such as, *Capernaum* (2018) by Nadine Labaki which received the Cannes Jury Prize for that year, and *All This Victory* (2019) a film by Ahmad Ghossein which got the top prize at the Venice International Film Festival (Tarraf, 2021). Additionally, a couple of these Lebanese films have been nominated for an Academy award for Best Foreign Film, like Ziad Doueiry's *The Insult* (2017) and Labaki's *Caparnaum,* Not only that, but there has also been a number of global publications extensively mentioning the growing industry (Mouawad, 2017).

Despite multiple outputs by Lebanese filmmakers, there is nevertheless a dominant notion within popular and academic discourse that the Lebanese film industry does not exist. In light of the fact that the industry faces many challenges, and lacks a coherent and complete structure, people and academics both question the existence of the industry in the first place. Lina Khatib, in one of the few written monographs on Lebanese Cinema, describes the surprised faces she encounters when she mentions that she is writing a book on Lebanese cinema (Khatib, 2008). She says "Cinema in Lebanon is still not an industry, though it has seeds of one. And it suffers from many of the same problems it has faced since its inception" (Khatib, 2008, P.31).

Similarly, Wissam Mouawad in his article entitled "Lebanese and the French Co-production System: The Postcard Strategy" argues that due to Lebanon's demographic nature, and the domination of Egyptian cinema in the first half of the 20th

century, and the American genre's influence globally, Lebanese cinema has always struggled to place itself in the film production market (Mouawad, 2017). Hence, he states "This is why there has never existed in Lebanon a true film industry" (Mouawad, 2017, P.71).

Another dominant discourse or argument that discussions of Lebanese cinema are grounded in, is the impact of foreign funds on the local film productions. Questions that are often raised in this regard include, but are not limited to, queries on the extent of the influence of these funds on local films and what kind of influence they have, as well as how transnational films serve or comply with stereotypical representations and perspectives of the country that the film comes from.

It is true that Lebanese cinema faces several obstacles, does not have a defined model or nature, and relies mainly on international funds, which hinders its nurturing. The industry also suffers from lack of funding where most of the movies are financed by foreign money. Latest numbers show that in 2018, more than 75% of feature films produced in Lebanon were put together through international funds (Mouawad, 2017, P.5). In addition, the government is almost absolutely absent from setting policies or acknowledging a union that can protect the rights, provide security and encourage people working in the industry to produce films or encourage people who would like to pursue a career in the industry to chase it. Instead of support, the Lebanese governments place relatively, high taxes and have a very complicated bureaucracy process set in place for film production. Besides, the Lebanese film industry operates within an unstable socio-political and economic context, which limits anyone who works in film production from any meaningful strategic planning, and impedes future developmental

plans for the industry, as well as diminishes industry workers' morale and hope to work towards a vision they might have for Lebanese cinema.

Despite all this, the assumption and confidence in denying the Lebanese film industry's existence and portraying its dependency on international funds as a determination of western influence, undermines the efforts and achievements of those who have contributed to its progress. The long-established approaches to study Lebanese cinema have been dominated by either analyses and explorations of its content, or arguments about the industry's weak infrastructure and sources of funds. These latter arguments are often mobilized to suggest an absence of industry or to highlight western influence over the industry. What results is often an overlooking of the complex operations and power dynamics that exist within local production processes themselves. These methods of study are often influenced and grounded in political-economic theories that tend to see cultural and creative work as a form of effort that is dependent on economic and political factors and subject to monetary and power interests and the main reason behind their production is financial benefit (Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M., 1972, P.110-111).

To scholarships such as those mentioned above, the role of research is to uncover the ways in which we, as citizen-audiences and workers in the film industry, are socialized into broader economic and political interests (Havens, T., Lotz, A. D., & Tinic, S., 2009, P.249). These theoretical aspects have directed a great deal of attention to argue, directly or indirectly, that media institutions, like film industry, and their laborers are a form of control and failed to recognize the creativity, resistance, and role of human agency within the production process that help negotiate the material existences in their daily practices.

Stating that media outputs are another form of commodity that yields to the interests of capital is a deviation from recognizing other forms of power that exist in media industries as well as moments of creativity, and challenges faced by human agents or what is noted by Hesmondhalgh (2002) to be "the complex, ambivalent, and contested behavior which occurs in these industries" (P.3). I argue that the limitations of such efforts lie in the fact that they provide a broad structural picture of the industry and neglect the details in the day-to-day production process which can reveal valuable information on the complex dynamics of media industries including power and how workers function within the institution.

I have reached this conclusion as I spoke to laborers in the industry about the various struggles they have to face in their field of work, and the influence of funds on the movies they have worked on, and their production process, I noticed that most of them, as much as they expressed the different difficulties they go through on a daily basis when working on a film, and the different interests of funders, were all equally very eager to also emphasize how they overcome and navigate those challenges to produce a successful film that meets their expectations.

It is for these reasons that I recognized the necessity of providing new literature on Lebanese cinema and the film industry, specifically, which acknowledges all the power dynamics shape the industry. In other words, I insist on a scholarship that reveals the great deal of negotiations, creativity, and resilience that labourers endure and that recognizes these efforts as a form of agency that influences the final output of the films instead of only focusing on broader factors.

In this framework, Tarraf (2021), in one of the most recent articles written on Lebanese cinema, debates against the dominant academic discourse on Lebanese

cinema that overemphasizes the function of western funds in the filmmaking process, and the frequent projection of the industry's challenge as indicators of its inexistence. She calls instead on the need to consider how these obstacles are handled by filmmakers presenting it as another source of force that determines the output of Lebanese films (Tarraf, 2021).

I am not proposing here that the source of finance of Lebanese films, the absence of government support, global market of cinema, and the context the Lebanese cinema is found within does not negatively impact the industry and thus the films themselves. It is inevitable, and undeniable that the source of money, politics, national culture, and governmental structure guide and affect Lebanese cinema's structure, and identity. Nor I am suggesting that transnational, and political economic theories should not be explored or could be useful in understanding the industry. What I am putting forward is that these explorations can be restricting from covering all facets of Lebanese cinema as they do not tackle other roots of influence that take place within the production process itself.

I am proposing that as we explore these dynamics of power that we ask or approach our questions in a way that explores as well how people who work in the industry may express, transfer, and handle these factors from their end. In this way we would be observing all forms of influence and have a closer look at how they are actually orchestrated and executed. Despite the role of the source of funding, and socio-political factors on the film industry, the ways that the workers of the industry interact with these factors are important to explore. In other terms, films that are produced from foreign funds and often referred to as "Independent" cinema even though they might be influenced by political or cultural interests of the funders they are still however

produced in a local framework, and we must have a closer look at how they have been shaped throughout this process. On that point, Rossoukh and Caton (2021) state films that are produced from foreign funds and often referred to as "Independent" cinema even though they might be influenced by political or cultural interests of the funders they are still however produced in a local framework, and "are still dependent on a film industry or industries for their making" (P.2). A film industry through which its films are mostly completed by foreign funding, even though its source of funding may influence its content, its movies are mostly produced nationally. In this sense, understanding and defining a film industry, that relies on foreign funds, is not only to be examined as an output of political and cultural interests but we must explore the ways they have been shaped through the process of their film productions. For this reason, this research asks, how do people working in the Lebanese film industry negotiate the neoliberalist economy, and the socio-political challenges in the country during the production processes of their movies?

The objective of this study is to move away from refutations about the existence of a Lebanese film industry by focusing instead on how industry insiders negotiate the multiple problems imposed on them or in other words "how filmmaking, though powerfully transnational, has come to terms with local social realities, be they economic, political or, cultural that affect the artists' projects they are committed to" (Rassoukh & Caton, 2021, P.13). These particular challenges and how they are negotiated are in fact what define this industry and lend proof to its existence. By materializing and grounding the interrelationship between daily habits, networking, power, and funding with the general economic, political and social issues that underlie them we make a case of change in the industry tangible. Thus, we allow for future

discussions on how to find solutions to these problems in the industry rather than seeing them as abridgments that are not attainable or never to be possibly reversed.

In order to do that, this research will present the thoughts of people who work in the Lebanese film industry and put them in conversation with Janet Wolff's neo-Marxist analysis on artistic production which positions laborers and recipients as the content producers themselves as well as social arbitrators. In other words, I will be showing how the ideas, inputs, and decisions of those who work in the industry are a form of equal and opposing force to larger socio-political and economic components, and their impact on the material produced.

To clarify, the film production process is the manufacture of a media product, starting from its raw material to its final outcome. The operation is a mixture of functions, including budgeting, scheduling, determining location, recording, editing, and making aesthetical choices. It takes a wide range of collaborative skills from innovation, supervision, communication and research which are executed by people who come from different backgrounds and particular circumstances. Conditions affecting the entities communicating and negotiating the media outcome can be reflected and manifested in the final product. These conditions are usually what are solely explored to understand Lebanese industry. But film industry does not only refer to the manufacture of a media product, as the definition of an industry per se, it also speaks to the set of behaviors, values, and beliefs of individuals that impact the mechanisms of the industry. It mediates the rules that direct peoples' behaviors, and it manifests the subconscious intentions of individuals involved in its process. The term industry, in case of films, does not only reflect material elements that are included in the

process but indirect customs, and behavioral patterns linked to the society, and to specific formal institutions such as the government and public services.

As we speak of the various interactions and tasks required to produce media content, I realize how media production is grounded in and interlocked with different cultural, political, and economic circumstances. However, I can also envision how day-to-day realities of media industries are rooted in and affected by the political policies, economic, and social structures, or how Janet Wolff (1993) puts it there is an interrelationship between the "thought" and "material activity." According to Wolff (1993), ideas, thoughts, and consciousness are all grounded in the conditions of existences. She says, "As people, including artists, are socially and historically located, and are members of particular social groups, and then their thought, including their artistic ideas, is ideological", hence reflected in culture. For this reason, it is essential to analyze the different forms of content-enforcement taking place in the Lebanese cinema's industry.

This research suggests that to be able to really understand the Lebanese film industry it is crucial that we look at the industry with a sociological lens meaning to engage sociological conditions of cinematic production such as living conditions, history, social status, salaries, personal sources, values, beliefs, and thoughts of the people who put effort in the operational process. I debate that the specific production activities, practice, values, ideologies, and performances of those who work in the industry and the industry's mechanism embody the broader social and political context that the industry is found within, and we must understand them to get the full picture of the industry.

In this research I will portray the ways in which the workers of Lebanese film industry make it around and mediate the fragile infrastructure of the industry, their working conditions, absence of government's support, lack of funds, international funding, and other day-to-day realities of the production industry to have a full picture of how different forms of power are reconciled in the final output of films. To make my case, I will analyze the thoughts and experiences of those who work in the Lebanese feature film production industry and put them in conversation with theories related to social production of art to explain, interpret, and understand films as expressions linked to dominant ideology and contextual conditions. I will also engage with previous case studies done in the realm of production studies to elaborate on daily matters encountered by people who work in film production, as well as concepts of transnational cinema to tackle how the issue of funding does not only reflect globalization processes, and international funding's influence on local production but is also reveals how Lebanese mirrors, although at times jagged and fragmented, the society from which it originates and governmental disregard of the industry.

A. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

As discussed, many of the literature on Lebanese film industry or cinema, argue that the Lebanese film industry or cinema is constructed by the west, haunted by the civil war, or state that it is a failed industry. For instance, Wissam Mouawad (2017) argues that Lebanese film industry complies to western stereotypes, and representations of Lebanon, as they are the main source of funding to Lebanese movies. More Specifically, he states that Lebanese filmmakers "must always comply with certain expectations that can lead to the projection of an exoticizing discourse about their

country" (P.80.). With his argument, Mouawad completely dismisses all agency laborers have over their work and disregards all of their efforts with a reductionist approach to understand their realities, and how they navigate around them.

On the other hand, Toukan (2011) investigates the reason behind the reliance of the film industry on western funds. In her study on Lebanese contemporary art after the civil war she mentions that there has been a rise in what is called "independent" or "alternative" art productions and spaces in the middle east (Toukan, 2011). Toukan (201) argues that after the Lebanese civil war, people and artists wanted to disassociate themselves from any system that resembles the war. They believed that because politicians who were during the war are still in control of the governments and state devices they must disconnect with it (Toukan,2011). They saw that having any kind of relationship with the political system or through funding or imagining the past would be a form of replication the of war rather than criticizing politics or producing "political art" which made them seek western donors (Toukan,2011).

Although Toukan, does not focus on portraying western funds as the main power over film industry in Lebanon and the way it is formed, her approach only presents and explores politics as the main component that has influence over the film industry. Toukan neglects all other dynamics of agency that may take place in shaping the industry. She does not engage with relationship of these broader factors with the daily realities of the industry and how they are negotiated which together create the meanings produced in the final output of the film industry.

Such studies, to understand cinema or film industry has frequently been ruled by political economic theories or transnational aspect of the industry ignoring the operations and the controlling elements that exist inside the content generating

procedure. Most scholars who write about, analyze, and investigate the Lebanese film industry are mainly influenced by standard financial matters and theories of political economy, treating media essentially as a commodity. These approaches have led to the fundamental focus on macro-level issues of "regulatory regimes, concentration of media ownership, historical change, and their larger connection to capital interests" neglecting by that the inside practices and applications of media production operations (Havens, T., Lotz, A. D., & Tinic, S. 2009, P.234).

These theoretical aspects have directed a great deal of attention to argue that media institutions and their laborers are a form of economic control and failed to recognize the creativity, resistance, and role of human agency within the production process that help negotiate the material existences in their daily practices. Stating that media is another form of commodity that yields to the interests of capital is a deviation from recognizing other forms of ideological power that exist in media industries as well as moments of creativity, and challenges faced by human agents. In opposition, this research argues that there are different equal sources of power that determines the definition, structure, and outcomes of Lebanese cinema. Specifically, the influence of the thoughts, creativity, decisions of those who work in the industry, and the way they negotiate the broader factors imposed on them.

However, it is important to note that I am not saying that thoughts, ideas, and decisions do not come dissociated from materialistic circumstances such as social status, history, economic and political conditions. On the contrary, they are formulated as a reaction or reflection on those circumstances whatever the final reflection is, and in their role these reflections are influencing the final outcome of the films as they are impacting its formulation. But it is incomplete to understand these circumstances on

their own, without considering the way they are transferred, expressed, and navigated. According to Rassoukh and Caton (2021), "these theories informed our understanding of film industries as objects and texts and neglected the relation of these material "to a complex historical or social context" (P.15). To be able to understand the industry, one must not only look at external and global factors that affect the industry rather it imperative that we look closely at the specific local realities of the industry and observe the connection between those particulars and the general situation of their setting. In this way we will be able to better assess the particularities of the Lebanese film industry as well as their interactions with global factors.

By way of explanation, I see that there is a necessity to understand the relation between the macro factors and micro context that are often overlooked. The multi-layered realities and characteristics of the film industry in Lebanon and its relationship to the context it is found within, is what makes it distinguishable thus defined. The problems the industry faces from lack of state support, volatile socio-political conditions, and complex national identity are not only to be seen as obstacles, but they are a replication of what Lebanon is as a country and the circumstances it is found within and confronting this idea will allow us not to only focus or compare Lebanese cinema to other industries but to look at it in its own conditions. The Lebanese film industry's difference and specific problems are what make it unique, and we are to explore these states of affairs and the connection that underlies between them and the surrounding they exist within to complement the industry's progress and help shape, understand, and reflect on its development.

The limitations of efforts mentioned above lies in the fact that they provide a broad structural picture of the industry and neglect the details in the day-to-day

production process which can reveal valuable information on the complex dynamics of media industries including power and how workers function within the institution (Havens, T., Lotz, A. D., & Tinic, S., 2009, P.248). In this sense to stress on the external forces of power such as economic interest, political institutions, and advertising and their impact on media productions is a depreciation of other existing frame of powers that exist within the operation itself such as the workers' wants, thoughts, and hierarchies.

There is a necessity of considering the daily practices of media production processes which can give us a complementary and more detailed vision of how different kinds of power can play a role in media's content. For economic and political factors are not exclusively the only power, it is also determined by different individuals, ways and means. "Power does not only operate on multiple levels, but it is not so pervasive as to allow for complete domination. The operation of power is constantly involved in assertion and negotiation and, most importantly, is never permanently achieved." (Havens, T., Lotz, A. D., & Tinic, S., 2009, P.248).

For that reason, this thesis will be theoretically framed based on Janet Wolff (1993) *The Social Production of Art* theory. Wolff (1993) argues that the real nature of art can be drawn from social and historical prerequisites that eliminate the mystical notion that art is universally on equal terms. Specifically, Wolff (1993) states "it is not true today, that the artist has worked in isolation from social and political constraints of a direct or indirect kind" (P.). In this way, Wolff (1993) says that it is not only the artist has the influence over their work but their materialistic conditions. At the same time, she emphasizes that none of each rule any of the others component influence of the artwork. Both equally must be explored.

When it comes to films, in general, they tend to be recognized as a product of one mastermind: the director. That idea would imply that this form of art transcended from one disposition of genius with little regard to "crucial work involved by producers, camera crews, actors, scriptwriters" (Wolff, 1993). These support personnel are interlocked with realistic constraints outside the bubble that is the artform itself. What this means is that budgeting (for design, scope, set locations… etc), labor hours, equipment availability and general infrastructural support can all be determining factors in what the final finished product might look like. In this paper, I aim to emphasize this theory, filling the gap between the director's vision and the constraints that affect the production's output. I intend to shed light on the socio-political and socio-economic context in modern Lebanon are negotiated by the film industry's laborers showing buy that how film is not the result of a standardized artform, but rather the reflection of all the activities and processes that are undertaken to create it.

B. Methodology

The creative realm is extensive, diverse and rich with multiple interpretations and perceptions that are open for discussion. Films are no different, but the film industry is objective and concrete in ways art cannot be. Industry, by definition, is an economic process that includes laborers, creation, planning, execution, distribution, production, manufacturing and institutional application. For my purpose, I intend to emphasize how the laborers of the film industry in Lebanon negotiate the socio-economic and political implications on it. This is meant to create, however much, a deviation from the notion that Lebanese films are only a result of foreign funders' influence, and thus are the only source of power over the industry. Rather, I want to

shed light on the middle ground that is equally shaped by those who work in the industry.

To confidently defend my argument, I resorted to interviews with 3 filmmakers, 2 costume designers, 1 art director and 2 producers. These people, working in the film industry, are the ones to portray what they may potentially face in order to perform their respective tasks, and how they work around them. It is also a way to ensure that they are the ones defining the industry and making sense of how they see it. I have established that the portrayal of the difficulties faced as well as the innovative solutions filmmakers and laborers in the industry are able to act on, can effectively fill the void in Wolff's theory, essentially linking the effect of macro political and financial circumstances to the social context that eventually trickles down to the micro processes that these said laborers face.

The interviews that I conducted involved semi-structured questions that were aimed to provide answers on the difficulties and solutions that are proposed in Lebanon's context. I aimed to find out what kind of structural support they lack, how the socio-political and economic situation affects their day-to-day work, morale, creativity, and progress and how they navigate them. I intended to understand how the industry functions and their perspective on the different dynamics that shape it. I asked about the influence of funding on their films, as well as the power play that is involved in preventing such intrusion or involvement.

Some interviews were face to face and other were over the phone due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. However, in both cases the interviews were recorded to be later transcribed, facilitating the information in one place and making them easier to analyze later on. The data offered by the interviews were interpreted and conceived

based on existing theories and knowledge. I tried to find patterns and reoccurring themes as well as identifying different experiences of the interviews trying to reflect and understand them based on previous studies made as well as analyze and connect them with other interviewees' answers.

To respect interviewees confidentiality, so that it does not impact their profession or personal lives in any shape or form, I have referred to them as participants throughout the text and did not reveal their names. The numbers given to each participant was based on the chronological order of when I conducted the interview.

In addition to my personal communications, I have also used two published interviews with two Lebanese filmmakers. One is with Nadine Labaki published in the Guardian, and the other one is with Ziad Doueiri published in Middle East Institute. The reason I chose to engage with published interviews rather than my own in this specific chapter, is because I wanted to exemplify my arguments with tangible cases and show how the ways that those who work in the industry navigate certain circumstance could be seen in the movies themselves. By doing that, I would be providing a concrete example on the agency of those who work in the industry over their work. I make use of the published interviews to engage with my analyses of the filmmakers' movies *Capernaum* and *The Insult* to show the correlation between the filmmakers experiences, input, and how it is conveyed in the final output.

In conclusion this research used interviews with professionals in Lebanese film production companies to elaborate on their experiences and put them in conversation to help understand how these elements shape productions of the Lebanese film industry. I analyzed the data according to the theories discussed in the literature review above. This study encouraged many questions to follow and was an initiative to analyze the industry

not only from a theoretical perspective but with case studies which together helped

create a better understanding of the Lebanese feature film production industry.

CHAPTER II

ECONOMY WITH NO BARRIERS CREATES A BARRIER TO ITS GROWTH: HOW LEBANON'S FILM INDUSTRY NAVIGATES NEO-LIBERALISM

Lebanon has been known for its belief in free market and laissez-faire economic identity way before the emergence of neo-liberalism (Taraschi, 2021). Ever since Lebanon obtained its independence in 1943, the country was a leading example of an open economy in the region, among neighboring Arab countries known by strong state interventionism (Taraschi, 2021, P.1). However, neo-liberalism in Lebanon does not embolden growth through equal competences, but rather the economy is controlled by the political elites who are known to also be commercial and financial oligarchies (Traboulsi, 2007). The two-fold nature of neoliberalism, specifically politics and economy, allowed conflicting systems to exist in Lebanon, where cronyism and corruption is embedded in its structures, which was detrimental to the industries, including the film industry.

The economic nature of Lebanon tied with corruption, has created a web of challenges for the film industry. The neo-liberal economy illustrated by lack of appropriate state funding, high taxation regulations imposed on production, absence of a union for the laborers of the industry, shapes the industry itself. The film industry is influenced by the context it exists within. As Janet Wolff (1993) argues, artistic ideology embodies both "thought" and "material activity" meaning the film industry is formed by the thoughts and ideas of those have been influenced the economic environment that they developed in, as well as molded by the material provided directly to it. In this chapter, I will explore how the Lebanese economic systems animate and

shape the dynamics of the country's film industry. To do that, I will mainly highlight the impact of the economy from the perspectives of those who work in the industry and illustrate later how that fits with Wolff's Social Production of Art theory, mainly the argument that art products are also molded by socio-economic factors.

A. The History Nature of Neoliberalism in Lebanon

Lebanon has two different phases of following free market ideology. The first, was before the civil war and is believed to have been maintained due to Lebanon's diverse demographic, geographic location, and historical trade tradition. During the 20th century, Lebanon was the only Arab country in the region to adopt laissez-faire and free market economy. After the country's independence in 1943, and the national pact, Lebanon was distinguished as the "merchant republic", where the government's involvement in the economy was almost inexistant and public services were not available (Taraschi, 2021). On the other hand, the second phase of neo-liberalism is thought to have a different nature linked to the consequences of the civil war which gave power to warlords with commercial and financial power to utilize neoliberalism disproportionately for their own personal gains.

After the civil war (1975-1990) the social and economic situation in Lebanon was completely devastated and demanded reconstruction. The country was desperate for any new set of policies, ideologies, identities, and political figures. As a result, Rafik Hariri, who was assigned a prime minister after the war, called for Lebanon to go back to its pre-war free market economy stating (1999), "Our strategy was based on re-establishing and strengthening one of the fundamental pillars of the Lebanese economy, namely the free, open, liberal and democratic nature of our system". However, the two-

fold nature of neoliberalism, specifically politics and economy, allowed conflicting systems to exist in a country where cronyism and corruption is embedded in its structures. The "merchant republic" in Lebanon is controlled by the political elites who are known to also be commercial and financial oligarchies (Traboulsi, 2007), meaning that those who are responsible to regulate, are the same ones who have interest in the ways these regulations would affect their economic interests.

Neoliberalism as an economy is an ideological approach that is meant to support and encourage economic freedom, with minimalistic state intervention. Common characteristics of a neoliberal economy are policies for deregulation, free trade, globalization, privatization, and a reduction of public expenditure. Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as a political-economic theory that suggests that human beings' prosperity and advancement is achieved by freeing individual's investments, and talents within a system known for its private property rights, free markets, and free trades. In other words, neo-liberalism is an ideology that believes that human being can prosper and be successful by finding their own way within an institution that has limited regulations on businesses and entrepreneurship and ensures the right of estate ownership by citizens of a country.

In a neo-liberalist economy, the extent of the involvement by the government varies from industry to industry. Harvey (2007) explains that the framework of the role of the state within such an economy, is to ensure quality and integrity of money, as well as guarantee the proper functioning of security, and legal institutions to safeguard market operations. However, the state is expected to intervene when certain industries do not exist, then "they must be created, by state action if necessary" says Harvey (2007, P.2). Despite the fact that neoliberalism has become so embedded in individuals'

minds that it has become the natural and automatic way to make sense of the world, and how to live, neoliberalism in practice does not fully mirror the ideals of its theory.

In practice, neoliberalism may lead to market failure, centralized or unequal distribution of wealth and power, and can challenge social relations, or more specifically how Harvey (2007) puts it "neoliberalism entails creative destruction, not only for institutional framework, and powers… but ways of life and habits of the heart" (P.3). In addition, neoliberalism in theory is standard however in reality it is very fragile to change, and its implementation can vary based on governments that adopt it, and the context that it exists within. Harvey (2007) explains that the theory departs and evolves in practice due to "chaotic evolution, and uneven geographical development of state institutions, power and functions" (P.64).

In this perspective, when neoliberalism exists in a corrupt state, and where the people who have political power through the government directly or indirectly are at the same time economic elites, this economic system can be detrimental to industries. In this case, not only is the lack of support from government a potential obstacle to industries' growth, but also any interference of the government would not be for the benefit of the industries but rather ensures that the regulations or governmental policies meets personal or financial gains of those placing them. This is the case of the political economic situation in Lebanon. A corruption that sweeps revenue from taxation and bureaucratic processes with little reinvestment in the industries, one of many is the film industry.

The state of a country's economy and GDP often is a good indicator of how productive the society really is. After the civil war, Lebanese states appropriated the tools of neoliberalism. Simitian (2020) states "conservative values associated with rural

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sectarianism, feudal authority, and libertarianism have seeped into the urban fabric and expropriated the financial tools of neoliberalism" (P.51). This reality still dominates the economic nature of Lebanon and has led the country to have one of the highest debt-to-GDP ratios in the world. Investments and growth in infrastructure, public space and social benefits can boost efficiency in a system's output. The advantages can be felt in direct ways such as higher mobility and better social services or indirectly in terms of morale boost. For instance, in reference to the impact of the United States' GDP on the country, Heintz (2009) indicates that "the $93 billion high-end increase in public infrastructure investment would yield an annual GDP increase of about $77 billion. This is a productivity dividend of about $260 per year for every U.S. resident". The effect of an investment in high end public infrastructure on a country's GDP is tremendous. It shows how investments on certain industries can be an investment in the economic state of the country.

When governments lay thorough plans and infrastructure for their respective economies, industries can potentially thrive and rely on the provided support. According to the Middle East Institute (2018), during the 30 years following the Lebanese civil war, there was never any solid infrastructure laid out, as many attempts to do so failed as a result people were pushed to put forward their own ways and lay out their own groundwork and system to function within. The film industry is no different, and the government's absence and lack of support, has forced those who work in it to find set their own regulations, and security nets as well as find innovative ways to work around the challenges they face. As a result, Fahim (2018) writes, "An entire generation of filmmakers grew accustomed to the restrictive stipulations of foreign funding—the sole mean of finance and production during and after the war". Considering the fact that

the government has not extended a helping hand in developing a union for filmmakers in Lebanon, there exists no legislative laws that promote, support and encourage local productions; none that are effective anyway. This often leads laborers, creators and entrepreneurs in any industry to incorporate neoliberal methodologies in their bid to produce and outcompete.

According to Cooper (2019) in her scholarship on *Neoliberal theory and film studies*, "Neoliberalism is much more than a matter of economics: it fundamentally alters older configurations of the self, society, culture, aesthetics, and the relationships between them" (P.1). This is generally an implication of how the principles of 'free market' impose competition and entrepreneurship in areas of everyday life that are not associated with economics, but are rather social, creative and personal. Ultimately, laborers in a film industry that resides in a free, highly competitive market have to innovate and use creative approaches to be able to produce their films such as the case in Lebanon. In a way, the reality of Lebanese film industry mentioned above has provided a room for creativity to surface, and enhanced competitiveness but it has also at the same time exhausted the industry's laborers. It is difficult for those who work in the industry and are facing struggles to push through and be the ones to find solutions.

B. High Governmental Taxation Revenue with Little Reinvestment

Despite the neoliberal nature of Lebanese economy, the government places taxations on the film industry. It is one of the ways that illustrates how in a neoliberal economy the government's interference can vary. Governments can have multiple positive reasons for interfering in a marketplace, often using taxation. Regulatory bodies can use "macro statistics to estimate the gross value of production, value-added,

fixed capital formation, employment, exports, and so on" (Hemels & Goto, 2017, P.23). This insight can provide a structural foundation to building a taxation and reinvestment policy that is based on relative benefits and advantages films can bring to the local economy.

According to Hemel and Goto's (2017) study on the benefits of government taxation on the creative field in *Tax incentives for the creative industries,* they emphasize that such taxes can achieve policy goals, adherent legislations, information campaigns, and most crucially, direct subsidies (loans, guarantees, and grants) as well as tax incentives (reliefs, deferrals, and deductions for film producers). However, in Lebanon despite having a taxation policy set in place there is no meaningful or strategic support provided by the government in return.

Lebanon imposes an annual income tax of 11 percent on Lebanese production houses, and a measly 7.5 percent on every film freelancers and independent filmmakers produce. Usually, taxes are imposed in expectation to be spent again on the industry's enhancement or to encourage its advancement however this is not the case in Lebanon. One of the producers I interviewed explains to me that they would have accepted and acknowledged the taxes imposed on them, but only if they knew transparently how this money is being used, she says (Participant 2, personal communication, December 1, 2020):

This is a natural and a common approach to a healthy industry, only if the taxable income is reinvested in the industry itself. Unfortunately, this money is not spent to enhance the industry, or support those who work in it. We do not know how the government will spend our money, or how it will be distributed. We also definitely can not see the money being translated into policies, or funds that benefit us.

The burden of taxation is not only related to the fact that it is not followed by government support. The development of the industry is being restraint by these tax regulations. High taxes mean that less money is staying in the hands of those who are working in it and can invest in its growth. The money that is taken away by the state, could have been spent on sales growth, new productions, employment generation, new equipment, or any sort of investment that can help enhance the industry's future or facilitate its work.

In this manner, whether through financial assistance, complicated bureaucratic processes, or policies that can support the exposure of locally produced films. The issue is that the taxation also hinders the industry from being successful on its own, or efficiently privatized. The tangible presence or involvement of the government in the film industry is acting as an opposition rather than support to it. The state does not support the industry, but it also limits its potential for success.

C. Funding in the Lebanese film Industry: A Concept in Theory

In Lebanon, Part of the Ministry of Culture's role is to provide support, oversee, and regulate what best fits the cinema and the film industry in the country, but that has only been a concept by theory where none of the efforts or tasks were translated into actions or strategies. One of the many ways through which this can be illustrated is the lack of governmental funding to the film industry. There is no money directed by the government or any public body to the Lebanese cinema, or its laborers, forcing those who work in it to find their own means to overcome this obstacle. This has led the industry to rely mainly on international funds to secure their budgets for their film projects and has also created a space for prioritizing departments, involved in the

production process, over others impacting by that the quality of the outcome. Once the budget is secured, the other challenge would be how to distribute the budget on all the departments of the production process. Many times, the budget is very limited and barely covers expenses, as a result producers end up prioritizing certain expenses of departments or equipment's based on what the movie's most production needs are.

The only fund available by the state was a fund launched back in 1998 by the Ministry of culture which allows filmmakers or producers to obtain 25 percent of the expenses of up to seven feature films annually with no more than 200,000$ cash assistance for each film (Khatib, 2011, P.32). The fund also included 50,000$ given to 10 short films per year (Khatib, 2011, P.32). Even though the financial assistance is there it is met however by many obstacles. The criterion of selection is not clear, and the bureaucratic process is too complicated to understand or follow. In addition, the amount of the funds provided is too little whether for how many films will be funded annually, or the amount expected to be part of a film budget. In that reference, one of the filmmakers interviewed comments, "Hypothetically the fund is there but the problem is that we can not access it. There are many things that can stop you. First, we are not sure of the criteria of selection as it is not clear who, and why the request of funding may be declined or accepted. And second, even if you get the fund, it usually comes after years of developing the film which does not make it very useful". In this sense, most of those who work in the film industry, believe that governmental funds for filmmaking in practice do not exist as it is very difficult to access them.

The absence of proper government funding to Lebanese cinema has pushed Lebanese filmmakers and producers to rely on international funding, a matter that has dominated scholarships written on the industry portraying the movies produced by

foreign money as a western outcome. One of the leading filmmakers in Lebanon states (Participant 3, personal communication, December 3, 2020):

> It is very unfortunate to see and hear this perspective whether by academics or the populations. It is true that when we want to pitch the idea of a film to specific funders, we study our options closely and propose it for funders we know have an interest in specific subjects, themes, and genres but this does not mean that our films are a dictation of what those who are financing it wants the outcome to be. It is more of a marketing strategy. We package and pitch our movie in a way that we know would intrigue the funders or the audiences they're interested in, meaning that it does not rule out completely the ideas and aesthetics of the movie we have in mind but rather we adapt its presentation in a way that convinces the funders to why this film can be of success, and they can give us their money. This does not mean that we cater our films to fit what they want to see or hear from us, or in our movies. On the contrary, what we do is we scout for funders who have an interest in the idea that is already developed. Also, in the end, even if there is a type of compromise from any of our ends, it is a collaboration and it is a give and take process whether suggestions from our side or theirs.

All films start with an idea, or a good written story. However, the bottom line is filmmaking is an expensive business, and you need money to turn these concepts into a movie. Filmmaking process entails a range of expenses whether through the scriptwriting process, pre/postproduction process, or for the film's distribution. To secure the budget needed to make the film, producers, filmmakers, or scriptwriters, which the idea could be brought by either of them, need to hunt for investors that could find an interest in it. These investors could be individuals with money who are involved in film business, or production houses that secure funds, but these investment providers are attracted to different concepts to many reasons whether specific genres, personal interests, profits, or story plots.

To acquire the financial sum that is needed to develop an idea into a movie, the holder of the idea must present it in a way that appeals to the interest of those financing

it. This is what those who work in the film industry do. They have a concept already put in place, and they scout for investors that in somehow it is possible for them to package their idea in a way that can convince investors to bet on it. They do not change their idea, but it is the way they propose it to those investors is what varies. They need to introduce or tweak the concept or motive of the movie in a way that answers that raises or addresses the curiosity of the investors. This does not mean that they give up what they have in mind to form the movie, but they play around with the way they approach the investors to make sure it fits their interests. This also requires a scouting for production houses and investors that have the basis or ground of interest that the idea could be categorized under or catered to.

In this way, those who work in the film industry in Lebanon do not compromise the content of their movie to fit the interests of those who fund it or molded by them, but it remains the work of those who came up with it. I am not saying here that the source of money does not have an impact on how the movies are shaped because obviously they do in a way or another but to say it is only an output of it is an inaccurate representation and undermines all the input and agency of those who work in Lebanese film industry have over their work. It is a negotiation process between the holder of the idea and the producer (production company or film studio) and it ensures both interests are represented in the process. So, understanding the film industry in Lebanon is quite further complex than just focusing on its funding sources. It is important also to consider all factors that play in its formation and identity to see the whole picture.

There is another consequence to the lack of proper funding that also needs to be explored to have a complementary understanding of the industry, and what makes it the way it is. The impact of the lack of financial assistance is not only reflected on the

budget of film production project as a whole but also on the way this budget is distributed among other departments throughout the filmmaking process that the laborers have to work around. Due to the difficulty for the expenses to be obtained, budgets are often distributed on other departments very carefully, and thus sometimes quite unevenly leaving certain departments overlooked.

The breakdown of the budget allocates an amount of money to each department working within the production process. For example, even though, "the day-to-day work of the costume designer requires skill, discipline, humility, creativity attention to detail, and speed – all on budget" (Banks, 2009, P.91). One of the costume designers in Lebanon informed me that the designers are often given the least funds (Participant 7, personal communication, December 15, 2019). The designer pointed out that she once received a budget that may cover dressing twenty casts to dress a hundred forcing her to create the clothes from scratch, other times buy them from stores or rent them from a wardrobe house to fit the different characters' needs (Participant 7, personal communication, December 15, 2019).

On the other hand, in Lebanon, the budget limits minimal resources required, such as needles and fabrics etc. to make a costume. As a result, the creation of clothes from scratch is never an option restricting the inventiveness of the work. Hence, the tightening of creativity in style limits the option of genre because in order to have diversified media content one must-have innovation in aesthetics. In regard to that, one of the costume designers I interviews expresses the limitation of having a tightened budget, "It's disappointing. Sometimes you may know the perfect vision of a character and the way they're supposed to be portrayed but you simply can not apply it because of the money" she said (Participant 7, personal communication, December 15, 2019). The

option of renting the clothes from a wardrobe house is also not available. Costume rental services and shops are not a common idea in Lebanon. Usually, costumes that come to a production are rented to clients through special boutiques or department stores. Both designers that I've interviewed said that the lack of resources often makes them reach out for their own clothes, from their own wardrobes, to use on set (Participant 6 & 7, personal communication, December 15 & 16, 2019).

The demand for designers to work with less money leaves them with no other choice than to take advantage of business fashion stores. These types of stores usually want to promote their supplies through the actors, so they provide the designers with their branded dressings. However, this means that might have to compromise what costumes can best serve the characters' representation as they would have to choose between what is available. Clothes are used to facilitate the story and if the designers are bounded to fashion, they might not find suitable clothes for the personas. More specifically one of the designers told me, "We are usually forced into using clothes that might not fit the character just because we do not have any other resource. I do not always find what I want with the clothes provided to me. So, I try my best to make things up with whatever I have." (Participant 6, personal communication, December 16, 2019). Every outfit used in a film or onscreen is supposed to be developed and altered to fit the needs of a character and the scene, and if this does not happen it jeopardizes the quality of the film, and its final output, as well as limits its potentials.

From here, most of the laborers in the industry, whether filmmakers or below-the-line laborers tend to find a creative way to overcome the limitations of fund for the industry, whether it be through securing the whole budget of the project or ensuring a

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method to implement their work with a limited one without jeopardizing the standard or quality of their work. Their creative efforts to navigate around these challenges are what must be highlighted identifying the industry itself.

D. Challenge of Exhibition: The Limitation of Lebanon's Film Marketplace

If budgets are to be secured in one way or another, mainly through foreign money, to create a film the next challenge would be is its exhibition and circulation. Lebanon's film marketplace is often dwarfed by foreign, imported, films. The galactic nature of the scope of foreign films acquires a bigger viewer base than local counterparts. Because of the war, up until 1991, there had been a devastating decrease in theaters present across Lebanon (upwards of 85%). That percentage has decreased since, and "multiplex modern cinemas" mainly in Beirut and its suburbs rose again, and are mainly reserved for Hollywood, French and Egyptian films with little regard to local films.

Many feature films have never even been released in a theater (Khatib, 2008). This can lead the local film industry to struggle, especially when theaters can bring a level of exposure and revenue that no other channel can. One of the Lebanese filmmakers commented saying (Participant 3, personal communication, December 3, 2020):

> We have always requested from stakeholders, or cinema theaters in Lebanon to support the Lebanese films locally produced. But unfortunately, culture is the least of their worries they are only acting as businesspeople who want to gain money from cinema. They will never sacrifice screening a Lebanese movie for few days if it means they can screen a Hollywood one that can bring them more cash. The government does not impose on them any kind of regulations as well, which does not help. We need their assistance in forcing theatres in Lebanon to stream certain amount of Lebanese movies for a certain period of time regardless of profit made

relevant to other. In the end it is an economic cycle. If the industry as a whole flourish from this step it will feed into the economy in general, but the first steps must be taken.

Through this we can see how the nature of the Lebanese economy, which is embedded in free market ideology, and minimal or no meaningful involvement by the government also trickles down to the exposure given to the movies. Owners of cinemas or theatres with no imposed quotas or regulation would always put first profits that they can gain from foreign movies over supporting local movies that might not give them the same revenue. In this way, neo-liberalism also acts an obstacle to having them placed in the market as they get swamped with globalized production.

Considering Lebanon's notoriously weak economy, and low GDP, the film industry tends to depend on imported movies rather than local ones, as compared to countries with higher GDP (Lee, 2004). Governments across the world, notably in France and South Korea, have intervened in the market and set in place a distributional condition known as screen quota. Screen quota is the limitation or standardization of the ratio of imported films relative to local ones shown across theaters in a given country. Although this kind of intervention can be scrutinized and labeled as "cultural protectionism", it can provide a form of subsidies to local projects. This form of legislative intervention is virtually non-existent in Lebanon, with potentially crippling effects on locally produced films. A local filmmaker commented on that saying "there is a demand for Lebanese films and our culture is well exported into the Arab world, with tremendous potential to publish internationally but there is little effort and support to do so" (Participant 5, personal communication, January 13, 2021). The number of films made by Lebanese filmmakers that have been screened internationally, are only a proof

to the potential, and quality of the movies to be distributed, and for Lebanese filmmakers who have managed to export these abroad and overcome these challenges it is only fair to acknowledge that the industry exists.

E. Lack of Lebanese Government Support Forces Self Sufficient and Regulated Film Industry

Other problems that go beyond the issues of funding, include the lack of unions for those who work in the industry. There is no union for filmmakers, sound engineers, costume designers, or any workers who work in the industry whatever their job might be. This leaves the industry with no regulations in terms of working hours, income, cost prices etc. To one of the filmmakers interviewed this did not seem of a big issue for him, "But this is not a huge problem in my opinion" he pointed out (Participant 3, personal communication, December 3, 2020). He then added saying "As people who work in the industry, whether filmmakers or any other profession we have found our own way to communicate and set standards to the cost of our work in order to not break the market" he explains (Participant 3, personal communication, December 3, 2020).

People who work in the industry have managed to find their own ways to organize themselves, and set a way of working to avoid exploitation, and set a framework. One of the executive producers I interviewed said, "In my production house, we limited working hours to 12 hours per day maximum. The market is very volatile and if you do not set this expectation and standard for yourself and for those who work with you many will break it and exploit us. It is important that we lead this, and we take the initiative when nothing is set in place by those who are supposed to govern the industry". In different ways, those who work in the film industry have

managed to innovate ways to secure themselves, as well as keep the industry operational.

It is important to note that as much as this statement by one of the owners of a production house has been confirmed by one of the art directors that works with her, there remains a huge part of the industry that is not explored any many others who work in the industry still find it challenging to receive an income that fully compensates their work and time. Many such as the costume designers I have interviewed are even pushed to work in the advertisement industry for sustainable income and stability, while staying in the film industry which is what they are passionate about. Like this, human resources potentials are limited when they need to worry about proper stable finances and cater their creativity in different ways.

The lack of government support has pushed those who work in the film industry in Lebanon to be self-sufficient, and self-regulatory. The ways the laborers navigate through to keep the industry surviving, and currently somehow making it ways to international cinema markets is what makes us see what shapes it. Those who work in the industry have managed to build an industry out of nothing, and this is why it is important to consider their inputs and efforts when defining the industry or trying to understand it. In this sense, their agency in shaping the film industry is obvious and disregarding it when looking into the film industry in Lebanon would not give a complete picture of what the industry is.

In this chapter, I have managed to present how the neo-liberalist economy in Lebanon shapes the dynamics that animate the film industry. The free-market economy has pushed those who work in the industry to put in the effort to find different sources for their finances, set their own regulations to protect their rights, and navigate around

the challenges by finding solutions to the obstacles they face with a minimal compromise to the standard of their work. The way the economic factors of Lebanon has forced itself on the industry with its conditions, and the way those who work in it find themselves forced to pilot their way around these circumstances is clear evidence to their agency in the formation of the film industry.

The film industry in Lebanon is not only shaped by its foreign funds, nor do its challenges prove it inexistence, but rather these circumstances and how they are overcome act as real agents that define the film industry in Lebanon. There is much more to the dynamics of the industry that makes it what it is and impacts the final creative outputs. As Wolff argues, economic factors shape creative artwork, and the way these materials are interacted would define it. In this way, the neo-liberalist economy of Lebanon has been proven to shape the film industry whether materialistically through lack of government support, or ideologically through the belief thus creativity of those who work in the industry, and this is what makes it what it is.

CHAPTER III

THE IMPACT OF THE VOLATILE LEBANESE CONTEXT
ON ITS FILM INDUSTRY

Since 2019, Lebanon has been experiencing a rapidly escalating socio-politico-economic crisis that is plunging the country deep into poverty and endangering population welfare, economic development, social welfare, and national stability. This overlapping crisis is having a toll on individuals' day to day life functionalities, and economic and social sectors as well as the film industry. In this perspective, in this chapter I will provide a brief overview of Lebanon's current complex crisis, to re-focus after on the ways through which it is impacting people who work in the film industry and the industry itself. I argue that the overlapping crisis and the instability tied to it, influences the laborers creative thinking, and makes it difficult for them to manage their work effectively, thereby strategically hindering the evolvement of the film industry in Lebanon.

To be able to do that, I will reflect on what those who work in the Lebanese film industry have to say about the current situation they are living in, and how it is affecting professional life. While in my previous chapter I have also discussed the nature of Lebanon's economy and its impact on the industry and its labors, in this part of the study I am shedding light on how these broader factors influence the creativity aspect, and their strategic vision rather than materialistic obstacles. Focusing on the current socio-political and economic crisis is not to say that the country has always been enjoying economic growth and political solidity, on contrary Lebanon has a long history of war, and the economy and politics has always been volatile. The idea is, that the on-going contextual situation acts as a periodic, and relevant moment that can be used

more concretely to exemplify my original intention to think about the complex ways people in the industry are impacted by and interact with the context they are situated within and also how they reconcile it within their work.

A. Lebanon on Hold: A Political Deadlock, and Socio- Economic Crises

Lebanon is in a socio-politico-economic crisis that has reached unprecedented levels since the end of the civil war (1975-1990). The country has always been part of an unsettled political region, and its economy has always fluctuated, but there was always room to predict what it is heading into - whether to the worst or the better. Today, the economic situation is rapidly deteriorating in a country that is a hostage to international and regional politics which is currently at a shifting stage. This comes overlapping with the presence of irresponsive and unreactive political elites, whether due to impunity or incompetence, who are not placing or proposing any structural economic and financial reforms for recovery. All of this is happening, in a three-year period, and on top of the tragic Beirut port's explosion, political turmoil uplifted by the October 2019 revolution, and a shocking wave of COVID-19 pandemic. This has left the population in Lebanon living on constant edge with no clue of what to expect next putting the country on hold.

The World Bank alerted in June 2021 that Lebanon's economy is heading into one of the world's worst crises since the mid-19th century. By the end of 2021, Lebanon's annual inflation rate rose to more than 200%, and 15 billion dollars is needed for economic recovery, as claimed by central bank governor Riad Salameh (Tamo, 2021). Between October 2019 and December 2021, the Lebanese currency has lost more than 90% of its value (Tamo, 2021) impacting people's purchasing power, and the

ability of both, the population as well as well all industries', to access basic items, raw material, and services through which are mostly imported. The banking system is paralyzed. This has resulted in an 80% slump in the value of deposits since depositors are either cut off from foreign currency savings or forced to withdraw cash in the collapsing local currency (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2021).

Consequently, the multi-layered socio-politico-economic crisis in the country is pushing an increasing part of the population into poverty. A published report from the American University of Beirut's Lebanon Crisis Observatory (Ramadan, 2021) on the economic situation in the country monitoring the high cost of living daily, shows that Lebanese families are currently spending almost five times their minimum wage just to feed themselves and may soon no longer be able to ensure the minimum food without having recourse to help from their relatives or from humanitarian organizations. The United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia's report titled *Multidimensional Poverty in Lebanon: Painful Reality and Uncertain Prospects* (2021) said that 82% of the Lebanese population lives in multidimensional poverty, which considers factors other than income such as access to health, education, and public utilities. Almost the entire Syrian refugee population in Lebanon are now classified as living in deep poverty (United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2021). This forced more than 80% of the population to prioritize food and lodging over healthcare and educational expenses (United Nations World Food Programme, 2021).

Meanwhile, the current political leaders who have seized power after the civil war through manipulation of identity politics, division, and the threat are taking no proper or tangible actions to find proper long-term solutions to the current crisis. They

remain swamped by their own political agendas, and interests by constantly putting vital decisions or political issues capture of their disputes, with little consideration to the struggles that are rising in the meantime. Despite their incapacity, corruption, and negligence, they are still determined to stay in power, and they are willing to use their influence to mobilize security institutions to confront rising demonstrations and demands for reforms and elimination of corruption even if it led to violent clashes between the Lebanese population and security forces or the army. The constant political stalemate before reaching an agreement on every single policy or political decision, in a country of economic crisis, is sliding the country into deeper financial chaos, and poverty. Only to prove that Lebanon's fate remains captured between internal political agendas, preservation of power struggle, and external foreign factors.

In addition, Lebanon is hostage to regional and international political influences and conditions – mainly U.S., Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel with two interests on their agenda: Hezbollah's military presence, and their regional intervention in Syria, and Yemen against their relative axis (Safieddine, 2021) - that worsens the country's already existing confessional and political division. There are some who see this influence as a result of the partisan faction between the Middle East's Sunni and Shia communities, with comparable manifestations in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and others who believe that Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon jeopardizes the country's neutrality from the divisions in neighboring countries and keeps Lebanon's fate determined by the development of Iran's negotiating stance on its nuclear program with the United States.

On top of that, the presence of the heavily armed Hezbollah focuses the attention of neighbors, and allies, some like Israel that are suspicious and cautious towards the armed political group's intentions and military abilities especially that the justification

of their weapons is based on Israeli resistance. With the instability in neighboring countries, regional wars, and unknown actions from foreign actors who have political interests and agendas in Lebanon - that tops local demands - and the region, the country remains in constant distress on what events might or might not drive it into a war, particularly when the countries' economy and socio-political conditions are weak making it an easy ground to settle international or regional disputes. As a result, Lebanon remains haunted by anticipation of possible military violence which has been a mainstay in the lives of ordinary Lebanese.

In that perspective, it is important to note that all previous experiences of internal armed conflict or important change in political narratives in Lebanon's history involved and needed direct foreign intervention to take place, whether through military support or through funding of armed groups in the country. But, in the few months after U.S. President Joe Biden took office, he has ordered a full withdrawal of U.S troops from Afghanistan and begun to review the military presence in Iraq, Syria, and other countries in the region where conflicts exist (Al-Jazeera, 2021). His administration is also cutting military support for the Saudi-led offensive Houthi rebels in Yemen, and the Pentagon has diminished its military presence and weapons out of other Middle East countries (Al-Jazeera, 2021). Meanwhile, Biden's administration is reopening the discussions with Iran on the 2015 nuclear deal. Considering, Biden's administration's retreat from the middle east and interest to pivot its focus and influence on parts of Asia to counter Chinese expanding presence, and Iran's interest to carry on the talks on its nuclear deals that are still ongoing is leaving Lebanon's destiny hanging until the political prospect is established.

In conclusion, the multifaced crisis in Lebanon has led to unexpected political events unraveling, constant fluctuation in the local currency's value, and a rise in unforeseen security issues. Lebanon's socio-economic and political turmoil is likely to remain for coming years, as the country's weak political leaders attempts to address deep structural issues struggle under the weight of political divisions that are rooted in sectarianism, economic challenges and competing demands in a troubling regional environment with shifting political dynamics.

B. Lebanese Film Industry's Creativity Impacted by Interlocked Crises

The interlocked crisis in Lebanon is affecting the creativity of the people who work in the industry. The influence of political, and social stability is impacting people's growth, and thought forming, especially for those who work in creative industries such as film. As Friedman (2006) states, the standard of living conditions does not only influence how human beings are able to live and afford basic necessities and goods, but also entirely configures "social, political and, ultimately, the moral character of a people" (P.1). That means that in some instances, although creative thinking can somehow flow it is still bounded by the socio-economic situation. On the other hand, even when the circumstances can offer material for content creation, the media produced would be so tied down by the volatile environment, since the space for creation in the mind is so limited to keep room for other priority thoughts and worries.

Friedman (2006) also argues that "developing countries", such as Lebanon, are associated with growth. In a developing country, polarizing differences between the ones that enjoy wealth and privatized ties, and the ones that do not, can have a difference on the type of productivity and creativity that those individuals are able to

produce. Given that Lebanon is labeled under what so called a developing country this shows that now that more than 80% of Lebanese population are living in poverty, this is impacting their ability to produce and be creative. Using statistical analysis, creativity was shown to be positively correlated with a higher level of socioeconomic status (Parsasirat, 2013).

Many people who are working in the Lebanese film industry find it very difficult, and hard to keep their minds off their day-to-day struggles to meet ends, or even being able to process the unexpected events that may unravel any day. The uncertainty that is taking over the country is also forcing itself on an individual scale meaning that none of individuals who work in the film industry are being able to focus on imagination and visions that are much needed in their profession, but often find themselves occupied by daily news and reservations. In that aspect, one of the producers I interviewed in Lebanon comments: "Nowadays, it is nearly impossible to meet the conditions necessary for creative work, such as serenity of mind and psychological strength. We can not work effectively, when every day we wake up to something new as a consequence to the economic situation. We're all overwhelmed by the challenges of everyday life" (Participant 2, personal communication, December 1, 2020). This has left laborer's the industry with no motivation, or mind capacity to focus on their work but fixated on how to solve problems, the producer adds: "The country's severe crisis is affecting our energy and diverting us from artistic work". (Participant 2, personal communication, December 1, 2020).

Creativity is very difficult to define, and even harder to pinpoint the sources of inspiration that result in the type of input laborers in the film industry are able to rely on. As Wolff (1993) argues, "creativity is untenable and cannot be used to criticize

analysis of art as ideology" (P.70). However, she also specifies that artwork is a consequence of socio-economic and political the artists experience, and for that I argue that the challenging conditions or circumstances often act as real agents that define the creative output. More specifically, the current political deadlock, and socio-economic crises in Lebanon is in two different ways shaping the film industry, thus its output too.

The first way the current crises is impacting the creativity of those who work in the industry is by influencing the story, plot, aesthetics, and script of a movie. A filmmaker told me that "these situations and the way of life in a free-for-all kind of environment offer a lot of relatable material that can be used to tell a compelling story" (Participant 4, personal communication, January 4, 2021). This is a good example of how the current context factors directly into Lebanese film. For others, working on a film act as a therapeutic process, and a getaway from the current reality. Another opinion from a different filmmaker was that "working on a film or any form of creative work can be a kind of meditation and escape for the people involved" (Participant 3, personal communication, December 3, 2020). Based on these outlooks, those who work in the industry either get inspired on how to approach their work by the volatile socio-political system or are pushed to treat the filmmaking process and its topic as a way to forget about the conditions it is produced within. In this sense, we see how those who work in the industry express and transmit their context, has a direct link thus power over the industry's dynamics.

To wrap up, the current overlapping crisis in Lebanon is impacting the ability of those work in the industry from being innovative, and imaginative. The consequences of the crises on their daily lives are dominating their thoughts and leaving almost no leeway for them to produce originally. On the other hand, the situation is also affecting

the film industry quite directly by either molding the content of the films influences by the circumstances, or by the film being a way for meditation. In all cases, this shows us that laborers who work in the industry have direct influence over their work, and through them we saw what also characterizes the Lebanese film industry. This not to say that the industry has not produced during this period of time, on the contrary there has been a lot of films finalized but mainly streamed on digital platforms like Netflix. But the idea is to highlight how much the workers in the industry had to overcome emphasizing by that the impact it has on the industry, and how it is shaped through the ways that the circumstances have been navigated.

C. A Focus on the Now with No Strategic Vision

The inability to have any kind of idea or hint on what to expect the next day means that people in Lebanon are unable to plan basic things in their day-to-day lives and struggling in setting a plan to execute their work to achieve their goals as they do not know based on what factors they must act. This challenge is affecting people from all backgrounds and in different working fields including those who work in the film industry and production houses hindering them from having a strategy to ensure the development of their industry and forcing them to focus on dealing with the impromptu happenings and crises management. The development of a company, or an industry in general depends on its strategic management, which is a planning system, and is based on prospects of management of future activities by considering all types of environments as contributing factors which is not possible in the case of Lebanon.

Strategic management is a constantly repeated process of organization management which connects the adoption, planning, and execution of the current

solution and the long-term strategy of organization (Ambler, 2016). The process of strategic management consists of the evaluation of three essential elements of strategic thinking: Present, Future and How. You need to identify where you are now as an organization or industry at the given time (present), what do you want (future), and then to see how you will be able to achieve these objectives (Ambler, 2016). The process of strategic thinking is continuous and repetitive. In other words, it needs to be renewed, and rethought whenever relevant or more specifically whenever any elements or factors that might impact the elements change.

However, the strategic thinking process starts from the point at which organization is at the moment: stakeholders, mission, values, environment analysis, and most importantly the assessment of the obstacles that interfere with the achievement of goals defined and which determine the future of organization (Ambler, 2016). Not being able to find out what are the things that might interfere and stop you from achieving your aims, means that you will not be able to plan how to mitigate them and this leaves the industry or the organization working on an ad-hoc basis. It will force them to focus on how to overcome things that are unexpected and sudden leaving the industry or the organization not working towards a vision or fulfilling an achievement but putting all its effort on finding solutions to unexpected unravelling happenings.

In Lebanon, the overlapping crises is creating a lot of uncertainties. The volatile situation is leading to a constant fluctuation in the value of the local currency causing an instability in the market's prices, forcing the government to constantly come up with new decisions and policies, and the banking system coming up with new memorandums every now and then. These are coming on top of the direct consequences of an economic collapse and a state bankruptcy such as a disintegrating health system,

electricity black outs, higher unemployment rates, lower wages and incomes, lost opportunities, and failed industries and companies. All of these are untangling so fast, with no hints ahead to when or where they're going to happen making it impossible to foresee what factors may play into your plan, including how to plan a filming project, and leave the laborer of the industry focused on how to overcome the challenges of today rather on the ambitions of the future of the industry.

As mentioned, Lebanon is suffering from a constant devaluation of its local currency affecting the prices and availability of essential goods in the country which are highly imported including fuel and gas. Due to shortages in the latter, it is very difficult for line producers to add on top of their already existing tasks to ensure management of the production process, to guarantee and or even control that fuel is available for the movements of their caterers, employers, cast members, and even to move the equipment's to reach the shooting settings. One of the producers elaborated on that saying "At some point it became all we needed to think about ahead of a shooting day. Some days even if you have the money to pay to fuel your car, the fuel stations are either closed, or the queue is endless which means you will spend the day waiting for your turn to fill your car" (Participant 2, personal communication, December 1, 2020). Between May and July 2021 clashes broke out at petrol stations across the country, as fuel crisis worsened. With the government no longer able to provide dollars to subsidize imports of oil and other fuel, petrol was in short supply. People were finding very difficult to fuel their vehicles in a country where public transportation did not exist. This has impacted every aspect of overseeing transportation needs of the production process of films.

Transportation management is an essential part of film production process, it ensures procuring transportation vehicles associated with production. This includes any big trucks, trailers that are used for makeup and costume, lighting vehicles, personal trailers for directors and film stars, and any rental cars for traveling cast and crew, and transporting equipment and crew to the filming locations as well as to any other necessary areas relative to the shooting. Managing transportation in a country where fuel is not available is very challenging. The first challenge they encounter is securing fuel to the trucks used for make-up and costume, as well as the lightening vehicles. Second, if the crew did not manage to fill their cars with fuel it is impossible to rent a car or book taxis for the crew as many of them where closed because they could not fuel their cars as well. As a result, has added a burden on an industry with no infrastructure or support available, and sometimes even put filming process on hold, in elaboration one of the producers said: "It was so difficult to have to focus on ways to go around of shortage of fuel to be able to stick to our set shooting schedules. This soaks up most of our energy and leaves you demotivated from focusing on other necessary things. Sometimes we even had to put shooting on holds or reschedule" (Participant 2, personal communication, December 1, 2020).

In this way, shortages of fuel in the country impacted an efficient filming process or even put it on hold. It left people working in the industry, instead of focusing on what they need to do to make the film better and make sure that its outcome meets their expectations, they found themselves putting in effort to look for ways to fill their vehicles with fuel to ensure that the shooting takes place. All the space and energy needed from these laborers to be put in the creativity and execution of the film project

was limited as more space in their mind and time were put on solving day to day challenges making it impossible for them to plan ahead or set a goal to achieve.

In the framework of transportation, the socio-political instability in the country has also led to scattered protests, roadblocks, and conflict individual incidents in various areas across Lebanon. This in its own way, has also impacted the execution of an already set plan where people wake up to unannounced news that certain routes are not facilitated for movements leaving any to have to change their schedule of the day including those who work in the film industry. For that people who work in the industry had to assess the situation every morning before the shooting, "We now have to counter for roadblocks as well. Every day ahead of a shoot we need to wake up one hour earlier than we used to make sure the roads we need to take are still open, or if we can find an alternative route to reach the setting" says one of the filmmakers I interviewed (Participant 4, personal communication, January 4, 2020). On some days, people of the industry managed to find different routes that leads to the same location they are heading to but in other cases they just had to cancel the day of shooting.

The crisis in Lebanon is coming at the same time where the whole world is also fighting a global pandemic which had its own toll on Lebanon too. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly and harshly impacted globally the film industry, and businesses related to it. The film industry is substantially affected because its production, and consumption demand crowd of people to be together in one place (Shah, Yaqoub, & Wu, 2020). According to U.S. entertainment industry union IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees), more than 120,000 film industry workers have lost their jobs in Hollywood due to lockdown, and Worldwide

film industry has approximately lost $10 billion due to the pandemic in the first quarter of 2020 (Pulver, 2020; Whitten, 2020).

Since the pandemic, Lebanon has gone through two intensive, and months long lockdowns that has put all the industries, including the film one on hold. Different to other working environments, working from home or remotely is not an option in filmmaking, as Epstein (2020) puts it directly "Directors ca not teleconference with actors. Makeup artists can not do their jobs via Slack." As a result, in Lebanon, and internationally cinemas or theatres are shut down, film productions are halted, the release dates of the upcoming films are delayed, thousands of crew members and workers have lost their jobs, all of this have added an additional burden to an industry who is already enduring a lot in Lebanon (Shah, Yaqoub, & Wu, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the lockdowns as a prevention from the virus. have prevented many shootings to take place, especially those that might have required travelling or postponed others to an unknown date that could not be predicted. Permits to ensure filming through ways of networking was obtained in one way or another but that also meant that it was another obstacle that the industry and its laborers had to work around.

Even if the crew got the legal green light to carry on with the filming, they yet faced other restrictions that they needed to take care of. Variety reported that Some studios have convened cross-department "strategy teams" to figure out how employees in infected areas can remain safe Epstein (2020). One of the producers told me: "Even if we managed to get the permission to film, we had to deal with other things like hiring someone who can take care of staff health and control over protection measures on set" (Participant 2, personal communication, December 1, 2020). In this way, ensuring safe

working environment that respects infection prevention measures also added the costs and additional management role on industries including the film industry. Throughout the filming, especially in a movie, one can not wear a mask, so people had to test for COVID-19 ahead of shooting to make sure as much as possible that no one was infected. On top of that, amount of people presents on set had to be limited. During the filming the production management had to prioritize crew members and compromise members of the team. In this aspect the producer comments: "This definitely limited our resources, aside from the times where we did not have cast or crew members because they were either infected or they were in contact of a person who is" (Participant 2, personal communication, December 1, 2020). From here, COVID-19 was another thing to counter for, and another challenge to overcome to ensure the execution of filming and making sure that the execution plan is as much as possible in place.

In this aspect, while the development and success of an industry relies mainly on setting a strategic plan that is based on set goals, and a mitigation plan to anticipate challenges, the Lebanese film industry today can not do that, and is left as a hostage to a volatile socio-political context. The film industry today is focused on how to overcome the day-to-day challenges that are directly linked to the current context and is not able to think about its future objectives. In addition, it can not also set plans to how it might solve problems of today as they are changing on a day-to-day basis with no hints to what is coming next.

In this chapter I have reflected on the multi-layered crisis Lebanon is going through showing how it has impacted the creativity of those who work in the industry, as well as hindered them from having a strategic vision of the industry and their work. The crises have limited the innovation and imagination of those who work in the

industry as they realize that their thoughts are occupied by how to manage day-to-day unexpected events leaving no space for them to think and produce uniquely. The situation is at the same time impacting the industry directly by shaping the content of the films based on the inspiration of the current context, or by the filmmaking being a form of a getaway.

In addition, the situation is also hindering the industry from having objectives and aims forcing it to work on an ad-hoc basis. The fuel shortages, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the scattered roadblocks, are all an added layer of challenges on the people who work in the industry. The more difficult part is that all of these challenges come unexpectedly leaving no room for planned mitigation measures and forcing those who work in the industry to put their efforts in ways to find solutions to these obstacles rather than focusing on a future of the industry.

In this way, we can see how the socio-political circumstances that the film industry is found within impacts the way it is shaped whether directly or through the people who work in it proving by that the opposing power they have over the work and the industry. Though them we have managed to see an essential face of the industry, and a closer look to what describes it.

CHAPTER IV

THE CASES OF "CAPERNAUM" AND "THE INSULT"

I have showed in my previous chapters how the materialistic resources and the way they are navigated by the laborers of the Lebanese film industry shape the industry itself, highlighting their agency in the industries formation and its output. I have also showed by that, the importance of defining the industry by those who work in it. In that sense, by focusing on day-to-day realities of the industry I presented how "behind-the-scenes" information on the industry that are not textual or made public is a vital to understanding the Lebanese film industry. Nevertheless, as much as it is essential to provide space, and examine the industry through the eyes of its laborers, we can not deny that one of the ways that film industry or cinema is defined is also through discourses that surround the films after their release. Making sense of the industry also unravels in the ways it is reflected on, discussed, and how those who worked on the movie confer to it.

In addition, it is important that as much as we acknowledge these workers agency and empower their voices that we also reflect and analyze the implications of the ways they're portraying and making sense of the industry through their discussions. As I have mentioned in my introduction, that the film industry does not only refer to the manufacture of a media product as an industry per se, it is also a result of ideas being translated into a tangible output. It speaks to set of behaviors, values, and beliefs of individuals that impact the process of the industry which also must be seen as an agency to be examined. This does not negate the argument already established in this thesis which states that the industry must be "self-reflective" or "self-defined". On the contrary what I am saying is that the narrative surrounding the Lebanese films by those

who work in it offer a definition in the industry, or what Klinger (1997) refers to as essential "to help establish the terms by which the film will be discussed and evaluated in public" (P.114). The way filmmakers discuss their movies help establish their definition and the way the industry is seen. Filmmakers are also people who work in the industry, in this way we are still exploring how they define it and not focusing only on analyzing the content. It is exploring how these workers see the industry and their films. Consequently, it is important to examine how inter-textuality outlines and frames the film industries and its attempts to produce meaning for the text. Not only to present it as is but to criticize it too.

The factors and the circumstances, under which artists and laborers in the industry attempt to deliver their works, exert major force on the artform itself. As Wolff (1993) claims, "the theory of ideology states that the ideas and beliefs people have are systematically related to their actual and material conditions of existence" (P.50). This is not to say that these external and contextual elements dictate solely the direction of films produced, giving no power to those who work in the industry. Rather I argue that the way these workers perceive and make sense of their living conditions and their films is a major power over how the industry is formed. Workers have developed certain thoughts, opinions, and outlooks that are based on these circumstances. They translate them in different ways through their production, aesthetic decisions, and narrative of the film itself. Their perception of their context shapes their films, and the way they execute it in their films is a proof of their agency and power over the industry and its films. Assessing filmmakers, and consequently their films, to demonstrate how these factors have had a tangible influence on their creative products, can give a good representation of what agency laborers in the industry have over their work.

When filmmakers operate in a specific society and environment, they also become a product of such a system influencing by that their actions, decisions, and imagination. As a result, this ultimately impacts their work. As per Wolff (1993), if filmmakers and laborers are shaped by their cultural, historical, and present social context, then that is directly reflected in their form of work. In that aspect, it is important to, know, see, present and examine these specificities of filmmakers' backgrounds to be able to understand how, and why they refer to them as they speak about their films. However, since my interviews are bounded to specific conditions on revealing this information, and due to the fact that not all Lebanese filmmakers are subject to broad public recognition, it is inevitable that to be able to explore that end I have to discuss and examine filmmakers whose backgrounds are known, and information about them is accessible to be able to engage ana analyze how they refer to their movies is linked to their background specificities.

Specifically, I will be looking at the interviews of Nadine Labaki on *Capernaum*, and Ziad Doueiri on *The Insult.* The reason I have chosen these two films, is first due to both movies popularity internationally meaning they have helped spread a huge discourse internationally on the Lebanese film industry specially by being nominated to the Oscar for best foreign films. Secondly, I have chosen *Capernaum* as the movies' plot serves as a clear example on how neoliberalism is negotiated by laborers of the industry. On the other hand, *The Insult* exemplifies the complicated political context of Lebanon which is also a component discussed throughout the thesis. This helps in showing how also political environment and how its negotiated could be seen in the film itself and define the industry. By doing that, I would be demonstrating by case studies the two arguments I explored in the previous two chapters.

That being said, it is important also to note that by focusing on filmmakers, I am not treating them as the main creators of the movies, or the only ones with ownership the movies. But, due to the fact that filmmakers are the ones who help in the discourse created around the films, and the background information on it, this helps in giving concrete examples on the discussions taking place about the movies in public, and also it is a feasible way to show tangibly how my analysis of these discourses is linked to the movies.

A. Case 1: Capernaum

Capernaum is a Lebanese movie that has won Cannes Jury Prize in 2018 and has been nominated to win the Oscar for best foreign film. The movie is about a boy who runs away from his family and sues them for giving birth to him due to their living conditions. The movie is directed by Nadine Labaki, a Lebanese filmmaker who comes from a middle-class background, lived through the Lebanese civil war, and in a system that has forced a lifestyle that is adjusted to the country's neoliberalist ideology. From here, I will look at how these particular orientations, circumstances, space, and society and settings and the way they are expressed by the filmmaker are reflected in Lebanese film industry's connotations.

Similar to many independent Lebanese feature films, the *Capernaum* is embedded in realism. As mentioned, after the civil war most "independent" or "alternative" art productions were considered a mean to break any association with the political system Toukan (2011). Artists believed that their art should be a form of criticism of the civil war rather than a reproduction of its narratives (Toukan, 2011). Ironically, in all of Nadine Labaki's interviews after the success of *Capernaum*

internationally, the director highlights the fact that the main inspiration behind her being a filmmaker in the first place is situated in her experience of the Lebanese civil war. She says, "My interest in films came mainly from my experience of the Lebanese civil war. As children me and my sister, who is also a film-maker, were confined. We lived behind sandbags. But we were lucky: we also lived above a small video store. We would wait for the power to come back on and then we would watch the same VHS tapes over and over again. It allowed us to escape our reality" (Cooke, 2019).

Acknowledging that her own interest in films and filmmaking came as a result of life conditions, Labaki showcases that ideas of filmmaking, specifically Lebanese in this case, are embedded in their own specific trajectory, context, political space, and society. In this sense, Labaki happened to live in the time of war, near a video store, and with specific life conditions and class background. These materialistic conditions have shaped her conscious decision to be a filmmaker and influenced her ideology as a filmmaker. If Nadine had grown up in a different atmosphere, with a different family, and in a different building her vision on what she wants to be in life would have definitely changed. Wolff (1993) sees this as an interrelationship among what she calls thought and material activity. It is an example of how ideas, thoughts, and consciousness are grounded in the conditions of existence.

As Labaki's efforts were put together to highlight the miseries street kids face and her concern to voice their daily sufferings, *Capernaum* reflects in two different ways how ideas are not innocent of political, economic, and materialistic subjectivities. First, it is established that the narrative of the movie is inspired through Nadine Labaki's personal observations of the daily sight of children in Lebanese streets who are often begging for a living or lying homeless on the side of roads. This strived in her,

what she expresses as, a sense of responsibility and urgency to take action and provide agency within her capacity and field (Cooke, 2019). As Toukan (2011) explains, Lebanese contemporary artists after the civil war were constituted to "challenge the traditional role of cultural institutions in the creation of art" (P.3).

In their own way, Lebanese contemporary artists try to re-imagine the Lebanese society and help in reforming its identity. This is what Labaki aimed to do. She was trying through highlighting the miseries of street children to force society to acknowledge their conditions and work on changing it. This motif illustrates how culture and art is produced by people who have their own particular social and historical situations that affect their work. Like all aspects of "consciousness" artwork in this sense is influenced and affected by life's context. Labaki's own position in society as a director, and her childhood upbringing generated a specific vision and belief on society which are eventually imprinted on all her social aspects and productivity one of them is her art. This is one way through which we can see how ideology is presented in her work. Through the filmmaker's circumstances we can understand the genre of their work and the choices they make in their film work.

On the other hand, when Labaki explains in interviews her intention behind the film dissecting the director's choices in the movie from its narrative to production, we see how *Capernaum* is formulated in light of what the director is interested and occupied with at the time. The director in *Capernaum* portrays for us the story of a neglected street boy living in the suburbs of Beirut with his uneducated poor parents. The underprivileged kid Zain, played by Zain Al Rifai, is a stateless and unofficially registered boy who runs away from his family when they marry his young sister off in return for food resources. Leaving his parents behind and facing them in court, the story

unravels in flashbacks. In those recollections Labaki shadows the misadventures of Zain as a he finds temporary shelter in the arms of Rahil (Yardanos Shiferaw), an Ethiopian refugee who unlawfully works at an amusement park and has an infant Yonas (Boluwatife Treasure Benkole). As Zain operates to immigrate from the country he finds himself forced to take care of Rahil's baby after she disappears. Shortly after Zain falls into the traps of a child trafficking gang. While the plot may seem to have voiced the struggles of those marginalized, the director's determination to examine "Why these people are not happy to be alive?" instead of "Who is responsible for their miseries?" degraded the struggles of those marginalized and placed the blame on the poor, migrants, and women's reproduction instead of pointing out society's xenophobia, classist structure, and state's injustices (Saghier, 2018).

The decision of Labaki to portray the struggles of those marginalized does not come without an explanation. Nadine Labaki comes from a middle-class family, just like many of the audiences of the movie, and to them they're enjoying an experience of something they've never seen or lived or in other words in what many critics have categorized as "poverty porn." The director's life conditions allowed her to see the miseries of the marginalized as something "new," a fantasy she has not experienced and a world she does not know about that she wants to explore. This subjectivity catered to fill the interest of a particular class and group of society to see what they want to see.

The plot highlights the Zain's conflict is not with the corrupted state, sectarian and xenophobic system of Lebanon nor the high class elites who gain their power from the injustices of those marginalized but his anger is targeted to his family who should not have had kids and populated poverty. Zain is narrated to blame his family. In this sense the narrative was speaking to the poor themselves and sending them a message on

how to live their lives and discipline their bodies instead of criticizing those responsible for their conditions. The conflict is positioned to be between the poor themselves. Even though the movie targets the socio-economic injustices it is decontextualized feeding into the governmental propaganda against refugees, the liberal illusion of social mobility, and the elites (Saghieh, 2018).

By revolving the plot around Zain suing his parents Labaki blamed the poor for being poor and for populating. She represented the judicial system as the way to justice while it's corruption and the clientelism embedded in it, is one of the main reasons behind the disparities of those marginalized. Instead of criticizing the state for its lack of healthcare services, job opportunities, and public support, the poor are judged by their own children for having kids. To Saghieh (2018), this is a form of whitewashing of racist, classist, and nationalist Lebanese complicity with structural barriers to justice for women, migrants, children, poor, and marginalized groups. In this way Nadine Labaki's class background and her beliefs that are established by materialistic conditions served to portray the gaze of an outsider to the poor and marginalized making the movie about them, rather than for them as she claims in her interviews. Capernaum was an imprint to the artist's ideas, values and conditions of her existence. As Wolff (1993) argues, "as people, including artists, are socially and historically located, and are members of particular social groups, then their thought, including their artistic ideas, is ideological" (P.62). The background of Labaki shaped the movie's approach on how to highlight poverty in the movie.

The movie was not only developed in the frame of the filmmaker's materialistic class conditions but also on how she conceives neo-liberal economy. Labaki has studied in a University of Saint Joseph Beirut, a French educational institution founded by the

Jesuits in 1875. The institution conforms or creates a realm that is somehow influenced by neoliberal ideology, and thus influences those exposed to its academic system. Michele Lamont (2014) in her paper "How Neo-liberalism has Transformed France's Symbolic Boundaries" explains that French institutions embody neoliberal ideology and submit to its norm, which belittles vulnerability and demands of those less fortunate and pushes them to be more self-sufficient and take responsibility for their own fate. To that extent, *Capernaum* employs a neoliberalist approach to the topic and how the filmmaker makes sense of this aspect. I am not stating here that educational institution necessarily embodies neo-liberalism ideology in their teachings, lectures, or research directly.

However, what I am putting forward is that schooling and educational procedures are apparatuses that train, and adjust individuals' abilities to meet the society, and economic needs it exists within. Thus, in this manner, indirectly, in this case, the French educational institution which prompts transnational and cross-cultural educational system function in a way to discipline its enrollers to fit in the society that they are expected to operate within. Foucault's work identifies schools as "Establishments of society-wide disciplinary. It goes hand in hand it with the development of new educational procedures and relays through which individual and collective subjects could be managed, their contexts regulated, their capacities augmented, and their effects channelled to meet new global demands for active, multi-skilled and self-regulated citizens" (Deacon, 2006, P.181). Knowing that the University of Saint Joseph channels French educational system, as well as is founded in a neoliberalist state (Lebanon), it is inevitable that its students are exposed to a specific way of seeing life.

In this sense, Labaki according to these economic and political forces portrayed the underprivileged problem as the responsibility of the poor who must act to change their realities rather than pointing out those actually responsible for these miseries. Labaki was not able to point out that the structure of our societies which is indulged in neoliberalism values is the actual problem as she is part of the system itself. Thus, the movie will not reflect an image that can disrupt the structure of those supporting it rather it was subject to replicate its beliefs, values, and ideas. To this end, Capernaum has proven to be also molded by the filmmakers' beliefs. It was a formation contextualized and visioned in effect of the director's cultural values, class, and ideas as well as a result of neo liberal politics.

B. Case 2: The Insult

In a similar manner, the movie *The Insult* is grounded in what Ziad Doueiri (the director) calls "his truth" of the Lebanese civil war, subjecting the movie to Doueiri's personal experience of the Lebanese 1975 war. In his interviews about the film Doueiri explains that during the war he was raised to believe that Christians were the only reason behind the sufferings of Lebanese people (Fahim, 2018). He also explains that he grew up in a leftist pro-Palestinian family that made him have one perspective on the war: Muslims were exclusively the victims of it. It is what he calls "a myth he grew up with" (Fahim, 2018). Through that we see how the director's ideas, and thoughts were translated on his choice of how to portray the Lebanese Civil war and from what angle to proceed. The movie focuses on a Lebanese Christian (Adel Karam) and a Palestinian refugee (Kamel El Basha) who end up in court after a fight turns violent.

The story starts to reveal the roots of the fight which is based on the civil war's wounds of the nation. The movie chooses to highlight the incident of Damour Massacre which is often undermined relative to the Massacres that followed (Fahim, 2018). Doueiri being raised to exclusively see the miseries and negative outcomes of the Sabra and Shatila massacres triggered in what Marijke de Valck calls "dogma of discovery" (Chan, 2011). He wanted to discover the other side's story: the suffering of the Christians that were not familiar to him. Doueiri takes us through that perspective in the journey where the focus was on the Christians experience rather than the Palestinians' story. He portrays the Christians equally as victims of the 1975 war.

The movie was a reaction in response to the available perception of the war in Doueiri's mind which he was always knowledgeable off but this time to him it was essential to explore and fill in the vague and missing spaces on how it is seen from someone else's vision of the war (Fahim, 2018). Thus, by challenging his own experiences, the film was grounded by his own motifs show casing that films can not be formulated or excluded from their socio-political context. A context which is based on the artist's own history, politics, and memories and other societal categories they've been born with.

Not only was the perspective of the movie affected by Doueiri's motifs, so was the plot itself. The story was inspired by a real incident with the director. When Doueiri was living in Beirut watering his plants the broken gutter sprayed someone walking down the streets which led to an argument between both. The issue was later resolved but left Doueiri thinking what could have happened if it was not and triggering the idea of his movies' narrative (Fahim, 2018). *The Insult* in this sense is clearly linked to its

directors and writer's materialistic occurrences and what he has gone through making it an interpretation of his ideology and his consciousness is expressed through the film.

On the other hand, Doueiri also highlights another form of ideological body that influenced the movie which was not mentioned by Labaki. He states that his movie was screened by General Security for censorship purposes. Any political movie that comes out is evaluated by the government to protect its "regimes" (Fahim, 2018). When it comes to religious and political topics in movies General Security refer to their "committee," which is made up of civil society members mainly religious and governmental representatives (Fahim, 2018). These entities make sure that the movie reflects or at least does not intervene with their representation of their values, and beliefs. This clearly reflects the strong dynamics of power that play into the formation of the movie up to its release.

In conclusion, the way Lebanese movies are interpreted by those who work in the industry tend to represent the challenges of Lebanese society as it is. Instead of creating a space for us, where we escape from those realities and fantasize for alternative living conditions, movies convey an image of fear and obedience to the existing society. Lebanese movies make sense of their socio-political and economic conditions within particular historical, political, cultural and social context. Lebanese movies are rooted and influenced by the "reality" of the filmmakers' lives. That is evident in the themes revolving around sectarianism, even if films intend to close with an anti-religious and sectarian moral.

One of my interviewees, a Lebanese filmmaker, mentioned that "when we talk about feature films, they usually root from a cause that the director is passionate about expressing" (Participant 3, personal communication, December 3, 2020). A cause can

normally be dominant amongst collectives in a nation, but it also roots from the experiences of the filmmakers themselves. Passion towards a cause as such, also roots from struggles or privileges that one endures or enjoys during their upbringing. He also went on to say that "Lebanese storytellers can only tell stories that they have been either exposed to, or they have lived through themselves on some level" (Participant 3, personal communication, December 3, 2020) but they will always find it extremely difficult to tell a story that reflects the opinions and values of people with different backgrounds.

In this sense films are a result of values and perceptions formed from social upbringing of the industry's laborer's that is in turn rooted from political and economic context supports this argument (Wolff, 1993). Wolff (1993) finds it fascinating that art is not only divine and supernatural but also a combination of the artist's thoughts and what background they come from those forms said thoughts. That is reflected in the artform in ways that Wolff (1993) describes as "private" and "individual", meaning that all forms of integration in films can be directly traced back to the individual experiences that led to the formation of the project. These experiences can be ones of filmmakers, technicians, cameramen, editors, sound engineers, scriptwriters, actors and other laborers that have a concurrent influence on the resulting film.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have reflected in this study on how those who work in the film industry in Lebanon manage their ways around the consequences of the neo-liberalist nature, and the socio-political turmoil of the country, proving by that the ways through which these problems are navigated act as an equal and opposing force to influences of funding, and larger socio-political and economic components. I did not rule out the influence of these broader factors, but I focused on them through the eyes of those who work in the industry to highlight that these factors do not directly shape the industry but the way the workers of the industry perceive those factors, mitigate them, and execute them is also an essential power over how the industry is shaped. Thus, they must be taken into consideration when we discuss or analyze the Lebanese film industry.

In addition, it was also essential to look at concrete examples on how the laborers consume their broader existence, and the way they are situated in it by seeing the impact it had on their movies. Even though many has lived in similar circumstances yet each of them had their own unique way through which they retrieved it, consumed it, and different ways through which they translated it into their work showing yet again the importance of not focusing only on the elements but how they were mediated through the laborer of the industry.

Economic, and socio-political conditions do not influence the industry without passing through those who work in it. They go through them, and the laborer's who work in the industry are the ones to determine how they will interpret, work around these conditions, and reflect on them which is why they must be the main source to

define the industry and what it is. We can not have a top bottom approach through which we completely forget about the agency of these laborers and assume a reductionist approach to understanding the industry. Theories about how certain economic natures, funding, and socio-political conditions might influence an industry should not be just based on what is believed hypothetically a result of a certain system but should be balanced out by exploring how these big components are tackled by the people who work inside them, and this is what I have illustrated through this study.

The free-market nature of the Lebanese economy pushed the people who work in the film industry to find alternative ways to guide themselves, and set their own regulations to protect their rights, and steer around the odds of the economic system. The ways the laborers interact with these materialistic conditions is a balanced understanding of all the power and agencies that form the film industry. On the other hand, the uncertain socio-political context of Lebanon is yet another way through which the laborers have innovated to overcome the challenges of roadblocks, fuel shortages, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and has pushed through to remain productive while the situation limited their creativity. In this way, we can see how it is not the context that has only determined the fate of the film industry but the ways through which its laborers have handled it that molded it into what it is.

In this manner, I have uncovered that media institutions and their laborers should not be only approached or understood as a form of control of broader economic and political interest but the rather that these workers have their own ways to understand, resist, think, and interpret differently these broader factors, and we must recognize their agency within the production process through which they negotiate these circumstances. Although, I do realize that the challenges imposed by the Lebanese

context can often act or be perceived as more of an obstacle, than being able to focus on the innovativeness of those who work in it yet still it is important as a first step to give the room for them to talk about the industry. It is also important to explore the industry to reveal valuable information on the complex of dynamics of media industries and not only the general socio-political and economic factors without taking them into consideration as we are missing a huge factor that molds the industry to what it is. It is important to explore how the people who work in the industry may express, transfer, and handle from their end these factors to observe all types of power and have a closer look on how they are orchestrated and executed.

In this, as this study materialized and grounded the interrelationship between daily habits, networking, power, and funding with the general economic, political and social issues in the Lebanon that underlie beyond them. From here, this study opens the door for us to start questioning next how we can work on studies proposing solutions to the Lebanese film industry. The next step would be elaborating further on each obstacle as a study case on its own trying to understand more deeply its roots and addressing them.

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