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**Cinematic Im/mobilities in the Planetary Now**

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This article has been translated by William Brubacher, a PhD candidate in English Studies at Université de Montréal. His research interests include hauntology, experimental writing, modernist and English Canadian literatures, urban writing, and queer studies. He is currently writing his doctoral dissertation, titled *Disghosting: Experimental Reconsiderations of Haunting in Canadian Literature*.

## Introduction

- 1 A person dies. Their last will does not conclude their life; it does not lead to eternal rest but sets in motion the lives of the heirs, who must retrace their origins before a tombstone can be laid and a name engraved. The fire of truth must be ignited and im/mobility, in all its paradoxical duplicity, must be endured.
- 2 Denis Villeneuve's feature film *Incendies* (Canada/France, 2010) serves as a starting point for a reflection on the tension between mobility and immobility in global cinema. In this article, I assume that this opposition between movement and immobility dominates the film on several levels, that is, its physical as well as emotional, psychological, but also social, political, and cinematic level. The idea of im/mobility helps uncover the different layers of a complex narrative that otherwise remain hidden under the veil of an extraordinary story. This article tries to demonstrate that *Incendies'*

aesthetics of im/mobility facilitates a profound contemplation of the experience of war and its various consequences of migration, exile, and diaspora.

- 3 Before I turn to *Incendies* as an example of im/mobility, some basic questions need to be raised and answered: Why focus on the issue of im/mobility? Why call this article “Im/mobilities in *Incendies*” and not “Immobility and mobility in *Incendies*”? Why the slash? Does this typographic character mark a break between immobility and mobility? In the introduction to the *Mobility Studies* manifesto, Stephen Greenblatt observes a fundamental epistemological shift in the social sciences and humanities in the second half of the twentieth century: the demise of a set of traditional assumptions about the evolution of rooted, teleological, authentic cultural identities gave way to the emergence of new theories of hybridity, network theory, and ever-changing flows. It is within this framework that the renowned scholar of new historicism formulates the urgent need to rethink the dialectic between cultural persistence and change in an age of global mobility:

First, *mobility must be taken in a highly literal sense*. [...] Only when conditions directly related to literal movement are firmly grasped will it be possible fully to understand the metaphorical movements [...] Second, *mobility studies should shed light on hidden as well as conspicuous movements* of peoples, objects, images, texts, and ideas. [...]. Third, *mobility studies should identify and analyze the “contact zones” where cultural goods are exchanged*. [...] Fourth, *mobility studies should account in new ways for the tension between individual agency and structural constraint*. [...] Fifth, *mobility studies should analyze the sensation of rootedness*. The paradox here is only apparent: it is impossible to understand mobility without also understanding the glacial weight of what appears bounded and static.<sup>1</sup>

- 4 The first four points of this theory are based on the literal definition of movement, on the hidden and visible aspects of people, objects, but also texts and ideas, on contact zones, and, finally, on the tension between individual action and structural restrictions. The fifth argument maintains that mobility studies should also analyse its opposite, namely the sense of rootedness, limitations, and the static. There is a seemingly paradoxical complicity between roots and trajectories, a reciprocity that Elizabeth DeLoughrey has addressed in terms of identities and cultural dimensions: *Roots and Routes* can – but need not – be read as homophones.<sup>2</sup> By speaking of im/mobility rather than of immobility and mobility, the perspective of this article is in line with DeLoughrey’s thinking. The slash is used not for reasons of linguistic economy or graphic preference. In fact, there are additional aspects, neither completely immobile nor completely mobile ones, and, even more importantly, productive and relational aspects whose mobility also creates immobilities and vice versa. Thus, the term im/mobilities refers to the excess inherent in both terms and to their dialectical relationship. In fact, the second part of my title, “Im/mobilities in *Incendies*”, is designed to emphasise the ambivalence inherent in this terminological construction, an ambivalence that is fundamental to the construction of the film’s history, narrative, and cinematographic staging.



Figure 1. A bus on a narrow road in a dry and mountainous setting. Denis Villeneuve (dir.), *Incendies*, 2010.

- 5 I thus begin by examining im/mobilities in a rather literal sense before reflecting on the formation of psychological and emotional, political, social, and cultural im/mobilities as they occur in the film and its cinematography. I then discuss the film's key scene and provide a conclusion. Overall, this essay aims to uncover and highlight the film's hidden movements and stillnesses and to identify areas of contact and tension between individual (in)action and structural constraints, between mobility and immobility.

## *Incendies*

- 6 *Incendies* is a key film in Villeneuve's career, having been nominated for a 2011 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, winning several international awards, and thus gaining the visibility necessary for Villeneuve to be entrusted with blockbuster productions.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that Denis Villeneuve's Quebec films – *Maelström* (2000), *Polytechnique* (2009), and *Incendies* (2010) – are different from his more recent productions such as *Dune* (2021), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Arrival* (2016), *Sicario* (2015), and *Enemy* (2013), which are situated in the Hollywood tradition. As far as the story and the narrative of *Incendies* are concerned, it is essential to point out that these are the results of two adaptations, namely an autobiography that was adapted for the theatre, which was then adapted for the big screen. Here, we see the mobility of the media form, the story, and the latter's settings and protagonists. Originally, the autobiography recounted the life of the Lebanese activist Souha Bechara, who tried to assassinate Antoine Lahad, commander of the South Lebanese Army – an ally of the Israel Defense Forces – during the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon between 1985 and 2000 following the 1982 invasion. Without having planned an escape route, Bechara was instantly imprisoned and then tortured during her ten years of incarceration in a dreaded prison of the Israeli occupation zone.<sup>4</sup> Her autobiography, *Résistante* (written in French), explains the evolution of her political activism from a pacifist stance to one of active engagement, gun in hand, and her imprisonment.<sup>5</sup> She writes her autobiography in an austere style that also characterises several contemporary memoirs from the Arab world and conceals a sophisticated effort to

submit a personal story to collective memory while initiating a space for reconciliation based on human understanding.<sup>6</sup>

- 7 Bechara's autobiography was later adapted into a play by Lebanese-Québécois playwright, actor, and theatre director Wajdi Mouawad.<sup>7</sup> The play was first performed in France and then Canada in 2003 under the title *Incendies*. On stage, "the quest for the self that helps shape the dramatic and scenic writing of this production is forcefully embodied in a staging that sparks the creativity of the audience."<sup>8</sup> Here, the military conflict remains completely decontextualised: it appears as a civil war between refugees and militias without a recognisable religious affiliation or location. Nevertheless, some clues point to twentieth-century Lebanon: the proper names are mostly Arabic-sounding<sup>9</sup> and one of the military invasions from the South (to the North) is named.<sup>10</sup>
- 8 In turn, the film adaptation by Québécois director Denis Villeneuve, in collaboration with writer and producer Valérie Beaugrand-Champagne, is "a meticulous work of purification of the original text in order to immerse the spectator in a realist fictional universe and to show rather than evoke, as Mouawad does, the quest for origins undertaken by the protagonists."<sup>11</sup> In sharp contrast to the autobiography and the play, the film projects an orientalist<sup>12</sup> image of religious conflict and eliminates its dimensions of international politics by starting the story earlier: during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).<sup>13</sup> The film retains the figure of the murderer, but, unlike the original autobiographical persona, the fictional character does not become a celebrated national heroine who speaks for herself in a clear and comprehensible voice.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the film shows her transformation into a static and silent figure while the enigma of her life remains to be unravelled. In contrast to its predecessors, it foregrounds forced movements and immobilities.



Figure 2. Jeanne and Simon reading their mother's final letter at the notary's. Denis Villeneuve (dir.), *Incendies*, 2010.

- 9 The film tells the story of a woman, Nawal Marwan (Lubna Azabal), who lives in Canada and, after her death, bequeaths three letters to her twins Jeanne (Melissa Désormeaux-Poulin) and Simon (Maxim Gaudette): one for their father, whom they believe to have died in Lebanon, one for their brother, whose existence was unknown to them, and a third addressed to themselves but which they will only receive after having delivered

the other two letters.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the story of *Incendies* is based on a traditional quest narrative. More precisely, two different quests must be accomplished, while the protagonists of both follow their own reasons for becoming active seekers of their past. Set in motion by the reading of Nawal's will, the first quest revolves around the twins' search for their origins. As a result of their investigation, Jeanne – and then Simon and the lawyer Jean Lebel (Rémy Girard) – are compelled to become mobile themselves, to travel both physically and psychologically.

- 10 Similarly, a generation earlier, their mother repeatedly fought against various forms of coerced immobility. The protagonist's first incentive to move occurs during her youth when she finds herself pregnant, unmarried, and wanting to flee with her lover Wahab (Hamed Najem). However, Wahab is killed by her brothers,<sup>16</sup> but, being protected by her grandmother (Majida Hussein), the head of the family,<sup>17</sup> Nawal narrowly escapes the honour killing herself. The matriarch sends her granddaughter to study in the city, far from her family, but also far from her newborn son (the result of Nawal's illicit relationship with her lover), whom she entrusts to an orphanage from which he will emerge as a child soldier. In the midst of the civil war, Nawal sets out to find her son but, unfortunately, struggling against a stream of refugees, she arrives too late to rescue him: the orphanage has been burned down, the children abducted. This unsuccessful search will haunt her throughout her life, leaving her with unanswered questions and the burden of the unfulfilled promise she made to her baby to find him one day. Similarly and equally unsuccessful, the lost son will also search for his mother. In the early years of their fruitless search, and as a result of the war, both become increasingly radicalised but unwittingly find themselves on opposite sides of the war parties: she as the perpetrator of an attack on an important politician, and he as a torture and rape specialist in a notorious prison. Finally freed from physical and psychological coercion, Nawal and her twins, who were born in the prison, take refuge in Canada. During her exile in Canada, she works for the lawyer Lebel until she becomes almost permanently silent. The mother and her children's transatlantic crossing is psychologically charged with and driven by an unspeakable taboo. The major difference between the three quests lies in their temporalities: the search of the heirs, as a result of their mother's long-term search for her son, succeeds fairly quickly, which also successfully completes the quest for the father and brother.

## Physical Im/mobilities

- 11 In the diegetic and narrative space of *Incendies*, mobility appears as the consequence of restrictive physical, political, and social immobilities.<sup>18</sup> The parochial community rules of the small village, an ancestral place marked by stasis, regulate the individual through strict behavioral, political, and social rules. This coercive environment drives the attempt of two young lovers who had pre-marital sexual relations to escape the rigid norms and violent punishment stipulated by the village's social and moral laws. The result of this attempt to flee is a permanent immobilisation of the lover's body (and, perhaps, a mobilisation of his spirit) when he is coldly executed by Nawal's brothers. The young woman would have suffered the same fate had it not been for the intervention of her grandmother, who confined her to bedrest for the duration of her pregnancy, entrusted the baby to the midwife, and sent Nawal away. From then on, the majority of Nawal's physical movements are similar: despite the terrible events



experienced by the protagonists, their movements are always privileged compared to those left behind. Nawal can study in the city, walk against the flow of refugees, and look for her son. She even finds a way to infiltrate a politician's family and assassinate him. Once released from prison, she and her twins take refuge in Canada. Nevertheless, it is after many years of exile that Nawal is im/mobilised, almost paralysed, and falls permanently silent, which contrasts with the combativeness and mobility that characterised her during her youth.

- 12 Initially led by the mathematician Jeanne, the twins' quest for their origins takes them across the Atlantic to the Middle East in search of clues, if not answers, to the history of their biological mother and father. This also entails a return to the parental homeland.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the immobility that began with the mother's death – the end of the body's autonomous mobility – is also a return to the beginning of the mother's mobility. Similarly, the mother's death also occasions the visit of the prison and, thus, a return to Jeanne's place of birth. It should be emphasised that, in *Incendies*, the female position is repeatedly one that, despite patriarchal obstacles, manages to be mobile and ignore male failures and abandonments.

## Psychological, Emotional, and Mathematical Im/mobilities

- 13 The search for origins involves both the exploration of the past to fill the empty spaces where family memory is absent due to trauma and the creation of personal memory. The psychological and emotional ruptures raise the question of how to continue to live in spite of the unbearable nature of the tragic revelations, tragic in the general as well as literary sense. In the film, psychological mobility derives from Nawal's and Nihad's ability to adapt to different situations throughout their lives. Their search for each other transforms the mother and her first son. Their only meeting is a fatal one: neither of them physically recognises the other. Unknowingly and unaware of each other, they find themselves on opposite sides of the war: the prisoner and the guard; the murderer who is punished and the torturer who goes unpunished. The twins' psychological mobility is then a matter of their adaptation to new information obtained after the death of their mother and its relation to the traces of their origins.
- 14 Psychological immobility is also often reflected at moments when the protagonist is stupefied. Indeed, the revelation of the truth provokes a terrible shock for most characters as they are confronted with the unspeakable. This discovery of the truth is reminiscent of the process of understanding incest in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*.<sup>20</sup> For, as soon as the mother and the twins become aware of the older son and brother, this knowledge gives rise to a feeling of horror, which, in this case, does not cause amazement but physical and linguistic inertia, dumbfoundedness, silence, and the manic stammering of word fragments, numbers, and unfinished thoughts. Learning about the truth fosters neither enlightenment nor happiness. On the contrary, it immobilises all movement. The psychological immobility or shock caused by traumatic realisations manifests itself physically, but above all it manifests itself as a crisis of language, a breakdown of speech, even aphasia and thus silence.
- 15 On stage, this phenomenon temporarily affects Jeanne and Simon.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, in the film the revelation of the truth spontaneously leads to psychological ruptures that

result in a convulsive verbal repetition of words and numbers, in a repetitive formulation of an impossible equation. Nevertheless, this repetition of sounds does not begin at this moment. In fact, it is a theme that runs through the film, beginning with Nawal's confinement until the birth of her first child and culminating in her imprisonment. Indeed, Nawal's nickname, "The Woman Who Sings," serves as the title of the film in a number of other languages.<sup>22</sup> She got this nickname in the Kfar Rayat prison, where she used to sing a monotonous and unmelodious song, the repetitive lullaby "Nami" by Marcel Khalife, in order not to succumb to the recurring torture she suffered and heard. The lullaby diverts Nawal's thoughts and carries them beyond the sounds and screams of the tortured. Moreover, the song gives her agency, saves her from madness, and imaginatively takes her into a different world. However, this method simultaneously puts her in even greater peril, because the guards interpret her singing, her audible presence, as an act of open defiance against the regime. Although the repetitive, monotonous song appears to signify the prisoner's incarceration, it keeps her body and mind active and mobile despite the confinement. Moreover, this extraordinary strategy later serves to communicate crucial information to her daughter.



Figure 3. Nawal realizes the full extent of her familial tragedy in the swimming pool (top); Jeanne and Simon crawl after realizing the full extent of their familial tragedy (bottom). Denis Villeneuve (dir.), *Incendies*, 2010.

- 16 For Nawal and the twins, understanding and responding to a new discovery during their quest is directly associated with different configurations of im/mobilities. In the film, one place associated with mobility without movement is the swimming pool. A square with a watertight edge and a fixed water volume that is constantly replenished, the pool is full of swimmers who are in continual motion without geographically moving. For Nawal, a Canadian municipal swimming pool becomes a place of petrification, permanent silence, and psychic decompensation. For the twins, a pool in



a Lebanese hotel eventually becomes the site of recognition. First, however, they seem transfixed, sitting on a bed in their hotel room, while trying to understand an apparently impossible numerical logic. Their momentary stillness is not only psychological but caused by a mathematical conundrum because, as they say, “One plus one is one.”

- 17 Indeed, the calculation one plus one equals one is significant for various reasons. For one thing, it refers to a mathematical procedure known as the Collatz conjecture, which is not, however, explicitly named in the play when it is presented by Jeanne to her brother in a crucial scene of recognition.<sup>23</sup> For another, it symbolises the tragic ignorance of a torturer who, without knowing it, repeatedly rapes and abuses his own mother and thereby becomes at once brother and father to the children he fathers with his mother while remaining her son. The possibility of one plus one being one is an impossibility yet becomes tragically possible in the film. A mathematical poetics,<sup>24</sup> this calculation generates an addition without any increase, an addition that does not exceed the initial number, an addition without movement. In the film, which reduces the numbers game, the twins seek to escape the horror of the truth of their biological father/brother as they plunge into the hotel pool and perform a desperate crawl stroke. As they realise the fact of their incestuous origins, the twins begin to understand their mother’s sudden silence, and it is the audience’s role to differentiate between Nawal’s final state of apathy and the militant anger that animates her as a young woman. Outwardly silent and immobile, she is shaken to her core by these revelations.

## Sociocultural and Political Im/mobilities

- 18 Both as play and film, *Incendies* represents war. By showing soldiers and refugees without situating them in particular histories, by showing anger without tracing its origins, the film invites the audience to make up their own stories and contexts. Consequently, it is not a political film in the militant sense of the term: it does not take sides. Rather, the position taken is one of forgiveness, redemption, and peace. For instance, in the play, several people talk about the need to “break the thread” of anger.<sup>25</sup> In the film, however, the possibility of forgiveness and peace is mediated only through images that reflect the protagonists’ state of immobilised shock caused by the horror and violence of war and the traumas that result from it. Nevertheless, a strategy of movement and stillness is equally important to understanding the film’s political, social, and cultural representations of im/mobilities.
- 19 Nawal’s movement from her native village to the city and the university is not only a geographical movement from the South to the North; it is also a movement in the topology of the film,<sup>26</sup> an *event*<sup>27</sup> that leads to social, cultural, and intellectual change. That this movement also implies a political change is made visible through Nawal’s return in search of her son: because of her fashionable Western clothes, she clearly stands out from other women. In a crucial scene, when she takes a bus after finding the orphanage destroyed, she shows the kind of flexibility her social (intellectual and religious) position offers her: hiding her cross and veiling herself, she transforms herself into a Muslim and enters a bus full of refugees. Soon thereafter, she escapes death by showing this same cross to the Christian militia that coldly kill the passengers of the bus, including children. Similarly, in Canada, her role as a secretary in a lawyer’s

firm affords her a better position than many other immigrants have. Nevertheless, despite her survival skills, she remains threatened by an ever-present violent carceral system and human rights violations and therefore occupies a dangerous and precarious social position.

- 20 For the twins who grew up in Canada, the great moment of im/mobility is surely the return to their native country. Without speaking the local language and knowing the social codes, Jeanne bears the burden of her inherited cultural differences and her mother's past although neither of the twins is accepted in their mother's former community.<sup>28</sup> For both, the return reveals what they do *not* know and thus an experience of profound disconnection. Socially, the twins do not seem mobile enough; their position is not one of radical social mobility, but her mother's last will unsettles their lives and questions their sedentary and safely uneventful life in Canada. Jeanne risks falling down the social ladder when she abandons her doctoral studies in mathematics to go to Lebanon. This issue of social change related to a personal quest is addressed more explicitly in the play, in which Simon is a more complex character, an amateur boxer training (unsuccessfully) to become a professional. Indeed, Simon is worried about Jeanne, whom he advises against accepting the will and going in search of their origins. At the same time, the lawyer advises Simon to go on a quest with him to work through his traumas that prevent him from moving forward and creating the right conditions for a boxing career.<sup>29</sup>
- 21 Considering the ways in which the film represents political im/mobilities, it is possible to argue that *Incendies* demonstrates "a new cosmopolitan consciousness and a transnational turn in Quebec cinema."<sup>30</sup> However, a distinction must be made between host country and country of origin. In the former, the apparently successful integration of the three asylum seekers reveals an international and cosmopolitan community. In the latter, the civil war disrupts both the stasis and calcification of rural rigour and the mobility of politicised protest, academic intellectual life, and creativity in urban spaces. In a way, the difference between rural and urban Lebanese spaces, as well as the two lifestyles related to these spaces, are destroyed. The violence that is unleashed generates, as we have seen, many physical and psychological displacements. However, at the level of politics, the violence of civil war has not brought about any great changes, only an endless war of reciprocal violence and its share of political assassinations, imprisonments, tortures, summary executions, reprisals, rapes, and child recruitments. It is the population that suffers the violent dislocations, the forced mobility caused by the war and its ultimate lack of direction; it leads to immobility, political stasis, and the coercive regulations of human movement. In the end, everything changes because of the war, but nothing changes because of the war.

## Cinematographic Im/mobilities

- 22 Until the digitisation of film, cinematography necessarily operated through the duality of immobility (i.e., the still photograph or frame) and mobility (i.e., the filmed photograph) in the material production of film itself: 24 photographs/frames on a film strip yield one second of animated images for a projection. Indeed, film is mobilised immobility. In the case of *Incendies*, the director's bias, in collaboration with cinematographer André Turpin, seems to be projected onto the movement of the narrative and the cinematic shot, a complicated movement with radical temporal

changes accomplished by ellipses, analepses, and prolepses, by quests and paralyses.<sup>31</sup> Within this aesthetic field, the progress of the quest leads to a contrary movement, from the present to the hidden information of the past, to the mystery of the twins' birth. Indeed, a form of cinematic im/mobility resurfaces repeatedly in *Incendies* in the form of long-lasting, even generational, prolepses and analepses, particularly between the mother and daughter during their time in southern Lebanon. Cuts and counter-cuts, and scenes in which the clothing, technology, amenities, and decorations are the only elements giving clues to the era in question (before the clear appearance of one of the protagonists), lose the viewer in the chronotope and encourage reflection on the links between scenes. These difficulties in identifying the situation as well as the continuation in time play with cinematic time and im/mobility. This ambiguity, which leaves room for misunderstandings, is accentuated by the repetition of identical shots linking different temporalities.

- 23 A striking example of temporal leaps, that is, of structural and visual parallels that together generate cinematic im/mobility, is the repetition of the same framing (high-angle establishing shot of a road crossing the opposite hill, sun, dry earth) in which a white bus moves twice in the same direction; the repetition creates an echo and superimposes the daughter's journey onto that of the mother. We can see that for a young woman visibly adapted to living in Beirut in the 1970s, the journey to the south of Lebanon is – precisely because of this cinematic repetition – just as alienating as a foreign woman's journey without local cultural and linguistic skills in the 2000s. This scene is typical of the framing in the Lebanese part of the film: rural and urban landscapes are captured in panoramic shots evoking Orientalist visions of tranquillity and timelessness.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the Canadian scenes can be interpreted as deterritorialised, generic, and anonymous third spaces of suburbanity.<sup>33</sup> The reduced extradiegetic sound, too, presents parallels and paralyses; a single song is the primary support of the auditory universe of the diegesis: “You and Whose Army?” by Radiohead comes from another linguistic, cultural, and musical space. However, like the Lebanese lullaby “Nami,” repetitions of sound, in addition to those embedded in the diegesis, form an acoustic and musical im/mobility that complements the visual and narrative im/mobility of the story.
- 24 The cinematic elements that construct im/mobility always contain a metafictional aspect as they expose their own constructedness. This is particularly visible and complex in a scene where photographs apparently hold a historiographical value in the narration before being exposed as contemporaneous and political photographs in an editorial office at the time of their creation. This shift establishes an intermedial negotiation between photography – an immobilised moment – and filmography – the recreation of visual fluidity through the rapid succession of images. In this scene, and throughout the film, aesthetics opens towards an ethical question. Reading André Habib's harsh criticism of a previous Villeneuve film, *Polytechnique*,<sup>34</sup> which Bruno Dequen takes up again in his critique of *Incendies*, we may legitimately ask ourselves whether horror can be narrated adequately, in cinematically convincing ways, or whether, in this case, “the aesthetics of the filmmaker are in conflict with the ethical modesty that such a subject demands.”<sup>35</sup> However, the desire to represent brutality only in an ugly light is reductive. A well-orchestrated aesthetic and narrative strategy is essential, especially in a film in which fatal blindness and character immobility, repetitive actions, and intertextual tradition – from tragedy to war film – must

coexist. This strategy is particularly evident in a scene in which the main character understands everything but her daughter and the audience remain ignorant.

## The Central Scene: Recognition in the Community Pool

- 25 In Canada, Nawal interrupts her swimming in a public pool when she sees the heel of a man's foot, tattooed with three vertically arranged black dots. The camera's perspective here adopts the instabilities, restricted perspectives, and low angles of the swimmers. The viewer, who has already witnessed the moment when the grandmother tattooed the newborn through a close-up, understands immediately that he is her long-lost son.<sup>36</sup> Nawal emerges from the pool with calm but feverish movements, passes a group of men at the edge of the pool without talking to the man with the tattoo, and sits motionless, with a blank stare, on a deck chair. It takes the whole film for the audience to discover the unspeakable reason why this woman suddenly becomes petrified in this very moment that leads to the resolution of various existential questions. In the water, she recognises the heel of the newborn baby her grandmother had tattooed with this distinctive sign. It is her son's heel. At the same time, and this is where the problem lies, she recognises him, out of the water, as her torturer and rapist. The scene is thus used to generate a double awareness: from behind, this man is the son she has found, whose foot is marked; from the front, the same man has the face of her former torturer.



Figure 4. The tattoo on the man's foot from Nawal's perspective in the swimming pool. Denis Villeneuve (dir.), *Incendies*, 2010.

- 26 This double awareness exists on both physical and metaphorical levels, and it includes a cognitive and emotional temporal aspect, in this order: the hope of the encounter turns into the horror of the encounter. The acoustics of the scene, the slightly muffled background sound of the public swimming pool and the silence of the protagonist, give the scene a surrealist atmosphere. Indeed, this opening scene is almost silent; everything is played out in Nawal's eyes. No words are spoken, everything is visual. The focus is on the stupefaction of the character in a state of shock. The recognition of the facts is unbearable. The lighting of the scene, the raw summer light reflected in the water of the pool, responds to the Enlightenment's use of light as a symbol of

knowledge and reason within the process of enlightening the darkness of superstition and ignorance; its blinding quality further illustrates the challenging demands of recognition as a search process. In terms of verisimilitude, the pool is important as it increases the likelihood that Nawal will see her son's bare foot, making the sight of the tattoo plausible. The scene has different symbolic dimensions: the pool as a womb and a return to the maternal womb contrasts with the image of the public pool as a shared space where the opposing sides of a civil war meet; the 'deep end' of the pool signifies the depths of the unconscious. Furthermore, im/mobility reappears in the fluidity of water: the pool as water in constant motion contrasts with the solidity and impermeability of the pool walls. Swimming in a pool also enacts im/mobility: swimming laps is indeed to move without actually moving.

- 27 Cinematically, it matters that the pool scene is repeated. It is with this repetition that the dramaturgical centrality of a double recognition is represented in the visual language of the film. Firstly, the Canadian swimming pool reappears later in the film, but in a different form: in winter, the pool looks abandoned; it is empty and no one swims there. Without water, the pool can, at best, be used for other purposes, but it is not used for swimming. The shot of the empty pool is inserted into the actions surrounding the mother's death. It becomes a place of desolation and a place of memory of the beginning of the end. Secondly, the cinematic use of the pool as a place of recognition where the characters react to a painful situation also returns: when the twins, and in particular Simon, understand the truth, it is the swimming pool of the hotel in the country of their birth that serves as a place of release. Unlike their mother, they react to this painful realisation by swimming vigorously. Simon's violent crawl is reminiscent of Xerxes, who has the sea whipped. The effect of these parallel scenes is that the mother's non-violent, silent, and ultimately elaborate reaction contrasts sharply with the twins' emotional responses.

## Oscillations of Im/mobility

- 28 In my memory, this crucial scene was the first of the film. This is obviously not true. The scene in the Canadian public pool is rather the beginning of a process, that of the resolution of a shattering mystery, an atypical discovery: one and one equals one. The three dots on the heel entering the field of vision at the edge of the pool mark the emergence of a tragic misunderstanding of both the trajectory of Nawal's search and the identity of her torturer that unleashes silence in life and generates three letters in death. By ending Nawal's quest and provoking Jeanne and Simon's, this scene is crucial to the cinematic narrative.
- 29 The film's first scene, however, is a different one. The camera shows a panorama of an arid mountainous landscape with palm trees moving in the wind. It then slowly tracks backwards to reveal a broken window and the interior of a classroom. As it pans horizontally to show the shaving of beaten children guarded by armed men, it becomes evident that these are forcibly conscripted child soldiers. In their midst is a child whose tattooed heel is emphasised by a close-up as hair falls beside it. Indeed, the first and last scenes echo each other: both show the one who is looked for, the man with the three-dot tattoo, Nihad or Abu Tarek or whatever he decides to call himself. The end of the film shows him as a middle-aged man standing at Nawal's tombstone. Here again, the oscillation of im/mobility becomes apparent: the wanted man must undergo radical



changes and yet continue to live without a mother, at the mercy of (another) horror for the rest of his life.



Figure 5. The end: Nawal's first son at her grave. Denis Villeneuve (dir.), *Incendies*, 2010.

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## NOTES

1. Greenblatt, Stephen, "A Mobility Studies Manifesto", in Stephen Greenblatt et al. (ed.) *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 250-253, here pp. 250-252.
2. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.
3. Among them, prizes in Adélaïde, Sudbury, Portland, Rotterdam, Valladolid, Vancouver, and Warsaw (International Movie Database, "Incendies – Awards". <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1255953/awards>, accessed 13 April 2023. "Before he arrived in Hollywood, Villeneuve had established himself as a major force in Québec [...]. *Incendies* [...] had garnered international attention, including an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film in 2011." Amy J. Ransom "The Director's Cut: Denis Villeneuve Before *Blade Runner 2049*", *Science Fiction Film and Television*, vol. 13, n°1, 2020, pp. 119-127, here p. 119.
4. *Résistante* "recounts the evolution of a political and military activist, an athletic young pacifist who spent 10 years in Khiam prison, six in solitary confinement. With the withdrawal of Israeli forces in the south of Lebanon in 2000, Khaim [sic] prison was liberated by the local population." Lynne D. Rogers, "Stark Narratives of Memory: Souha Béchara's *Résistante* and Elias Sanbar's *Le Bien des absents*", *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 72, Fall 2005, pp. 95-104; here pp. 99-100.
5. "For western readers, her unadorned narrative elucidates a committed pacifist's choice of violence, renders a more comprehensive view of the Lebanese war and dispels several popular stereotypes." Rogers. "Narratives", p. 100.
6. Rogers, "Narratives", p. 95.
7. The Lebanese-born Franco-Quebec playwright studied in Quebec, where he acted, wrote, and directed numerous plays; he is now a theatre director in Paris (Catherine Khordoc, "Visibility

Graphs and Blindspots: Wajdi Mouawad's *Incendies* and its Mathematical Poetics", *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 30, n°4, 2019, pp. 307-316, here pp. 307-308.)

8. "[L]a quête de soi qui participe à la formation des écritures dramatique et scénique de cette production s'incarne avec force dans une mise en scène qui suscite la créativité des spectateurs." Esther Pelletier, Irène Roy, "Incendies': Évoquer pour susciter l'imaginaire et montrer plutôt que dire", *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, vol. 30, n° 2, Autumn 2015, pp. 111-128, here p. 112. ["The quest for the self that helps shape the dramatic and scenic writing of this production is forcefully embodied in a staging that sparks the creativity of the audience." (Translator's translation)]

9. Nawal, Wahab, Sawda, Abdessamad, Chamseddine, and surprisingly "JEANNE. Non ! Non ! Ce n'est pas ça ! Ce n'est pas nous ! Je m'appelle Jeanne et mon frère, Simon. [/] MALAK. Janaane et Sarwane..." in Wajdi Mouawad, *Incendies. Le Sang des promesses / 2. Nouvelle édition. Postface de Charlotte Farcet*, Montréal/Arles, Leméac Éditeur/Actes Sud, p. 100.

10. Puis il y a eu l'invasion du pays par l'armée étrangère. Ils sont montés jusqu'au Nord." Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 123.

11. "[U]n minutieux travail d'épuration du texte original pour [...] plonger le spectateur dans un univers fictionnel réaliste [et pour] montrer plutôt qu'évoquer, comme le fait Mouawad, la quête des origines entreprise par les protagonistes." Pelletier and Roy, "Incendies", p.112.

12. In the spirit of Edward Said and his pioneering book *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978.

13. For a summary of criticism of the film's highly aestheticised visuality, which often elicits touristic perspectives on Lebanon, cf. Claudia Kotte "Zero Degrees of Separation: Post-Exilic Return in Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*", in Rebecca Prime (ed.) *Cinematic Homecomings: Exile and Return in Transnational Cinema*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, pp. 287-302, here pp. 299-300.

14. This change is troubling in that it repeats orientalist and sexist stereotypes that the autobiography seeks to contest: "Her intelligent story immediately shatters the banal dichotomy between the submissive Arab female and the fundamentalist martyr. In her Epilogue, Béchara dismisses the notion of an activist being a brainwashed robot. Taking full responsibility for her action, she observes that: 'Aucun endoctrinement ne peut pousser à agir celui ou celle qui ne croit pas à la cause, qui ne l'a pas comprise, qui n'a pas décidé de la vivre jusqu'au bout.' (199) Nor does she find any of the nationalistic glory in battle and maintains the simple truth that "La guerre est folle." (49) And perhaps more importantly, her actions defy the portrayal of the Lebanese War as a civil conflict between Muslims and Christians. While these tensions did and do exist, the reduction of this international strife of 20 years to a religious conflict becomes another cynical mask justifying foreign military aggression under the guise of security concerns." Rogers, "Narratives", p. 100.

15. International Movie Data Base, "Incendies". <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1255953/>, accessed 13 April 2023.

16. The theatrical version does not involve the murder of Wahab, the young lover of Nawal (a 14- or 15-year-old girl), but their capitulation to the village system.

17. In the play, the mother Jihan is the dominant force demanding submission. As a grandmother, Nazira is a benevolent ally who wants Nawal to learn to read, write, and count and, in addition, to speak and think (cf. Mouawad, *Incendies*, pp. 35-42). It is she who, in her last words, anticipates those of Nawal: "Toi, Nawal, quand tu sauras, reviens et grave mon nom sur la pierre 'Nazira'. Grave mon nom car j'ai tenu mes promesses." Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 42.

18. With André Gardiés one could distinguish between four kinds of cinematic spaces: the "cinematographic space" of the place of screening, the "diegetic space," which "the film constructs as a reality independent of the story," the "narrative space[,] the specific spatiality of the characters, which contributes to giving substance to the story in which they are involved," and the "viewer space[,] the spatiality produced by the mode of communication that the film

adopts”; Lévy stresses a “narrative/diegesis duality,” “a clear difference between the second and third of these. [D]iegetic space poses problems in terms of following the action” as it “cannot be reduced to the movements of the characters who use it and pass through it,” while narrative space “is a framework for the action and has no meaning apart from the action.” Jacques Lévy, “On Space in Cinema”, *Annales de géographie*, vol. 694, iss. 6, 2013, pp. 689-711, here pp. 690-1.

19. This thinly veiled intertextual allusion to Aimé Césaire’s famous work (*Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1939) is deliberate: the reason behind it is the difficulty to return to the country of origin that does not welcome you with open arms.

20. Sophocles, *The Theban Plays: Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone*, Trans. George Young, Ed. T. N. R. Rogers, Newburyport, Dover Publications, 2006.

21. “HERMILE LEBEL. Il n’a toujours pas dit un mot. Il est resté avec Chamseddine et quand il est sorti, Jeanne, votre frère avait le regard de votre mère. [...] On a peut-être trop poussé pour connaître la vérité.” Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 120.

22. For example, the title in German is *Die Frau die singt - Incendies*, in Italian *La donna che canta*, in Portuguese *Incendies - A mulher que canta*.

23. In the play, the twin affirms that “En mathématiques, 1 + 1 ne font pas 1,9 ou 2,2. Ils font 2. Que vous y croyiez ou pas, ils font 2.” Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 30. This thread will be followed when Simon asks Jeanne : “Tu m’as toujours dit que un plus un font deux. Est-ce que c’est vrai ? [...] Ça ne peut jamais faire un ? [/] JEANNE. Qu’est-ce que tu as trouvé, Simon ? [/] SIMON. Un plus un, est-ce que ça peut faire un ? [/] JEANNE. Oui. [/] SIMON. Comment ça ? [...] JEANNE. [...] Il y a une conjecture très étrange en mathématiques. [...] Peu importe le chiffre de départ, on arrive à... Non ! [/] SIMON. Tu te tais. Comme je me suis tu quand j’ai compris.” Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 122.

24. Khordoc, “Visibility”, p. 314.

25. Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 42.

26. The film does not exhibit any decolonial topology: the South is still the place of violence, of a society marked by rigour, while the North is the place of academic institutions, of openness to the world, and of exile.

27. In the sense of crossing a border between two divided semantic spaces. (cf. Jurij Michajlovič Lotman, *La structure du texte artistique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973).

28. The most striking shock occurs in the village where their mother was born: she is not welcomed by the women of the village as Nawal's daughter. However, it is not clear whether this is because her mother had premarital sex or because she tried to assassinate a politician.

29. “SIMON. Je ne serai pas capable de le chercher, de le trouver ! [/] HERMILE LEBEL. Mais si, vous allez être capable ! Vous êtes boxeur ! [/] SIMON. Amateur. Je suis boxeur amateur. Je n’ai jamais fait un combat professionnel. [/] HERMILE LEBEL. Je vais vous aider [...]. On le retrouvera, votre frère ! J’en suis sûr. Peut-être que ça va vous aider à vivre, à vous battre, à gagner, à devenir professionnel. Je crois à ça ! C’est dans le cosmos, ces affaires-là ! Faut faire confiance.” Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 105.

30. “[U]ne nouvelle conscience cosmopolite et même un tournant transnational dans le cinéma québécois” Kotte, “Zero”, p. 288. [“A new cosmopolitan consciousness and a transnational turn in Quebec cinema” (Translator’s translation)].

31. “Like the original play, the film’s mythic framework stretches the limits of standard chronology, and its elliptical narrative and stunning photography (by Villeneuve’s long-time teammate, André Turpin), sealed Villeneuve’s status as a Québécois auteur.” Ransom, “Director’s Cut”, p. 119.

32. Kotte, “Zero”, p. 293; p. 296.

33. Kotte, “Zero”, p. 294.

34. André Habib, “Mortes tous les après-midis - retour sur Polytechnique”. <https://horschamp.qc.ca/article/mortes-tous-les-aprs-midis>, accessed 13 April 2023.

35. “[L]’esthétique du cinéaste entre en conflit avec la pudeur éthique qu’un tel sujet demande.” Bruno Dequen, “Au mauvais endroit”, *24 images*, vol. 148, 2010, p. 62. [“The aesthetics of the filmmaker are in conflict with the ethical modesty that such a subject demands.” (Translator’s translation)].

36. This idea of the tattoo differs entirely from the play in which a clown nose, a gift from the father to the young mother, serves as a sign of recognition : “Les gens qui m’ont vu grandir m’ont toujours dit que cet objet était une trace de mes origines, de ma dignité en quelque sorte, puisque, d’après l’histoire, il m’a été donné par ma mère. Un petit nez rouge. Un petit nez de clown.” Mouawad, *Incendies*, p. 125.

## ABSTRACTS

The dramatic film *Incendies* (2010) by Denis Villeneuve initiates and complexifies a discussion of the tension between mobility and immobility that is linked to tensions between conviviality and conflict, forgiveness and revenge, diaspora and exile. The present article argues that the tension and extension of an oscillating in-between captured by the term *im/mobility* pervades the film on multiple levels. Consequently, the film’s portrayal and use of physical, psychological, emotional, mathematical, cultural, and political - but also cinematographic - im/mobilities are discussed in detail. While the focus on im/mobility allows us to uncover layers of this film that usually remain covered by a story that is extremely hard to digest, the film’s use of the tension and oscillation of im/mobility offers important insights into its dramaturgic, political, aesthetic, and cinematographic potential.

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