

# Incendies: Trauma and the Gray Zone in Denis Villeneuve Film

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**Abstract**— Based on the homonymous play by the Lebanese Wadji Mouawad, the film *Incendies* (2009) has as premise the search of a twin couple, Jeanne and Simon, for the life, and death, story of their mother Nawal - after she goes into a catatonic state. Against the backdrop of Denis Villeneuve's film, our proposal, in this article is to deal with the effects of trauma for both Nawal and her children Jeanne, Simon and Abou Tarek / Nihad in the two places he occupies: son and father of his brothers. We will start with the definition of trauma proposed by Sigmund Freud, in which he defines trauma as a stimulus that exceeds our capacity for assimilation and, based on this definition, we will deal with the ideas about trauma attributed to the psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, in which he divides it in two: the structuring trauma and the destructuring or invalidating trauma. It will be on the basis of these divisions that we will build a justification for the catatonic state of Nawal and the reason that she would have to include her children (all of them) in its history full of "fires".

**Keywords**— Denial, *Incendies*, Gray Zone, Trauma.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Is one plus one equal to one? In the universe of Denis Villeneuve's film, in a stunning update of Sophocles' Oedipus, this question is answered in the affirmative, as much astonishment it causes. In this sense, mathematical language is called upon to support a solution to one of the most striking enigmas of humanity: parricide and incest. The use of mathematical principles to shed light on existential dramas is notorious.

The film begins in an oracular tone with the presence of a notary public who seems to be the embodiment of the figure of Tiresias who, when reading the testament, makes an enunciation: he delivers two letters and tells the dead woman's twins children that they must be delivered to their brother and father respectively. Difficult situation regarding the discovery of the existence of a living father and brother, especially at the moment when the mother who could speak is dead.

The oracular sentence that determines the delivery of said letters to their addressees is a sine qua non condition for the completion of the funeral ritual with the placement of a headstone, since the mother leaves one of her promises to her children: find her first child. And if the promise is not paid, a tombstone cannot be placed in her grave; the mother was buried without prayers, naked and with her

face turned to the ground, because she was indebted to this unfulfilled promise in life.

The destiny traced due to the delivery of the letters generates a conflict between the twins: the sister is willing to carry out the mother's request and the brother refuses. In a way, this sentence puts the two of them on a route that when traveling they make important discoveries: unveil the mother's past through a history marked by mishaps, pain, violence, suffering and torture, to finally arrive at the whereabouts of the brother who is also their father.

One of the lines of the movie of the character Jeanne who embarked on the paths of mathematics is quite illuminating in this respect: "will be discussed Insoluble problems that will always lead you to other equally insoluble problems". It was the endeavor to unravel the enigmas of their mother's life story that the two characters, Simon and Jeanne, were faced with horror against an unbearable knowledge to be known, even though they were warned by a school janitor that "sometimes it's better not to know everything".

At this point, the stories of the mother and the twins come together in a meeting marked by trauma, since this mother was silent after discovering that the son she seeks to find was her torturer and father of her two children. Here is very strong evidence that had an immediate traumatic

effect: erase the ability to transmit the revelation that Nawal faced. Certainly, that would be a finding that would impose on their children to walk on dark paths, gather filigree of knowledge and finally, in an instant of seeing, witness the shock suffered by the father/brother at the moment when he faced these certainties.

It was in the waters that the mystery was revealed to Nawal. This, a middle-aged woman, inside a community pool observes the feet of people on the outside edge of the pool. Among several feet, she sees the unmistakable mark tattooed on her son's right heel on the day of his birth, which crossed time as a mark of memory. Mother and son were separated at the moment he was born, and now they were reunited due to this uneven look. Upon leaving the pool and getting close to her son, Nawal recognizes another person in his countenance as well: her torturer and rapist during the period she spent in a prison in the Middle East. With this information the woman cannot elaborate in her psyche the cruel Discovery, that is, she cannot create a sense of what she is seeing and what is being unveiled at that very moment through the processing of the gaze. Faced with such impotence before the evidences verified, Nawal entered a catatonic and silence state until the moment of her death.

But David Villeneuve's film doesn't start there. Based on the homonymous play by Lebanese Canada-based Wadji Mouawad, the film *Incendies* (2009) has as premise the search of the twin couple, Jeanne and Simon, for the story of life, and death, of their mother Nawal. This, after her precocious and unexpected death leaves the responsibility of her executor to entrust his children with two functions: locate from her hometown - some unspecified place in the Middle East, most likely Lebanon - their unknown father, who they believed to be dead, and a brother they did not know existed.

To understand the relationship between the functions left by their mother, through the will, and her death, the twins must begin through her past. From a fragmented story, between scenes from their mother's past and the twins' present, they discover that Nawal, due to her own traumas, hid most of her life and the lives of her own children. Counting that Nawal's past was full of traumatic experiences, it was to be expected that she would struggle with all her strength to get away from that world geographically and subjectively.

Nawal, from a Christian family, born in a country divided by ethnic-religious conflict, unnamed nation in the Middle East, becomes pregnant by a Muslim refugee, the latter, killed by Nawal brothers when they learned about the romance. The child, who is born in secret thanks to the

interference of the great-grandmother, is taken to an orphanage, not without first receiving a distinctive mark, three points tattooed vertically on the heel, to one day be recognized, perhaps by the mother. Nawal, in fact, finds him again.

Our proposal, in this article, is to deal with the effects of traumas for both Nawal and her children Jeanne, Simon and Abou Tarek / Nihad in the two places he occupies: son and father of his brothers. These traumas are gradually unveiled over the course of the film's history by the discoveries of the twins. We will start with the definition of trauma proposed by Sigmund Freud, in which he defines trauma as a stimulus that exceeds our capacity for assimilation, or, in his own terms, "An experience that brings to mind, in a short period of time, an increase in stimulus too big to be absorbed" (FREUD, [1917]1976, p. 335). From this definition we will deal with the ideas about trauma attributed to the psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, in which he divides it in two (PINHEIRO, 1995): structuring trauma and destructuring or invalidating trauma. It will be based on these divisions that we will build a justification for the catatonic state of Nawal in the pool and the reason that she would have to include her children (all of them) in her history full of "fires" (incendies).

## II. THE ISSUE OF TRAUMA

In psychoanalytic writings, since Freud, the traumatic event can present itself in different ways, including different types of aggressions, any serious event, "or even any harmful chronic situation" (DOIN, 2005, p.2). What matters to Freud is that these events go beyond the capacity for assimilation, that is, of psychic elaboration of the individuals who experience them. These traumas are not necessarily of a sexual nature. From the observation of Austrian soldiers returning from the First World War, who despite many tormenting memories were unable to talk about them, Freud identifies that experiences of war, social and political violence can also be seen as traumatic, as everyone who participates in it is invaded by stimuli that they cannot assimilate or represent.

In this sphere, the German philosopher and essayist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) writes, in his well-known text *The narrator* (1936/1994), that the experience would be on the verge of extinction and, with that, the modern human being would be losing the ability to elaborate as a true experience (Erfahrung) what he lives. This is because the transformations - technological, ethical, aesthetic, perceptual, etc. - that occurred from Modernity would have caused a profound change in the structure of experience. We would no longer have the ability to integrate

perceptions with our individual and collective memories, that is, with the wisdom accumulated historically. It is this capacity for integrating memories that Benjamin calls the elaboration of experience in the traditional sense of the term. In this regard, he reports the return of soldiers from World War I:

At the end of the war, it was observed that the combatants returned mute from the battlefield not richer, but poorer in communicable experience. (...) There was nothing unusual about that. Because there have never been experiences more radically demoralized than the strategic experience of trench warfare, the economic experience by inflation, the experience of the body through the material war and the ethical experience by the government. A generation that still went to school on a horse-drawn tram found itself outdoors in a landscape where nothing had remained unchanged, except the clouds, and beneath them, in a force field of torrents and explosions, the fragile human body (BENJAMIN, [1936]1994, p. 198).

In this passage described above, Benjamin is using as an example the traumatic experience suffered by soldiers in the First World War. It was also an experience of shock that the soldiers, who returned from it, were unable to elaborate as a true experience. Like trauma, the shock experience "brings to mind, in a short period of time, an increase in stimulus too large to be absorbed" (FREUD, [1917]1976, p. 335). Indeed, it is the notion of trauma in Freud that Benjamin will derive his conception of the shocks experienced in Modernity. Just as soldiers received more stimuli than they could handle, the inhabitants of large cities would be at all times having to deal with more stimuli than their psychic apparatus would be able to elaborate.

With this in mind, we can say that we suffer a trauma when we receive a greater amount of stimuli than our capacity to elaborate, to assimilate them. If the stimulus is excessive, we could not give a sense or produce a representation of what we experience, we could not integrate these stimuli into all of our past experiences. The traumatic is, therefore, the excessive for us. Excessive stimuli do not make us produce memories, but only images that are frozen and repeated indefinitely, images that require elaboration, as in a traumatic dream (FREUD, [1920]1976). Freud states that the traumatic dream is characterized by a compulsion to repeat; the dreamer compulsively repeats the traumatic scene trying to make it assimilated or elaborated by the psyche.

According to Freud, the excess resulting from traumas could be integrated into our memory if we went through an elaboration work (FREUD, [1914]1976). As the father of psychoanalysis said, elaboration is a work that the psychic apparatus does to control excitations and establish connections between ideas or representations, avoiding direct discharge of stimulations. In this sense, elaboration produces meanings and allows choices between a stimulus and the reaction to it, making a subject less dependent on the impulses or orders that come to him (FREUD, [1926]1977).

For Freud, the elaboration work consisted of reliving the trauma, talking about it and turning it into a memory like the others. Instead of repeating, recall. In this way, it would be possible to resume the normal functioning of memory and sensations, instead of living with frozen memories and anesthetized sensations.

This conception of trauma, capable of being elaborated, would be closer than the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi treated as a structuring trauma, as we will see later. These would be the traumas suffered by Nawal's children, Jeanne and Simon, throughout the movie. As the film shows us how the twins, little by little, discover the traumatic events of their mother's life and, from then on, they understand, more and more, why she left specific instructions for them. And gradually, climbing all the steps indicated by her in the testament letter, they could finally build her headstone, feeling that a certain route was fulfilled.

These steps, or purposes, left by Nawal, which they must follow, can be seen as potential ways of elaborating traumas that at first they did not even know existed and that they end up experiencing during their journey. That is, they discover one event at a time - such as the fact that they had a brother and he became a war soldier, the tragedies suffered by her mother while she lived in the Middle East and finally the reason that led her to enter catatonic state in that community pool. That way, they would not encounter any really excessive events, as everything would be done in small doses. Without having their capacity for elaboration invalidated, the twins could integrate their traumas into their individual and collective memories, that is, to the historically accumulated wisdom.

Ferenczi believes that every encounter between the subject and the world has a traumatic potential and traumas are one of the possibilities that open space for changes in the rhythm of life. "It is through disruptions in an established balance that living beings change. In that sense, trauma enhances life" (REIS, 2017, p. 182). Even when the twins discover the worst of secrets, that their brother is also

their mother's rapist and as a consequence his own father, when they find him and give him his mother's letters containing all the explanations, they are in the process of elaborating everything that happened. Structuring trauma contributes to development, even if it comes from suffering. Traumatic shock can produce an excess that, when elaborated, propels the subject forward, towards something new.

In this case, we understand as structuring trauma “an event or process that exceeds our capacity for assimilation at a certain moment, and that can, gradually, be integrated into the psyche and linked to other images and representations” (GONDAR, 2017, p. 90-91).

So far, we have seen that there are traumas that can be assimilated, allowing the subject to return to the normal functioning of his memory and sensations. But what about when the trauma cannot be assimilated, or rather, what happens when a trauma remains incommunicable, unrepresentable in the psyche as in the case of Nawal?

### III. DESTRUCTURING TRAUMA AND THE GRAY ZONE

As we have seen, trauma according to Freud is very close to the notion of structuring trauma proposed by the first-generation Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi (1873-1933). However, in addition to the structuring trauma, there is another type of trauma in Ferenczi's thought: the destructuring or invalidating trauma.

In order to exemplify a destructuring traumatic situation, Ferenczi (1933/1992) proposes a model for thinking a real violence scenario: an adult who sexually abuses a child, emphasizing the confusion of languages involved there, and another adult to whom the child confides what happened. In this situation, therefore, there are three characters and two moments (PINHEIRO, 1995). In the first moment the child plays with an adult and, while the child is in the language of tenderness - tenderness, here, is not opposed to sexuality, referring to a sexuality experienced from another parameter, not genital, ludic - fantasizing playfully in relation to the adult, the latter judges children's games as seductive advances of those who have already reached maturity. Because of this, the adult responds to playful seduction through another type of language: that of passion. He mistakes playful tenderness for genital seduction and ends up performing acts of sexual significance. This adult, out of guilt or fear, tells the victim that nothing has happened.

In the second moment, the child, without being able to elaborate psychically, that is, giving meaning to what

happened to her, seeks another adult of her trust so that he can help her with some explanation about the suffered violence. The second adult also denies what happened. It is through sexual violence and denial that the destructuring or invalidating traumatic scenario is constructed. The denial, here, is not just a matter of words, it is “the affections of a subject, his suffering, and himself as a subject that is being denied. The conjunction between the violence of the act and the victim's discredit, constitute, for Ferenczi, the invalidating trauma” (GONDAR, 2017, 91).

This model built by Ferenczi does not invalidate traumatic situations that occurred in different circumstances. He proposes this model as an organizing reference. However, in cases of extreme violence, invalidating trauma can occur without the violent act and denial taking place at two different times or containing three characters specifically.

Ferenczi validates what we are saying in *Reflections on trauma* (1934/1992, p. 110), a text in which he deals with psychic commotion as an immediate reaction to trauma: “A commotion can be purely physical, purely moral or physical and moral. Physical commotion is always also psychic; psychic commotion can, without any physical interference, engendering shock”. According to him, the shock would be equivalent to the annihilation of the feeling of self.

Thus, if the physical commotion is always also psychic, we can think about the possibility that physical violence psychically produces what corresponds to a denial generating the invalidating trauma. Gondar (2017) exposes two situations that can be considered similar to the sexual abuse scenario in the family, from the victim's psychological point of view: the experience of torture and the experience in the extermination camps. What will be important, in the three cases, is the experience of the annihilation of the Self and the importance of denial - located in what will be called the gray zone - for this to happen.

Who first wrote about the gray zone was Primo Levi (1919-1987), survivor of the Auschwitz extermination camp, in his book *The Drowned and the Saved* (2016). Levi writes that

the network of human relations within the Lager was not simple: it could not be reduced to two blocks, that of the victims and that of the oppressors. (...) [everyone] hoped to find a terrible but decipherable world, according to that simple model that we atavically bring with us, “we” inside and the enemy outside, separated by a clear, geographical boundary. On the contrary,

joining Lager was a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which we plunged was certainly terrible, but also undecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was around but also inside, the “we” lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one border was not distinguished but many and confused, perhaps countless, separating each from the other (LEVI, 2016, p. 28).

Levi writes that the biggest shock within what he calls Lager (concentration camps) was the fact that the world inside could not be reduced into two blocks: the oppressors and the oppressed. The limits were not clear, because there was a hybrid class, a class of prisoners, who for different reasons, collaborated with the soldiers, that is, with the enemy. With that, it was no longer possible to organize a terrible, but decipherable, reality between friend and enemy. For once there, the subject suffered “a concentric aggression on the part of those in whom it was expected to find future allies” (LEVI, 2016, p. 28). The shock suffered was so great that it soon overturned the ability to resist and for many it was deadly, because “it is difficult to defend yourself from a blow for which you are not prepared” (LEVI, 2016, p. 29).

The fact of not being able to separate the world, inside, between friend and enemy was the biggest shock. Are these ill-defined outlines inside the Auschwitz death camp, this impossibility of making a division between victims and oppressors, between us and them - because often the we were inside them - that Levi called the gray zone.

Ferenczi (1934/1992) explains that the shock produces in subjectivity “the loss of its own form and the easy and without resistance of a granted form, like a bag of flour” (FERENCZI, 1992, p. 109), or, as has already been said, the shock is equivalent to the annihilation of the sense of self, of the ability to resist as oneself. Therefore, it is not difficult to see the relationship between what Ferenczi calls denial and what Levi is calling the gray zone. “In both situations, are being denied the values and world references that the subject has and on which your psyche is structured; it is the subject himself, therefore, who is being disallowed to exist as such” (GONDAR, 2017, p. 93). What interests us is that in both experiences the psychic effects will be similar. The lack of meaning and doubts about his own perception of reality are feelings experienced by the denied subject, and Levi situates what we are calling denial, or discredit, in that gray zone.

The relationship between the experience of torture and the gray zone is brought by the psychiatrist and essayist Frantz Fanon (1925-1961). Fanon, after graduating in

France, worked as director of the Psychiatric Hospital of Blida-Joinville in Algeria. His medical experience in that hospital, with the tortured Algerians, made it possible to verify that most of the victims of torture went through the same tactic by their torturers (FANON, 1979):

This tactic consisted of presenting itself to the victim in a contradictory manner, making the attitude, the voice and the behavior oscillate between two extremes. Thus, in some moments, the torturer screamed, raped and hurt the subject, while in others, he spoke sweetly to him, saying he was concerned about his pains and even treating his wounds. (GONDAR, 2017, p. 94)

Just as Jews who had just arrived in the extermination camp, as Primo Levi reported, had difficulties in organizing a reality between oppressor and oppressed, the victims of torture in Algeria, as Fanon identifies, were also unable to integrate the torturer only in the image of oppressor. The torturer placed himself in a gray zone where nothing made sense, further contributing to the annihilation.

Both in the extermination camp experience, in the torture experience described above, and in the experience of sexual abuse suffered by a child in a family environment, the values and references of life that are being denied are located in a gray zone. In the case of abuse by an adult who should protect that child, the denial already begins with the possibility of the act happening. For, once again, we can see the ill-defined contours for the psyche of this child in question. The child cannot identify her abuser only as an enemy or oppressor, “but as someone who also has tender feelings for her, who also takes care of her, someone who cannot be situated in them, and who is part of us, in order to guarantee the self” (GONDAR, 2017, p. 94). In this case, the violator adult presents himself to the child in an ill-defined place, or rather, in a gray zone.

We can affirm that Nawal suffered a destructuring trauma, because, when leaving that community pool and recognizing in her lost son's face her torturer, and rapist, she also collided with a place of ill-defined contours, a gray zone. The shock experienced by Nawal was so great that it overturned her ability to resist. “An unexpected shock, unprepared and overwhelming, acts so to speak as an anesthetic. (...) By suspending all kinds of psychic activity, added to the establishment of a state of passivity devoid of any and all resistance” (FERENCZI, 1934/1992, p. 113). Her catatonic state, according to Ferenczi (1934/1992), also includes the suspension of perception and the suspension of thought. As a consequence, the personality is deprived of any protection.

There is no way to defend yourself from a blow that you didn't expect to hit. Her world values and the structuring of her psyche were denied within a gray zone. For her the destructuring trauma, or disabling, it ended up being deadly. Even though Nawal went through all the traumas that marked her existence - murder of her fiancé, loss of child, imprisonment, torture and rape -, all of which are potential destructuring traumas, and still keep moving forward, despite all the suffering, realizing that her lost son was actually the father of her twin children, she fails to create a representation of what she is witnessing and succumbs to a catatonic state.

Before recognizing that three vertical dots tattoo on her son's heel, even though she went through countless traumas as already mentioned, her world, as terrible as it was, made sense. She could tell the friend from the enemy, the aggressor from the oppressed, the torturer from the tortured victim. But the moment she leaves that pool and recognizes in the same person both a victim of her actions - we will deal with Abou Tarek's traumas below - and the enemy, or rather, her aggressor, her world is denied and everything that used to make sense to her from one moment to the next does not.

In the case of Abou Tarek, or Nihad his name at birth, his traumas already begin at the time of his birth. Separated from his mother and sent to an orphanage, Tarek was also a victim of the ethnic-religious war in the Middle East. After having his orphanage destroyed, Abou Tarek is recruited for the holy war in which he becomes an accomplished soldier. Having known only violence, he grows up and becomes the cruelest torturer of a female prison, a prison that would be the same as Nawal would stay for a while. The film does not follow the life story of Abou/Nihad, what we know about him is information obtained through reports from other people that in one way or another would be related to the story. What is shown to us, onlookers, is that when the twins manage to find their father, and brother, they give him two letters from Nawal. The first is addressed to Nihad, explaining that she was his mother and that she never stopped looking for and loving him; the second is aimed at Abou Tarek, her torturer, rapist and father of her twins.

When delivering the letters to their father/brother the twins leave, and, as we said earlier, they would be in the process of traumatic elaboration because of everything they discovered about their mother's story and their own story. It now remains for Abou Tarek / Nihad to deal with his own traumas, old and new, after all his discoveries through the letters delivered by Jeanne and Simon. The film does not show us what happens psychically to him after reading the letters, however it is not impossible to think due to

everything that he went through in his life, and on top of the new information about him having committed incest, his own perception of reality has ill-defined borders, that is, that he is in a gray zone.

The scene of the delivery of letters is quite emblematic, first by the fact that evidence, in a comprehensive way, Simon's finding that one plus one equals one, giving a very complex outline to the enigma of the film that brings together, at the same time, the arguments of mathematics in the solution of existential dramas. Once the solution of mathematical operation completely escapes the field of concrete held, the argument used in the film, both by the author of the play and by the director, touches on an insoluble solution about the origin of the twins: they are fruits of the violation of incest and for that reason condemned to have a father who is at the same time a brother, thus bonding two lineages of descent.

#### IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this way the film combines two nuances of the human condition, as we can infer from an excerpt from one of the letters: "My loves, where does your story begin? At your birth? Then it starts in horror. At your father's birth? So, it starts in a love story".

The traumatic story of the origin of Nawal's three children begins in love and comes to hate. From love to horror, there are four lives marked by the footsteps of destiny with traumas that will never be cured and boundaries that will never be defined. The outcome produced by the living letters of the letters gives new meaning to the life of the twins and ensnares the brother/father in a cage of despair from which only death will free him, as happened with Nawal. Ultimately it is trauma and finally death that unites Nawal, Abou Tarek, Simon and Jeanne forever.

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