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STAGING MEMORY IN WAJDI MOUAWAD'S *INCENDIES*: ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OR POETIC VENUE?

This essay examines the forms of history and memory representation in *Incendies*, the 2004 play by Wajdi Mouawad, and its 2010 film version, directed by Denis Villeneuve. *Incendies* tells the story of a twin brother and sister on the quest to uncover the mystery of their mother's past and the silence of her last years. A contemporary re-telling of the Oedipus myth, the play examines what kind of cultural, collective, and individual memories inform the journeys of its characters, who are exilic children. The play serves Mouawad as a public platform to stage the testimony of his childhood trauma: the trauma of war, the trauma of exilic adaptation, and the challenges of return. As this essay argues, when moved from one medium to another, Mouawad's work forces the directors to seek its historical and geographical contextualization. If in its original staging, *Incendies* allows Mouawad to elevate the story of his personal suffering to the universals of abandoned childhood, to reach in its language the realms of poetic expression, and to make memory a separate, almost tangible entity on stage, then the 2010 film version by Villeneuve turns this play into an archaeological site to excavate the recent history of a single war-torn Middle East country (supposedly Lebanon), an objective at odds with Mouawad's own view of theatre as a venue where poetry meets politics. Naturally the transposition from a play to a film presupposes a significant mutation of the original and raises questions of textual fidelity. This essay, however, does not propose a simple comparative analysis of two works, but aims to discuss: 1) how and to what effect the *palimpsest history* of Mouawad's play is transferred onto the screen; and 2) how and to what effect its *testimonial chronotope* is actualized in Villeneuve's film. As its theoretical lens, this paper uses Lubomir Doležel's distinction between *fictional worlds* created in the work of literature based on a particular historical event and *historical worlds* evoked in the historical narrative documenting and analyzing this event.

Dans cet article, Meerzon examine les formes de représentation de l'histoire et de la mémoire dans Incendies, à la fois dans sa forme dramatique de 2004 par Wajdi Mouawad et son adaptation au grand écran en 2010 par Denis Villeneuve. Incendies raconte la quête d'une femme et de son jumeau qui partent à la découverte du mystérieux passé de leur mère et qui cherchent à percer le silence des dernières années de sa vie. Version contemporaine du mythe d'Edipe, le récit examine des souvenirs culturels, collectifs et individuels qui informent la trajectoire des enfants de l'exil que sont les personnages principaux. Elle sert aussi de plateforme publique à Mouawad, lui permet-

tant de mettre en scène le témoignage du traumatisme qu'il a vécu dans son enfance : celui de la guerre et de l'adaptation de l'exilé, celui aussi du retour difficile. Selon Meerzon, l'œuvre de Mouawad, lorsqu'elle est adaptée d'un médium à un autre, oblige son réalisateur à l'inscrire dans un contexte historique et géographique précis. Si, dans sa première version, *Incendies* permet à Mouawad d'élever le récit des souffrances qu'il a vécues au statut de celui, plus universel, d'une enfance qui prend fin ; si cette première version lui permet aussi d'atteindre dans son langage les sphères de l'expression poétique et de faire de la mémoire une entité distincte, presque tangible, sur scène, la version cinématographique de 2010 par Villeneuve, par contre, transforme la pièce en site archéologique où l'on veut mettre à jour l'histoire récente d'un pays du Moyen-Orient déchiré par la guerre (le Liban, semble-t-il). Or, cet objectif qui va à l'encontre de la vision qu'à Mouawad du théâtre comme lieu de croisement de la poésie et du politique. Le fait qu'une pièce de théâtre soit transposée au grand écran présuppose naturellement une mutation importante de l'œuvre originale et suscite des interrogations sur la fidélité textuelle. Cela dit, Meerzon ne propose pas une simple analyse contrastive des deux œuvres mais souhaite plutôt explorer les questions suivantes : 1) Comment l'histoire palimpseste de la pièce de Mouawad est-elle traduite au grand écran, et quels effets cela aurait-il pu produire? et 2) De quelle façon le chronotope du témoignage est-il actualisé dans le film de Villeneuve, et quels effets cela aurait-il pu produire? Meerzon utilise comme appareil théorique la distinction qu'opère Lubomir Doležel entre les univers fictifs créés dans l'œuvre littéraire fondée sur un événement historique donné et les univers historiques qu'évoquent les récits historiques servant à documenter et à analyser cet événement.



“Now this is how you adapt a play for the screen,” wrote Michael Phillips, *The Chicago Tribune* film critic, about Denis Villeneuve’s 2010 film *Incendies*, based on the 2004 play by Wajdi Mouawad.¹ “A treatise on survival,” it is “a lesson in adaptation”: a cinema work that grabs the audience’s attention by “burrowing so deeply into the characters’ psyches, [that] their discoveries become your own [. . .]. It’s a testament to the effectiveness of Mouawad’s story” (Phillips). Naturally, the transposition of a play into a film presupposes a significant mutation of the original. This essay, however, does not seek to conduct a simple comparative analysis of the given works; rather, it aims to discuss how and to what effect the *palimpsest history* of Mouawad’s play is transferred onto the screen; and how and to what effect its *testimonial chronotope* is actualized in Villeneuve’s film.

I recognize the work of Wajdi Mouawad, a Lebanese-Quebécois playwright and theatre director, as a site for investigating and performing hybrid subjectivity—a temporal and psychophysical venue where cultural, linguistic, and generational contexts intersect. I suggest that when moved from one medium to another, as a form of performative concretization or film adaptation, Mouawad’s work forces other artists to seek its historical and geographical contextualization. In its original staging *Incendies* serves Mouawad as proof of his post-exilic homecoming; it allows him to create a new history, a new memory and to elevate the story of his personal suffering to the universals of abandoned childhood. Through the play’s symbolic mise-en-scenes, Mouawad reaches the realms of poetic expression, and makes memory a separate, almost tangible entity on stage. By contrast, in Villeneuve’s film, the same story turns into an archaeological site to excavate the history of the Middle East, an objective at odds with Mouawad’s own view of theatre, and art in general, as a place where poetry meets politics.

History vs. Fiction: Setting the Theoretical Framework

As its theoretical lens, this article uses Lubomir Doležel’s (2010) distinction between *fictional worlds* created in the work of literature based on a particular historical event and *historical worlds* evoked in the historical narrative documenting this event. As Doležel writes, fictional worlds are “imaginary alternates of the actual world,” whereas historical worlds are “cognitive models of the actual past” (33). Fictional worlds are “free to call into fictional existence any conceivable world,” whereas historical worlds are “restricted to the physically possible ones” (35). Finally, fictional worlds contain the agents of action characterized by a high degree of *transworld identity*; the authors of fiction are free to “alter all, even the basic, individuating properties of the actual-past persons when transposing them into a fictional world” (36), whereas “the persons of historical worlds (like their events, setting, etc.) bear documented properties. Their physical and mental traits, their temporal and spatial location, their actions and communications are not constructed by free imagination but reconstructed from available evidence” (37).

Doležel’s distinction is based on the differentiation between historical, dramatic, and performative verisimilitude as it is treated in the works of fiction and in historical narratives. As he explains, “possible worlds of fiction are products of *poiesis*. By writing a text the author creates a fictional world that was not available prior to

this act” (41). These fictional worlds are free from the conditions of truth, they are performative, and they “satisfy the human need for imaginative expanse, emotional excitement, and aesthetic pleasure” (42). The works of historical narratives, on the other hand, are “means of *noesis*, of knowledge acquisition; they construct historical worlds as models of the actual world. Therefore, they are constrained by the requirement of truth valuation. Historical text is not performative; it does not create a world that did not exist before the act of representation” (42).

Despite the controversial nature of the last statement, I find Doležel’s claim suitable for my argument. I recognize Mouawad’s dramatic (theatrical) world as closer to what Doležel (after Aristotle) names a fictional narrative marked by the high degree of performativity, whereas I see Villeneuve’s cinematic rendering of the play as closer in its performative devices to the work of *noesis* or Doležel’s historical narrative, marked by the low degree of performativity. Created in the verbal signs of the “low iconicity and high symbolic function” (McFarlane 27), a dramatic text normally enjoys the freedom of a fictional world. It is characterized by a degree of incompleteness since the playwright’s artistic choices “are determined by aesthetic (stylistic) and semantic factors” (Doležel 37). Wajdi Mouawad’s dramatic world is marked by a high degree of performativity and he structures his theatrical *mise-en-scène* or performance text (including dialogue, speech, sound, lighting, setting and other visual components) as a poetic utterance, which, much like early nineteenth century Romantic poetry, features the *lyrical I* of the poet/dramatist in the centre of the action. Moreover, his dramatic and theatrical texts are based on such principles of poetic composition, such as verbal and visual onomatopoeia, thematic and structural repetitions, dramatic and spatial metaphors, rhythmical pattering and tropes variations.²

In its social and political stand, Mouawad’s theatre tends to speak for (on behalf of) an imaginary community or an “exilic nation” of exiled subjects, those who share a mother tongue and the cultural customs different from the language and the customs of an adopted country. However, if Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities are based on the continuity of narratives and linguistic, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity, the exilic nation of guiltless subjects forced to flee their native countries suggests a counter-arrangement—a community based on linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, as well as a shared experience of estrangement and displacement. To these people, *my nation will remain in*

my imagination, it will linger as a product of their memory and as a wishful thought. In this context, Derek Walcott's famous statement, "[E]ither I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (346), is experienced as a cultural, linguistic, spatially, and temporally imaged paradigm; this paradigm is always reinforced by the émigré's personal history, social and artistic aims, as well as through the process of mythologization of his/her exilic experience. A voluntarily exile who can frequently reunite with his/her native country will portray this exilic nation as a land in transition. My nation (the product of one's memory, fantasy, and new encounters) will not only remain as one's imagination but also become a process of negotiation, a travelogue of what one remembers and what one sees upon his/her returns. Like Wajdi Mouawad, a child of exile, who either has no clear recollection of his/her native land or had never been truly exposed to it, will always strive to evoke it artistically. My nation—a land of one's ancestors and a source of an exilic child's wonder and guilt—will be performed as a third space of enunciation (Bhabha 218). In this context, *Incendies* serves Mouawad as a public platform to stage the testimony of his childhood trauma. It originates at the crossroads of poetic, fictional and historical narratives, and builds upon the fictional truth (*poiesis*) of a dramatic play and the historical truth (*noesis*) of the history of the region, as it is evoked by Mouawad's personal memory of the events. The play becomes a symbolic embodiment of the author's fictional birthplace. In *Incendies*, Lebanon—the historical place, the geo-political entity, and the fictional construct—is presented in the way *the exilic imaginary community* collectively remembers, imagines, and evokes it in their everyday narratives. This fictional "on-stage" Lebanon embodies Mouawad's own personally imagined community as the possibility of "convergences [linguistic, cultural, social, performative, among others] in translocal social action that would otherwise be hard to imagine" (Appadurai 8).

Defined by its visual "over-specification" (the dominance of the visual, iconic sign), cinema shares this property with visual arts. Hence, any given film operates with the cinematic signs characterized by their "high iconicity and uncertain symbolic function." These cinematic signs work "directly, sensuously, [and] perceptually" on the filmgoer's receptive mechanisms (McFarlane 27). Accordingly, if in plays the fictional setting and the characters' physicality are often evoked through dialogue, then, in film, "the frame instantly, and at any given moment, provides information of [. . .] visual complexity." This information concretizes and

contextualizes “any given word,” because it is conveyed to the audience through “the *spatial* impact of the frame” (27). The film’s iconicity and its spatial/temporal concreteness afford the onscreen story its “physical presence” (29). Therefore, any given film, be it a documentary or a feature film, is rooted in the verisimilitude of the visual sign. As a result, a cinematic rendition of a stage play (an adaptation) approximates the play’s fictional world on screen to the fictional world of a historical narrative and is defined by the subjectivity of the adaptor. On screen, therefore, and as this article argues, Mouawad’s metaphorical dramatic material is contextualized through the principles of cinematic narration and so acquires the characteristics of a historical world.

History vs. Fiction: *Incendies* On Page and On Stage

To Plato “all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed” (289). The traumatic experience of war and exile possesses the plays of Wajdi Mouawad. The playwright’s own recollections of the past (as they emerge within his interviews and through dramatic texts) combine Mouawad’s memories of the war—the trauma that he experienced prematurely, “before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood, and in some cases before any conscious sense of self” (Suleiman 277)—with the dark fantasies of his nightmares, and the imagined memory. Born in 1968 in Lebanon, on the verge on the Lebanese civil war, Mouawad belongs to those children-survivors, who during the time of the atrocities were “too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have *been there*” (277). His “premature bewilderment” with trauma is “accompanied by premature aging, having to act as an adult while still a child” (Kestenberg and Brenner in Suleiman 277). Hence, Mouawad’s theatrical rendering of the Lebanese civil war is positioned within his *affiliative postmemory*, a type of memory that allows “the intra-generational horizontal identification” (Hirsch 115), and is often located in the family’s “objects, images, and documents, in fragments and traces” of the past lost to eternity (119).

The plays of Wajdi Mouawad refer to his family’s second emigration, mourn the early death of the artist’s mother, and strive to reconcile Mouawad’s affiliative postmemory with his present day experience. For example, an image of a small garden behind his family’s country home, the young writer’s personal paradise, is attached in Mouawad’s memory to the semi-real and

semi-fictional chronotope of his disappeared home. The bombing of the small garden behind a picturesque old house in the mountains that destroyed the childhood of Wahab, the protagonist of Mouawad's novel *Visage retrouvé*, is the same event that destroyed the childhood of Harwan, the protagonist of his one-man show *Seuls*. The terrorist attack that started the war—destroying a bus carrying civilians and the boy witnessing this horrible event (supposedly the author himself)—is evoked in *Incendies*. With each new work, however, the playwright moves further away from the cause of his initial trauma and thus becomes more capable of transposing his existential anxiety or “artistic witness” (Malpede 167). As Mouawad admits, today the Lebanese civil war—“a condition of horror for any type of human experience” (“Clavardage”)—serves in his theatre as a lens through which one can better see history.

Written and directed by Wajdi Mouawad for Théâtre de Quat'Sous (Montreal) in 2004, *Incendies*³ is an example of a theatre work that actively builds on the distinction between the ontological truth of history (the history of the Lebanese War and its atrocities), the fictional probability created in the play based on the particular historical events, and the historical narratives documenting and analyzing this event. A retelling of the Greek myth, *Incendies* presents a modern tragedy of Oedipus and Jocasta's children—Jeanne and her twin brother Simon⁴—forced to discover the truth of their origins. The death of the twins' parent (their mother Nawal) triggers the detective plot. When the twins receive the will of their late mother, Jeanne and Simon begin a journey into the history of her silence. In the course of their odyssey, the twins uncover the horrible truth of their birth: their mother was a resistance fighter and their father is their brother, the rapist-torturer chosen by Fate to be their parent.

In its complex plot and philosophical inquiry, the play insists on the necessity of communal memory and personal testimony. It asserts the need for telling individual stories of horror as the mechanism of collective healing. In *Incendies*, the Lebanese civil war serves as the background to Nawal's fight for love, her civil resistance, the torture, and finally her testimonial silence. On stage, these historical worlds acquire the quality of in-betweenness and the play's characters obtain *transworld identities*. In *Incendies*, the Lebanon of the author's childhood presents itself, using the words of Salman Rushdie, as “two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space” (22). Mouawad's theatre “first quotes history, but then ‘forgets’ the

exact reference when the performance itself, the here and now of the theatre, fully absorbs the spectators” (Rokem 213). In this “modern fairy-tale” (Rushdie 68), the war is experienced as the exilic children’s shots of memory—removed in time and distorted in imagination. The poetic rhythms of Mouawad’s dialogue determine “the totally imagined story, set in a historical period, in which magic unaccountably intervenes,” and “the totally imagined story, set in a historical period, without magic” but full of geographical and temporal distortions (Brooke-Rose 127).

The scene in Alphonse Lebel’s (Nawal’s lawyer) backyard (the episode n. 19) exemplifies the mechanisms of performing history on page and stage as Mouawad sees them. The action unfolds simultaneously within several temporal and spatial fictional settings, but it is placed within a single physical locale of a stage space. The notary invites the twins, Jeanne and Simon, to sign their mother’s will and accidentally mentions Nawal’s “bus phobia.” Once during the war, she witnessed a group of gunmen setting the bus ablaze, burning its passengers alive. The scene in Lebel’s backyard overlaps with another one, set at an earlier time and in another space, when Nawal tells her friend Sawda the truth: she was that bus’s passenger.

I was in the bus, Sawda. I was with them! When they doused us with gas, I screamed: ‘I’m not from the camp, I’m not one of the refugees from the camp, I’m one of you, I’m looking for my child, one of the children they kidnapped.’ So they let me off the bus, and then, then they opened fire, and in a flash, the bus went up in flames, it went up in flames with everybody inside, the old people, the children, the women, everyone! One woman tried to escape through a window, but the soldiers shot her, and she died there, straddling the window with her child on her arms in the middle of the blaze, her skin melted, her child’s skin melted, everything melted and everyone burned to death. (*Scorched* 43)

This horrifying episode, which appears in the play as Nawal’s recollection and later in Villeneuve’s film as her experience, “is not a figment of [Mouawad’s] imagination. The attack occurred on April 13, 1975 and is widely seen as marking the beginning of Lebanon’s civil war” (Arsenault). It is possible that the young Mouawad saw the attackers and the victims. In the play Nawal conveys these memories to her children through the power of a theatrical testimony. The spatial/temporal simultaneity that char-

acterizes the theatrical enactment of Nawal's memories and the twins' journey to the East suggests the persistence of the trauma. It spills from one generation onto the next, no matter how large the temporal and spatial gaps may be. The past and the present, as Mouawad's text and staging insist, are inseparable within the post-exilic subject's identity, his artistic testimony.

To Mouawad, therefore, as to Salman Rushdie, realistic writing "can break a writer's heart" (Rushdie 68): it cannot sustain the horror of witness or the fear of testimony. As Perreault suggests, looking at Mouawad's theatre, "one needs to see a metaphor"; "what he wanted to describe is a country in the middle of voiding itself of its soul." Today, he is ready to "come to terms with this lie," and "deep down he denounces a reality that is much more metaphysical than it is real" ("Le jardin disparu"). Hence, in his plays, Mouawad reconstructs his own lost home and that of his characters as palimpsest history, an alternative fictional world similar in its distinctiveness to science fiction. The fictional Lebanon acts as the transformation of the playwright's virtual, "seemingly limitless digital archive" of his own memory and imagination into "a three-dimensional, tactile entity" of a theatre performance (Hirsch and Spitzer 270). Such distortion defines Mouawad's worldview as exilic and his view of himself as a poet. It also explains why Mouawad insists that although *Incendies* draws on a number of real-life events and characters, it remains fiction. *Incendies*, a tale of "a very shameful war, where fathers killed sons, where sons killed their brothers, where sons raped their mothers," is a story of silence (Mouawad qtd. in Morrow). Our parents, says Mouawad, "didn't want to explain to my generation what had happened." Instead, the children were pushed to learn about the war from history books: "strangers had to tell me my own story" (qtd. in Morrow). According to Villeneuve, for instance, the story of Nawal, the central figure of the play, was partly inspired by a young woman named Soha Bechara, who used to be Mouawad's neighbour in Beirut (qtd. in Douglas). As Mouawad himself recalls, he created Nawal from memory. She is based on a woman he once met, someone who "attempted to assassinate the commander of the South Lebanon Army in the 1980s and was interned in the army's notorious El-Khiam prison for 10 years. She spent her sentence in solitary confinement, in a cell next to the torture room" (Mouawad qtd. in Morrow).⁵

In the play, Nawal's story unfolds as a series of flashbacks and coded narratives, which the characters-survivors of the "over there" geography of the post-civil-war Lebanon relate to Nawal's

children, Jeanne and Simon. The fictional timeline extends into the modern history of Lebanon as far as 1951, when a fourteen-year-old Nawal Marwan falls in love with a young Palestinian, Wahab, from the Deressa refugee camp. In her Christian village, such love is forbidden and Nawal faces the choice of either submitting to her family, denying her love, and giving up her unborn child, or forever leaving her father's house. Uneducated, scared, and weak-willed, Nawal chooses to forget Wahab, whose fate remains unknown. In secret and shame, Nawal gives birth to a boy, who she calls Nihad. The baby is quickly taken away from the young mother; and the only token of love she can give him is a silly red clown nose. Nihad is sent away to the orphanage, which would later perish in the hostilities of the civil war. In the memory of her first love and full of motherly guilt, at the age of nineteen Nawal begins her search for her son in the south provinces of Lebanon, which had been torn during the war between "Muslim Palestinian militants and right-wing nationalist Christian forces who collaborated with Israel" (Schmitz). On the roads of her unfulfilling quest Nawal joins the resistance movement and participates in the assassination of one of the militia leaders. "Nawal, unable to forgive, joins forces with the revolutionary Palestinian resistance to get close to the Christian powerholders and warlords" (Schmitz). Although Nawal's plan of attack is never fully revealed in the play, it is implied that she joins the household of Chad, the leader of the militiamen, and becomes "a French tutor to his son until the moment of opportunity when [. . .] she carries out a point-blank assassination in full knowledge of the consequences" (Schmitz). This last event brings Nawal to prison, where "for 10 years, she heard the crying and pain of the tortured. To try not to become mad, she began to sing. She sang the songs she knew—popular songs. The other people in the jail, who heard this woman but never saw her, called her 'The Woman Who Sings.' She gave them hope and courage to survive" (Mouawad qtd. in Morrow). As Villeneuve would explain, because Moauwad makes "a poetic transposition" of this figure in his play, the filmmaker also would only partially keep the resemblance between the character and its source in his film (qtd. in Douglas). In the film, Nawal's heroic acts, which changed the history of her country, are conditioned by the character's personal story of lost love and broken family and not necessarily by her social consciousness.

Hence, on page and on stage, this play actualizes the "virtual archive" of the author's memory and imagination. The issues of memory, history, and survival, together with the problems of

living through past traumas and finding a way to creatively define one's present, perpetually reappear in *Incendies*. Its testimonial chronotope engages with the dichotomy of dramatic past and present that unfolds simultaneously in the space of a single theatrical locale. In its tragic appeal, the play strives to equalize the horrors of the Lebanese war with those of the Trojan War, and so to bring its conflict to the heights of the Western dramatic canon. The play also examines the kind of cultural, collective, and individual memories that inform the homecoming of its two other characters, the exilic children. The question remains, however: what happens to Mouawad's dramatic testimonials when they are moved out from their original artistic context and transposed into another one?

History vs. Fiction: *Incendies* On Screen

Denis Villeneuve saw *Incendies* in 2005 in Mouawad's own staging. He was instantly attracted to the story and soon approached the author for the rights. Mouawad granted Villeneuve the full freedom to make the play his own but promised no help in converting it into a film script. The filmmaker opted for keeping the play's unique structure, the originality of its setting, and the complexity of its themes, and thus placed his film somewhere between a modern Greek tragedy and melodrama. He took some liberties with the text; by breaking it into several chapters he attempted to approximate on screen the poetic nature of Mouawad's play. Amazed by the way Mouawad "was able to deal with the intimate, the political, and the mythological at the same time," the filmmaker sought to transform "a dialogue-driven play set largely in refugee camps and a jail cell into an expansive, epic film" (Villeneuve qtd. in King). Accordingly, although somewhat paradoxically, in order to preserve Mouawad's dramatic poetry, Villeneuve sought to approximate the stylistics of a silent film. He significantly altered the dialogue and "dramatized some of the stories the characters tell," so as to show "everything the characters describe onstage instead of having anyone tell it" (Villeneuve qtd. in Rodriguez).

Though poetic, symbolic, and metaphorical, Villeneuve's film also approximates the cinematic genres of a "Social Problem Film" and a "War Movie" (Cartmell and Whelehan 86). It studies the conflict of individual versus history and demonstrates that "mankind has been taken hostage by fanatics, war mongers and monsters, and the ransom is being paid in the blood of innocents" (Dretzka). Hence, Villeneuve's *Incendies* presents the filmmaker's

personal, perhaps tourist-like, view of the Middle East and its recent history, concretized within the iconicity of a cinematic sign. The film turns into a travelogue of Villeneuve's cultural learning. As he says, in a manner equal to the original play, his film is a work of fiction. It reveals a position of "a Canadian director [making] a film about war in the Middle East," someone who knows "nothing about Arab culture" and "about war" (Villeneuve qtd. in Jenkins). The film studies the story of a single family unfolding against the background of modern history, and so it visually and thus historically, geographically, and culturally contextualizes the play's existential anxieties. Consequently, Villeneuve does not seek historical authenticity. Shot in Jordan not Lebanon, the film mimics the palimpsest history and the imaginary geography of Mouawad's play. It engages with the playwright's postmemory and satisfies the director's personal search for the "imaginary point of view." As Villeneuve explains, in Jordan "I found the exact landscape [. . .] that I had in mind [. . .] It was a fantasy place to shoot because north of Jordan looks very close to the south of Lebanon," but it is not it (qtd. in Douglas).

At the same time, choosing Jordan as the fictional space of *Incendies's* cinematic transposition, Villeneuve approaches the issues of historical truth, personal memory, and poetic license in the same way that the playwright deals with them in his texts. To Villeneuve, the original *Incendies* was "politically neutral," (if such position is possible) and so he wanted "the film to be politically neutral," too. He saw this work as "about peace, about ending the cycle of violence" and thus he did not want his film "to be part of this conflict. It was very important to set [the movie] in a fictional land like this" (Villeneuve qtd. in Douglas). In the film, therefore, the symbolism of the play's testimonial chronotope—the spatial simultaneity of the multi-temporal action—takes on the devices of *cinematic enunciation* or textual stretch (McFarlane 20), which can cinematically load up the narrative and contextual gaps found in the original. A device of cinematic enunciation "characterizes the process that creates, releases, shapes [. . .] the 'utterance.'" It also refers to:

the ways in which the utterance is mediated, and, as such, obviously shares common ground with narration, [. . .] and discourse [. . .]. Film may lack those literary marks of enunciation such as person and tense, but in the ways in which, for example, shots are angled and framed and related to each other (i.e. in matters relating to *mise-en-scène* and montage) the enunciatory processes are inscribed. (McFarlane 20)

Therefore, a cinematic enunciation, “in relation to the transposition of novels to the screen, is a matter of adaptation proper, not of transfer,” because its effects “are closely tied to the semiotic system in which they are manifested” (McFarlane 20). A device of adaptation proper, cinematic enunciation allows Villeneuve to straighten up the dramatic plot and to achieve on screen the effect of temporal/spatial simultaneity.

The 2010 *Incendies* begins with the establishing *panoramic* shot that presents a view of the bucolic Middle Eastern landscape from the window of the Muslim resistance’s camp. The shot is accompanied by a Radiohead composition entitled “You and Whose Army?” It slowly moves to a close-up on a group of young boys who are getting their heads shaved before they begin their military training as guerrilla fighters. One of them, the boy with a three-point tattoo on his ankle, is Nihad, Nawal’s lost son. The story of Nihad, however, is quite mysterious, both in the original play and in the film. According to the dramatic timeline, Nihad—the son of the Christian Nawal and the Muslim Wahab from the refugee camp—is taken to the orphanage in Kfar Rayat on the day of his birth. Later, the Harmanni family adopts the boy on their way through Kfar Rayat. After that, as the play tells us, the boy approached Sheik Chamseddine, the spiritual leader of the resistance movement in the South and fought for him for some time. Forced by the enigma of his birth, Nihad left Chamseddine’s camps and headed North to find his mother. Disappointed by the outcome of his search and convinced that finding Nawal is impossible, Nihad became a sniper who killed both for the sake of killing and for the artistry of the photographs he takes of his victims. When another foreign army invaded the country to help the militia control the population, Nihad joined the new army, becoming a torture rapist and interrogator in the South. As the guard in the Kfar Rayat’s prison, Nihad assumed the name Abou Tarek. He raped and tortured Nawal, and thus became the father of the twins, Simon and Jeanne. In the film, however, all of these details of Nihad’s fictional biography are lost. We only know that he is on the other side to Nawal. When Nawal shoots the militia leader, Chad, she is taken to the prison in Kfar Rayat and meets Abou Tarek, as her guard and torturer.

Plot-wise, this establishing shot shifts the dramatic conflict from the story of two siblings searching for their father and brother, to the story of three children sacrificed to the laws of war. In terms of time/space, this shot establishes the relationships between the people and the landscape. The absence of characters

within the opening frame provides the film's descriptive quality. "It is not that story-time has been arrested. It is just that it has not yet begun" (Chatman 129). In its descriptive force, the establishing shot approximates the spatial/temporal simultaneity of the play's testimonial chronotope. As Villeneuve recollects, in its original minimal staging, "the play conjured snipers, assassinations and bloody reprisals entirely with dialogue" (qtd. in Jenkins). Looking to transpose this mythic quality of language into the film, Villeneuve sought to find the cinematic equivalent to the power and poetics of Mouawad's verbal images. This objective called for a minimalist setting, abstract costumes, generalized sounds, and extensive use of color. The decision to shoot the film in Jordan, therefore, reflected the director's desire to escape the immediate identification of the film's story with the 1975-1990 Lebanese war. Thanks to his cameraman André Turpin, most of the outdoor scenes were shot without artificial light, the feature that adds to the poeticity of the film and augments the degree of its authenticity. As Villeneuve explains, he saw his work with André Turpin as a special partnership, based on the combination of historical research and artistic impulse. Villeneuve describes Turpin as:

a stuntman, he likes when it's dangerous and complicated, and the thing is that during research before the movie, I showed him a lot of photographs, a lot of film extracts of what I wanted and I said I wanted something as natural as possible. Our work together before was very elaborate, very aesthetically stylish, we were trying to make beautiful images all the time, but on this one, I wanted us to be laid back aesthetically, [. . .] the style to be more subtle. (qtd. in Douglas)⁶

The poeticity of the cinematic narrative rests here with the combination of the stunningly filmed landscapes and the horrifying story unfolding against this spectacular background: the principles of contradiction and thematic montage, devices often indicating the filmmaker's special interest for poetic composition, are here even more supported by Villeneuve's desire to find analogues in cinematic expression for the poeticity of Mouawad's dramatic language (Wagner 222-27).

At the same time, the film's opening scene and the decision not to use clearly identifiable Middle Eastern music as its soundtrack establish Villeneuve's position as the film auteur, who deliberately "wanted that scene to feel awkward—to underline the fact

that it's a movie about the Middle East made by a foreigner. The music was very important to stress the Western point of view," to allow himself "to remain neutral and apolitical, [in order] to talk about war without raising anger" (Villeneuve qtd. in Rodriguez). Villeneuve's film, therefore, demonstrates that the transposition of a story from one medium into another is conditioned not only by the obvious formal differences between the two media, but also by the position of the artist/adaptor, his/her particular emotional attachment or detachment to the "historical truth" that the adaptation sets to depict. In the words of Rodriguez, "although the film never mentions its setting by name, Lebanon is the obvious inspiration." Shot in Jordan, the film demonstrates how Villeneuve chose to deal with the specificity of the cinematic representation, which, if he had decided to stay true to the playwright's memories of historical events, would have forced the filmmaker to take political sides. As Villeneuve saw it, however, the fact that:

[He] has no connection to the Middle East made him a perfect choice to direct *Incendies*. [. . .] When Mouawad gave me the film rights he said, 'It's going to be tough to make this without setting it in Lebanon, because you're going to have to show villages. You'll have to show a country. What will you do?' I thought about it, but I finally realized it would be a very bad idea, because in order for the movie to work—to be faithful to the play and the message of peace—it has to be neutral. It was crucial to remain apolitical, so you can talk about war without raising anger. The Middle East is a minefield. It's very difficult to talk about politics there without putting your foot in your mouth. By focusing on these two twins and their mother, I was able to convey the complexity of the dilemma in the region without getting into specifics. (qtd. in Rodriguez)

This statement, of course, betrays Villeneuve's position as a Western filmmaker, whose take on the fictional events of the play and its historical counter-facts is marked by cultural estrangement. No artistic rendering of any war conflict—historical or fictional, set in the Middle East or elsewhere—can be "neutral" and "apolitical." Naturally, for Villeneuve, the film itself would have to function as the proof of the encounter. Much like the photographs that the second generation survivors take in the places of their parents' sufferings, Villeneuve's film functions as both iconic representation of the filmmaker's fantasy of a faraway country, the highly symbolic object of identification for the film's

characters, and “the uncertainty about what they depict” for the audience (Hirsch and Spitzer 298). Hence, although Villeneuve sees his ignorance of the region’s culture and history beneficial to the film, the screen reveals the filmmaker’s own preoccupations. For example, by repeatedly accentuating various symbols of Christianity, one of the Middle Eastern religions used during the war for the wrong purposes, the film reveals its political engagement. It stages the complexities of the conflict based on the religious intolerance, and thus presents its audiences with the questions of guilt and responsibility. According to Buckwalter, *Incendies* is:

a film about the horrors of war. Nawal, a Christian, sees horrible violence perpetrated by her own religion against Muslims, and the other way around. In one of the film’s most harrowing scenes, she must pretend to be Muslim to board a bus, and then, when the bus is machine-gunned by Christian militants, [she] is forced to reveal the cross she carries in order to save herself; even though it means abandoning the last survivors to their own deaths. The war makes monsters of everyone, including Nawal and the son she’s never known. They both become unlikely assassins as the conflicts surrounding the country’s revolution heat up.

Yet one can also say that Villeneuve’s film searches for its own authenticity. If in his play *Mouawad* evokes a sense of authenticity through the use of dialogue and the play’s temporal/spatial simultaneity (testimonial chronotope), then Villeneuve aims to reach a similar effect using cinematic narrative. He employs the principles of continuous editing when he shoots the same picturesque mountain road twice: first to present the journey of the mother (we see Nawal moving along the road, the character’s own tragic route of losing her son, her country, and finally her freedom), then when we see Nawal’s daughter Jeanne walking along the same sites, making her own historical and personal discoveries. The first time the film encourages viewers to associate this mountain road with the path of death: the war is raging all around, and in the next scene we will see the bus massacre. The second time the shot suggests a set of broader associations: this road becomes the path of history, the history of one nation and the story of the characters, the filmmaker, and the viewers’ individualized discoveries of it. This device, therefore, brings Villeneuve’s film closer to the original play. As he explains, the theme of traveling and the

devices of travelogue do not exist in Mouawad's play. There the characters arrive "at their destination right away and they [talk] about what they saw, but cinema is fantastic, because you can move across landscapes and see the effect of a journey on a character" (Villeneuve qtd. in Douglas).

Therefore, it is essential for the study of adaptation, as McFarlane suggests, to discuss "to what extent the film-maker has picked up visual suggestions from the novel [or, I suggest, from the play, in this case] in his representation of key verbal signs – and how the visual representation affects one's 'reading' of the film text" (27). The reason is that the juxtaposition and the continuity of information provided within *on-screen* and *off-screen space*, as well as the alternations between "long shot and close-up, between seeing and being seen [. . .] advert to enunciatory techniques peculiar to the unfolding of cinematic narrative" (McFarlane 28). These techniques do not have an equivalent in the novelistic narrative and function differently on stage. The onstage/offstage dichotomy and the alternations between seeing and being seen serve as the devices of suspense, dramatic chronotope, and the causal chain plot sequences in theatre. The focalizing and the meaning forming power of a long shot and a close-up, as well as their alternations, are purely cinematic. Villeneuve uses the work of camera and employs extra-diegetic sound in order to underline certain activities in the film: not to describe but to render the play's fictional world in "pictorial form" (Chatman 128). The film builds on the phenomenon of visual perception: "seeing is, after all, believing" (128). Hence, Villeneuve casts Lubna Azabal as Nawal Marwan and Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin as Jeanne. The two actresses strongly resemble each other, so their simultaneous or alternating presence on the screen allows the director to create a type of cinematic magic, to reach the past/present simultaneity—the testimonial chronotope of the play—normally impossible to achieve in film. As he explains, he initially considered using a cinematic trick: "[to] play with shadows in between the scenes. Seeing a woman walking in the dark and then seeing another woman and we [would] think it's the same, but in fact, we're going to the daughter or from daughter to the mother" (Villeneuve qtd. in Douglas). Casting two actresses who resemble each other not only gave Villeneuve a chance to create a cinematic equivalent to the theatrical phenomenon of simultaneity, suggested in the "dialogue between the mother and the daughter," but also to talk "about transmission between two generations," to suggest the transferability of trauma (Villeneuve qtd. in Douglas).

According to Freddie Rokem, performing history in theatre allows the testimony of an artist-survivor to be heard. On stage, the *actors/hyper-historians* enact two separate histories: 1) the palimpsest history of the plays they create when the acting itself becomes the embodiment of history, a transposition of the historical past on stage; and 2) the story of their production process. *The theatrical energy of performing history* provides the space for the encounter between the real and the metaphorical, but at the same time it remains “a construction that can never become ‘real’ in the sense that the historical past was” (202). It is the spectators who “create the meanings of a performance, by activating different psychological and social energies” (192). They become witnesses to multiple stage histories: those of the historical past and those of the actors enacting it. The character’s victimization on stage provides audiences with the emotional space for “identification and involvement as well as distance” (204). Hence, in this ontological collision of energies, theatre can turn into a “dialectical antidote to the destructive energies of history and its painful failures” (192). As such, Mouawad’s plays, the sites of *performative testimony*, provide the exilic subject with the critical practice of theatrical contextualization of an historical event; they present a combination of the author’s personal traumatic encounter with the devices of artistic production. Instances of stage poetry, these plays “bear witness to the national tragedy of Lebanon, work through the trauma it caused, and offer hope to the survivors” (Moss 174).

Villeneuve’s take on *the function of audience as witness* differs from Mouawad’s. He finds the latter’s work too violent, seeking the effect of shock not catharsis, frequently slipping into gothic horror. Citing his own fear of violence, Villeneuve avoids the unnecessary shocking images on screen and thus protects his audiences from the traumatic effects of cinematic representation. For instance, shooting his film in Jordan, with the Lebanese and Iraqi crew and cast, Villeneuve felt “a huge responsibility to film those war scenes in front of people who had been in a war a few months ago” (qtd. in Jenkins). Surprisingly, after the initial screening in Beirut (March 2010), as Villeneuve recalls, “a lot of people said to me that we should show this film to their children, to show them what they had been through. They said, ‘We never talk about this part of our history. They teach history to the children up to 1975. After that, it’s a taboo era’” (qtd. in Jenkins). Thus, in the words of Thomas Cardwell, the film:

[...] successfully explores the residual effect of past trauma on contemporary lives. As one character comments, ‘Death is

never the end of the story. It leaves traces.' There are several moments in the film when Jeanne is warned about finding out too much and she even experiences prejudices that are still being kept alive as a result of her mother's legacy. Ultimately the case is made for the need to reconcile with the past even if the process is painful and *Incendies* effectively argues that this is necessary so that contemporary generations can break the cycle of violence that has plagued their predecessors. (Cardwell)

At the same time, Jeanne and Simon's estranged cultural position on the history of their native country and its trauma allows the Western spectator to identify with the story, to become a witness to the personal history of the characters and their nation's collective memory, and thus to become their own hyper-historians. In its visual iconicity, the film insists, perhaps more than the play does, on the children/strangers' right to create their own memories of the encounter, and thus even to alternate the shapes and the history of the place itself. Although the fictional landscape does not change from the scene enacted in the country's past to the scene enacted in the country's present, the audience's attitude to it changes. The film stages all three degrees of traumatic experience found in the original: that of Nawal, that of her children, and that of the audience. Each layer, reinforcing the function of actor as hyper-historian in theatre, turns the film audiences into history's witnesses. Thus, in his film, Villeneuve replaces the urgency of the identity quest and search for truth that drives the siblings of Mouawad's play with the estranged engagement with history, memory, and trauma of his own Jeanne and Simon.

However, the film insists, perhaps more than the play does, on the fictional characters/exilic children's right to create their own memories of the encounter, and thus their attempts (even if only in their imagination) to alternate the shapes and the history of the place itself. As Hirsch and Spitzer explain, when returning to their ancestral homeland, second generation survivors "bring that knowledge with them and connect it to what they find there, on site. The spaces they encounter are then modulated and informed by what is being brought to them. [. . .] The moment of transmission occurs through the testimonial encounter" (299-300). The children's meeting with the land of their parents is perhaps less authentic and less verifiable, but it serves as the important point of re-discovery and confirmation of "those kernels of the past that had not been destroyed by the massive

historical fractures that propelled [their] families across the world” (300).

At the same time, the siblings’ cultural position reflects the emotional and intellectual ignorance of Western spectators, particularly in Quebec and North America. In the film, as in many recent “journey stories” for theatre with the Western character traveling to the East,⁷ Jeanne and Simon simultaneously act as the tourists-travelers themselves and as the guides for the spectator’s journey. Paradoxically, this position of a cultural wanderer or cultural tourist, allows a Western spectator to identify with the story of historical Lebanon and to become a witness to the personal history of the characters and their nation’s collective memory, and thus to become their own hyper-historians. This position, however, is not without danger: very easily it grants the spectator, the easy chair traveler, the eminence of cultural superiority marked by the gaze of cultural and emotional estrangement (Said 1995; Bhabha 2004; Bharucha 1993).

History vs. Fiction—Theatre vs. Film

In conclusion, I would like to go back to Lubomir Doležel’s distinction between fictional and historical worlds based on the transworld identity of their characters, something that always deviates from the historical reality. As I have demonstrated, Mouawad’s *Incendies* stages the palimpsest history of Lebanon as it is marked by the author’s own encounter with the land of his ancestors. In *Incendies*, the exilic children’s quest for self-discovery can be completed only within the cosmopolitanism of *the exilic imaginary* (Jestrovic and Meerzon 8-10). The truth about Jeanne and Simon’s mother’s past and about the past of their country is unattainable and belongs now to a mythological time. This truth can be discovered only through the act of artistic inquiry, the children’s active re-invention, re-imagining, and re-framing of the past. For Mouawad himself, this process turns into the quest of the “Lebanon lost in pieces” (qtd. in *Perrier*). The play looks at the metamorphosis of the characters’ postmemory. Through the twins’ “direct encounter with the city [the country in this case], the narratives and images that had been conveyed to them” in the past receive their new “physical reality” (Hirsch and Spitzer 270) in the present. By taking a bus or going on foot, Jeanne and Simon situate the fantasies of their postmemory in the actual geography and climate of their native country, “in proper scale, concretely and in color, textured by smells and surrounding sounds” (270). In Villeneuve’s film, the same *lieux de mémoire* of

the fictional Middle East turns into the filmmaker's account of his own journey into the history of the other's oblivion. To paraphrase Hirsch and Spitzer, when "traveling without the benefit of survivors as guides," the Quebecois film director had to "rely on maps and images" to help him find the sites he sought after (202). Mouawad's play served Villeneuve as both "a *vehicle* and a *figure* of the processes of postmemory" (203). It became his own object of imaginary memory, an artistic construct that allows a stranger to approximate the history of the other. As stated above, the experience of divided self constitutes the identity of the exilic subjects, whereas the somewhat limited sense of the "back-there" geography, its history and culture (transmitted to the second generation immigrants) creates the phenomenon of the exilic imaginary.

As the works of Wajdi Mouawad demonstrate, however, very often artists who are children of exile strive to overcome the confines of their postmemory (a combination of the children's distorted memories and fantasies catalyzed by the family narratives) and extend their own exilic imaginary to the cultural referents of their adopted land. Thus the phenomenon of "my nation is in my imagination," as it appears in Mouawad's theatre, is created in a dialogue with the artist's imaginary "back-home" culture and geography. The dramatic setting of *Incendies* is marked by the historical imagery of the war-torn Beirut and at the same time by the author's personal memory of the catastrophe. It also borders the world of the "fantastic," in which the character might be "the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination," or where the fictional reality, the fictional world, "is controlled by laws unknown to us" (Todorov 25). In Mouawad's work all of these processes take place: the geography of his plays often oscillates between the given realities of the region, the playwright's memory of it, and his own creation of the newly shaped locales.

Paradoxically, the 2010 *Incendies* presents its audience with the possible world of a historical rather than fictional narrative. Mouawad's play helps Villeneuve and his audiences to "search for and locate the site [. . .] and a figure for understanding the mediated relationship of a second generation, born elsewhere, to a history that has lost its location through the willful erasures of politics and the inadvertent ravages of time" (Hirsch and Spitzer 203). It becomes the object of Villeneuve's own postmemory, the artistic construct that allows a stranger to approximate the history of the Other. ❁

Notes

- 1 Denis Villeneuve is a three-time Genie Award-winner for Best Achievement in Direction. His Oscar-nominated 2010 film *Incendies* features Lubna Azabal as Nawal Marwan, Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin as Jeanne, and Maxim Gaudette as Simon.
- 2 For more on this subject see Meerzon, “Searching for Poetry: On Improvisation and Collective Collaboration in the Theatre of Wajdi Mouawad,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 43 (2010): 29-34.
- 3 In this article I quote from the English version of this play *Scorched*, translated by Linda Gaboriau, published by Playwrights Canada in 2005.
- 4 The names of Jeanne and Simon are used in this text in the way they appear in the original text, in French.
- 5 Among other historical references found in Mouawad’s play, the prison in Kfar Rayat where Nawal was held in captivity and where she gave birth to the twins deserves special mention. The prison was established in 1978 and later served as the major focal point of the 1997 International Tribunal for war crimes. In 2000 it was turned into a museum. As Dahab writes:

the Kfar Rayat prison where Nawal spent five years most likely stands for the actual Khiam prison in Southern Lebanon [...] where Lebanese hired by Israelis tortured other Lebanese. Like its semifictional counterpart, the Khiam prison closed down in 2000, after Israeli forces withdrew from Southern Lebanon, becoming a museum thereafter. The executioners who had worked in it later found refuge either in Israel or in Canada. Hence [in *Incendies*] the character Abou Tarek [Nawal’s son who she does not recognize as her torturer] ends up in Montréal, where he is supposedly tried, a detail that may be puzzling at first, but one which is otherwise consistent with that historical footnote. (153).

Nawal’s prison cell number (72) appears on her vest. It bears historical symbolism too: in 1972 a bill passed increasing the number of seats in the Lebanese parliament from 99 to 108 in an attempt to ensure a more accurate and equitable representation of all religions of the region. 1972 was also a year of the last elections that were held in Lebanon prior to the civil war erupting in 1975. August 20th, 1980—the date of Nawal’s children’s birth—is symbolic as on that day the United Nations passed Resolution 478 calling for Israel’s compliance with Resolution 476, reaffirming the overriding necessity to end the prolonged occupation of Arab territories occupied by Israel since 1967 (Resolution 478 (Aug. 20th, 1980); <<http://domino.un.org/>

UNISPAL.NSF/0/dde590c6ff232007852560df0065fddb?OpenDocument; May 22, 2010>; Resolution 476 (June 30th, 1980); <<http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/b86613e7d92097880525672e007227a7/6de6da8a650b4c3b852560df00663826!OpenDocument>; May 22, 2010>).

- 6 The interior scenes—the jail and the notary office, for example—were shot in a basement, with the use of the artificial light; the rest was done naturally, outdoors (Villeneuve qtd. in Douglas).
- 7 In the plays of the cycle, Mouawad actively explores the literary archetype of the adventure novel, with the young character setting up for a journey into the far away, so to search for his/her historical and ethnic identity, to understand something about oneself and the world. Here, I also refer to such plays as *Le Collier d'Hélène* (2000) by the Quebec playwright Carole Fréchette; *After Akhmatova* (2011) by the Canadian Kate Cayley; and *Whispering Pines* (2011) by another Canadian Richard Sanger, among others.

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