

## FROM SUITCASE CHILDREN TO EURO-ORPHANS: CINEMATIC PORTRAYALS

Rahime Özgün KEHYA  
Kafkas University, Türkiye  
ozgunkehya@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4695-3689>

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyses three European films about children left behind by their parents in their home countries due to labour migration. Developed in the German language in the second half of the twentieth century as *Kofferkinder* (suitcase children), this concept has been called Euro-orphans since the twenty-first century. Although neological concepts and time-space differ, the experiences and traumas of the children and parents concerned are similar. From the 1950s onwards, such family disintegrations affected a noteworthy part of the population immigrating to Germany and other European countries from Greece and Italy and the 1960s onwards, from Turkey. Later, migrant parents from Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Poland left their children with relatives, neighbours or in childcare facilities, which has become an essential sociological fact regarding the migration phenomenon that prevents family reunification and causes lifelong trauma, especially for children. With changing social, political and economic conditions, migration causes children left behind not to receive parental care in the long term. This study reveals the glocality of the issue through a sociological analysis of three films about migration from Turkey, Romania and Poland, selected according to judgemental sampling. According to the findings, *Sandstern* (2018) depicts the reunification of a Turkish suitcase boy with his parents in Germany and the challenges of his otherness and alienation from a distant history of the 1980s. *Calea Dunării* (2013) and *I am Kuba* (2015) tell more contemporary dramas of Euro-Orphans. In conclusion, while the selected films depict children left behind, migration here has an involuntary character as a way of escaping poverty in different times and geographies.

**Keywords:** *Migration, Suitcase Children, Kofferkinder, Euro-Orphans, Children Left Behind.*

## BAVUL ÇOCUKLARDAN AVRUPA'NIN YETİMLERİNE: SİNEMA TASVİRLERİ

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, emek göçü nedeniyle ebeveynleri tarafından kendi ülkelerinde geride bırakılan çocukları konu alan üç Avrupa filmini incelemektedir. Yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısında Alman dilinde *Kofferkinder* (bavul çocuklar) olarak geliştirilen bu kavram, yirmi birinci yüzyıldan itibaren Euro-yetimler olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Neolojik kavramlar ve zaman-mekân farklılık gösterse de söz konusu çocukların ve ebeveynlerin deneyimleri ve travmaları benzerdir. Bu tür aile parçalanmaları 1950'lerden itibaren Yunanistan ve İtalya'dan, 1960'lardan itibaren de Türkiye'den Almanya'ya ve diğer Avrupa ülkelerine göç eden nüfusun kayda değer bir bölümünü etkilemiştir. Daha sonra Romanya, Bulgaristan, Moldova ve Polonya'dan gelen göçmen ebeveynlerin çocuklarını akrabalarına, komşularına veya çocuk bakım kurumlarına bırakmaları, aile birleşimini engelleyen ve özellikle çocuklar için yaşam

boyu travmaya neden olan göç olgusuna ilişkin önemli bir sosyolojik gerçek haline gelmiştir. Değişen sosyal, siyasi ve ekonomik koşullarla birlikte göç, geride kalan çocukların uzun vadede ebeveyn bakımı alamamasına neden olmaktadır. Bu çalışma, yargısal örnekleme göre seçilen Türkiye, Romanya ve Polonya'dan göç konulu üç filmin sosyolojik analizi yoluyla konunun küyerelliğini ortaya koymaktadır. Elde edilen bulgulara göre *Sandstern* (2018), bir Türk bavul çocuğun Almanya'daki ailesiyle yeniden bir araya gelişini ve 1980'lerin uzak geçmişinden gelen ötekilik ve yabancılaşma sorunlarını tasvir etmektedir. *Calea Dunării* (2013) ve *I am Kuba* (2015) ise daha güncel Avrupalı yetim dramlarını anlatmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, seçilen filmlerde geride kalan çocukların tasviri yapılırken buradaki göç, farklı zaman ve coğrafyalarda yoksulluktan kaçmanın bir yolu olarak gönülsüz bir niteliğe sahiptir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göç, Bavul Çocuklar, *Kofferkinder*, Euro-Yetimler, Geride Kalan Çocuklar.

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing need for labour in the industrialised countries of Europe after the Second World War and the eastward expansion of the European Union left millions of children socially orphaned. With one or both parents working abroad, these children grew up without parents. This social upheaval, which once occurred with labour migration to Germany from countries like Italy and Turkey, is also an important social phenomenon after EU enlargement, affecting low-income families in Eastern European countries like Romania and Poland. Although the depiction of these left-behind children has changed over time [suitcase children (*kofferkinder*) or Euro orphans], families torn apart by poverty and migration are still the subject of some films in the twenty-first century with different dramatic reflections and constructions. With a sociological approach to the selected films, this study aims to show whether the locality of parent-child separation persists, applying examples of emigration from Turkey, Romania, and Poland.

Like suitcase children, the terms *European orphan*, *EU orphan*, or *Euro-Orphan* describe the temporary abandonment of children (children left behind). For this reason, it is helpful to look more closely at the definition of the term, which is the main subject of the study. "The Commission defines 'EU orphans' those children left behind in the country of origin by parents who have gone to work abroad. This is another vulnerable group, that breaks the pattern of childcare (Mogavero, 2014)." Orphanhood here is not a biological orphanhood, i.e., the result of actual death. However, a social orphanhood, i.e., a constructed orphanhood, is a neological concept that needs to be fully anchored in everyday language.

The term Euro-orphan stems from the fact that due to mass labour migration and forced family separations from Eastern European countries to Western European countries, various people in the country-of-origin care for children. In Eastern European countries such as Poland and Romania, the collapse of communism and membership in the European Union led to migration and a massive social orphanage for economic reasons. Studies have shown that more than half of children in Moldova have grown up without a mother or father at some point. Some NGOs estimate that between 500,000 and 1 million children are affected in EU member states such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland (Nejezchleba, 2013). Also, this study shows that the problems associated with the phenomenon persist in the Romanian case:

Since Romania joined the EU in 2007, an estimated 15% of the adult population has left the country to work in Western Europe. That situation has created a vacuum at home, leaving entire villages without any adults of working age. It's also created strains within the families themselves. Between 100,000 and 300,000 minors have been left behind, often to be raised by their grandparents (Lovett & Essoo, 2018).

The suitcase child was a widespread sociological phenomenon in the 1960s and the following years of the migration wave, especially towards Germany from Turkey. However, it has become a more recent social phenomenon in Eastern European countries. Among the films analysed, the ones about Euro-orphans in Poland and Romania tell a social reality of today. In presenting the past and present migration

background, it is necessary to consider the production of the films in the sample and the different dimensions of experiences in the countries of origin and host countries in fictional and non-fictional studies. In the stories of children left behind by adult migrants, isolation, alienation, xenophobia, otherness, and integration are among the themes that have affected the lives of millions of children. The reason for selecting three films is to reveal the locality of being a suitcase child and to make a historical and geographical comparison. Migration in countries with different cultures negatively affects children left behind, but these effects are the same or very similar in social-psychological terms. Therefore, the paper focuses on the social faces of migration with a sociological analysis method. According to Benshoff, “some structuralist theorists in the wake of Lévi-Strauss continued to focus on underlying structural binaries whose variation and interaction helped to shape (and thus explain) “surface” phenomena, while other poststructuralist thinkers began to question the ideological meanings of such a project itself (Benshoff, 2015, p. 54).” Without focusing on the film's ideological, linguistic and cultural details, we will analyse the reality of being a suitcase child from a distance by comparing history and space. The films were selected according to judgemental sampling.

### CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND AND CINEMA

Migration, whether forced or voluntary, is a global and local issue, and often children are adversely affected by migrating or being left behind. The media and cinema can represent sociocultural facts from time to time to inform and sensitise the audience. As Ryan M Niemiec and Danny Wedding argue, they can promote social change, such as family planning, educating young girls, and managing the poverty cycle (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). Especially in developing countries, children left behind due to internal or external migration appear as a social and new reality in cinema.<sup>1</sup>

China is a case in point regarding the globalisation of the fate shared by the children left behind. Pissin cites the *Desires*' (2012) soundtrack and video as examples of children left behind due to labour migration. Until August 2012, the most viewed music video on youku.com was the film's theme song, sung by Ma Ruoji, a six-year-old girl. The film is dedicated to *children left behind*. The music video depicts the life of a left-behind girl who grows up alone, missing her mother. (Pissin, 2014) Xu explores the power of digital narratives of children left behind due to internal migration in China:

The issue of “left-behind children” in China has been widely recognized as a significant social problem, as more than 61 million children are living in villages away from their parents, who have migrated to large cities to seek employment opportunities. There is a very limited number of media products depicting left-behind children in rural China as central characters with individual personalities (...) the paper examines how narratives are weaved about the lives and emotions of these children, and how the stories make sense of their family experiences. The paper discusses the power of digital narratives and visual-based expressions (Xu, 2021, p. 82).

Poverty leads to (forced) migration and being left behind. We should question whether this is a voluntary migration in the disintegration of families for economic reasons, even if it is not due to war, conflicts, or climate change.<sup>2</sup> The issues associated with the suitcase child phenomenon justify the problems

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<sup>1</sup> For information on the impact of migration on children left behind at the global level, see (Rossi, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Although the selected films do not significantly reflect Italian neorealism, we can mention them in the footnote in terms of their treatment of social realities. Italian neorealism played this social role in the 1940s and 50s (Celli & Cottino-Jones, 2007, p. 44); the influence of the trend continues today, and some filmmakers set out to promote social change and give a voice to disadvantaged groups, including impoverished migrants and children. For example, the film *Turtles Can Fly* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2004) was filmed in a refugee camp on the Turkish-Iraqi border in 2003 before the American occupation and depicts the vulnerability of children in the face of war. (Bozbay Zuhail, 2019) *Turtles Can Fly* features the different stories of children with various perspectives on gender differences, personality and their experiences while facing problems such as war, disability, sexual violence and death. (Arora, 2017, p. 116) (...) the Italian Academy Award-winning feature film *Mediterraneo* (Gabriele Salvatores, 1991) is inextricably linked to that of the local women, children and elderly left behind by the war

encountered in the health integration of second-generation migrant children from Turkey. Although the migration context is important here, the economic dimension of the problem adds a meaningful layer of infrastructure that is not only based on ethnic, religious and cultural grounds. The number of films dealing with suitcase children in Turkish Yeşilçam cinema and German cinema is limited. However, we can cite Türkan Şoray's *Dönüş* [Return] (1972) and Memduh Ün's *Kaçak* [Fugitive] (1983) as examples. *Dönüş* depicts the cultural change of a man from the countryside who migrates to work in Germany, the wife (Gülcan) and son he leaves behind, and the conflict between Ağa and the villagers. In addition, the woman left behind is subjected to sexual harassment by the Ağa and some village men while trying to fulfil her parental roles and care for her son independently.<sup>3</sup> According to Özgü Yolcu, who approaches the film with feminist film criticism, the dominant patriarchal mentality in the village deems Gülcan as an "object." However, Gülcan does not accept this role, defending herself and awaiting her husband's return for a long time (Yolcu, 2022, p. 51). *Kaçak* tells the story of the relationship between a fugitive (Habip) and a woman left behind (Hacer). She has not heard from her husband, who works abroad, for five years. Their young son Mehmet misses his biological father and believes Habip is his father. In the film, we witness the drama of a wife and a boy left behind in the contexts of poverty, gender, social pressure, sexual harassment and bullying. Since the examples of emigration in Yeşilçam cinema mostly depict children left behind by their fathers, it would be appropriate to call them suitcase children. From this point of view, we also observe a diversity between children who experience parental absence and children who only experience maternal or paternal absence.

### SUITCASE CHILDREN-EURO ORPHANS

After the 1961 Guest Worker (*Gastarbeiter*) Agreement, labour migrants from different provinces of Turkey to Germany often had to leave their families behind. According to Lee's four categories of migration causes, this type of migration was a voluntary labour migration that occurred due to (1) the influence of some push factors from the country of origin [e.g. Turkey], (2) attractive factors in the destination country [e.g. Germany], (3) intervening opportunities and (4) personal factors (Lee, 1966). Depending on the push and pull factors, the need for human resources and cheap labour led to the migration of millions of people from Turkey. As mentioned in a BBC documentary, at that time, there were many people and little money in Turkey, while in Germany, there were few people and much money (*Mustafa: Guestworker No 569716*, 1973). In the 2000s, Poland, Romania and similar countries had more people and less money than Western European countries. Moreover, this pull-push factor led to the migration of millions of people from Eastern Europe to Western European countries with the Eastern Bloc's collapse and the European Union's expansion. After the 'Suitcase Children' depiction developed for the first migrant countries such as Greece, Italy and Turkey, a new concept emerged as 'Euro Orphans'.

There are many academic studies and films on the tragedy of the migrants being expatriated and homesick; however, there are few multidimensional representations of the children left behind as parentless children. For example, Eren-Nijhar's definition of the feeling of *expatriation* in the first years of Turkish-German labour migration is targeted at migrants:

When migrants from Turkey left their homeland and migrated to different parts of Europe, they thought they would go to 'Gurbet' to find a job for a short time, earn money and return home again. The family members and relatives, who stayed behind, thought they sent their loved ones to 'Gurbet' while they

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(Favero, 2011). These two film examples give us an example of being left behind or having to stay in a refugee camp caused by war.

<sup>3</sup> Uğur Çağlak analyses *Dönüş* in the context of migration and fragmented families. In his 2017 publication, he observes that similar problems persist in today's conditions. For example, he points to the district of Kulu in Konya, Turkey, which has an exceptionally high level of migration to Sweden. In Kulu, around 30 percent of school-age children were negatively affected by broken families that emerged with migration. He cites adverse conditions such as longing, loneliness, lack of parental attention, the burden of heavy household management and easy addiction to bad habits (Çağlak, 2017, p. 139).

stayed in their homeland. 'Gurbet' as a word covers many different words, including concepts such as 'migration, distant lands, longing, hard work, being a stranger, belonging, longing and loneliness'. The word 'expatriation' has its roots in the Arabic word 'Ghurba', which means 'to be away from the motherland' (Eren Nijhar, 2016, p. 17).

However, spouses and children were at the other centre of the expatriate's loneliness and sense of being away from the homeland. According to Lea Nocera, various laws and practices have treated guest workers as temporary projects, and guest workers have failed to achieve their goals; these factors have forced them to live in a state of continual transience (Nocera, 2018, p. 13). That Germany still did not recognise itself as a country of migration until the millennium, and the constant idea of returning and the feeling of transience are also related to the (dis-)integration process and cinema, a concept used by Ömer Alkın. See (Alkın, 2020, p. 165).<sup>4</sup> Thus, disintegration concerned not only the macro level but also the micro-level disintegration because of the lack of family unification. While integration here was relatively successful in economic terms, the failure of family reunification could lead to psycho-social disintegration. Moreover, economic expectations were often not realised as desired, and such dissatisfaction has led to a continuous prolongation of the period that Turkish parents aimed to stay.

Of course, we cannot take a reductionist approach and say that all suitcase children go through the same experiences and trauma. However, some studies show that this is a social and psychological trauma. Maria Papoulios' definition of *Kofferkind* (*suitcase children*) generally refers to the children of first-generation guest workers left behind in Turkey for a limited period. However, for the children of migrant workers, who often lived separately from their parents for many years while their parents worked in Germany, the term refers to an extended period. Papoulios uses the concept of the *suitcase child* to argue that the separation of mother and child causes psychopathological reactions in the families of migrant workers (Papoulios, 1987). According to other studies and the testimonies of the participants, the number of these children, mostly live with relatives in Turkey and only see their parents during some holidays, i.e., suitcase children, is relatively high and makes up a social problem. Gülçin Wilhelm stated in 2011 that the number of adult victims was high (seven hundred thousand), and parents' emotional and physical deprivation could be a factor influencing the experiences of the children of these people (Wilhelm, 2011b, 2011a). For example, in a focus group interview for a selected film for my PhD thesis, a protagonist (Esra) who had to grow up separated from her parents in Berlin in the film *8 Saniye* [*8 Seconds*] (Ömer Faruk Sorak, 2015) revealed that about half of the participants, especially those with a second-generation migrant background, had a suitcase childhood experience. In terms of self-expression in the focus group interview, the story of a woman in her fifties with a migration background had emotional commonalities with other interviewees. Therefore, this person is exemplary in representing individuals who pass from suitcase childhood to suitcase adulthood:

My mother also migrated to Germany and worked in the 70s. At that time, we three sisters stayed with our grandmother in Turkey. So, there was a period in my life just like Esra's. For example, I was left without a mother when I was 3.5 years old. This situation lasted for seven years; my mother returned to Turkey when I was 11. I only saw my mum in the summers; my father, grandmother, and grandfather all worked. I don't understand how we grew up with aunts and uncles, but no one cared for or disciplined us. For example, my older sister went to boarding school. Someone would put food for my little sister and me. My aunt or grandmother, someone, brushed our hair in the mornings. Actually, we, three sisters, grew up poor, without love (...) We accepted whatever anyone gave us. We had no say because we didn't have a mother taking care of us; our father was working. He went to the casino at weekends; he didn't care about us; we grew up in a strange family. Actually, they (the parents) said, 'we love you so much; we stayed abroad to buy a house for you.' Okay, you bought your beautiful house, but how did the children grow up? How were we? No one could heal our wounds (Kehya, 2022).

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<sup>4</sup> Alkın, one of Germany's leading scholars on the visual culture of migration, argues that integration policies in Germany have widened the distinction between us ("non-migrants") and non-us ("migrants"). Such a disintegration has also manifested itself in perspectives in cinema (Alkın, 2020, p. 95).

There are psychological studies in German literature, especially on suitcase children and second-generation members of Turkish families in Germany. Even when reunited with their families, their psychological vulnerability continued in adulthood (Karatza-Meents, 2014). The mourning for these transnational children's multiple losses and their parents' guilt can last for many years (Frohn, 2017). On the other hand, in Antia et al.'s literature review, although studies mostly reveal the adverse effects of migration on left-behind children, there are factors such as region, gender, family structure, and factors independent of the migration context, such as feeling depressed and isolated (Antia et al., 2020). In short, studies in the reviewed literature show that suitcase children grow up to become suitcase adults; they cannot eliminate the feeling of being left behind and social orphanhood. However, some studies also show that being a suitcase child is beneficial, depending on changing conditions. Therefore, the conditions under which children are left behind are essential in a film study, especially regarding social aspects.

As unification with the European Union facilitated migration, there has yet to be comprehensive literature on the experiences of low-income Eastern European families with Euro-orphan status, especially in film studies. However, the similarities between “suitcase children” or “left-behind children” and the problems experienced in the background can serve as a reference.

### ***Sandstern [The Tale of a Thousand and One Lives] (2018)*<sup>5</sup>**

The tragic comedy, *Sandstern* (Yılmaz Arslan, 2018) begins with the story of a deaf-mute nomad who wanders through the desert guided by a star he follows. After spending years in the care of his grandmother in Turkey, 12-year-old Oktay is reunited with his parents in the 1980s in former West Germany. Because Oktay does not speak German, he is behind his classmates when he starts school, and his peers bully him. At first, the boy cannot connect with his parents or the country that would be his new home. When he lands at the airport, he shows the wedding photos of his parents to find them because he does not recognise them. This situation shows the photographic conditions of the time, the economic circumstances and the long separation from his family. When the family is reunited, tensions arise, and Oktay's otherness is felt.

Despite his everyday problems and his feeling of not belonging, he enters a dialogue with people who have similar experiences of otherness, and they ease the tensions in the film. He befriends his classmate Tina, an Italian, and his neighbour Anna, an East Prussian who lost her family after the war. She treats Oktay like her own grandson because she knows what it is like to lose his homeland, but she dies soon after the film begins. Oktay thus loses his surrogate grandmother. Tina's mistaking him for a Sicilian can be interpreted as an encounter or a shared otherness under the umbrella of a kind of “us” offered by the multicultural environment. This situation is reminiscent of Serhat Güney's Kreuzberg portrayal, which was called “*Little Istanbul*” after the fall of the Berlin Wall:

To see this radical transformation in Kreuzberg, you only need to walk along Oranienstrasse or sit in Café Kotti for five or ten minutes. It is as if a sauce enriched with flavours from 72 nations has been poured over a deep-rooted German-Turkish infrastructure. (Güney, 2015, pp. 124–125)

It is an essential experience for Oktay to have a sense of home, not with blood relatives, but with strangers.<sup>6</sup> Because these people are the ‘Others’ in a society whose degrees vary, feeling alien and xenophobia, class and gender intersection among the others like in the film *Angst essen Seele auf* [*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*] (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974). Emmi, a German woman from the poor class, and Ali, a guest worker, are the 'Others' in the society. While Emmi experiences otherness because of

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<sup>5</sup> Production: Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium

<sup>6</sup> Such a description of belonging reminds us of the proverb, “home is where the heart is.”

her class and being a woman, we should also consider the ideology of ageism; Ali is an immigrant and is marginalized because of his ethnicity.

In *Sandstern*, Oktay relives parental separation and absence because of violent fights and infidelities after years of living away from his parents in Turkey as a suitcase child. In addition, when his mother is arrested for drug dealing, he has to take on life responsibilities and enters early adulthood. Also, his smoking habit makes him an early adult. His mother's involvement in crime is a negative indicator according to Castles et al.'s integration theory (2002, pp. 131–132).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when Oktay's mother is arrested and handcuffed, he calls his “mum” for the first time with sadness. This situation will also lead to physical disintegration due to the criminal element between mother and son trying to reintegrate.

Oktay learns after a quarrel that he is haemophiliac, even minor wounds are risky for him, and during his treatment, he gets HIV from a blood-clotting drug. When placed in a boarding school for physically disabled children, he seeks warmth and affection. He develops a love for the paraplegic Luba and builds friendships with his roommate Thomas, who has MS. Developing relationships with his family and the friendships he makes mean his social integration.

In the last sequence, he works as a health professional and tells the children at the hospital the story of the deaf-mute Bedouin and his star. The guiding sand star metaphor and the story of the Bedouin are narrated in the voice of the adult Oktay. Parallel to the story, Oktay was a suitcase child away from parental care in Turkey, and when he arrived in Germany, he could not understand and speak German, leading to hearing and speech impairments. The camel allegorises the development of belonging and integration with characters such as Anna and Tina to be both companions and helpers. It conveys that his efforts and the support of various people are essential to survive in the desert or the water.

Oktay stands at the film's centre regarding the characteristics that constitute his identity and the plot. There is a representation of him beyond his otherness as a second-generation migrant belonging to a minority religion. The following factors make up the social-cultural-medical conditions for the child to become the ‘Other’ of the ‘Other’: Growing up without parents, being a suitcase child, being exposed to peer bullying, being exposed to parental separation, having a disintegrated mother in terms of crime indicators and re-experiencing suitcase childhood, suffering haemophilia, HIV positive and potential AIDS disease.

*Sandstern* is about the mutual integration of a first-generation family towards the country and their children left behind. Having migrated to Germany as a young child, the film contains references from the director's background. The themes in the film are self-discovery, foreignness, xenophobia, disability, otherness, tolerance, solidarity, hatred, and prejudice. The issues here present obstacles and possibilities for integrating a suitcase child into his new life after joining his family in Germany. We hear at the film's end: “*Tomorrow, I will tell you a new story.*” This new story reminds us that the drama of suitcase children will not end, that we will describe them as the orphans of Europe like in *Calea Dunării* and *I am Kuba*, and that there are children left behind in other countries.

### ***Calea Dunării [Way of the Danube] (2013)***

Directed and written by Sabin Dorohoi, the short drama *Calea Dunării* is 13 minutes long. The film tells the story of left-behind children whose families work abroad. *Way of the Danube* focuses on 7-year-old Ionut, who lives with his grandfather in a small Romanian village on the banks of the Danube. His parents work in Vienna, Austria. Despite the gifts and ready-to-eat food sent to him, the boy misses them very much. When he learns during a lesson at school that the Danube passes through Vienna, he

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<sup>7</sup> Castles et al. take a multidimensional and mutually responsible approach to integration. Accordingly, integration is not only reduced to cultural dimensions. Therefore, according to the integration indicators they have identified, there are representations such as health, crime, and exposure to crime/discrimination in this film (Castles et al., 2002, pp. 131–132).

takes a boat, thinking it is the only way to reach them. Therefore, the Danube River presents a social reality as an essential character in the film.

Telephone and letters are an essential link between Ionut, a Euro-orphan from *Calea Dunării*, and his family abroad. Ionut tries to send letters to express his feelings and longing. His friend Calea is also a Euro-Orphan. Working abroad, her parents also promised to visit her during the summer holidays. However, by not visiting, they develop a sense of disappointment and distrust in their left-behind children. This situation brings to mind the hundreds of thousands of Turkish labourers who migrated to Germany after the 1960s, leaving their children in Turkey, and the financial conditions and the fact that they could not see their children yearly. Ionut asks, "Why did you promise me?" He is a child who had to mature early beyond his crying or childish behaviours.<sup>8</sup>

### ***I am Kuba (2015)***

This 58-minute documentary film by Åse Drivenes is a Norwegian, Polish, and German co-production. It tells the story of Kuba (12) and Mikolaj (8), whose parents are forced to work abroad, leaving them in the care of some relatives. The film focuses on the daily life of Kuba and Mikolaj and Kuba's responsibilities alone. Shot in a small town in Poland, where it is difficult to find work, the film depicts the complexity of the families of European orphans, which number in the thousands.

When his parents go abroad to work, Kuba has to look after his younger brother and ensure his safety. Kuba is, therefore, a left-behind child who has to be both a brother and a parent. Adults' responsibilities, such as cooking and taking the younger brother to and from school, gradually become more and more burdensome for the child, who is reaching puberty. As in *Calea Dunării*, they no longer believe the parents' promise that they will return soon. Although some legal regulations do not allow 12-year-olds to live alone with a minor in some countries, economic circumstances can override the law. Getting together with their mother on weekends is a more significant opportunity than in the other selected films. After the revolts of Cuba, an important decision is taken, and we can consider their reunion with their mother in Vienna as a new story in *Sandstern*. Because yesterday, today and tomorrow, new stories of suitcase children, Euro-Orphans and left-behind children continue to be told.

### **CONCLUSION**

As long as migration continues, whether we call them suitcase children or European Orphans, the traumas experienced by children left behind and deprived of parental care are likely to continue, even if the descriptions change. We should also not forget the different sources of trauma that await them when they reunite with their families in a foreign country. The social realities experienced by disadvantaged children in various dimensions of migration seem never to end. Europe's orphans and those from all over the world experience separation from their parents. The geographies and cultures of the children left behind vary, but their socioeconomic and psychological conditions are nearly identical. This study focuses on children's separation from parents in three films, *Sandstern*, *I am Cuba*, and *Calea Dunării* selected based on judgemental sampling.

*Sandstern* is about the suitcase child phenomenon of the 1980s from a more historical perspective. However, the films *I am Cuba* and *Calea Dunării* are about the present or the recent past. After countries such as Greece, Italy, and Turkey experienced the mass separation of parents and children in the second half of the twentieth century, the 2000s, with the expansion of the European Union towards the East, led to family disintegrations. The inability of labour migration to provide adequate infrastructure for childcare has led to psycho-social-cultural problems in various dimensions, first for the children left

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<sup>8</sup> The film designer's statements that the migration effect started ten years ago align with the literature findings. After 10-20 years, we see that the side effects of parental absence emerge. Daniel Ignat, the film's costume designer, states that he experienced separation from his mother and that he could see his intense longing for his mother in the film. He designed the costumes with monochromatic and sad clothes for the children to express their feelings. The film shows unfinished houses and winter. See (Dorohoi, 2013)



behind and then for reunification with their families. The labour migration to Germany started in the 1950s has experienced disadvantages and advantages of free movement with the collapse of communist systems in European countries in the 1980s and the enlargement of the European Union.

In these three films, despite the differences in time and place, the victim children fight heroically against their loneliness and difficult circumstances, and we watch them from their point of view. In *Calea Dunării*, the gifts sent and the products of consumer culture appeal to materialistic needs, while the longing for parents is at the centre of the film, and the way to reach them is through letters and the Danube River. In *I am Kuba*, two siblings' physical, biological, and security needs must be met by a 12-year-old boy who has to take on the role of a parent as a big brother. His orphanhood concerning migration is greater than that of the fictional character in the other film due to the multiplier effect of these responsibilities. Both of them lose their trust when their parents do not keep their promises that they will return. In the film *Sandstern*, we watch a suitcase boy telling his own story when he becomes an adult. Although he is reunited with his parents in his early adolescence in Germany, his problems do not end with his otherness and alienation related to migration, health, disability, and family break-up. Then he becomes a suitcase teenager again when he is placed in a boarding school for disabled children. The protagonist tells and, like the audience, watches his story after thirty-eight years (2018) at the intersection of comedy and drama. If the story of the rest in the other two films had continued, similar concerns might have arisen about their belonging and integration into a new country and their families. Of course, each child's experience of being a suitcase child or a Euro-orphan is unique, but they also have much in common with just being children.

The selected films portray migration due to poverty rather than voluntary labour migration, which is pseudo-voluntary but based on necessity. Because poverty, unemployment, and the need for better living conditions force family members to live apart from each other. Although the vital decisions taken by parents in line with urgent needs may seem voluntary, this situation points to an involuntary experience for the children left behind. When we see their mothers or fathers working in a developed country, working somewhere or walking on the road, we may not know the migration's background. However, the selected films reveal the multidimensional background of reality, namely that migration costs more than meets the eye. We should ask: Does labour migration strengthen the destination country and weaken the place left behind? The reality of migration negatively affected children. These children's (so-called) material empowerment and emotional disempowerment make us question the human cost of the free movement of labour in modern Europe.

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