

## Book review

### Sébastien Fevry/Serge Goriely/Arnaud Join-Lambert (eds.), *Regards croisés sur Incendies*

Du théâtre de Mouawad au cinéma de Villeneuve. Louvain-la-Neuve:  
L'Harmattan 2016, 138 pages, ISBN: 978-2-8061-0281-2

INCENDIES (FIRES, Denis Villeneuve, CN/FR 2011) is a feature film that offers striking interpretative resonances as we seek to understand extreme violence in the contemporary world, for it highlights religious legitimization, war, exile, the quest for identity, and the desire to stop this destructive, nihilistic turmoil. Through the art of film, this outstanding work establishes a disturbing tension between the realistic images of film and the universalization of violence as an aspect of the human condition.

The film deals with the excessively violent heritage of a female character, Nawal Marwan, during a civil war in an undefined Near Eastern country. Having lived through an endless series of highly traumatic experiences that included the murder of her lover by her brothers, the abandonment of her first child, a massacre, the killing of a party leader, jail, torture, rape, and the birth of her twins in jail, Marwan finally leaves her country for Canada, where she raises her children, works as a secretary, and eventually dies. In an unconventional testament, she calls on her twins, Jeanne and Simon, to confront their origins, for posthumously she asks them to find their father and brother and give them a letter.

In narrating their quest for their unknown relatives in a world on which violence has left indelible marks, the film analyses the response to their terrifying inheritance by a generation born in exile, by people both geographically and psychologically distant from the war and its consequences. The film expresses in a metaphorical and universal tragic language the challenge of confronting such a violent history. The film's references to civil war function variously, with its presentation of war realistic but unspecific. The film itself is an adaptation of the stageplay *Incendies* by Lebanese author Wajdi Mouawad, first performed in 2003.

The film does not adopt the step-by-step narrative of the play. Instead, it responds to the play by exploring tragedy as a possible framework for expressing the constraints and challenges of the human condition as it encounters war and

collective and individual violence. How can people living in exile understand and overcome a heritage of revenge and violent annihilation? How can they deal with the merciless circumstances of their birth?

The volume under review discusses the film *INCENDIES* (2011) in an interdisciplinary setting and presents the results of a project by Cinespi, a research group dedicated to film, religion, and spirituality that is based at the Université catholique de Louvain (see <https://www.uclouvain.be/360857.html>). The book offers deep insight not only into the film, its complex narrative structure, and stylistic choices for images and sound, but also into the screenplay. Furthermore, the comparison with the different versions of Mouawad's play allows an interpretation of the film in dialogue with the text of the drama and with the varied performances of the play on stage. In the edited volume, the film is contextualized within the filmography of Canadian director Denis Villeneuve and considered in light of reception processes around the world.

Drawn from a variety of disciplines, the contributions are part of a systematic, well-structured approach to the complexity of the film and to its inspiration in both history and the theatre. Viewed in this light, the volume can be considered an outstanding example of a successful, stimulating interdisciplinary exchange between theology, ethics, media, cinema and performance studies, French literature, and mathematics.

The first contribution, by Serge Goriely, introduces the different references in *INCENDIES*, to history, particularly to the civil war in Lebanon, and to Mouawad's play. By highlighting the stylistic and technical characteristics of the filmic adaptation, he stresses the film's independent contribution as it forms a complex relationship with the theatre. The comparison between film and play is embedded in a revealing discussion of theoretical works, particularly those of Gilles Deleuze and André Bazin.

The comparison between theatre and film is enriched by an illuminating analysis of the screenplay that is seen as a further aspect of the inter-medial project developed around *Incendies*. Sensitive to the tension between theatre as text and theatre as performance on stage and analysing transformations of the screenplay during the production of the film, Gabrielle Tremblay understands the adaption of the theatre play as a dynamic process.

The next chapters are dedicated to analysis of the film. Sylvie Bissonnette considers the use of character doubles within Villeneuve's work. Aurélie Palud scrutinises the strategy deployed in *INCENDIES*, in particular at the aesthetic level, to stage the uncovering of the truth and the related transformation. Arnaud Join-Lambert's article concentrates on the role and significance of the notary, a central character in the film, who assumes a sacred connotation. The chapters by Sébastien Fevry and Marc Klugkist respond to the function and significance of genre aspects in this film, a "tragedy" in classical terms, with explicit refer-

ences to the figure of Oedipus. Jean Van Schaftingen's contribution explains the dramaturgic role of mathematics in *INCENDIES*. Jeanne, one of the protagonists, is a mathematician, and mathematical problems are combined with the narrative on many levels. The discussion of the mathematical problems that are staged within the film and Van Schaftingen's diegesis therefore offer deep insight into the construction of the film. The chapter by Jean-Luc Maroy focuses on explicit religious references in *INCENDIES*, not only in the form of explicit religious symbols, but also in the interaction between religious communities and violence, with fundamental categories such as "revelation" and "promise" crucial. The analysis of Villeneuve's film is completed by the contribution by Walter Lesch, who reads the filmic narration from an ethical perspective and focuses on the role of the testament and its essential function in sustaining the characters in their search for identity.

The volume concludes with research by Patricia Cortes on the reception of the film by selected groups of women in Bolivia.

The well-written essays are worth reading, but the volume is worth more than the sum of its parts. Taken as a collective project, the book as a whole highlights the artistic complexity of the different forms of staging for Mouawad's theatrical play. The film appears as a narrative and aesthetic performance in dialogue with the text and mise-en-scènes of *Incendies*. This broader inter-medial project is presented as an artistic attempt to deal with universal and crucial aspects of the human condition, especially in the specific context of religiously motivated violence. In this sense, the book emphasises the ability of the arts to elaborate historical experience.

This volume is recommended highly, not only as a critical reading of the work of Villeneuve and Mouawad, but also as a stepping stone in preparing academic courses on religion, violence, and exile.

## FILMOGRAPHY

*INCENDIES* (FIRES, Denis Villeneuve, CN/FR 2011).

