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## Introduction

Cinema is the art that represents and makes one feels violence most immediately. The movie *Incendies* [Fires] by Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve (1976- ) comes close to the documentary or news report genres, borrowing their codes and mores without hesitation: handheld camera, close-ups on characters and their expressions to catch their emotions or on pieces of evidence related to an on-going investigation, natural lighting, moving back and forth between events and the witnesses' stories, the presence of pictures and posters, an investigation linking bits of information distant in time that make sense when put together, and inlays of text as a caption for the story. Cinema does not stop the movement of events; on the contrary, it conveys it to the viewer, with the cameraperson recording the action at closest possible range. It does not freeze expressions but allows the lapse of time necessary for us to catch changes in the face or body language.

The cinematographic art sends visual and audio information simultaneously, thus soliciting the two senses most used in interpersonal communication; they are also those which most often warn us of a danger. For instance, an explosion can be seen and heard at the very moment it happens, as can the damage it causes. It imposes itself on viewers, unless they close their eyes and shut their ears, whereas other arts leave room for a more detached interpretation. In the latter case, the artists' genius lies in imposing the strength of their creations despite the possibility of the viewers protecting themselves from it. If the sequence shows the burning of a bus full of passengers, which been previously doused with petrol and ignited by a machinegun burst, the viewers hear the fuel being splashed, they understand that it is highly flammable as they watch militiamen pour it from jerry cans, they see the victims panic as they smell the fuel inside the vehicle, and they see and hear the vehicle and bodies bursting into flames immediately after the burst of machinegun fire. The *Incendies* movie poster evokes this episode, the central sequence of the film, against a red background. A movie can

play with silence and noise, water and fire, to immerse the viewer in the action. This could not be done with a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music, a novel, a play, or a movie poster.

Villeneuve, having acquired a solid reputation as a filmmaker,<sup>1</sup> brings viewers to a questioning of violence in movie after movie. After making *Incendies*, he directed three Hollywood-style thrillers – *Prisoners* (2013), *Enemy* (2013) and *Sicario* (2015) – though he was not the screenwriter. *Prisoners* is about the abduction and execution of children in a small North American town by a woman dedicated to vengeance against God. As a counterpoint, the movie shows a father committed to self-help justice trying to find the perpetrator and resorting to torturing a simpleton whom he deems him guilty, because he wants revenge and believes it will free his child. *Enemy* hints at a psychotic rivalry between its characters, one of whom wants to possess the other's wife. Finally, *Sicario* questions the resort to ultra-violence through the story of a Mexican magistrate whose family has been slaughtered and CIA agents who abandon the rule of law to fight drug cartels along the US-Mexican border. The agents use the same methods as the cartels, as a law-abiding policewoman watches, indicating the porous border between order and chaos.

Villeneuve later directed several sci-fi movies, including *Arrival* (2016).<sup>2</sup> In this movie, human beings murder an extra-terrestrial, only discover that universal peace can be achieved through the following the guidance of the ETs. Confronted with the arrival of ETs, humankind is only able to consider a military response, though the ETs come with a long-term alliance offer.

Before *Incendies*, Villeneuve made *Polytechnique* (2009), a true story about the slaughter of students, mostly women, by a young man resentful of feminists at a Montreal university. It is set in Canada, a country famous for its citizens' self-restraint, low levels of violence, and greater moderation than other country on the North American continent. The movie deals with the survivors' sense of helplessness in the face of the violence they witnessed or suffered, as well as their feelings of guilt. The movie is filmed in black and white in the style of direct news report.

In this cinematographic corpus, violence is everywhere yet there is no noticeable complacency toward it: no aestheticization, no heroic deed to sublimate it. If violence is shown in all its expressions, it is to create aversion in viewers, so they will disapprove of it more forcefully and maybe avoid it in the future. Within Villeneuve's filmography, which exhibits a constant purpose through its various exploratory modes and genres, *Incendies* is a seminal movie. It tackles the horror of civil war in a Middle East country, unnamed as if the author wanted to underline the universality and timelessness of the story. It originated in Villeneuve's wish to adapt the eponymous play by Wajdi Mouawad (1968- ), a Canadian playwright of Lebanese origin, known as one of the most important authors of his generation in the French speaking world. The play is part of a tetralogy, *Le sang des promesses* [*The Blood of Promises*]. Villeneuve freely confesses that his adaptation of the play took a long time to mature because of its complex narrative structure, which was adopted to take into account the limitations imposed by the theatre genre. Villeneuve had to deconstruct the play in order to stay faithful to its general storyline and to preserve its drama power. To succeed, he used all of the liberty Mouawad had granted him: "He gave me the possibility of total misunderstanding. I believe there are several ways to adapt *Incendies*, but the one which seemed the more striking was to really get away from him and go back to the source. He gave me a few keys of inspiration, texts, images, and I returned to the origin of ideas, then went in a

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<sup>1</sup> Villeneuve was named filmmaker of the decade by Hollywood critics in January 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Later, he was commissioned to make a sequel for the movie *Blade Runner—Blade Runner 2049*, released in 2018—where the *replicants'* (crypto-human creatures) violence is questioned. He is also making another movie adaptation of *Dune*, Frank Herbert's cult novel, to be released at the end of 2020.

totally different direction”<sup>3</sup>. The story goes that Mouawad told him: “You can use the title, a character or anything provided that you eat the play up and re-digest it.” Thus, Villeneuve avoids the dead end of filmed theatre, substituting crude reality filming of stories impossible to perform on a theatre stage: he simplifies, condenses dialogues, adds likelihood and historicity, downplaying the emphases of a text explicitly inspired by Greek tragedy to impose the obviousness of contemporary events. Cinema as utilized here creates an impression of plausibility by showing events, whereas a play can only juxtapose the telling of tales and verbalise emotions. If we were to argue for the technical and artistic superiority of cinema to all other arts as to representing violence - be it Goya’s painting, Stravinsky’s music, Rude’s sculpture, de-constructivist architecture or Russian novels – *Incendies*, because of its topic and rendering as a documentary, would provide overwhelming evidence.

## I. Synopsis and Analytical Frame

Set in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in a Middle Eastern country, the movie tells how a young woman named Jeanne Marwan investigates her family origins; she is later joined by her brother Simon, who is at first hostile to the investigation. Their recently deceased mother left her last will with a notary named Jean Label, stating that her twin children shall be given two sealed letters: one addressed to their father, whom they believed long dead; the other to a brother they did not even know existed.

Following a complex order that spans fifty-year and told in flashbacks from the investigation, the film shows us the two characters’ lives: Nawal, who pledged to herself to find a son she begot when very young, a child fathered by a refugee who had been killed by his brothers before the child’s birth; and Nihad, an orphan turned child-soldier and war criminal. These episodes are presented to the viewer as results of the investigation conducted by the twins—or sometimes in anticipation of these results.

Nawal’s quest of her son takes place in an Arab territory where Christian militias and Muslim refugees from a neighbouring country are at war with each other and entangled in a long-lasting revenge cycle.

The investigation ascertains that the twins’ father and brother are one and the same, as Nihad the orphan became Abou Tarek, a tormentor who raped Nawal many times, ignorant that she was his mother, when she was detained after killing the Christian militia chief.

Denis Villeneuve’s movie has received many awards in international festivals and represented Canada in Hollywood Oscar competition. It is one of the most successful Quebec movies of 2010-11. It is taught in cinema schools. Mouawad’s play has received considered acclaim and has been honoured with some of the highest awards. To this day, these works shed light on the turmoil in the Middle East and the terrorism at the centre of the West world’s worries, as it finds itself unable to contain the risks to peace rising from the endless torments of the Arab-Muslim world. As stated above, Villeneuve is a filmmaker of violence, of its fatality as well as its condemnation. *Incendies* is his strongest, most universal, and yet most personal movie: he co-authored the script working from a synopsis he enjoyed a great deal of freedom in writing, unlike his later experience with Hollywood-type movies.

For our analysis, we shall rely on the mimetic theory of René Girard (1923-2015), often referred to as an anthropologist of violence. In Girard’s theory, desire stems from the imitation of the desire of somebody else taken as a model; but this model may also oppose the satisfaction of that desire, thus generating rivalries that can reach the utmost degree of violence and draw the antagonists into conflicts that can lead to death. Aware of the forces at

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<sup>3</sup> Camille Lukan, *Avoir/Alire* (2011): [www.avoir-alire.com/entretien-avec-denis-villeneuve](http://www.avoir-alire.com/entretien-avec-denis-villeneuve) (accessed December 15, 2019).

work in violence and acknowledging the anthropological importance of the Scriptures, specifically the Passion narratives, Girard give precedence to the point of view of victims, those who are lynched after a mimetic crisis, the scapegoats, whereas he believes most institutions, philosophies, religions, and other ideologies, including those working to lessen violence, have historically adopted the point of view of persecutors. Some of his followers have already developed a considerable body of movie criticism,<sup>4</sup> since the “seventh art” is so closely associated with mimetic desire.

Villeneuve indicates explicitly and demonstrates in all his filmography a preference for victims, readily adopting their point of view. In *Incendies*, we see blatant examples of the escalation to extreme violence of rivalry created by blatant acquisitive desire in the clash between armed groups during the civil war, as well as in the murder of Nawal’s lover, Wahab. But the question of desire is more complex here since it intersects with a concept not touched on in mimetic theory, that is, the promise, as made to oneself or imposed on others. Also, the narrative portrays different manifestations of maternal and grand-maternal love, a form of love which represents a notable exception to rivalry-generated desire highlighted by mimetic theory.

## II. Escalation to Extremes

One of the film’s major lessons is expressed by Maddad, a local notary and a character created by Villeneuve. Maddad matter-of-factly states, “You have to understand that this period is a chain of reprisals interlocked by an implacable logic, like additions.” In the play, the description of the sequence of paybacks comes from a doctor, who is asked about the orphans’ fate. His answer gives a taste of Mouawad’s style and the lucidity of his insight:

Everything happened very quickly. The refugees came. They took everybody. Even new-born babies. Everybody. They were angry. [Why?] To get revenge. Two days ago, the militiamen hanged three refugee teenagers who had risked getting out of the camp. Why have the militiamen hanged the three teenagers? Because two refugees had raped and killed a girl in the village of Kfar Samira. Why had these two men raped this girl? Because the militiamen had stoned a refugee family. Why had the militiamen stoned them? Because the refugees had burnt a house next to the thyme hill. Why had the refugees burned the house? To take revenge for the militiamen destroying a well they had dug. Why did the militiamen destroy the well? Because refugees had burnt crops next to the dog river. Why had they burnt the crop? There has to be a reason, but my memory stops here, I can’t go further back, but the story can go on and on, one thing leading to another, from anger to anger, from pain to sadness, from rape to murder, back to the creation of the world.<sup>5</sup>

The history of exactions is enumerated, as in an anthropological report. And the concatenation of whys and because, as well as symmetry between reciprocal reprisals, mirrors the mad logic of an unbreakable chain, generating an interminable string of justifications for endless revenge between the two parts to the conflict. The limits of memory leaves room for

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<sup>4</sup> For example, *Mimetic Theory and Film*, edited by Paolo Diego Bubbio and Chris Fleming (New York: Bloomsbury Academic USA, 2019) and David Humbert, *Violence in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock: a Study in Mimesis* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies* (Montreal and Arles: Leméac and Actes Sud, 2009), 60-61. Our translation.

filling in the blank with stories that go all the way back to Abel and Cain, Isaac and Ishmael, or to any of many other pairs of enemy brothers.

One kills or injures first because of besmirched honour, that is, for literally nothing, as Girard observed.<sup>6</sup> In this instance, familial, religious, and politico-military conflicts interact with each other to exacerbate the violence irrigating all human relations. What begins as thwarted love takes on monstrous proportions as it blends with conflicts that overstep and encompass cultural oppositions in geopolitical deadlocks. The fate of both main characters, the mother and her first-born son, are bound to violence totally against their will by a fatal spiral reminiscent of Greek tragedy. The intentions of Nawal and Nihad are only, quite naturally, to find each other, to put an end to the inhuman separation their circumstances and other people have imposed on them. Nawal is ready to face any danger to find her son, as she promised herself at his birth, even if it means giving up the somewhat protected position she enjoys as a Christian in her community: she demonstrates her resolve when she's a student activist and when she hides her politico-religious identity to boards Muslim refugee bus. Nihad, who has no clues to help him find his mother, migrates from an orphan to becoming a child-soldier. Chamseddin—the activist leader, who killed all of the Christians in the area to avenge the Muslim refugees tormented by the country's Christians—tells us that Nihad was prepared to die as a suicide bomber in hopes of revealing his existence to his unknown mother, even though it would only be posthumously. When mother and child finally cross paths again, with both of their destinies already loaded with deaths, a tragic sequence of events leads them to the opposite of their hopes, to incestuous rapes, to a relationship of victim and torturer.

Mouawad and Villeneuve remind us that, whatever the partial successes of religion, politics, and economy, violence is always waiting for the opportunity to reappear or even, in some contexts, always already occupying centre stage. In Nawal's family history, an honour-crime, combined with the arrival of Muslim refugees expelled by a hostile neighbouring country and arriving in a fragile multi-confession country in the Middle East, was enough to make horror inevitable.

The tragic fatality in the destinies of Nawal and Nihad echoes the ineluctable irruption of violence in a world governed by acquisitive *mimesis*, in a context where religion, politics, and economics, far from working to lessen violence, come together to unleash it. That leaves no room for the main characters' to have desires of the sort described in the literature or depicted in the cinema of mostly pacified societies, such as Western societies with values and practice drawn from a liberal ideology with respect for human rights. In the perpetually at war Middle East where the narrative is set, the sole desires of many identity groups and their leaders is for power over a territory and its people or opportunities for profitable predation. That suffices to create conditions and circumstances that can cause any individual to drift into a multitude of violent acts. There are no "innocent victims" in *Incendies* since even Nawal kills the leader of the nationalist Christian militias; revenge alone is the driver. There is always somebody else who did something first, which serves as the prime justification for violent acts. Therefore, it is not possible to end the revenge cycle, unless the truth about violence can be established and living together can be imposed instead of dying together.

Another way to address the always possible recurrence of violence and the quasi-impossibility to resist it is to go back to the play's genesis. In interviews, Mouawad relates some details from his own life and from other sources of inspiration on which he drew to

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<sup>6</sup> In René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1987): "To fight for prestige, [or] honor is to fight for literally nothing."

write *Incendies*.<sup>7</sup> We learn of his own precocious use of guns among Christian militiamen in the Chouf district in Lebanon, near Beirut, when he was not yet eight years old. Had his Maronite Christian parents not left, he could have become a child-soldier: “My family and I left before the slaughter of Sabra and Chatila in 1982, perpetrated by the very Christian militias to which I was dreaming to belong.” Mouawad and his family were also a victim of a bomb that fell in the vegetable garden of their family house in the mountain; he escaped thanks to his father, but his mother lost her hearing. What made the strongest impression was witnessing a bus attack by a Christian militia who gunned down the vehicle in a Beirut suburb on April 13, 1975. Yet, he sees his immigration to France in 1977 and then to Quebec in 1983 as a wound. His journey back to Lebanon in 1992 was by his own avowal a “return to oneself.” What he describes in the play is a fate that could have been his own had his parents not opted for a change in the course of their lives.

In addition, the journalist Josée Lambert informed him of the existence of a clandestine prison in Khiam, jointly operated by the South Lebanon Liberation Army and Israeli armed forces, where many of the atrocities described in the play and the movie were perpetrated. Lambert also told him the story of Souha Bechara, a Palestinian who attacked a Christian militia chief and wounded him with two bullets. She was incarcerated in Khiam after this attempted murder. She provides the prototype for the “singing woman.” Among the bits of information that impressed Mouawad is this sentence from a woman interrogating her torturer: “How could you do this? I could be your mother?”

The playwright adds to these testimonies the story of a mother sending her twins on a quest for their origin. But clearly the logics of documentary, biographical narrative, and war news reporting are at work in the play, which Villeneuve, exercising his prerogatives as director, reinforces with narrating devices specific to cinema.

Mouawad staged Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* in 1998 and Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* in 1999, which supplied other sources of inspiration. He expressed his consciousness of the problem of violence and his sense of duty as a contemporary playwright to address it: “The empires predating us have needed human blood to achieve their evolution, which can seem inconsistent. Today, this contradiction seems unbearable for us because none of us, alive, can tell what happened in the gas chambers. Here, on the threshold of this place, stops our experience, therefore horror cannot serve as education anymore. In this we have evolved. I believe it. Maybe it is too early for us to accept it. We can no more learn from nor about others’ bloodshed.”<sup>8</sup>

Regarding violence and the will to put an end to it or mitigate it, two significant differences between Mouawad’s play and Villeneuve’s movie should be noted.

Girard has drawn attention to the practice of sacrifice in traditional cultures as an answer to the problem of contagious violence and its tendency to escalate. Sacrifice is a lesser violence used to contain a greater violence. If the film director dispenses with numerous theatrical effects in favour of an almost journalistic realism, he nevertheless loses in the course of the movie some of Mouawad’s most powerful intuitions concerning this use of lesser violence. In the play, Mouawad brings together Nawal and someone called Sawda, who insists on accompanying her in her maternal quest. There is an obvious mimetic contagion between Sawda the refugee and Nawal the activist, who is initially a pacifist. But when Sawda in her despair prepares to kill as many people as possible in the name of her cause, Nawal decides to substitute for mass slaughter the killing of only one person, the Christian militia chief. Such

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<sup>7</sup> In Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies* (Montreal and Arles: Leméac and Actes Sud, 2009), Charlotte Farcet’s afterword, pp. 135 and followings (our translation). Other information comes from Françoise Coissard, *Etude critique d’Incendies* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Françoise Coissard, *Etude critique d’Incendies* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014), 28. Our translation.

is the motivation of the act that lands her in prison in Kfar Ryat. This sacrificial substitution is missing in the movie, as is the character of Sawda. In fact, as presented by Villeneuve, the killing of the Christian militia chief is only an immediate vengeful response to the slaughter perpetuated by hooded militiamen against Muslim refugees on a bus. To leave no doubt as to Nawal's motive, Villeneuve introduces a short flashback at during the killing: in a close-up, we see Nawal's recollection of an AK-47s decorated with Virgin Mary stickers, used to shoot refugees in the bus. In contrast, Mouawad presents the killing of the Christian militia chief by Nawal as a deliberate attempt to minimize violence, a way to contain Sawda the refugee's plans of large-scale massacre to repay the Christians for the slaughter of her own people. That it is a lesser violence is indicated by Nawal's explicit will to shoot only two bullets, one for Sawda, the other for herself, and at the same time fulfil her promise to her grandmother to "step out of hatred." This lesser violence is also stressed by the contrast with what is assumed to be Sawda's fate; after the killing she would have committed a suicide bombing attack with an explosive belt, in a bar patronised by militiamen, in other words, a mass slaughter, not targeted on a specific sacrificed person.

Nawal's project looks like a sacrifice, a lesser violence in hope of returning to civil peace, rather than an ascent to violence extremes. This sacrifice is anthropologically complex since it comprises both the persona of the sacrificed person, the militia chief, and the sacrificing woman, who loses her freedom, might even lose her life, and certainly loses control of her destiny. One finds a distant echo in the quasi-mythological character acquired by the "singing woman," the nickname bestowed upon Nawal during her detention. Nawal's sacrifice, accepting 15 years of prison without ever giving in despite torture, is known and admired by everybody – the Muslims refugees, who want to honour their debt to her, other Christians, such as the prison guard in Kfar Ryat, and even Maddad in Villeneuve's movie, who represents lay institutions.

There is at least one other major departure from Mouawad's intuitions in Villeneuve's movie adaptation, which might be considered a lack. The director even confessed to having had doubts regarding his choice's relevance. The play tells that Nawal spent a decade in her life attending trials of an international criminal court established in Canada to judge crimes against humanity. This is what allowed her to identify her tormentor as her son and the father of the twins and made her plunge into prolonged silence and prostration. The theme of judicial qualification and reconstitutions through a trial aimed at acceding to the victims' requests is very powerful. It solemnly puts the viewers alongside the victims. Villeneuve, on the other hand, opts for a shrewd visual solution, a tattoo on the heel that enables immediate identification of the victim-child and the quasi-immediate discovery of that he is one with the rapist-torturer. With this choice Villeneuve forsakes collective condemnation by criminal justice as the "last word on violence," which singles out and sanctions the guilty person, redressing as many wrongs as possible done to victims or their next of kin and ultimately aiming at the deterrence of any repetition of such acts.

### III. The Victim's Point of View and Victim/Tormentor Entanglement

Another notable feature in Mouawad's and Villeneuve's works is that they adopt the victims' point of view. Even if this dramatic angle is more common nowadays, it is used here with a rare intensity.

As a reflection of his constant concern to take the victim's side, Villeneuve gives a predominant role to women,<sup>9</sup> be it in Nawal's quest or Jeanne's inquiry, reinforcing a feature

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<sup>9</sup> This is a constant feature of his filmography, most notably in *Polytechnique* where a mass murderer kills preferably female students because of his hatred for feminists. In *Sicario*, he has demanded that his

already present in Mouawad's work. Deprivation of motherhood and subjugation to rapes as a war weapon are powerful manifestations of patriarchal societies' tendency to victimize women. From the point of view of sacrificial victims, even if women are not the most numerous among them in myths, Iphigenia's and many other mythological figures' sacrifice are there to remind us that women are victims. These women are sometimes also personalities of uncommon strength of character, for example, Antigone, now largely recognised in the West as the origin of natural right (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, chapter 13) and consequently of human rights (the United States Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, both of which refer to natural rights).

As for the fate of Nihad, the apparent monster who kills children for pleasure and rapes women to break their will, he can be seen as the victim of circumstances that imposed a fatal trajectory on him like Oedipus.<sup>10</sup> The logic of family honour leads him to the loss of his father before even being born, then an immediate separation from his mother as soon as he is delivered, then to the orphanage and a blurred identity. A little while later, he is abducted by an armed group of refugees who make him a child soldier, an episode that causes him to drift and become a sniper who can shoot children without reason, even in his fellow soldiers' minds. Further along his cursed existence, his reconversion amidst the Christian militia makes a tormentor of him. This journey unfolds alongside the impossible quest for his mother. He finally meets her to rape her, in total ignorance, and he identifies her, after her death, only when receiving the two letters she transmitted to him via the twins, Jeanne and Simon. This shock makes him cry, finally. So Nihad is also and above all a victim, even if his crimes cannot be forgiven, as Nawal wrote in one of the letters that the twins must deliver to him. The distinction between the tormentor-rapist-father of the twins, whose acts are inexcusable, and the abandoned son, to whom unconditional maternal love was promised and is due, represents an attempt to solve a unsolvable problem.

More widely, from a dramaturgic point of view, the play belongs to a tetralogy called *The Blood of Promises*. The death of a character is the starting point of all four fables. War is "the theatre of theatre" for Mouawad, in which a life departed establishes the necessity of a departure, of a voyage, of an Odyssey. It is also the quest for consolation, the theatrical stage being for him "like a locus of merciless consolation."<sup>11</sup>

Another aspect of the making of the movie shows Villeneuve's concern for victims: the movie was shot in Jordan next to refugee camps where many extras were hired. A documentary made during the movie shooting flags similarities between these Iraqis' own experience and some sequences in which they performed.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Villeneuve tells us he consulted with them to give a stronger realism to the sequences he shot with them. He observes that "to see the war from the point of view of victims is something which they understood very well."<sup>13</sup> And in the documentary, some refugees playing as extras say they had the feeling of re-enacting real events. The movie maker thus augments the realism found by Mouawad in his own childhood memories and in the story of Souha Bechara, the Palestinian who tried to kill a Maronite leader.

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scriptwriters introduce among the main characters a law-abiding policewoman as a counterpoint to the two avengers who have opted to transgress the law.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the twins' incestuous origin, the tattoo on the heel alludes to Oedipus and the etymology of his name: swollen feet. This detail has been added by Villeneuve as a more plausible means of identification than the one imagined by Mouawad.

<sup>11</sup> Mouawad, *Incendies* (Montreal and Arles: Leméac and Actes Sud, 2009), Foreword. Our translation.

<sup>12</sup> Barbeau-Lavalette, *Se souvenir des cendres*. A documentary included with the movie DVD.

<sup>13</sup> Boris Henry, *Livret pédagogique* (Paris: Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, 2012), 4. Our translation.

The horror of the shooting and burning of the refugee bus, set as the culmination of the movie and the key moment when Nawal's pacifist destiny turns into a killing project, stresses even more, as if needed, the importance given to the victims' point of view. The greater part of the sequence is shot from their points of view, not the militiamen's. It also flags the fatal spiral that turns victims or the witnesses of exactions into violent people.

As Girard argues, the claim to be able to sort out the guilty and the innocent, in the manner of a scapegoating lynch mob or public opinion looking for whom to blame for the evils it suffers, does not resist observation: all are guilty, actually or potentially, and all are victims.<sup>14</sup> The actual victims are most often the product of a selection process partly subject to chance.

The willingness to get out of the cycle of violence at all costs is strongly expressed in the denouement. Simon has been informed that Abou Tarek lives in Canada now as Nihad Harmani. The twins meet him and give him the two letters their mother's will meant to reach him: Nihad reads the letter to the father, whom Nawal cannot forgive, then the letter to the son she had sworn to love at his birth. She also transmits this message in this second letter: "nothing is more beautiful than being together." Lebel finally hands over the third letter Nawal dictated to him for the twins. It starts with "My loves," probably the first caring word she ever had for her children. She then provides the moral epilogue of their quest: "Your story begins with a promise, that to break the thread of anger. Thanks to you, I finally can fulfil it today, the thread is broken and I can take the time to rock you, to gently sing a lullaby to console you. Nothing is more beautiful than to be together. I love you. Your mother, Nawal."

#### IV. "The Blood of Promises" or Imposed Desire

If the first two analyses proposed here show an indisputable proximity between Mouawad's and Villeneuve's artistic projects and lessons drawn from Girard's is mimetic theory, a third point of view seems to me a stimulating element for the latter. As explained in the introduction, for Girard all desire is mimetic, an imitation of the other's desire, this other taken as a model without the subject even being conscious of it. But there is another possibility, here at the origin of the tragedy, in which desire is not suggested but imposed on oneself and/or others, who are therefore obliged to adopt it. This is the actual heart of Villeneuve's movie, as well as Mouawad's play, even of his tetralogy. Mouawad stated that "there is always somebody promising something to someone else and not keeping their word. From these forfeited promises, result tragedies, pains, immense sorrows."<sup>15</sup> The question of promises and its link with violence is central to his tetralogy. Mouawad speaks of the titles of his plays: "*Littoral* [*Seashore*], *Incendies* [*Fires*], *Forêts* [*Forests*], *Ciels* [*Skies*], as if to recreate elements to respond to the loss of elements. Pulled from the sea, here is *Littoral*; pulled from desire, here is *Incendies*; pulled from the mountain, here is *Forêts*; pulled from the birds, here is *Ciels*."<sup>16</sup> This enumeration is doubly strange. First, one recognises the four symbolic elements: water, fire, earth and air. But if seashore evokes water, forests evoke the earth, skies the air, fires evoke, generally even if not systematically, a human action, that of an incendiary or a fire victim. In addition, the story is about ignitions or burnings caused by or endured by humans.

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<sup>14</sup> René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *Job, the Victim of His People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Wajdi Mouawad: "Le Sang des promesses (*Littoral*, *Incendies*, *Forêts*, *Ciels*)", *Textualités* (2016, September) <https://textualites.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/wajdi-mouawad-le-sang-des-promesses-littoral-incendies-forets-ciels/> (Accessed December 15, 2019). Our translation.

<sup>16</sup> Françoise Coissard, *Etude critique d'Incendies* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014), 10. Our translation.

To this first singularity in Mouawad's enumeration another is added: the sea is naturally associated with water, the mountain is often a place where forests grow, and birds certainly fly in the sky. But the playwright breaks the convention in these associations by creating a relation between *Incendies* and desire, which is anything but intuitive. It reinforces our viewing fires as phenomena related to humans, be it setting a bus full of refugees afire or causing soul inflammation by painful events; but it takes more thinking to understand the presence of the concept of desire in this enumeration, even if *Incendies* is presented as "pulled from desire." There are no desires strictly speaking in neither Mouawad's nor Villeneuve's *Incendies*. So, what on earth can this be about? I propose to confront desire and promise here, thus exploring a topic almost never touched on by mimetic theory. Indeed, if desire seems scarcely present in *Incendies*, promises are numerous and the engine of action (as is often the case with desire, which creates movement in psychology).<sup>17</sup> In the play, the word comes up endlessly and is formalised as final wills revealed by the notary, wills that are injunctions to act imposed on her offspring by the testatrix.

Nawal is tied by promises made to her grandmother, as well as by her own to herself to find her son and to execute—or have her children execute—her only motto, many times stated: "Nothing is more beautiful than to be together." In Mouawad's play, this phrase also appears as a promise made to Wahab, her lover, just before their separation. The register is here that of absolute necessity—or even of a quasi-biological need or animal instinct—instead of mimetic desire, irresolute, uncertain, or circumstantial. No doubt in the Middle East, oral promises have retained more strength than in the Western world which now prefers contracts written in legal terms. One must understand the word "promise" in its strongest sense: through the commitment it imposes, a promise constrains the will, which is never spontaneous, more than desire, which is always spontaneous and only orients will, most of the time temporarily. With the promise, the imposing model is known and identifiable, whereas the model who inspires or suggests a desire may very well stay undetected and unknown as such.

A promise is also imposed on Lebel, the will executor. Indeed, Lebel doesn't hesitate, telling Simon, who refuses to abide by his mother's demands: "*A promise, for a notary, is tantamount to the sacred.*" As in many instances in the movie, the notary is here to remind the livings of their duties and the respect due to the dead person's last will. A will is either accepted or rejected, *en bloc*. Jeanne accepts this and finally Simon does as well. In sum, a network of promises links the characters, including the new-born Nihad whose grandmother promises to go and look for his mother, a promise obviously unrealistic but put here to tie each character to one or several others by way of promises.

In tragedy, fatality is often created by duties one cannot shun, contrary to the far more volatile world of desires, which suggests the exercise of liberty, even if illusory. Promises freeze desire into an obligation and can be fulfilled only if it keeps to the objective until its fulfilment. One can imagine what this freeze implies in some circumstances in terms of obsessions and dramatic consequences. But the promise is also the condition of perseverance and success in difficult undertakings. It is also the very expression of loyalty. It is indeed about a juridical commitment where the notary makes the promise sacrosanct, but also—and maybe above all—it is a moral commitment, as are the promises made by Nawal. The promise she made to herself not to weaken when in prison generates immense admiration for her. Nawal's inflexible resolve to fulfil her promises reveals an exceptional moral strength.

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire, The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession and Hypnosis*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) and *The Mimetic Brain* (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 2016).

The *Incendies* tragedy also rejuvenates a classical interrogation in modern philosophy: must one fulfil one's promises? Hobbes argues in *Leviathan* that pacts, if their purpose is legal, must be respected.<sup>18</sup> For Spinoza in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, it is possible by virtue of natural law to strike a pact by guile with the intention not to respect it or to give its commitment up if it is not useful.<sup>19</sup> At the other end, Kant addresses in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* the promise made knowing it could never be fulfilled in the context of his categorical imperative, "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your own will a universal law of nature." He concludes that the universalisation imperative imposes an obligation to make only tenable promises.<sup>20</sup> Far from such reasonings, tragedy upholds the imperative of committing oneself even to untenable promises and to obliging oneself and even one's offspring, even if new circumstances could justify giving them up. On a more basic level, *Incendies* can be seen as an incitement to make no promises and, even more so, not to impose promises on others to avoid bloodshed and disastrous concatenations.

As we will see in the following section, the fact that in *Incendies* the promise is made by a mother to a grandmother and transmitted to her children is neither innocuous nor fortuitous. This choice elucidates, if need still be, the meaning of Mouawad's expression, already quoted, "pulled from desire, here is *Incendies*."

## V. Maternal (and Grand-Maternal) Love

Maternal love is a problem for the mimetic theory, as it seems to completely escape its mechanisms. Girard was aware of the problem.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Covenants entered into by fear in the raw condition of nature are binding. For example, if I covenant with an enemy to pay a ransom or do a service in return for my life, I am bound by it. For it is a contract in which one party receives the benefit of life, while the other receives money or service in return; and consequently the covenant is valid unless some other law forbids the performance, which is not the case in the raw condition of nature. Therefore prisoners of war who are trusted to secure the payment of their ransom are obliged to pay it; and if a weaker prince make a disadvantageous peace with a stronger one, out of fear, he is bound to keep it—unless (as I said earlier) the war is renewed by some new and just cause of fear. And even in commonwealths (as distinct from the condition of nature) if I am forced to rescue myself from a thief by promising him money, I am bound to pay it until the civil law clears me of that obligation. For anything that I can lawfully do without obligation I can lawfully covenant to do through fear; and what I lawfully covenant I cannot lawfully break" (Chapter XIV: Of the First and Second Natural Laws, and Of Contracts).

<sup>19</sup> "(...) suppose a robber forces me to promise him that I will give him my goods when he demands them. Since I have a natural right to anything that I can get, I have a natural right to make this promise without intending to keep it. Another example: suppose that I have sincerely promised someone that I won't eat or drink anything for twenty days, and that I then come to see that this was foolish and that I'll do myself great harm by keeping my promise. Since the natural law [jus] obliges me to choose the lesser of two evils, I can with supreme right [jus] break faith with such a contract, and take back my promise. My natural right permits this, I'm saying, whether the stupidity of my promise is something that I clearly see for sure or merely believe because it seems right. Either way, I'll fear a great evil and will be led to do my best avoid it. From all this I infer that a contract can have force only if it is useful to us. If the usefulness goes, so does the contract, which becomes null and void. That's why it is foolish to demand of someone that he keep faith with you forever, unless at the same time you work to bring it about that violating the contract will bring more harm than good to the violator." (chapter XVI: The foundations of the State, the natural and civil right of each person, and the right of the supreme powers).

<sup>20</sup> "For the universality of a law that everyone who believes himself to be in distress could promise whatever occurred to him with the intention of not keeping it would make impossible the promise and the end one might have in making it, since no one would believe that anything has been promised him, but rather would laugh about every such utterance as vain pretense."

<sup>21</sup> For instance, in a comment on Solomon's judgement in *Things Hidden* and in *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008). The true mother is the one who gives up the

In a postface to Jean-Pierre Dupuis's essay on jealousy (*La Jalousie*), which its author presents as an alternative to mimetic desire, Olivier Rey explores the "pre-Oedipal" phase during which, according to psychoanalytic theory, an exclusive relationship between mother and infant leaves no room for any third party. It seems to be the moment of a feeling of completeness, the memory of which will nurture the forever unfulfilled desires of the child a later life into adulthood.<sup>22</sup> Hence, there would be a period when life would be fully free of mimetic desire, happy, with mother and infant forming a single entity, directed only by the physiological needs of feeding and protection. This period would be succeeded by a life spent in the thralls of mimetic desire, guided by the quest for this forever-lost completeness.

This contemporary approach should probably be nuanced. It only began to become widespread in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Maternal love in early childhood has probably been idealized only in recent times, as for a long time infants were entrusted to a wet-nurse and/or cautiously protected from a too strong attachment with their mothers, in a context of high infant mortality, as described by Philippe Ariès<sup>23</sup> and Elisabeth Badinter.<sup>24</sup>

However, Nawal and her three children who are taken away from her at birth are deprived by fate of this hypothetical phase of completeness between mother and infant(s), which every human is supposedly longing for. In a way, their experience brings them back to an earlier era. This exception to the contemporary ideal of the perfection of love between mother and child is even the root of tragic action, since deprivation of maternal love between Nawal and Nihad provokes the causal chain of events recounted in the movie. But it is also, even more, an attempt to escape from the pernicious cycle of violence.

As with Mouawad, who addresses the grand-maternal question more deeply by suggesting the difficulties of mother-daughter relations in contrast with those of grandmother and granddaughter, the grandmother's role in the movie is magnified to the extent that all grandmothers are its dedicatees: in this instance, Nawal's grandmother protects her granddaughter's life and forbids her brothers to perpetrate an honor crime; she then tries to organize what she thinks will be a less terrible fate for her granddaughter and great-grandson, i.e., an initial separation that permits Nawal to escape irretrievable loss of honor, offering a new start in town. The child is temporarily deposited in an orphanage and tattooed to make identification possible when the day comes to meet again. The grandmother finds herself unambiguously on the side of love and life against war and death, on the side of women's reason against men's insanity. Later in the movie, the nurse in the prison of Kfar Ryat poignantly echoes this situation, finding herself almost in the same position vis-a-vis the twins as the grandmother vis-a-vis her granddaughter. The nurse delivered the twins and saved them from certain death, she begins raising them then gives them back to Nawal at her liberation, and eventually she shows a quasi-maternal emotion on her deathbed when she recognizes the twins and learns they became adults. In a way, she feels the happiness Nawal went looking for without success. Grand-maternal love, notably in a female lineage – mother, daughter, grandchildren – seems to be a squared love, free of the negative sides it might have had: it is love of maternal love, love from the one who gave birth at the beginning of the chain and is charged with extending it. And it is probable that before midwives appeared in antiquity, back

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ownership of her child to save its life. Thus, maternal love would be a human relationship going beyond the mimetic desire of appropriation.

<sup>22</sup> Postface by Olivier Rey, "L'arrière pays," in Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La Jalousie. Une géométrie du désir*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldic (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> Elisabeth Badinter, *L'amour en plus. Histoire de l'amour maternel XVII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

during prehistoric times, the mother was the one to help her daughter with the delivery when her time came.

Maternal love is shown under a different, a dark light of circumstances that make its expression almost impossible. Nawal tries in vain to abort in Kfar Ryat prison. Simon blames his mother's constant lack of loving gestures, although it is impossible to tell the weight of his internal anger from the weight of reality in his accusation. The moment in the swimming pool when Nawal identifies Nihad's tattoo is the same moment she recognizes his face as Abou Tarek's, her tormentor and the twins' father. But Nawal doesn't think she's freed from the maternal promise she made in front of her grandmother the day she had to abandon Nihad. When her mutism seems to condemn her to never again interact with others, she finds the strength to dictate her last will and three letters to Lebel, the essential intermediary for the story and almost a substitute father for the twins. These texts give her the opportunity to express her mother's love to her three children at last and for ever, to reunite them beyond and somehow thanks to her own death. Thus, she pulls out the childhood knife still in her children's throat and creates the conditions for their living together around her modest funerary monument. In a rather strange way, she keeps what the French novelist Romain Gary spoke of in the title to one of his most famous books, *La promesse de l'aube* [*The Promise of Dawn*], a promise made by a mother to her child the very first day of its life, a promise that life cannot hold.

*Incendies* suggests that the ideal relationship between mother and infant(s) can still be pursued after death, even if it cannot take place initially at the beginning of life. The idea of completeness is indeed here, with the funeral rites truly ending only after a posthumous reconstitution of links within a family that the tragic circumstances of its members' lives seemed to have made forever impossible. Nawal searched until the end and obtained as much as possible of this "being together" of her children. Even though she never knew a period of completeness with them, she ensured that they were able to meet due to what the promises her last will imposed on them.

## Conclusion

Family tragedy and civil war exactions echo each other throughout the entire story and intervene as a fatality that compels the characters to adopt the most violent behaviours; yet the tragedy originates as a love story and a mother and son's shared desire to reunite. The tragic irony lies in the civil war that reunites them without their knowledge in an incestuous rape relation. The mother only recognizes her son at their last meeting, after which she is sentenced to mutism and almost ceases any social life for several years. Only her death and her last will allow her to consider ending this family drama with a gesture of appeasement. In the meantime, violence has reared its head in all of its forms: killings, attacks, slaughters, tortures, rapes, reprisals, expulsions, forced abandonment of children, the training and brainwashing of child-soldiers, social rejection and family bans, conflict with a mother's will, and more. If the expressions of this violence are most often staged, Villeneuve takes care to show as little as possible, the minimum needed for the strength of his story. His editing shuns any complacency, aestheticism or "heroization." Defying all reasonable expectations, the epilogue tries to end the story on a hopeful note, thanks to a promise finally fulfilled, if only posthumously, and to the creation of conditions for consolation, even though a complete reconciliation seems unreachable. It is thus evident that for both Villeneuve and Mouawad giving violence the last word is out of the question and that a space, even a very narrow one,

must be kept open for maternal love, this motive that eludes mimetic theory, though it is the most palpable thread of life that passes from mother to daughter.

Incidentally, *Incendies* questions our capacity under specific circumstances not only to suggest desires but also impose them on others. This goes far beyond the promise, even if it assumes a paradigmatic value in philosophical reflexion as well as in the movie. Everything related to education, to work relations, and indeed to most human relations consists in making the educator's or the manager's desire the child's or the worker's own, unwillingly or willingly. In these instances, the models are able to impose a desire. Against this exorbitant power, an ethical concern must rise. As for family and love relationships, they are constantly perturbed by imposition of commitments and obligations. The models, the one who has the authority, even if motivated by mimetic desires that he doesn't master, are also in a position deliberately to impose desires on those under their influence—and too often they do not refrain from doing so. The “blood of promises” is shed by both obligations and imposed commitments.

Maternal love and, to a less extent, grand-maternal love are other interesting topics of the movie. They are shown as beyond or rather prior to desire: eventually they are but the conditions for perseverance in being of a human race constantly confronted with violent schemes that make it move as soon as institutions meant to contain it are overrun.

More specifically, *Incendies* stages an abhorrent violence in its nonsense together with its inevitable revenge schemes that ensure its continuity. Once again, we are close to Girard who always emphasises mechanical causation and questions the precedence of intentions and the possibility to control by will. The testimony delivered by Villeneuve seems freed of all mythical lie: no one is excused for their violence or for having used it and no violence is hidden or mitigated, as the “letter to the son” bears testimony when it designates the unforgivable. Nawal's tragedy comes both from her initial separation from her child and from the killing she perpetrates, which thus inscribes herself in the chain of vengeance after witnessing the burning of the refugees' bus. Without the murder she perpetrated, she wouldn't have been imprisoned in Kfar Ryat by jailers who called upon a torturer to break her will, doing so because they regarded their reprisals as justified by the militia chief's murder.

As in Girard, one finds the notion that reconciliation, even or especially if it seems impossible, cannot happen unless a shared truth is reached by the protagonists concerning both the crimes and the victimisations on all sides. In Girard, violence and lie are related, and so are truth and conversion. Nawal's motto is “nothing is more beautiful than being together.” But to achieve this, first one has to accept that “childhood is a knife in a throat” and that “it cannot be pulled out easily”: all these lyrical quotations in the movie come from the play in which they are major lessons. Desire or maternal instinct—one doesn't quite know how to call it—leads her to lower or even stop the “monster addition of pain” that her life and most probably that of many women before her in her lineage have become. Here there is a consciousness of violent contagion and repetition, its causes and consequences, pain, and the vain quest of consolation through vengeance. Another exit may be found to avoid wreckage. The strange quest imposed on her twins by Nawal is a unique attempt at getting out of the revenge cycle by a reunion that reconciles through the truth of a rebuilt story. The hope of putting an end to inherited flare ups, those multiple fires, comes from the revelation of their origin.

By projecting Nawal's and Nihad's story at the civilisation level, as the entanglement of singular fates and the civil-war context in the Middle East invites us to do, we find unforgivable sins with consequences that last forever: slavery and human trafficking, colonization and the plunder of natural resources, human sacrifices and lynching, religious wars and all of the absurd conflicts that happened throughout the world, exploitation and exclusion of the weakest, genocide and other crimes against humanity, and so on. We would therefore need the equivalent of the promise of maternal love and its absence of conditionality

to live with this past that is forever present, sustained indefinitely by new crimes. This was attempted by some religious teachings, such as the teaching of Christ's love and the exaltation of the Father's love to which he kept referring to in the Gospels, which the Catholic church has formulated as the love of Mary, mother of God. In human history, all cultures have been to a lesser or greater degree both Nihads and Nawals. To continue to live together despite endogenous tragedies is the only possible project for societies and humanity.

Beyond the traditional cathartic role conferred on tragedy since Aristotle, this movie has a didactic ambition, one without illusion, to restrain all desires that could degenerate into violence before they pass beyond repair. Although this movie cannot, of course, succeed at this ambition, any attempt of this kind should be supported as safe and sane.

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