Research article

Being zoē: theorizing childhood through world cinema

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Abstract
This article examines the cinematic gaze on childhood in world cinema from a sociological perspective by bringing the *being* / *becoming* framework of the new sociology of childhood—developed primarily within the British sociology of childhood tradition—into dialogue with Agamben's distinction between *zoē* (nature) and *bios* (discourse). While childhood in cinema is often framed through developmental or nostalgic narratives, the article argues that certain films present childhood as a domain of experience that resists adult expectations and institutional regulation. Drawing on examples from diverse cultural and national contexts, childhood is conceptualized not as a culturally bounded figure but as a transnational cinematic form through which modern social orders are negotiated. Using the analytic pair being zoē and becoming bios, the article shows how the cinematic child is positioned both within and beyond social regulation, emerging as a threshold figure whose openness, excess, and indeterminacy expose tensions within modern social orders.

Key words
world cinema, sociology of cinema, sociology of childhood, agamben

Highlights

- This article proposes an original sociological theoretical framework for the cinematic image of the child by bringing the being / becoming distinction of the new sociology of childhood into dialogue with Agamben's concepts of *zoē* and *bios*.
- It argues that childhood in cinema should be understood not merely as a represented theme, but as an analytic mode of perception through which social orders become legible.
- The presence of the child on screen functions as a sociological indicator that reveals the limits and failures of modern institutions such as the family, schooling, and the state.

Araştırma makalesi

Varlık olarak *zoē*: dünya sineması üzerinden çocukluğu teorileştirmek

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Öz
Bu makale, özellikle İngiliz Çocukluk Sosyolojisi geleneği içinde gelişen yeni çocukluk sosyolojisinin *being* (olmakta olan)/*becoming* (oluşmakta olan) çerçevesini, Agamben'in *zoē* (doğa) ve *bios* (söylem) ayrımıyla ilişkilendirerek, dünya sinemasındaki çocuk bakışını sosyolojik bir perspektiften tartışmaktadır. Sinemada çocukluk sıklıkla gelişimsel ya da nostaljik anlatılar içinde konumlandırılsa da, bu çalışma bazı filmlerin çocukluğu yetişkin beklentilerine ve kurumsal düzenlemelere direnen bir deneyim alanı olarak görünür kıldığını savunur. Farklı kültürel ve ulusal bağlamlardan dünya sineması örneklerine dayanarak çocukluk, kültürel olarak sınırlı bir figürden ziyade modern toplumsal düzenlerin müzakere edildiği ulusötesi bir sinemasal form olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Bu amaçla makale, *being zoē* ve *becoming bios* kavramlarını paralel biçimde kullanarak, sinemadaki çocuğun hem toplumsal düzenlemelerin içinde hem de ötesinde nasıl konumlandığını gösterir. Ekrandaki çocuk, açıklığı, tekinsizliği, taşkınlığı ve belirsizliğiyle modern sosyal düzenlerin gerilim noktalarını açığa çıkaran bir eşik figürü olarak ele alınır. Böylece makale, dünya sinemasındaki çocuk imgesine ilişkin özgün bir sosyolojik teorik çerçeve önermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler
dünya sineması, sinema sosyolojisi, çocukluk sosyolojisi, agamben

Öne çıkanlar

- Bu makale, yeni çocukluk sosyolojisinin *being* / *becoming* ayrımını Agamben'in zoē / *bios* kavramlarıyla birlikte düşünerek, sinemadaki çocuk imgesine özgün bir sosyolojik teorik çerçeve önerir.
- Makale, çocukluğun sinemada temsil edilen bir tema olmanın ötesinde, toplumsal düzenleri teşhis etmeye yarayan analitik bir bakış rejimi olduğunu savunur.
- Çocuğun sinemadaki varlığı, aile, okul ve devlet gibi modern kurumların kusursuz işlemediğini gösteren bir sosyolojik gösterge işlevi görür.

Introduction: "*more than itself*": the sociological potential of the child's gaze

"The child's eye is a magnifying lens."

(Bachelard, 1994, p. 155)

"Only the cinema can permit this sort of childish reasoning without pretending shame. Why? Because it is the cinema."

(Godard, 1986, p. 84)

According to Lebeau, the first film to offer a genuinely child-centered point of view (POV) is English director George Albert Smith's short *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900) (Lebeau, 2008, pp. 40–41). In this short film, the camera takes the place of the objects seen through the child's magnifying glass, placing the viewer directly within the child's visual field. The appearance of a child's POV so early in cinema's history suggests that the new medium was, from the outset, drawn to the perceptual possibilities of childhood. The continued use of the child's gaze in contemporary cinema indicates that this connection between film and childhood has been present—and surprisingly enduring—since the earliest years of the medium.

Despite the close relationship between children and early cinema (Abel, 1998, p. 43; Düzcan, 2022; McKernan, 2007, p. 1; Kenkel 1999, Lebeau, 2008, pp. 23-24) at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries established with childhood as a new visual medium, we cannot say the same for early sociology emerging around the same period. Childhood was largely overlooked in classical sociological thought, where it appeared only as the "future citizen," positioned within a distant, macro-level perspective as a passive *Becoming*. This historical gap is striking, and it is precisely this gap that sparks the central question of this article. A distinct sociology of childhood- one that approaches children not merely through macro structures but as active agents, as a *Being* with a micro-presence- would not fully take shape until the 1990s. Only then would this relatively new field begin to address, retrospectively, the mischievous, unruly, and unsettling child protagonists of early cinema, as well as the children who once "conquered" movie theaters as a dominant audience group.

Although the active presence of the child has been central to cinema/medium from its earliest years, it did not enter the radar of sociology until much later. Even so, several conceptual pathways allow us to understand the cinematic child as a sociological subject. Childhood has been interpreted as a form of "*otherness*" (Lury, 2010, p. 13), as "*something more than itself*" (O'Connor, 2008, p. 9), as "*a potentiality rather than its actuality*" (Castañeda, 2002, pp. 1-3), as "*miracle*" in the newspapers (Atalay & Muratoğlu Pehlivan, 2024) "*agential beings in the screen*" (Wells, 2024) or as a spontaneous challenger to dominant norms (Lury, 2010a, p. 283). Other readings position the cinematic child within national allegory (Donald et al., 2017: 2; Sadr, 2007, 292-293; Beckett, 2017; Weng, 2016; Shmidt, 2024), while others approach it through political allegory (Diken & Laustsen, 2007, 48; Balanzategui, 2018; Henzler, 2018; Borgotallo, 2011: 22). Taken together, these approaches frame childhood as an allegorical multiplicity and a site of distinctive cinematic potential.

In this article, we aim to conceptualize the multiple, allegorical, and layered nature of the child figure in cinema through sociological concepts. Our analysis centers on the trajectory within the new sociology of childhood that moves from *becoming* to *being*, and we extend this by proposing an Agambenian reading of childhood as a threshold. This additional lens draws on Agamben's framework, which positions childhood as an in-between state between nature (*zoē*) and discourse/*bios*. Bringing these two lines of thought together, we discuss the cinematic child both as an experience situated at the edge of adulthood and as a form of '*being*' that cinema persistently foregrounds. Ultimately, we aim to reframe the aesthetic and sociological processes that position the cinematic child as an *excess*, an *otherness*, or a *challenger*, offering an alternative direction to existing readings of childhood in film.

Rethinking childhood from becoming to being

In 1993, a brutal murder committed by two children in England deeply affected studies in British Childhood Sociology. It is a striking coincidence that this sensational and tragic event took place between the first edition (1990) and the second edition (1997) of *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, one of the foundational works of the new sociology of childhood, edited by Alison James and Alan Prout. In the second edition of the book, the authors made small updates to their chapters. For example, this chapter by Harry Hendrick, the author of "*Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood*," devoted considerable space to the James Bulger case in this new version, in what can be read as a revealing historical convergence, and noted that the murder "hardened public attitudes toward children" and even influenced "the sociology of childhood literature" (Hendrick, 1997, p. 72). Chris Jenks, in his key book *Childhood*, treats the James Bulger murder as a breaking point. According to Jenks, this murder led to the collapse of the traditional understanding of childhood through a dramatic rejection of childhood innocence (Jenks, 1996, pp. 118-136). Jenks' book also went through new editions, and it is noteworthy that one of the new chapters added in the later edition is titled "*Childhood and Transgression*" (Jenks, 2005). Malevolent children, in one way or another, seem to have influenced the sociology of childhood literature from the very beginning.

For these reasons, the 1990s -whether marked by "evil" children or "angelic" ones- was the period in which British New Childhood Sociology flourished, influencing sociology committees across the world. In the preface to the second edition of their book, James and Prout emphasize that even within the seven years since the first edition, studies on the sociology of childhood had "*mushroomed*." They note that, in this short time, courses on childhood sociology had begun to appear and that conferences and academic events had visibly increased (James & Prout, 1997, vii). For this reason, the 1990s is known in the field of sociology together with its interdisciplinary character as the moment when the "new sociology of childhood" finally emerged as an independent area of study.

Of course, the main trajectory of the new sociology of childhood was not limited to the 'rejection of innocence'. It was increasingly acknowledged that children were no longer in

a state of passive subordination to parents or the education system. While the social constructability of childhood was certainly not denied (Arpacı, 2024; Bakioğlu, 2024; James and Prout, 1997; Wells, 2021), it was no longer discussed as a passive state that was simply created. Instead, it was considered an active form of agency through which children shaped their interactions (Alanen, 1988; Corsaro, 1997; Qvortrup, 1990; James and Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998; Wells, 2015). In short, the structural elements through which childhood was constructed gradually gave way to new studies that introduced the notion of children's participation and even took into account the malevolent aspects of that participation. As Wells (2015, p. 14) notes, 'One of the goals of the new paradigm of childhood has been to emphasise children's agency and incorporate their voices into childhood studies'.

Thinkers of the new sociology of childhood described this radical shift as a transition from '*Becoming*' to '*Being*' (James et al., 1998). This approach offered a new sociological perspective, shifting the focus from what childhood would become to what it is. This shift, of course, did not occur suddenly. It could be argued that Philippe Ariès's 1960 book *Centuries of Childhood*, translated into English in 1962, served as a functional source for the new sociology of childhood. Following Ariès, debates on the surprising variability of the concept of childhood -its historical existence (*being*)- gained momentum. Ariès essentially argues that 'in the Middle Ages, there was no category of childhood as we understand it in modern times', suggesting that the concept of childhood is a modern construct. According to Ariès, there was no distinction between childhood and adulthood in the Middle Ages, nor a modern sense of affection. Children wore adult clothing and entered the adult world as soon as infancy ended. More interestingly, Ariès grounds this provocative claim by examining representations of children in works of art. In this study, Ariès uses medieval art, which does not depict children until the twelfth century, as a point of reference (Ariès, 1962, pp. 33-50). Notably, although this book was heavily criticised by historians (Shahar, 1990; Orme, 2001; Pollock, 1983), it was met with considerable interest by sociologists. For this reason, it still holds a valuable place in university curricula on the sociology of childhood.

Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1983) is an example of studies that follow the line opened by Ariès. Postman notes that the invention of the printing press created a need for literacy, and he argues that this new invention widened the gap between childhood and adulthood, thereby producing modern childhood. According to Postman, who builds his argument on this Arièsian historical background, the new invention of television narrowed the distance between childhood and adulthood once again. Children, he claims, no longer have anything to learn from adults; childhood has disappeared (Postman, 1983, pp. 31-32).

In the rapid momentum of childhood sociology, certain historical stops are overlooked. For example, in the swift transition from the printing press to television, was another 'invention' neglected? Take cinema, for example. Postman's technological determinism overlooks cinema, even though cinema complicates his linear story of "disappearance" by placing the child at the center of public gaze. Secondly, observing children today as active

users of digital technologies makes Postman's concerns about the effects of television seem even more pertinent. So, what is disappearing here? Is it childhood itself, or could it be, as the new childhood sociologists suggest, the final stages of '*Becoming*' childhood? Could it be that what has vanished is the capacity of adulthood to construct and shape childhood?

Rather than dwelling on this second question too much, we will return to the first, which is the focus of this article. Could the invention of cinema, like the printing press or television, have affected the transition from childhood to adulthood? Is it not peculiar that childhood has come to define a long-lasting cinematic gaze or technique known as the child's point of view since the earliest films? Considering that Ariès drew inspiration from the absence of children in medieval art, it is worth noting how cinema has, in a sense, taken child imagery to new heights. However, looking at and understanding all of this would exceed the scope of this study.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the sociological significance of the 'functional' child's gaze in cinema. Firstly, the findings of the new sociology of childhood bear a striking resemblance to the typical behaviours of children in cinema. According to this perspective, a child's individuality, beyond the socialisation processes created by school or family, demonstrates that the construction mechanisms do not operate flawlessly. The Child in cinema likewise focuses on Being children who suggest that these "powerful" apparatuses do not function perfectly. At times, these children even expose the malfunctioning of these apparatuses and, through their very presence, can (inadvertently) become an uncanny figure of challenge. Additionally, by emphasizing that the inspirational text behind the new sociology of childhood was shaped by the doubts of a historian who examined works of art, I argue that the child images in cinema, as "active agents," correspond to the "*Being*" childhood of the new sociology of childhood. Cinema certainly includes "*Becoming*" childhood in its frame as well, but when it does so, it draws on the capacity of nostalgia or allegorical cinema. In any case, the historical–sociological potential of childhood appears as a *child gaze* that cinema absorbs more rapidly (Düzcan & Bakioğlu, 2024, p. 172).

So how does cinema find these being children? How is it even possible to reach Being childhood? Is the state of being a child an experience that an adult can easily access? At this point, another dilemma emerges: the fact that childhood, in Agamben's terms, is a threshold between zoē and bios—that is, the adult qualities present within childhood, or the traces of childhood that remain within adulthood. This threshold structure makes Agamben's conceptual toolkit essential for analysing how the experiences of Being childhood and Becoming childhood are articulated in cinema. Drawing on this framework allows us to theorise childhood as a threshold and to discuss its expressive potential more effectively.

Childhood at the threshold of bios and zoē

There are, of course, many literary, analytical, and even psychoanalytic approaches that treat childhood not as a "temporary" phase but as a critical threshold, and even emphasize its permanence (Winnicott, 1971; Bettelheim, 1976; Kiley, 1983). In this article, however, I choose to draw on Agamben's terminology, which I hope will offer a provocative theoretical contribution when read alongside the new sociology of childhood. This move directly engages the new sociology of childhood's tendency to focus on "children's experiences." For, as Agamben argues, "Modern man has been deprived of his experience... Experience has its locus only in childhood" (Agamben, 1993, p. 13).

To clarify this point further, in *Infancy and History* (1993) -a work Agamben wrote in Italian in 1978, and which was perhaps translated into English in 1993 with the rising momentum of the new sociology of childhood- he provocatively opens the discussion on the exceptional temporality of childhood. Unlike animals, who are born into language, children acquire it later in life. Agamben argues that this acquisition is experience itself and the element that initiates human historicity: "If man were a being who had spoken from birth, he would not possess such a historic quality. Man's infancy is therefore the pure and transcendent beginning of experience. In this sense, a theory of experience is also a theory of infancy. Experience has its locus in the childhood of man, and is now the subject of history" (Agamben, 1993, pp. 59-61).

According to Agamben, human nature is divided at its very origin because language is acquired from the outside. Childhood introduces a discontinuity -a break- into this nature, making it the source of the division between language and discourse (Agamben, 1993, p. 63). Is it possible to reach the origin of pure experience, pure language and childhood? It is impossible to reach the origin of language or a pre-linguistic state. In this sense, childhood cannot be accessed through a chronological return because the human being remains within this acquired language and therefore within childhood. "The fact of not having always already been speaking, of having been a child and still being a child, this is what experience is." (Agamben, 1993, p. 61). In this view, experience becomes the limit of language. For this reason, Agamben asks, "Is there an experience without speech?" and provides the following answer:

> (At first sight) the subject's constitution in and through language seems to entail the complete loss of any 'speechless' experience. Yet if a primordial experience exists, it is not subjective but precedes the subject; it occurs in man before the subject, that is, before language. In the strict sense of the term, a 'speechless' experience is infancy (in-fancy), whose limit is precisely the point at which language will trace its own boundary. (...) In this sense, a theory of experience can be nothing other than a theory of infancy (Agamben, 1993, p. 57).

According to Agamben, the human is dependent on infancy (Agamben, 1995, p. 97). The most fundamental feature of infancy -the feature that distinguishes it from adulthood- is the acquisition of language, something an adult cannot easily achieve. If this is the case, then within us there may persist a form of "childly sovereignty," much like the axolotl salamander or, in Bruckner's striking metaphor, the "eternal child/Child King, who survives behind the wrinkles of the mature man" (Bruckner, 2000, p. 95). For this reason, the attempt to transform eternal childhood into adulthood is a futile one. "Thought, that

is to say politics, is the name of this authentic appeal to return to the infantile body of humanity" (Agamben, 1995, p. 98).

The political character of childhood becomes more clearly understood in Agamben's later and somewhat more widely read work, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), where he approaches it through a biopolitical lens. Shaped in large part by Foucault's analyses, biopolitics does not reduce modern power to the practices of the state, legal mechanisms, or central apparatuses; rather, it foregrounds its capacity to penetrate the bodies and ways of life of individuals (Agamben, 1998, pp. 1-2).

In his examination of ancient Greek texts, Agamben notes that there are two words corresponding to the notion of life. The first, *zoē*, refers to "*bare life*" -the simple fact of being alive- which is shared by all living beings. The second, *bios*, designates a particular way of life belonging to a group (Agamben, 1998, p. 1). In ancient Greece, the sphere of *bios* was the domain of political activity, namely the *polis*. In short, Agamben stresses that it is crucial to remember that *zoē* is pre-linguistic, whereas *bios* is linguistic. As Murray (2013, p. 96) suggests, *zoē* is the realm of voice or childhood. Yet it is not a childhood to which we can return. Rather, it is a remainder an "excess" that stays with us. Ultimately, we cannot gain access to a world prior to *bios*, that is, to *zoē*.

Reading Agamben's two works together reveals that the concept of childhood, which in *Infancy and History* marks the origin of the distinction between language and discourse, corresponds in *Homo Sacer* to a more pronounced division between *zoē* and *bios*. In this later work, Agamben also focuses on the transition from voice to language. For him, voice -which we may call *zoē*, as in animals- is only associated with pain and pleasure. However, language contains justice and injustice, 'discourse', or *bios* (Agamben, 1998, p. 8). Furthermore, one of Agamben's core concepts is *'bare life'*, which is an intermediate zone between *zoē* and *bios*. For Agamben, the defining feature of modernity is the politicisation of *bare life*, or the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis (Agamben, 1998, pp. 6-7).

Childhood in cinema draws on the potential opened by this threshold between language and discourse. It allows adults to enter an "impossible" dialogue with their personal histories, with their own zoē. To look toward the source of the language–discourse split in which the adult still finds herself is, in truth, to look toward the experiences and the "origin" of a being who did not always speak and therefore has a "history." For this reason, cinema can affect adults, call them to a confrontation, and offer them a chance for repair. What is called the child's gaze thus becomes the adult's own gaze and even a gaze back at oneself. Children in cinema, therefore, are never simply children. Their position at a threshold that makes them subjects of modern politics turns them into an uncanny potential for experience. To the adult, they are at once distant and familiar.

What, then, comes into view when we read the New Sociology of Childhood's distinction between *Being* and *Becoming* alongside Agamben's division of *zoē* and *bios*? In the following section, I bring these conceptual pairs together in order to offer a theoretical contribution to the effort to conceptualise childhood in cinema. When cinematic childhood is formulated through these terms, the first hybrid concept that emerges is

Becoming Bios: a form of childhood imagined as an "unfinished," passive subject, confined to a future adulthood and therefore dependent on the adult's bios. It frames the child as someone not yet fully present, whose meaning is deferred to what they will eventually become. In this view, childhood is subordinated to a teleology of development, articulated through the norms, expectations, and narrative structures/trajectories of adulthood. The second is *Being Zoē*, which brings to the surface the vast and unsettling potential of childhood experience. It names a mode of childhood that is not defined by futurity or by a path toward adulthood, but by a primordial openness that precedes language and unsettles the adult's sense of order. In cinema, *Being Zoē* appears as the trace of a voice or experience that cannot be fully absorbed into discourse, and precisely for this reason becomes an uncanny, even disorienting, force within the adult's world.

Becoming bios: the persistance of the child king

"There is a Child King who survives behind the wrinkles of the mature man's."
(Bruckner, 2000, p. 95)

In tracing the trajectory of childhood studies, Jenks reminds us of a path that adults themselves come to need. As he puts it, "Analytically children have become, through our burgeoning contemporary studies, a way in which we explore missing, unexpressed and disempowered aspects of ourselves" (Jenks, 2005, p. 170). Castenada makes a similar point when he observes that "the turn back to one's childhood to repair the adult or to reclaim 'the child within' has become a familiar response to adult problems" (Castenada, 2002, p. 5).

In everyday life, the nostalgia of "we were once children" often signals a melancholic sense of lack. When we follow Jenks's insight that this is, in fact, an adult construction, it becomes clear that we are situated within the domain of the *Becoming* child. If we place this alongside Agamben's sense of the impossibility of reaching *zoē*, we arrive at the need to examine what "remembering childhood" actually entails. We know that in cinematic narratives -particularly in the biographical frames that appear so frequently- this act of "remembering childhood" often provides a crucial ground. Lury argues that this childlike world becomes a functional universe for filmmakers:

> I argue that the presence of the child allows film-makers to reflect on what can and cannot be said and to create filmic worlds in which the child's perspective is orchestrated via the representation of different embodied encounters and the adoption of an alternate mythic temporality, specifically the 'once upon a time' of the fairytale (Lury, 2010, p. 6).

Childhood has not yet passed through the domains and social frameworks that adults inhabit. For Halbwachs, adults' childhood memories are "reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs, 1950, pp. 35-41; Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 46-51). Therefore, even if we were able to reach not only the memories but childhood itself as it once existed, we would still fill that "content" into a framework shaped by the conditions of the present and in doing so, we would not come any closer to the boundaries of childhood.

We can now say with more confidence that nostalgia is a *bios* regime. While *zoē* threatens the adult's *bios*, the adult *bios* depends on a rapid reconciliation. Thus, the familiar narratives of "we were once children" reveal childhood in its *bios* form childhood as ideologically organised by the adult. They construct childhood as a *Becoming* that resolves past conflicts and legitimises adulthood.

The poetics of eternal childhood helps illuminate why *becoming* children in cinema are so often embraced as a nostalgic frame. One of the most familiar examples of this path is *Cinema Paradiso* (1988). The film is a striking instance of childhood constructed not as a *Being*, but as a *Becoming Bios* shaped by adult memory. The world of the young Toto is not presented to us through his own inner rhythm, his uncanny potential, or any intensity of *zoē*; instead, it appears within a nostalgic frame determined by the desires, lacks, and need to make sense of the past that belong to the adult Toto. Here, childhood is not an autonomous sphere of experience but the point of origin that enables the formation of the adult self. From Toto's passion for cinema to his bond with Alfredo, every element becomes biographical raw material that explains who Toto is in the present. In this way, the film offers childhood as an idealised past that serves the adult's emotional and symbolic needs; the lens of adult memory renders invisible any excess, uncanniness, or unknowability that might belong to the child's *Being*.

This nostalgic *bios* frame reaches its most intense form in Alfredo's command, "Don't come back again." The film presents this line not as something the child experiences, but as a fateful instruction that legitimises the adult Toto's life journey. His long absence from the town, the weakening of his bond with his mother, or even the selfishness of never checking in on Alfredo are all absorbed and excused as natural elements of a growth myth. For childhood is already framed in the film as a *Becoming*. What matters is not how young Toto lived his childhood, but how the adult Toto reorders that childhood and assigns it a symbolic function. The child we see in the film, therefore, is not a subject establishing his own *Being*, but material for the adult Toto's nostalgic and mythic self. In place of the child's *zoē*, the film installs a bright yet curated *bios* that meets the needs of adulthood.

Becoming childhood is not visualised in cinema only through a nostalgic aesthetic of 'incompleteness'. At the same time, the existence of *bios* as a lived reality can at moments suppress childhood itself and subject it to the strategies of the adult order. In Iranian cinema we see this process working in the opposite direction. Filmmakers replace love stories, which cannot feature adult men and women on screen, with safer themes such as sacrifice, loyalty and devotion, themes that can be carried by child actors (Sadr, 2002, pp. 227-237). In such cases the child figure does not represent their own Being experience; instead, the child carries an allegorical mandate produced to circumvent the restrictions of the adult order. Here the child fulfils a requirement of bios: to represent, to bear meaning and to fill the gaps left by the adult figure. This mediation renders the excess of the child's experience invisible and places them within the adult designed line of *Becoming*. It is therefore unsurprising that narratives composed solely of children or adolescents, such as *Lord of the Flies* (1963/1990), *The Tribe* (2014) or the earlier example *Kid in Hollywood* (1933), so readily lend themselves to allegorical readings.

In conclusion, when we draw on Agamben's concepts, we can say that the recollections of childhood in cinema lead us not to the zoē of childhood but to a version of childhood shaped by the adult's bios. For this reason, nostalgic childhood in cinema is often framed as an unfinished image that will eventually become something else. Since institutions such as school, family and the state operate as mechanisms that serve bios, childhood is compressed into a package of purity, innocence and nostalgia. This packaging reaches its peak in biographical and nostalgic narratives, where childhood is treated as a phase that comes to an end through external interventions such as war, relocation, growing up or migration. When child characters display hints of adulthood, this often makes their *Being* or *Zoē* experiences harder to notice. Yet cinema discovered a very different, even an opposite, potential of childhood at a remarkably early moment, a potential that I call *Being Zoē*.

Being zoē in cinema: the child's arts of the weak

"Children explore the very limits of consciousness and highlight, once again, the indefatigable, inherent and infinitely variable human capacity to transgress"

(Jenks, 2005, pp. 150-151)

'Children serve as a symbol of the artist's dissatisfaction with a society because the child push within the edge of language"

(Coveney, 1967, pp. 31-32)

Since the invention of cinema, why have we needed to depict childhood not through nostalgia, but through the lens of the uncanny, the malevolent, and other forms of '*otherness*'? As Donald (2017, p. 3) notes, 'Emotional impact and identification are sharper on screen when there is a child protagonist in play'. Let us then ask why we identify with child protagonists so quickly. These questions lead us to the central claim of this study. In such films, childhood becomes visible not through a developmental trajectory towards adulthood, but through an experience of being that is already present and effective in its own right. This *Being* becomes a powerful site of identification for the modern viewer when it carries an openness and an unfinished quality that adults can no longer access or recover by turning back, and when it touches *zoē*.

In Agamben's terms, childhood is one of the 'exceptional' zones produced by modernity, carrying a surplus of *zoē* that politics has not yet turned into *bios*. This *zoē* condition creates fragility, since children cannot make sense of violence. Yet it also produces a powerful effect that frequently appears in cinema. The child figure reveals an ethical threshold, an intuitive limit, or a possibility of pure existence that adults have lost. Consequently, the image of the child simultaneously embodies the prospect of a vulnerable existence in need of protection and a point of resistance that modernity has not eroded.

I would like to start by discussing two films in which the difference between *zoē* and *bios* is particularly apparent. The first is *Life is Beautiful* (1997), in which a Jewish father tries to protect his child from the camp's regime of *bare life* by keeping him within the relatively safe sphere of *zoē*. The longer the father postpones the child's inevitable transition from *zoē* to *bios*, the more intensely the viewer experiences the child's existence, and the more they feel a strange sense of relief upon realising that the ability to suspend the darker aspects of bios remains available to them as well. The film demonstrates that the child's world of play can shield the child from the weight of politics and even suspend the regimes of *bare life* in modernity. The continuity of *zoē* becomes a form of resistance, both within the narrative and within the viewer's emotional response.

Some viewers have criticised *Life is Beautiful* as a film that 'turns tragedy into comedy'. This reaction actually stems from the fact that the film is based on the ontological shift that we have discussed. It deliberately postpones the appearance of the Holocaust, instead placing the viewer within the child's *zoē* – a realm of play, illusion, silliness, misunderstanding, and innocent simplicity. No scene, when viewed from the perspective of *zoē*, diminishes the tragedy. On the contrary, it suspends its political weight and creates a different field of affect.

In short, what some viewers experience as a lack of seriousness is not an aesthetic choice of the narrative, but rather a structural consequence of the fact that the world of zoē does not recognise the regime of bios. For this reason, the film may appear as a 'comedy' to certain viewers. Yet this comedy is a manifestation of the zoē of childhood, a mode of experience that neither denies nor exists within the same frame as tragedy. Finding the film 'light' or 'frivolous' often stems from ignoring the child's existence and centring on how the adult should experience the events rather than how the child actually experiences them. The film invites us into the child's world and aims to demonstrate the strength of this way of being, which persists even in the face of catastrophe. The father's act of turning the camp into a game is not a refusal of seriousness, but rather the final resistance of zoē against bios. Whether viewers find this comic or unsettling depends on which mode of life -*zoē* or *bios*- they identify with more.

Bare life is not a natural or inevitable state of zoē but the result of the collapse of bios and the suspension of the political order (Agamben, 2011, p. 6). Children do not fully experience the political tragedy of *bare life* in the absence of the bios order created by adults because they do not yet possess the linguistic and cultural means to name it, describe it or place it within a historical context. For this reason, the longer *zoē* can be maintained, the more the tragedy of bare life remains in suspension (Agamben, 2011, p. 6).

But how long can the father keep the child within this sphere of *zoē*? The fragility inherent in this question highlights the child's capacity to reveal bare life. Their *Being*, which differs from that of adults and perceives the world without political interpretations, highlights the war's regime of bare life. This is why war films so often depict childhood (Lury, 2010, pp. 105–106). From the perspective of *zoē*, the child figure uniquely reveals both the intensity and unsayability of *bare life*. In other words, *zoē* is the

pre-political potential of childhood. Bare Life is what happens when that childhood is captured by the machine of sovereignty.

Life is Beautiful opens an exceptional space in which the passage from zoē to bios can be postponed, whereas (1985) presents the opposite, a world in which war thrusts childhood directly into the violent regime of *bios*. The film follows Florya's attempt to join the partisans during the Nazi occupation of Belarus, a process through which his Being, the childhood mode of sensing and perceiving, is gradually forced into adulthood. The devastation we witness through Florya's eyes produces a level of violence that the world of zoē cannot sustain. For this reason, the film shows that childhood is not only a form of innocence that can be protected but also a threshold that brings the scale of violence into view.

The final scene of the film is the clearest instance of this rupture. Florya aims his gun at a mud-stained portrait of Hitler and prepares to release his rage, but the camera shifts to a documentary collage that rewinds the flow of time. Bombings move backwards, buildings rise again, and the war unravels toward the past once it has been stripped of its political frame. This unwinding continues until it reaches Hitler's childhood. At each reversal Florya fires his gun, yet the moment a photograph of Hitler as a child appears, he stops. This pause is not merely a psychological hesitation but the moment in which the gap between zoē and bios comes into view. Florya suddenly finds himself before not a historical agent but a child freed of all political weight, pure life, zoē. Even though he has been forced into bios by the war, the child who emerges before him still carries the untouchable quality of *Being*.

This moment explains why cinema uses the figure of the child as such a powerful epistemic tool. When childhood experience becomes visible as *zoē*, it gains the force to unsettle every structure of *bios* in the adult world. Childhood accomplishes what adulthood cannot. Even the childhood of the most "malevolent" subject compels the viewer to stop and think again. For this reason, *Come and See* is not only a record of war but also a strong reminder of how childhood *Being* can be broken and yet still form an ethical threshold.

This is precisely why war films, which Lury links to the idea of "innocence" (Lury, 2010, pp. 105-106), so often choose to convey the sharpest form of *bare life* through the potential of the child's body. When the *bios* order created by adults collapses, the experience of *Being Zoē* moves to the centre of the scene and makes it clearer what bios has destroyed.

So, what do we see when we turn from periods of war to ordinary times? For example, consider school, which is both a symbolic site of *bios* and a space of *becoming* during the transition from childhood to adulthood. This is precisely the kind of setting in which the central insight of the new sociology of childhood operates: children should no longer be understood as extensions of the family or the school but as active agents (Alanen, 1988; Leonard, 2005; Heywood, 2001).

As child characters in cinema appear as active agents, the hidden side of the educational bios becomes more visible. By attending to their *Being* experiences, the cinematic child

undermines this bios. Consider the 1933 film *Zero for Conduct*. It follows a group of boarders who revolt and take over their school. As Ariès reminds us, children did at times rise up in schools, even taking up arms, and such uprisings can be traced in Europe well into the twentieth century, close to the period in which the film was made (Ariès, 1962, pp. 318-320). From its earliest years cinema has placed children in the frame not as passive subjects of socialisation, as the *Becoming* model would suggest, but as figures whose capacity for action and closeness to *zoē* shape the scene.

As this art of the weak continues, the "modern" future of childhood first appears in cinema. Truffaut's The *400 Blows* (1959), which was likely influenced by Vigo, brings the conflict between childhood and adulthood into view through the distinction between zoē and bios. At the centre of the film is Antoine, a young boy caught between family, society and the state. In a story that carries childhood beyond its innocent world, Antoine passes through all the institutions that Foucault would, years later, describe as "*disciplinary institutions*," such as the school, the prison and the reformatory (Foucault, 1977).

This movement does not show the institutions of *Becoming* as functioning perfectly; on the contrary, it points to the flaws in their operation. As Diken and Laustsen note, "cinema also can function as an indicator of the virtual, a *coming society*" (Diken and Laustsen, 2007, p. 1). Films such as *The 400 Blows*, and later works of a similar kind, bring into view the prison like forms of modern institutions and the ways in which society seeks to discipline individuals from childhood onward. This awareness of the crises within modern institutions becomes especially pronounced in Foucauldian sociological thought from the 1970s onward.

In critiques of modern institutions, the family comes to the forefront just as much as the school. *Kynodontas* (*Dogtooth*, 2009), in contrast to the earlier examples, is a stark allegory that shows how absurd and suffocating the outcome becomes when a regime of *Becoming* is created entirely by adults or parents with no place for the *zoē* of childhood. In the film the family controls the children's entire field of sensation, their words, their space and even their sense of reality. In this way the child's *Being*, the part that experiences, responds and forms meaning, is completely suppressed. What emerges is a closed and artificial world in which zoē is not protected and bios has been reduced to the language of domestic power.

The force of *Dogtooth* lies in how clearly it shows the dystopia that emerges when childhood is confined solely to *Becoming*, when it is continually directed toward the goals set by adults and given no space for its own experience. The children's "protected" world is in fact a void in which zoē has been entirely eliminated, a pure expanse of *bare life*. The absence of *zoē* is also the absence of *Being*. This is why the film is so unsettling for the viewer. When the vital, intuitive and singular existence of childhood is removed and replaced with nothing, but an architecture of bios constructed through rules, what remains is a sterile form of violence and a fragile emptiness of identity. In this way *Dogtoot* invites us to think about the fragile force of *zoē* shown in earlier war films, this time in its fully suppressed form. It brings into view the damage that can occur when a

child figure is cut off from *Being* not only in the midst of war but also within the ordinary institutions of everyday life.

As a result, cinema, much like the new sociology of childhood articulated in the 1990s, does not treat the child as a passive or obedient product of socialisation. The moment a child appears on screen, a dramatic tension begins to unfold: the pull between zoē and bios, and the shifting threshold between childhood and adulthood. Cinema remains central to sociological thought precisely because it can draw on this tension, using the visual force of the child's temporary capacity to hold these opposites together. As Postman reminds us, cinema emerged during the "high-watermark of childhood," (Postman, 1983, p. 67) and as a new art form of its time, it attached itself closely to the figure of the child.

Conclusion

The cinematic power of childhood lies in the way it embodies dramatic tension. The 'potential' that Castaneda describes -its openness, indeterminacy and unresolved form- positions the child as a threshold figure, moving between nature and politics, innocence and social order, instinct and norm, *zoē* and *bios*, and being and becoming. This tension is narratively fertile because the contradictions that adult characters must embody are already present in childhood as a condition of experience. As the new sociology of childhood has long argued, childhood is not a passive stage, but an active process of interpretation, response and generation of meaning. Cinema draws on this being as a way of seeing; a pair of glasses through which the structures of social life become visible. The child on screen is never merely a character; they become an analytical tool that reveals how cultural orders operate, where they fracture and where they break down.

The striking presence of childhood in cinema is reminiscent of Agamben's assertion that the boundary between zoē and bios is concentrated in this existential domain. Dramatic form often intensifies at moments when this threshold is preserved, strained or broken. Films portraying childhood as a process expose the adult world's desire to organise, stabilise and narrate life. In contrast, films allowing childhood to appear as a Being reveal an excess that resists such organisation. Together, these cinematic forms demonstrate that childhood is not merely a subject of representation, but also a perspective through which the social and political can be reconsidered. By returning to childhood, cinema continually returns to the point at which life is formed, named, regulated or left open. It is this point that gives childhood its enduring sociological and aesthetic power.

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