

FRAMING PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN FILM: *LES
SILENCES DU PALAIS* AND *INCENDIES*

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ABSTRACT

ANNA BERNARD-HOVERSTAD: Framing Perceptions of Violence against Women in
Film: *Les Silences du Palais and Incendies*
(Under the direction of Dominique D. Fisher)

This thesis focuses on how contemporary Francophone films visually represent violence against women, and explores how sexual violence functions to continue the subjugation and systematic victimization of women. I examine how Moufida Tlatli's *Les Silences du Palais* and Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies* approach the subject and portrayal of rape within the greater narrative of the film. The two films, quite different in their premise and setting, find commonality as they both treat and depict rape and family dynamics. As such, my goal is to evaluate how the historical contexts of the films affect the portrayal of the violent act and how it is committed, and I consider questions about the viewer's perceptions of the perpetrators intentions might nuance their reactions to the rape scene, as well as to the film as a whole.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 2006, Jyotika Viridi vocalized one of the greatest challenges to depicting rape in narratives.¹ She echoed concerns posed by feminist critics around the world about the difficulties of portraying sexually violent scenes in their works in a way that does not continue to violate the victim but also does not diminish the traumatizing reality of being raped:

“As feminists we are caught between a rock and a hard place: the erasure of rape from a narrative bears the marks of a patriarchal discourse of honour and chastity; yet showing rape, some argue, eroticizes it for the male gaze and purveys the victim myth. How do we refuse to erase the palpability of rape and negotiate the splintering of the private/public trauma associated with it?”
(266)

The dilemma posed by Viridi can be applied to a wide range of contexts, from contemporary discussions about rape culture in the United States to the Indian films Viridi studies. The subject of violence against women is incredibly complex, and not only because of the intimate nature of these crimes. The world of representations exerts great influence over common and popular perceptions of sexual violence. Cécile Dauphin and Arlette Farge note that a historiographical tendency exists which privileges “le monde des représentations, laissant l’objet de réalité à sa pauvre « inexistence ». Nous n’oublions pas pour autant à quel

¹ Viridi, a professor at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, studies contemporary Indian cinema from the perspective of postcolonial and cultural studies. Her work is focused on Indian films, but her writings speak to a broader problematic useful for the present analysis. In this particular citation, Viridi’s invocation of “a patriarchal discourse of honour and chastity” also evokes the larger question of the honor codes for female behavior. Policing of women’s behavior and sexuality by men and by society at large is addressed in both films that will be studied in this thesis.

point les discours et les représentations fabriquent insidieusement à leur tour des effets de réel intériorisés par les acteurs” (13). Images in popular culture throughout the world frequently bombard the public with specific and often inaccurate images of how violent situations arise, and there is no guarantee that these images concur with situations as articulated by a survivors or witnesses of a sexual assault, for example.

Films that treat and depict instances of sexual violence, therefore, form an essential component of public discourse. While rape is too often decontextualized and viewed solely as a form of personal violence, many films challenge the notion of sexual violence and rape as a private act. Specifically, the following analysis will examine sexual violence as it is depicted in two films, *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies*, arguing that these are not isolated cases of one individual acting against another, but are a part of a larger and more complex system that affects society as a whole across geographic spaces as well as over time. Taken together, the two films are quite different in terms of their premise and historical setting. *Les Silences du Palais* was made in 1994 by renowned Tunisian director Moufida Tlatli, and was filmed in Arabic. It is set in the 1950s, on the eve of Tunisian independence, and is centered around the daily lives, including routine sexual exploitation, of the servant women in the house of the Tunisian Beys. *Incendies*, by Canadian director Denis Villeneuve, is the 2011 rewriting of author Wajdi Mouawad’s 2003 play of the same title. The film recounts a daughter’s journey to investigate her mother’s life in a fictionalized version of Lebanon during the civil war in the 1970s and before emigrating to Canada. This journey includes the discovery that she and her twin brother are the result of their mother’s rape while she was a political prisoner during a conflict closely resembling the Lebanese Civil War.

Les Silences du Palais and *Incendies* were expressly selected because they appear to be so different at first glance, in terms of the story and plot of their narratives, the films' historical settings, and the varied countries of origin of the actors and directors. It would have been possible, for example, to also incorporate Denis Villeneuve's 2009 *Polytechnique*, a film that also addresses violence against women. *Polytechnique* depicts the 1989 femicide of the Montreal Massacre, during which 14 young women were killed by a gunman at Montreal's École Polytechnique.² However, *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies* were chosen because a comparative analysis of two films that traverse different countries and time periods demonstrates the widespread nature of sexual violence experienced by women. Those aspects that *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies* share demonstrate that the question of sexual violence in films is relevant in different contexts, in different countries, and across time periods. The elements the two films share in common are the focus of this thesis.

The historical contexts of both films revolve around periods of violent change on a national level that permeates the films and affects the lives of all the characters, even those removed from the physical violence of the colonial and postcolonial era. As such, it is necessary to evaluate the situations and historical contexts of the films to understand how they mark the portrayal of the violent act, especially how it is committed. In my comparative analysis, *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies* invite questions about the treatment of the

² This is not to imply that Villeneuve and Tlatli are the only directors to treat sexual violence on screen. Many filmmakers in Tunisia and Canada also do this. Raja Amari is, for instance, a contemporary Tunisian filmmaker whose film *Les Secrets* addresses many themes relevant to this study, including silences surrounding the place of women. However, this film is not (yet) readily available in DVD in the United States, like many Tunisian films that are generally more difficult to acquire. Like many North African films, *Les Secrets* is not widely available to Western audiences, and public interest in such films pales in comparison to Hollywood productions. Additionally, it is crucial to note that sexual violence affects men as well as women. Films like Nouri Bouzid's 1986 film *L'homme de cendres* (Tunisia) or Mark Foster's 2007 adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* both feature instances of sexual crimes committed against men by other men. Because this study is focused on violence against women, these two films are less relevant to my thesis.

powerless by dominant individuals, the limits of wartime abuse, how silences and shame surround rape, and how individuals and societies are affected by sexual violence.³

Importantly, they both depict rape sequences, and explore the perceived powerlessness of the central (female) figure, who is also a mother in both films. *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies* implicitly argue that the effects of rape on women and on families cannot be easily quantified and should never be diminished or homogenized. In both films, viewers are led to believe that the victims seen onscreen are not the only individuals to have been tortured, violated, or abused.

Considering the representation of sexual violence in the realm of film, further questions stem from Viridi's initial enquiry about the delicate balance between respecting victims without reducing or sanitizing their trauma. How can filmmakers seek to avoid perpetuating the patriarchal paradigm and deny the violence and exploitation that can be implicit in the viewer's gaze towards the victim? How can rape be depicted in a way that does not render the victim weak or subservient, but as a strong or individual agent in her or his own right? As I examine how Tlatli and Villeneuve respond to these questions, I assert that the two directors frame scenes of sexual violence similarly.⁴ In their films, such scenes are approached from a perspective that forces the viewer to consider how all individuals in a

³ The question of silence is immediately relevant to this problematic, as understandings of sexual violence differ so widely. Given the highly personal treatment of sexual violence and culture of shame that often surrounds sexual violence, many victims of crimes like this encounter difficulties articulating their experiences, especially in public forums. As Cécile Dauphin and Arlette Farge note, "la pudeur, la volonté de ne sombrer ni dans le misérabilisme ni dans le voyeurisme font de l'objet violence et femmes un objet complexe, difficile à manier" (13). The theme of silence is explored in greater throughout the following chapters.

⁴ In this instance, the gender of the filmmaker does not radically alter their presentation of violence: It is possible to argue that Villeneuve has a feminist approach to his films, especially considering his treatment of femicide in *Polytechnique*, as well as his treatment of violence against women in *Incendies*. Tlatli is now considered by some (younger) critics to be a part of an older school of Tunisian filmmakers, who have remarked that the women in her films often appear to play a less active and more subservient role than male characters.

society might be complicit in a sexually violent system, even if they do not consciously seek to commit a rape themselves, and even if they do not condone the violent system. Rather, this complicity can occur when individuals act in such a way as to allow or even to perpetuate social institutions that permit exploitation to occur. The context in which both Tlatli and Villeneuve present the rape scenes in the films exposes the violence against women inherent in the social systems of the two societies they represent. Through a comparative analysis of *Les Silences* and *Incendies*, I will argue that rape in these two films can and should be understood as part of a larger systematic and more problematic form of violence that tolerates and sometimes encourages sexual exploitation and violence.

Questions of violence and exploitation have been examined by many different disciplines, including postcolonial studies and feminist studies.⁵ Scholars such as Franz Fanon and Edward Said have been immensely influential in the past fifty years in scholarly discourse about violence in the postcolonial contexts.⁶ They are influential as both films studied in this thesis unfold in a revolutionary or postcolonial era, and considerations of violence should not be taken anachronistically. Both Fanon and Said discuss the exploitation of those with less power or agency by those with more. In his seminal 1961 monograph *Les Damnés de la Terre*, Fanon discusses violence in the framework of colonialism. He serves as a point of departure for postcolonial studies with his assertion of a “manicheistic” world system that exploits some at the expense of others:

“This world is divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never

⁵ See, for example: Madeleine Dobie, Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Sara Suleri, Meyda Yeğenoğlu.

⁶ Both Fanon and Said continue to be a point of departure for many scholars who write about inequitable power distributions, though many other influential scholars have also written about the subject in recent years, such as Gayatri Spivak and Jenny Sharpe.

come to mask the human realities...In the colonies the economic substructure is also a super-structure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (32).

The world Fanon describes is a dualistic world wherein colonial social conditions lead to the creation of a series of binary oppositions in which one party is more powerful than the other. This oppositions include the relationship between colonizer and colonized, or the difference between rich and poor across many societies. Though Fanon never explicitly defines the different uses of violence in his book, many scholars, such as feminist critic Chantal Kalisa rightly credits Fanon with demonstrating the myriad different forms violence takes, including physical, cultural, and structural.⁷

Continuing and attempting to quantify the notion of structural violence, sociologist Johan Galtung, published the treatise “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” in 1969. Galtung uses a series of distinctions to provide a precise definition of structural violence. He affirms that structural violence does systematically occur in the world, and uses the image of personal violence as the point of comparison for his conceptualization of structural violence. For Galtung, the difference between personal and structural violence is defined by the presence or lack of an actor: “We shall refer to the type of violence where there is an actor that commits the violence as *personal* or *direct*, and violence where there is no such actor as *structural* or *indirect*” (170). Therefore, rape in its archetypal conception is a clearly personal act, since one can generally state that there is an actor (the rapist) who commits the violence against the victim. However, considering rape a purely personal form of violence is problematic because it excludes the possibility that there might also be in place a permissive system that allows, or even encourages the rape to occur.

⁷ For a more in-depth discussion, see Chantal Kalisa, *Violence in Francophone African & Caribbean Women's Literature*, 9.

Additionally, rape has often been used systematically as a weapon during war. As Michele Perrot notes, “Le corps est au centre de toute relation de pouvoir” (351). As such, rape as a physical act has frequently been used by one actor to impose power over another. Though rape as a weapon of war might have easily identifiable actors, there is also a system in place that is more permissive or even encouraging of sexual crimes. For example, Véronique Nahoum-Grappe discusses in *De la violence et des femmes* the systematic use of rape as a weapon against women in the early 1990s war in the former Yugoslavia. Sexual violence occurred between individuals, but in this case are clearly part of a larger, structural system of violence and destabilization.⁸

Galtung clarifies his position regarding the overlap between direct and indirect violence in the same essay, calling attention to the consequences of the violence as well as the actors involved:

“In both cases [of both personal and structural violence] individuals may be killed or mutilated, hit or hurt in both senses of these words, and manipulated by means of stick or carrot strategies. But whereas in the first case[personal violence] these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons as actors, in the second case[structural violence] this is no longer meaningful. There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as un-equal life chances” (170-171).

Rape in the context of a structural violence might be an instance that necessarily breaks the barrier between the two types of violence. The “unequal life chances” Galtung discusses are apparent in many different ways. In a patriarchal society, for example, structural violence may be present in such a way as to limit the life chances of females, and therefore be more

⁸ Rape was formally recognized as a crime against humanity in 2001 as part of the Foca Rape Case argued before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. The decision to include acts of rape as a crime against humanity had two components: first, they were part of a systematic campaign undertaken by paramilitary grounds; second, because acts of rape included elements of enslavement. For further details, see Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, “Guerre et différence des sexes: Les viols systématiques” in *De la violence et des femmes*, and John Hagan, *Justice in the Balkans: Prosecuting War Crimes in the Hague Tribunal*.

permissive of certain types of personal violence, like sexual violence against women. Later in the essay, Galtung specifies that there is a degree of interplay between personal and structural violence, as he acknowledges that "...there may be a correlation so that structures richly endowed with structural violence often may also display above average incidence of personal violence" (178). Clearly, Galtung is not ignorant of situations in which personal violence is aided by the structural, and indeed even supports them, giving an example of a typical feudal structure. However, his following analysis focuses on determining whether or not it is possible to have purely personal or purely structural violence. While he concludes that these "pure" forms of violence are indeed possible, it is important here to consider just how intertwined the personal and structural violence may be. It is equally important to examine what that means for the victims of violence, whether these are victims of the feudalism described in Galtung's study, or victims of colonization as in the case of Fanon. For example, Zillah Eisenstein remarks that women are not the only victims of systematic sexual violence. In cases of rape, she writes "women's bodies are appropriated, conquered, and destroyed" (28). Within the familial context, then, all members are affected, including men, who are "demasculinized by the rape of their daughters or wives. Everyone is shamed in this process" (Eisenstein 27). Clearly, the individual subjected to the rape is not the only person to be traumatized, victimized, or punished by this act.

Edward Said's contribution to the discussion of violent domination is also eminent in his discussion of literature as it relates to the lasting effects of imperialism in former colonies. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said concurs with Fanon's assertion that binary divisions arose out of the colonial experience. He discusses the importance of these past divisions on the present:

“More important than the past itself... is its bearing upon cultural attitudes in the present. For reasons that are partly embedded in the imperial experience, the old divisions between colonizer and colonized have emerged in what is referred to as the North-South relationship, which has entailed defensiveness, various kinds of rhetorical and ideological combat, and a summering hostility that is quite likely to trigger devastating wars...” (17).

Because the division between powerful and less powerful has continued, Said implicitly argues that incorporating imperial rhetoric is a necessary component of postcolonial studies. Linked to this idea is Said’s suggestion that contemporary scholars, especially in the field of literature, cannot forget or ignore the importance of geography in this rhetoric. “Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored” (255). This concept of imperialism as geographical violence can be applied not only to public or physical spaces, but to private or human spaces and human identity as well. While colonizers certainly sought to bring physical territories and their inhabitants under control, it is possible to argue for an understanding of the body in a manner similar to the colonizer’s understandings of the colonized. In other words, it is possible to see the body as a colonized territory, subservient to a ruling power that is foreign to that body.

The specific importance of the female body is what Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne assert is missing in Said’s analysis:

“... the process of decolonization involves the colonized (who are categorized as weak, inferior, and effeminate) redefining themselves and the social order in an attempt to gain subjectivity. What Said does not explicitly take into account in [his definition of imperialism as geographical violence] is the role of the female body in both imperial and anti-imperial ideology. The female body is a site over which imperial power is exacted and therefore is crucial to both imperial and nationalist ideologies” (6).

Incorporating the female body is a crucial addition to Said's notion of the geography of imperialism for this project, especially as rape is a frequently invoked metaphor in descriptions of how colonizers treated the colonized.⁹ However, this metaphor is problematic because it necessarily equates women with land, a common orientalist trope. Women are transformed from an autonomous, living, human being into a territory to be conquered. As rape metaphors were frequently used, this trope became an ideological weapon used by colonized and colonizing men. The reduction in the status and agency of women made it easier to excuse a crime like rape (Thompson and Gunne 6).

Within the colonial and postcolonial context, this derogatory perception of the female body is highly relevant to Fanon and Galtung's theories of structural violence. The two ideas reinforce the recognition that women are disproportionately victimized in a structural system that systematically reduces their status in relation to men. Elements of structures that continue to repress women can include religious and political systems, institutions that Michele Perrot calls "les manuels de savoir-vivre" in her book *Les Femmes ou les silences de l'Histoire (i)*. She demonstrates how women are kept in a secondary or subordinate position by a number of different institutions, which are culturally specific, but can also be similar across international borders. This does, however, validate the necessity of considering how certain forms of violence target women specifically, and how structural violence affects women in particular. While Fanon, Galtung, and Said did not ignore the status of women, feminist critics charge that forms of violence against women require particular attention. It is here that Chantal Kalisa's notion of "gendered violence" is especially valuable:

"I define gendered violence in the context of feminist resistance to the depoliticization of 'private' and 'domestic' acts of violence. I understand the concept on a continuum,

⁹ See: Thompson and Gunne, p. 6

encompassing acts and sites of violence specific to women, such as domestic abuse and sexual violence... ” (13).

Kalisa’s definition is important to my conception of sexual violence because it encourages individuals to consider each violent act as a unique deed, rather than lumping all forms of sexual violence into a singular category.¹⁰ Singularizing any form of violence, such as rape, could ultimately serve a reductive purpose because it has the potential to homogenize all forms of rape and thereby ignore the varied appearances, enactments, and experiences of the rapists as well as their victims. For example, there is the dangerous possibility that rape could be qualified solely as an act of private violence (according to Galtung). This would be hugely debilitating to combatting structural social or political systems around the world that are tolerant of rape, when it is currently recognized by many countries as a weapon used systematically during war.

Additionally, Kalisa’s use of a spectrum of violence does not place sexual violence or the act of rape in a vacuum. Rather, understanding gendered violence as occurring on a continuum fosters the view that sexual violence is often related to other forms of violence, and therefore affects society and humanity as a whole. It discourages the notion that most rapes occur in extreme or rare situations, or only victimize a certain faction of a society; this is an untrue, if persistent belief. Though rape does disproportionately affect marginalized individuals, it is not exclusively located on the fringe and involves a wide array of other actors. Research in this area is conducted by many scholars in different disciplines that study rape; notably, sociologists around the world conduct research into the incidents and frequency of sexual violence, as well as the circumstances under which the violence was

¹⁰ Kalisa’s definition here applies to audiences of films, readers of fictional and non-fictional authors, as well as to society at large. While her work was written for a scholarly audience, it certainly addresses a much wider pattern that extends far beyond academia.

perpetrated. Studies, such as Kimberle Crenshaw's report "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", discuss how women become marginalized within a society, rendering them more susceptible to violence. While Crenshaw's study pertains more to women in the "real world" than visual portrayals of rape in film, her arguments are certainly relevant to the situations depicted on screen.

Properly contextualizing acts of violence is a crucial step in creating more accurate and more ethical representations of sexual violence in films. In complicating popular stereotypes and allowing actors involved in sexual violence to speak for themselves, directors such as Tlatli and Villeneuve prove that it is possible for filmmakers to portray sexual violence while also avoiding further exploitation or eroticization of the victim. The first chapter of this thesis discusses Tlatli's *Les Silences du Palais*, and generally focuses on the historical-political aspects of the film, the silencing of women, and the political significance the female body. The links between mother and daughter are examined, as well as the implied parallel between the Tunisian fight for independence and a servant girl's quest for independence and freedom from her constrained palace life. The second chapter focuses on Villeneuve's *Incendies* and continues the discussion about the relationship between silence and violence while examining how violence affects the children of its victims. Additionally, I discuss the depiction of rape in a wartime setting, as well as how Villeneuve portrayed both perpetrators and victims of violence.

CHAPTER 2

Les Silences du Palais

Les Silences du Palais unfolds through a series of flashbacks set within the palace of the Tunisian Beys in the 1950s. Alia is the illegitimate daughter of Khadija, a servant, and she grows up within the confines of the palace walls. Director Moufida Tlatli framed the story of Alia's adolescence with the historical context of Tunisia fighting for and eventually gaining independence from France. In the 1950's in Tunisia, the Beys ostensibly ruled the country; in reality, however, it was a French representative who was the true head of the government with full legislative and executive powers. Beginning in the 1880s, the French representative, given the official title of the Resident Général, actually ruled the country, and the Beys were seen by many as his puppet (Sherzer 50). This system of government continued until the 1950s, when the struggle for independence gained momentum and eventual success, and it is within this system of government that Tlatli places her film. Florence Martin notes that at end of the film, "...we see a male servant, Houssine, report on the nationalists' riots in the streets...Muted echoes of the general strike... reach women through his [Houssine's] and the radio's accounts. From these echoes, a Tunisian audience would guess that we are in January 1952, under the so-called 'rule' of Moncef Bey" (176). Given hints and suggestions such as these, it seems that Tlatli sought to position her film at a specific historical moment, towards the beginning of the conflict for Tunisian independence. The parallel between the exploitation of the female servants and the oppression of the Tunisian population by the French occupiers is reinforced since the film begins after

liberation is achieved for Tunisia and for Alia. Throughout the film, the link between Alia's struggle for independence against the confines and oppression of the palace, and Tunisia's fight for freedom from the French occupiers highlights the treatments of women throughout the film, and draws attention to the different forms of gendered violence to which the women are subjected.

Viewers experience the gendered violence of the film not only in the rape scene, but throughout the film in various forms. Gendered violence manifests in the patriarchal structures enforced within and outside of the palace, and is evident in isolation and segregation of the female servants. Notably, the political context of *Les Silences du Palais* is never explicitly discussed by the female characters of the film. As critic Roy Armes wrote, "It is clear that Tlatli attaches importance to the political events which coincide with the personal stories she is depicting. But she approaches politics only obliquely, through the lives of women who never leave the palace and the beys who are politically inactive" (Postcolonial Images, 166). Viewers only encounter the political context of the film, as well as the outside world where the political change occurs, through characters who are specifically not the servant women. Politics is a realm primarily relegated to men throughout the film, though viewers do see its effects on both men and women. The Beys discuss the political situation and their threatened political position with male French officials, and the only nationalist shown, Lofti, is a man. The viewer is placed in the same position as the servant woman, never directly informed about the events occurring in the streets outside the palace. In doing so, Tlatli highlights the sexual segregation of space and the women's lack of communication with the outside world, and how fully controlled and regulated their lives

are.¹¹ Their marginalization alone is a form of structural violence, and increases their vulnerability to aggression and sexual predation.¹² The servant women are essentially detainees, bound to serve the Beys and unable to physically leave the palace, though their minds and spirits may not be as bound as their bodies.

In spite of their isolation, viewers see that the women remain informed about events occurring outside the walls via their radio and other (male) servants who share the news with them. They, like their male counterparts, express desire, frustration, and anger. They act in a subversive and unified manner when they choose to help Khalti Hadda hide Lofti, a supporter of the revolution and wanted man when he arrived at the palace. The political, therefore, is not relegated to an entirely masculine position in the narrative, or to a position of secondary importance. Rather, its quiet persistence throughout the film is a constant reminder of structures in place that repress the rights of the women as well as the Tunisian public as a whole. The demonstration of the servant women's limited agency appears throughout the film in their inability to act in the public arena outside their kitchen and workspaces, and especially outside the palace walls.

Upon hearing news of fights that have broken out in the streets, the French enforcement of curfew laws, and crackdowns against the freedom fighters, one servant's speech exemplifies the parallel between the situation of the women slaves and the rebel Tunisian fighters. After hearing the curfew announcement, one woman comments, "Our lives are like curfews." This leads to the second woman's speech, which gives viewers a privileged glimpse into her mental and emotional state: "We have nothing to be afraid of. I don't belong to myself. I want to go out in the street, naked, barefoot... to run without being

¹¹ Fatima Mernissi remarks in *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* that in some Muslim societies in the 1970s and before, space was used "as a device for sexual control" (xvi).

¹² See: Galtung, Johan. "Cultural Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 27. 3 (1990) : 292.

stopped... to scream and shout out loud. (Cry) Only their bullets can shut me up, as they pass through me as if through a sieve. (Cries).”

The scene begins with a high-angle shot showing the servants sitting around the table, preparing a meal. In this medium-long shot, viewers are held at arm’s length through most of the curfew announcement, and the shot only moves to a close-up focus on the first woman’s face in the seconds before she begins to speak. Notably, staging this particular scene and monologue within the servants’ workspace silently reminds viewers of the women’s lower status, reinforcing the words of the servant after the announcement. When the shot cuts to the close-up on the first woman, she turns her head slightly as she delivers her line, “Our lives are like curfews,” and a sense of intimacy is almost created. Immediately after she is done speaking, however, the camera again cuts away from her face back to a long shot of the whole table. The camera angle remains high as it slowly zooms into a medium-close up that finally settles on the second servant woman as she speaks. The soft lighting and juxtaposition between closely framed shots and longer framed shots highlights the position of the viewer; every time the shot gets close to a woman’s face, her facial features and emotions are emphasized. However, before viewers have a real chance to identify with either woman, the camera moves away, suggestion perhaps that we not actually able to fully identify with these women, no matter how much sympathy or empathy we feel for them.

Additionally, as the second servant speaks, the shot is void of any extra-diegetic sound, so viewer’s attention is focused solely on her words. Throughout the scene, both women are aware that their lives are controlled by their positions as servants, and the second woman’s infuriation manifests in this hopeless and fatalistic speech. Her frustrations erupt into words that are incredibly dangerous for her to articulate at this particular moment.

Earlier in the scene, one (male) servant cautions another against using the word “independence”, saying that word leads to the (French) gallows. Clearly, even talk of independence is a public threat to the Beys, and the servant’s speech becomes doubly subversive in the private sphere for its protestation against her position as a servant, as well. The women acknowledge their oppression and their objectification without having any resources to resist or defend themselves.

The exploitation of the women that viewers see is not confined to the past timeline shown in the flashbacks. Significantly, the film begins in the 1960s, with a scene showing that Alia has become a singer; she performs at a party, and then is picked up in a car by her former teacher and current lover, Lofti. The scene begins with a long shot of Alia walking downstairs into the waiting car, and the camera tracks her progress. Once she enters the car, the shot cuts to a straight-on medium close-up of Lofti and Alia in the car. The camera frames the interior of the car in a fixed shot, unmoving as they speak to each other. The external diegetic sound, music coming from the party, is silenced as Alia shuts the car door, bring the focus to the conversation between the two. As Alia admits she was harassed, she directs her gaze forward, rather than looking at Lofti. The framing of the shot as well as the soft lighting that illuminates her face alerts viewers that Alia is the central figure of the shot and Lofti is not; yet she does not seem happy to see Lofti, or particularly at ease throughout the scene.

When Lofti asks her how her performance went, Alia suggests that she is routinely hassled at these sorts of engagements, calling it “the usual harassment”. Therefore, from the opening scenes of the film, viewers understand that Alia is still not freed from the patriarchal domination we will see that defined her childhood and adolescence. Even in an independent

Tunisia, and even in a life outside the palace walls, she is still subjected to systematic objectification by those who hire her as a singer. While it is not as aggressive as the (sexual) exploitation and sexual violence faced by Khedija and the other palace servants, Alia is still unable to fully participate in Tunisian society without being judged, harassed, or bullied, and is still over-sexualized due solely to her femininity. The link between Alia's struggle for independence and Tunisia's fight against the French protectorate is consequently weakened, as we see that the patriarchal paradigm continues years after Tunisia is freed of French rule, despite the political rhetoric of nationalists proclaiming the importance of self-rule.

Further, the role of Lofti is complicated. As a refugee within the palace, Lofti acted as a teacher and taught Alia to read and write, encouraged her to pursue music, and helped her "escape" from the palace. Later, in a time not covered by the film, he becomes her lover, but we see that the two of them are not at all equal partners. We learn at the very beginning of the film that Alia is subject to Lofti's wishes, and that she is once again pregnant with Lofti's child:

ALIA. I'm scared.

LOFTI. What of?

ALIA. Of the neighbors who stare. They stare at me all the time. Every eye accuses me, as if they could read my face.

LOFTI. It's in your head. They know nothing about you. It's a difficult period. Tomorrow you won't feel this burden.

ALIA. And afterwards, it will start again. Every abortion is painful. It's a part of me that abandons me. I want to keep it.

LOFTI. You're crazy! I thought the debate was over. A child needs a name, a family, a marriage.

ALIA. I'm not asking you to marry me... a failed singer.

LOFTI. Stop, Alia. You're torturing yourself, and me. You know I love you. You mean so much to me.

ALIA. You always have to win. Tomorrow I'll have my abortion. My head is going to explode.

Lofti exerts influence over Alia, and has evidently been able to convince her to get an abortion every time she has gotten pregnant, despite her desire to give birth to the child. He insists that he loves her, but his systematic refusal to both marry Alia and become a father limits Alia's choices. Her limitations are all the more striking because Alia remains under the control of a patriarchal society after her country gained independence:

“While Alia's transition into womanhood and Tunisia's transition into independence are both symbolically represented by Lofti (in a time not recounted by the narrative), the differences are striking. In the mid-sixties Tunisia is free, a subject of its own rule, while Alia is still a slave to her body and her lack of a family name. Lofti, then, represents patriarchy as it is manifest in a male dominated society and in nationhood” (Naaman 334).

Naaman succinctly demonstrates the inherent inequality between the Alia and Lofti. Alia, “still a slave to her body”, has evidently been unable to have a child in defiance of Lofti's wishes (Naaman 334). Like the Beys, Lofti exerts influence over Alia's ability to act in the manner she desires, at least until the end of the film when Alia decides to have this child regardless of Lofti's interest (or lack thereof) in parenthood. This, apparently, is the first case in which Alia has been able to disregard Lofti's wishes in favor of her own.

Because of Lofti's dominion over Alia, Lieve Spaas also commented on this disjunction between the rhetoric of the nationalists and their actions. “For Lofti, who taught Alia to write and advocated for her emancipation, the liberation of the country is indeed disconnected from that of women” (Spaas 170). Despite the promises of liberation that accompanied the rebel fighters' quest for freedom, women are apparently left out of this new, free, postcolonial society. It appears that Lofti either refuses to or is unable to help Alia achieve a degree of personal agency close or equal to his own. Even her body is subjected to his authority, as he refuses to allow her to give birth to their child. This creates a binary sort of opposition between the men and the women depicted in the film implicit in the patriarchal

social system which continues to manifest in the political arena in the 1960's just as it did under the "rule" of the Beys. Naaman also comments on the dichotomy in the status of men and women:

"Thus, the film portrays the nationalist project as a patriarchal one, one that embraces the binary oppositions of man/other and symbolic/imaginary; one that incorporates and tolerates women only as far as they are the property of men (to have a husband one must have a father)" (338).

The post-revolutionary society, as experienced by Alia, does not accept her status as Lofti's unmarried partner. She is subjected to gazes from neighbors and clients who harass her when she sings because she is an unmarried woman of uncertain paternity living with Lofti. The structural violence and the subjugation of women in a still-patriarchal society manifest indirectly in the 1960s Tunisia onscreen, but are undeniably present.

However, the most blatant depictions of structural and personal violence that viewers see occur within the palace, in the flashbacks to Alia's adolescent experiences. In her early years, Alia played often with Sarra, the daughter of Sid Bachir. The two apparently became good friends over the course of their childhood. Due to this friendship, as well as Alia's relationship with Sid Ali (the man presumed to be her father) her position within the palace hierarchy was more ambiguous.¹³ She was allowed to enter social spaces forbidden to the poor, female servants. As children, for example, the girls are often seen in the palace gardens together, a space otherwise off limits to servants. In another scene, Alia attends Sarra's music lessons but does not participate in them. Thus, the film maintains a distinction in the social status of the two, a difference that becomes more crucial as the girls become women. Alia's uncertain position within the palace is a source of anxiety for Khedija, especially as

¹³ The beginning of the film depicts the birth of Sarra and Alia. At Alia's birth, a woman asks "Who is her father?" to which another servant replies "Shut up". Thus, from the first moments of Alia's life, viewers understand that her parentage is uncertain and a taboo subject.

Alia reaches puberty. Her beauty, and skill as a signer, is recognized by the men “upstairs”; that is, Alia becomes an object of desire for the men in the Bey’s family. Though this might seem inevitable to viewers who witness the systematic mistreatment of the servants from the beginning, as well as Khedija’s growing worry for her daughter, Alia is only just beginning to realize how the palace functions. She is suddenly disillusioned when she witnesses her mother dancing for the Beys and their guests at a party. Alia slowly comes to understand that her mother’s work includes much more than simply waiting on the Beys, and that the women do not have a choice when a man issues a command for “tea” each night. This is important since Khedija and the other servant women are Alia’s sole guides to the palace when she comes to realize how different she and Sarra are. As Dorit Naaman noted, “Alia spends much of her time as a teenager spying on her mother, her role model of femininity” (335). From her mother’s experiences, Alia grasps that life inside the palace includes routine sexual exploitation in addition to the other work the women perform, and Alia’s acknowledgement of the Beys’ methodical manipulation of her mother and the other servants becomes the theme of the film.

After watching her mother dance, Alia and Khedija’s relationship grows tenuous. Alia struggles to make sense of the new realizations and of her own womanhood, and Khedija becomes more anxious on a daily basis, warning her daughter about the dangers of men without explicitly stating anything. Throughout the film it is implied that Sid Ali is particularly fond of Khedija, and that the feeling is mutual; these sentiments are even acknowledged by Sid Ali’s jealous wife who accuses Sid Ali of debasing himself in his attachment to Khedija and Alia. In spite of Sid Ali’s special attention to Alia, Khedija fears Alia’s beauty will lead to a life confined to the palace, similar to her own.

The situation peaks one day when Alia stumbles upon her mother and Sid Ali together in the bedroom she shares with her mother. Alia runs unseen out of the servants' quarters and around the gardens until she collapses in exhaustion. As she lies unconscious on the grass, her skirt spread around her, Sid Bachir finds her. The tension rises as Sid Bachir runs his hand up Alia's thigh, and Alia's safety is threatened. But Alia is not violated, and Sid Bachir instead carries her back to the room she shares with Khedija. The momentary relief after realizing Alia will not be raped in the garden returns as Sid Bachir lays her on the bed and says, "What a beauty." When Khedija enters the room immediately after this, Sid Bachir asks Khedija, "She's as beautiful as you. Are you scared?" and then rapes Khedija. Importantly, the rape scene was shot so that the camera cut back and forth between a close-up of Alia's face as she wakes up to witness the rape, and a long shot of Khedija struggling against Sid Bachir. The act of violation is never shown; instead, the final close-up on Alia's face cuts to a shot of her running towards the palace gate at night. The gate slowly closes as Alia gets closer, and she opens her mouth and screams as she shakes the bars of the closed gate. Significantly, the diegetic sound in this shot is replaced with silence. Viewers never hear Alia's expression of her pain. Alia, like all the servants of the palace, is silenced and unable to change her situation.

This shot of Alia running towards the palace gates and her silenced scream is one of the most poignant moments of the film. It is an obvious metaphor for the situation of the women in the palace; they are trapped within the walls, silenced and unable to leave.

Florence Martin borrows Michel Chion's expression "*point de cri*" to describe this scene:

In a cinematographic fiction, the 'screaming point' shows a scream coming out of a woman's mouth, which we see but may or may not hear. That scream occurs at a pivotal point in the film... This is exactly Alia's scream, uttered in

a differed reaction to her witnessing her mother's rape, a crucial moment in the construction of Alia's subjectivity (181).

Martin evokes two powerful ideas here. This scene is indeed a "pivotal point in the film", as Alia falls silent and ill immediately after witnessing her mother's rape. She lies in bed, and though the women tend to her, Alia does not heal quickly, and never speaks. Additionally, Martin draws attention to the development of Alia's subjectivity, calling her witnessing the rape a "crucial moment" for Alia. Alia, viewers may presume, now understands fully the structural exploitation that surrounds her; she has seen her mother with Sid Ali, in a situation assumed to be consensual, and she has seen her mother's violation by Sid Bachir. Though there is a difference between the two situations, since viewers may presume that Khedija and Sid Ali have a more personal relationship that eschews physical violence and goes slightly beyond that of servant/master, it is difficult to argue that Khedija actually had a meaningful choice. As a servant and as a woman, her world was limited to the palace, and the narrow choices she had for her future are revealed in a scene when she explains to Alia that she was sold to the Beys at the age of 10, and the palace has been her "home" ever since. In this sense, the servant women are more like sexual slaves than true servants, as we see that Khedija's life was defined by decisions made for her, not by her.¹⁴

Notably, this part of the film is peppered with other scenes referencing the worsening political situation in the country. While Alia is bedridden, viewers see the Beys in a room together, worried about their future, and viewers hear from a radio in the servants' quarters that French soldiers have shot, killed, and wounded demonstrators in the street. This is yet another reminder of the political upheaval in Tunisia, in sync with the upheaval Alia has just

¹⁴ Regarding female slaves in Tunisia, Dina Sherzer writes: "By insisting on the plight of the servants, Tlatli indirectly reminds spectators that the practice of having women slaves, which was abolished in Tunisia in the 1930s, was still alive in the 1950s, even if the women were not called slaves" (53).

experienced. The tone of the film is dark and worried, and continues as the women cannot heal Alia. She only regains her strength and voice when Khedija and Khalti Hadda combine their money and purchase a lute for Alia. Through music, Alia slowly heals and reignites her love of music. This emphasis on the power of music is important throughout the film, but is of particular importance in this sequence as viewers are able to witness the cathartic power music has for Alia. It is compared to the revolutionary power music apparently has in the outside world. Viewers who wouldn't have known otherwise are reminded that the French forbade certain songs from the radio and from being sung in public out of fear that they could inspire or increase the revolutionary fervor already present on the streets. The servants worry, to varying degrees, about listening to such songs on the radio.

In addition to being medicinal, music is also Alia's path to freeing herself from the palace. Alia's musical talents were noted by Sid Ali, who overheard her singing and playing the lute one day after her illness and invited her to play one evening for his family. While subtle, this marked Alia's transition from a quasi-family friend to a musician and performer. Alia goes on to perform at Sarra's wedding party for the guests of the Beys, a scene which parallels Khedija's dance performed at an earlier party also for the Beys and their guests. The change in Alia's status was also reflected in Alia's revolt against her palace life, including a mutiny against Khedija. The two come into conflict more often, over what Alia is and is not permitted to do, disputes about her musical performances and Khedija's inability to explicitly explain to Alia about the sexual exploitation she has suffered her whole life. Finally, Alia's status continued to transform through increased interactions with a man, Lofti. Lofti teaches Alia to read and write, drawing viewers' attention to Alia's previous lack of education. In one memorable exchange after a writing lesson, Lofti accuses Alia of not

knowing what she wants. He compares her loyalties, divided between the life she knows at the palace and the life she longs to have outside the walls, to the loyalties of Tunisia: “One word thrills you, the next scares you.” Alia’s hesitations are important, since they demonstrate the difficulty she has in choosing to leave the palace. Though she is coming to realize how dangerous it would be to stay, it is also necessary for viewers to understand how challenging it was for her to break out of the systematic exploitation of palace life.

Though viewers know from the opening scenes that Alia does indeed leave the palace and lives with Lofti, the climax of the film leaves no doubt as to how Alia chose to break from her mother’s life and strike out on her own. In the final sequence, the camera once again cuts between Alia and Khedija, as it did during the rape sequence. Contrasted on screen is Alia singing for guests at Sarra’s wedding party, and Khedija and the servant women secretly aborting her pregnancy. Once again, the revolutionary power of music was emphasized. As Alia chose to sing a forbidden hymn associated with the revolution to finish her set, Khedija, serving food at the wedding feast, clutches her abdomen in pain and slowly stumbles down the stairs towards the servants quarters. Alia remains on stage, singing the anthem of the revolution:

Its sadness bursts out in flashes that shake the sky, and extinguishes the stars,
Cherish the suffering of those who have fallen, so that the illumination can
spread
On their foreheads, after the torment, a light appears,
On yours was written shame and defeat.
You have handed Tunisia over to its enemy,
Plunged for a long time in darkness, the despair of the doves obscures the
domes,
But under the ashes, an ember burns for every loving heart.

The scene begins with a close-up of Alia’s face as she begins to sing. Through her song, she is linked to Khedija throughout the sequence, even though Khedija left the room before Alia

began to sing this anthem. The only external diegetic sound is Alia's singing voice, and it carries over between the cuts from Alia to Khediya. The close-up shots of Alia singing are framed so that she is the central focus; the background is plain, and the viewer focuses on her emotion. A sense of defiance arises from her stance in these shots, because her head is held high as she sings and looks out over the room from the stage, and presumably the crowd of guests is seen in the cutaways. In other close-up and medium close-up shots, such as those on individual party guests, the frame includes more background action behind the individual on whom the camera is focused. The subjects of these shots, including the wife of Sid Ali (who does not like Alia), are never as commanding as Alia appears in close-ups. Cutaway shots provide viewers with the context as we see offended party guests exiting the rooms.

However, the central focus remains on Alia, as the long shots of the guests whispering to each other and then leaving are framed as over-the-shoulder shots from Alia's point of view and a high camera angle. Viewers, then, see Alia in these shots, and appear to be looking down over the other guests with the same angle as Alia would have from the small stage.

The cuts to Khediya, scattered throughout Alia's song, have a different tone due to the lighting techniques. Whereas scenes of the wedding party are brightly lit and individual's faces are clearly displayed, the scenes of Khediya getting into and then lying in bed are softly lit from the right side of the frame, which draws viewer's attention to Khediya rather than the other women helping her. The constant cuts between the party scenes and the abortion scene are made more powerful for their contrast. The party seemed festive, and the women at the party are elaborately dressed and made-up. The servant women, however, have none of these luxuries, including adequate medical care. Lying in her bed, surrounded by other servant women, without a doctor, Khediya screams loudly and then dies. Her scream mixes with

Alia's singing, which ends as Khedija's scream does. This second *point de cri* contrasts with the first, as Khedija's voice is not silenced, and she expresses her agony before she dies.

After Khedija dies, the camera cuts to a close-up on the face of a servant woman, who says "God decided as such", and the camera pans down from her face to her bloody hands, to the bloody sheets next to her, and then back up to the bed, where it finally stops and rests on Khedija's body and a servant woman next to her. After Khedija's death, there is no sound except the dialogue, and the eventual echo of Alia's shoes as she runs through the palace to Khedija's room.

Tlatli's treatment of Khedija's rape and subsequent fatal abortion forces the viewer to acknowledge the context of her life. Throughout the film, Khedija was subjected to the will of others in every aspect of her life. Her choices, her actions and even her body were bound by the will and expectations of others, due to the structural violence of the patriarchal system exemplified in the Beys' systematic repression of the servant class. Alia's life was similarly defined by actors other than herself, first in her life at the palace, and later by Lofti. Yet, Alia does not allow the negative memories of the past to overwhelm her life. Viewers are given a privileged position as we experience Alia's memories with her via flashbacks while she wanders through the palace. In this way, we are able to witness the cathartic process of Alia's recollections. At the end of the film, we see Alia's decision to keep her baby, which she hopes will be a girl so she can name her daughter Khedija. This outright defiance of Lofti's demand for an abortion encourages the viewer to believe that perhaps she will be able to make a new life for herself and her child, and break the endless cycle of abuse and exploitation otherwise rampant in her life. Many films present rape scenes that define the viewing experience, as the rest of the film focuses either on recovery or on justice, Tlatli's

cinematographic choices defied these designations. Many American films that involve rape “represents the family as a refuge and heterosexual romance as [the victim’s] salvation” (Projansky 35). It is true that the servant women formed a particular type of family for each other, and through them Khedija and Alia found refuge in familial relationships. However, neither woman was saved from the systematic exploitation of patriarchy by a heterosexual romance, and these romances actually functioned to increase their oppression. Khedija was exploited by Sid Ali throughout the entirety of the film, and she is denied salvation in the form of a man.

Alia’s case is different than her mothers. At the end of the film, we see that she asserts her own agency, will, and independence in Tunisian society, and attempts to break out of the cycle of structural violence. Alia is no longer a victim, she is her own savior, and a survivor of the structural violence that characterized her life. While some critics have written that Tlatli belongs to an older generation of filmmakers in which women are represented as playing a more passive role, I argue that Alia breaks away from this particular characterization. While it is true at the beginning of the film that Lofti exerts influence over her, she is ultimately able to assert her will and agency over her future. The strength of the film’s ending is the resulting ambiguity, as viewers are denied the chance to see Alia in the future; it is uncertain if she is able to succeed in raising her daughter as a single mother. Instead of narrowing the focus to a simpler interaction between two individuals, the film’s ending draws attention to the repressive social norms as a whole. This again circles back to the thematic of structural violence present in social systems, and does not allow the viewer to exit the film feeling reassured, or even truly optimistic. We hope, along with Alia, that women’s lives will be improved in a more progressive future, but that hope is never

guaranteed. Tlatli purposefully leaves us with this ambiguity, forcing viewers to acknowledge that the exploitation faced by women in the past has continued into the present. If the women are victims, is it not due to a lack of action on their part, but is instead due to an epistemic oppression that denies them a voice.

CHAPTER 3

Incendies

Denis Villeneuve's 2010 filmic adaptation of *Incendies* follows the general plot of Wajdi Mouawad's original play, in which Canadian twins Jeanne and Simon Marwan search for their unknown father and half-brother after the death of their mother, Nawal. They only learn that their father is still alive and that their brother exists at all from their mother's will. Nawal's will stipulates that she may not be interred until the twins find their father and their sibling. Jeanne sets out to discover their long-lost sibling, and Simon eventually joins her. *Incendies* demonstrates how violence affects victims throughout their lives, as well as how families of both victims and perpetrators of crimes committed in the past continue to be disturbed in future generations. As seen in *Les Silences du Palais*, the structural violence depicted in the film complicates the stereotypical and Hollywood-inspired cinematic violence common in many contemporary films by exhibiting the lengths to which violent occurrences continue to haunt survivors and their families long after a violent action occurred. Further, the female characters in both of these films reach far beyond the stereotypical tropes too common in popular culture today. Like *Les Silences du Palais*, *Incendies* seeks to complicate viewer's understanding of how violent acts occur by demonstrating the permissive systems that exist in both films, as well as the silences that surround gendered violence.

After receiving the news about their father and brother, Jeanne and Simon are immediately overwhelmed by the news. However, their responses starkly contrast with each other. Jeanne's reaction was to search for their long-lost family, whereas Simon leaves the

notary's office angry. He wanted to disregard their mother's specific burial requests and her demand that the twins deliver the two letters she wrote to the father and to the son. Simon argues with Jeanne, believing that she feels culpable in some way for their mother's silence at the end of her life. Thus, the problematic of the silence, notable throughout the film, is introduced almost simultaneously in two different incarnations. It is evidenced first, and perhaps most obviously, in Nawal's refusal in the final years of her life. Additionally, Nawal's silence about her past prevents her children from fully knowing or understanding their mother, and forces the twins to undertake a journey of their own to come to grips with these revelations about their family.

Throughout the film, a parallel is drawn between the journey Jeanne undertakes to learn more about her mother's past and the flashbacks to Nawal's younger years searching for her lost son. Both women's quests are made significantly more difficult by their own lack of knowledge and the silence of others who apparently possess more knowledge than they want or are able to share. After the birth of her son, Nawal is sent to live with relatives and attend university in the main city of Daresh.¹⁵ The family never speaks of her pregnancy or her son, though Nawal clearly never forgets her child or loses her desire to find him again. When it is discovered that the university was shut down, Nawal's uncle refuses to allow the girls to go to the school with other crowds, limiting their movements and ability to react to the events unfolding around them. He forbids discussion of the violence in his home, again imposing a silence on the family. Out of desperation, Nawal sneaks out of her uncle's home

¹⁵ Presumably, the country in question is Lebanon. Villeneuve, like Mouawad, left the country unnamed and changed identifiers like city names to fictional locations. However, as Dominique Fisher and Mary Jean Green explain, many of the locations remain easily identifiable, even under their pseudonyms. The Kfar Ryat prison, for example, is the fictional name of a real prison, called Khiam, and the principle city was called Daresh, rather than Beirut. Fisher notes that this creates a distance from the actual historical events that occurred during the Lebanese Civil War of the 1970s. For more, see Fisher 89 and Green 107-8.

alone, and sets out to find her son. As far as viewers can tell, she has no concrete information about where her son's current whereabouts. Though others in her family might have been able to help Nawal, her illegitimate pregnancy was a subject too taboo to be discussed. As a result, Nawal wanders from point to point in the South, relying on reports of strangers to search for her son, and eventually (and mistakenly) believes him to be dead. As Michelle Perrot notes in the introduction to *Les Femmes ou les silences de l'Histoire*, "Le silence est l'ordinaire des femmes. Il convient à leur position seconde et subordonnée" (i). Here, the silence imposed by Nawal's family hampers her ability to find her son. Related to Viridi's invocation of honor codes that forcefully regulate women's behavior and sexuality, Nawal is kept in a subordinate position from the moment her family realizes she is pregnant. Her actions have been deemed unacceptable by her family, as seen when her brothers shoot her boyfriend and threaten to kill her. Nawal's actions are punished with a silence that surrounds her entire personal history, which effectively negates Nawal's personal agency and attempts to quell her desire to be reunited with her child.

Jeanne's movements were similarly hindered by her need to access taboo information. The silences imposed by her mother's family, as well as by society as a whole about the time period of the civil war traverses space and time to affect Jeanne in Canada as well as in the her mother's unnamed country of origin. She depends upon her doctoral advisor for advice about how to proceed in her search and connections abroad, and relies on an old photograph to seek information at the university her mother attended in Daresh. Jeanne never learned enough about Nawal's life from Nawal to even know where to begin her search. The language barrier further obstructs her goals, as she does not speak Arabic, or at least enough Arabic to communicate freely with those whom she meets. When Jeanne finally arrives in a

town somewhere in the south of the country, she meets a family who has information that would help her. In a roomful of women, one of whom serves as her translator, Jeanne asks about her mother and enquires about her father. As the women realize both who she is and what she wants from them, Jeanne receives no help from anyone. She is told she must leave after the room erupts in shouts and cries from the women. Jeanne's confusion is clear from her reaction; she does not understand what she has done to offend the women who were initially open and willing to help. The silence surrounding both wartime, as well as Nawal's life before she arrived in Canada are verboten. Jeanne's search for information became infinitely more difficult as she realizes that those who might help her are unwilling to do so, as the shame and the sorrow of the past continue to haunt individuals and families in the present. This reaction continues the cycle of violence, because it maintains a deleterious system of silence. Instead of reconciling silence and the truth about days past or encouraging healing through open discussion, Jeanne is punished in the present for her mother's past transgressions.¹⁶

The first individual who Jeanne finds willing to discuss her mother's past is a school janitor, who used to work at the Kfar Ryat prison. When Jeanne asks about her mother, he quietly tries to dissuade her pursuit of the subject, cautioning her that it might be better not to know. As Jeanne insists, he reveals the salient details of Nawal's imprisonment, including how she was raped by a torture specialist, Abou Tarek, and became pregnant. His revelations finally break silence surrounding Nawal's secret past, and his words make a great impact on Jeanne, who immediately calls Simon. For the first time in the film, Jeanne is overcome with emotion, and breaks down on the phone with Simon. As the janitor broke the silence with

¹⁶ Nawal's unspeakable actions include the assassination of the leader of the Christian militia, as well as her transgression of the family's honor code, which she broke when she became pregnant by Wahab (the boyfriend whom her family never approved).

her, Jeanne also broke the silence with Simon and spurred him into action. The powers of speech and knowledge are demonstrated here, as this information is enough to bring Simon, together with the notary Hermille Lebel to Daresh to help Jeanne find their brother and father. Whereas Simon was at first unwilling to participate in Jeanne's search for their family, he now becomes an active participant in the investigation. The janitor's admissions also had a secondary effect on the theme of silence; he called Nawal "Numéro 72, la femme qui chante". In his words, Nawal's defining characteristic in prison was her singing voice, a symbol of her resistance against her captors. Instead of remaining silent, Nawal's voice posed a direct threat to the prison system, which relied on subjugated bodies rather than active individuals. Instead, Nawal strongly asserted her defiance and agency to resist their punishments. From the prison's point of view, therefore, Nawal had to be silenced with whatever weapons were necessary. In this case, it was repeated rape and a pregnancy in prison that finally quelled Nawal's rebellious voice.

The limited number of scenes of wartime violence shown onscreen are significant because they show the pervasiveness and extent of the violence. Few people were left untouched. Even the families of military leaders were affected, as seen when Nawal assassinated the leader of the Christian militia. Significantly, in scenes where violence was represented onscreen, such as the leader's assassination or Nihad's work as a sniper, the cinematographic choices are noteworthy for their decided dissimilarity to typical Hollywood action and war films. Dominique D. Fisher writes,

"Incendies de Villeneuve n'est pas non plus un film qui traite de la guerre et de la violence d'une façon hollywoodienne... Villeneuve s'écarte de la pornographie de la violence en optant davantage pour la stratégie du retrait du regard en ayant recours au plan d'ensemble ou bien encore à celle de l'après en centrant le regard de la caméra sur les effets ou les traces de la violence" (95).

In *Incendies*, Villeneuve closely followed the life of Nawal, to the exclusion of other possible aspects of the storyline. Though the film's narrative revolved around the violence of civil war years and the series of discoveries it triggered, the film is not a "war movie" that hinges on gory, violent, sensational, or exaggerated scenes. What is most notable is that which Villeneuve excluded from shots rather than what the camera did capture. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag notes that "the photographic image... cannot simply be a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude"(46).¹⁷ In *Incendies*, the camera in most violent scenes tracks Nawal's movements closely and focuses on her emotional state, rather than favoring wide shots or long shots that might encompass a greater amount of gore, blood, or terror. Bodies of the dead are not exploited for their shock value, and the film often frames violent scenes like the assassination sequence from Nawal's point of view.¹⁸ As Fisher writes, "Villeneuve ne s'attache pas à choquer et à faire réagir le spectateur par la violence verbale et par la valence tragique et performative qui la caractérise" (13). Violent sequences rarely feature gratuitous shots of explosions or dead bodies, and the camera does not dwell on the aftermath of murder. Additionally, instead of exploiting the vulnerabilities inherent to being a victim of violence, Villeneuve chose to focus on how Nawal's experiences affected her present, and future, life. Nawal, and her children, thereby remain the focal point of the film.

¹⁷ While the filmic medium is of course different from photography, *Incendies* incorporates static shots and freeze frames which are both similar to photographic techniques. Framing is a consideration that affects both mediums.

¹⁸ The notable exception to this pattern is the burning bus sequence, which will be discussed in greater detail in pages 37-39.

In a first example, Nawal's assassination of the leader of the Christian militia, the entire sequence is depicted from her point of view. Tension naturally arises as the audience experiences the preparation for and fruition of the assassination with Nawal, waiting for what we know is coming. The sequence begins after Nawal renounces all ties with the Christians and cuts to a scene in which Nawal is tutoring the leader's son in French. Audiences see how she has become an accepted member of their household as she lunches with the family and attentively helps her young pupil with his French workbook. When the assassination occurs, it is swift. The camera tracks Nawal's movements as she removes her gun from her briefcase, walks out to the patio, and shoots the leader. This scene in particular is marked by the sudden arrival of the violence and the rapidity with which it is carried out. There is no build-up to Nawal's actions, no slow motion frames, and no stylized presentation of her actions. Thanks to the phone call Nawal received the night before, viewers already know what is going to happen.¹⁹ As such, there is need for an extra-diegetic soundtrack suggesting the arrival of impending doom. Immediately after shooting the leader, the scene cuts to a sequence in which Nawal is literally carried away from the house by the security forces. The choice to not show the immediate aftermath of the leader's assassination means that the viewer never sees his dead body, or his family's reaction to his death. Their grief is not exploited in this instance, because it is superfluous to the progression of the plot. Instead, the camera stays with Nawal, with a direct, eye-level shot of Nawal's face and the militiamen's legs removing her from the house. She is not fetishized as a violent female or a "femme fatale". Instead, viewers witness her disturbing actions and their horrifying consequences.

¹⁹ The phone call is ambiguous, but viewers can assume from the dialogue that Nawal is receiving an order, likely from someone in Chamseddine's organization. The voice on the other end indicates that she should do something the following day at 10am, which viewers come to see is the assassination of the leader.

While Villeneuve does not hesitate to show violence onscreen,²⁰ he limits these displays to scenes where it is valuable to understand how Nawal lived the violence and how her reaction to such experiences changed the course of her life. The most explicit scene undoubtedly occurs before Nawal assassinates the Christian leader. Her motivation for the assassination is explained as her journey shifts from searching for her son to being militant and anti-Christian. The Christian militia's attack on a bus full of Muslim passengers irrevocably changes Nawal's perspective of the conflict. According to Fisher, "Le bus qui flambe constitue selon Villeneuve un moment décisif de l'histoire de Nawal, car c'est à partir de là que tout change pour elle: celle-ci ne cherche plus seulement son fils mais décide de s'engager à combattre pour Chamseddine et les réfugiés" (95). For viewers, this scene functions as an emotional punch, when we first experience the visual aspect of the civil war. It's shocking for its drama, but also notable for its approach to the visual depiction of the violence on-screen. Villeneuve's cinematographic choices seem to aim for the understated rather than the sensational, at least as much as this is possible for a scene in which an entire bus of passengers are shot by militiamen, and then the bus is covered in gas and the survivors are burned with it.

As in the assassination sequence, Nawal's experience remains the sole focus of the camera throughout the scene. The camera is focused either on Nawal, or the shot is filmed from her point of view. As in the scene when she assassinates the Christian leader, the camera tracks and/or mimics Nawal's movements. When the driver argues with a militiaman and is shot point blank, the camera shows this framed through the bus window, from Nawal's

²⁰ Examples include, the death of Wahab at the beginning of the film, the assassination of the Christian leader, the sequence in which Nihad shoots the boys in Daresh, and the killing of the Muslims on the bus followed by the burning bus are all depicted onscreen. I would argue, however, that all these scenes help viewers understand the life experiences of one or more characters and are not irrelevant or gratuitous.

perspective. Immediately after the diver is shot, the camera leaves the exterior of the bus. Instead, viewers witness Nawal's realization of her bad situation, and her shock and fear when the militiamen begin shooting at the bus. In the aftermath of their shooting, the camera does not spend much time showing the dead bodies of her nameless fellow passengers or on their deaths. Key to this scene is how the camera focuses on Nawal, as well as the other surviving woman and her child. The vast majority of these shots are close-up or medium close-ups whose focal points are the faces of Nawal and the mother, which encourages viewers to identify with one or both of these women. Their emotions and experiences mediate viewers' reactions to the violent sequence, as viewers experience the terror with the two women. This is not to imply that the scenes are sanitized to exclude the bloody or violent elements. The violence is undeniably present and realistic in its sudden arrival and demonstration of the resulting trauma. The human reaction to such spontaneous violence is emphasized, and the horror of their situation registers on the faces of all three survivors. The women look at each other and at the bodies of their passengers, but their emotions remain the focus as they try to escape from the bus before it burns.

Desperation and terror are the key emotions displayed in the scene. After Nawal is able to save herself and unable to save the young Muslim girl, viewers are physically distanced from the ensuing violence. After the girl is wrested away from Nawal, the scene cuts to an extreme long shot. Here, the long shot places viewers in a distinctly disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the action of the shooting sequence. Fisher notes here that the girl's body in this scene is scarcely visible onscreen (96). In being held far from the action of the shooting itself, and we never see the girl's dead body after she was shot. Instead, the focus immediately switches to Nawal's reaction to the militiamen's actions. As the shot rings out

and the girl presumably dies, the camera cuts to a static shot, a medium close up of Nawal as she falls to the ground in time with the gunshot. This scene is immediately followed by a static shot on the burning bus,²¹ which fragments the rhythm of the sequence (Fisher 96). Viewers are disturbed, and experience the trauma of the scene with Nawal, from the shock and disbelief that this innocent girl could be shot in cold blood to the horror and disgust as their actions sink in. Again, in this instance, the child's dead body is not used as fodder for a sensational depiction of the horrors of war. Villeneuve demonstrates that the horrified reactions of Nawal, or the girl's mother, are amply sufficient to produce the same emotional effects within spectators, without catering to the violent Hollywood tropes which tend to favor the opposite. In films that evoke a glorious treatment of war, wide shots and pans of violent sequences are often used, occasionally in slow motion, and are often accompanied by dramatic music aimed at manipulating or steering the emotions of the spectators. In *Incendies*, however, spectators' emotions are incited as they register emotionally with principal characters, as well as through a more realistic and less exploitative portrayal of the violence itself.

If Nawal's life is altered by the burning bus and her assassination of the leader of the Christian militia, then it is radically transformed by her time in prison. It is here that the principal case of sexual violence occurs. In the prison, rape is a tool for the subjugation and silencing women. The goal of Abou Tarek, the torturer, was both to break Nawal's spirit as well as to silence her voice, ending the outward expression of her contempt and defiance of her jailors. The film hinges on this one instance of sexual violence in which rape was violently and repeatedly used to punish Prisoner 72, often called "la pute 72." Again,

²¹ Fisher also notes that the cut to the static shot of the bus "connote pour Nawal l'incendie du bus comme un 'instantané d'histoire et de mémoire' traumatique" (96).

however, Villeneuve refused to exploit and depict the rape itself onscreen. Abou Tarek is shown entering her cell, and in the aftermath, Nawal is shown lying on the ground, pulling her pants back up. However, the moments of the violation are not shown onscreen. Fisher comments here, “La scène du viol et les scènes de torture restent off-screen. Le film exploite là encore le retrait du regard. La caméra montre l’avant et l’après du viol dans une scène silencieuse” (97-8). Showing the rape onscreen is unnecessary, and it would be gratuitous to put Nawal’s victimhood on display. Violence here, Fisher demonstrates, is not rendered banal (97). Furthermore, the crucial aspect of the film’s presentation of this instance of sexual violence is how the narrative informs without showing viewers that this was not a solitary occurrence. It is implied that Nawal was violated more than once, and it is impossible to believe that she was the only female prisoner raped by Abou Tarek. After Nawal gives birth, two jail workers stand by the river to kill the babies. In this case, though, the woman refuses to let the man kill these children. To his protests, she insists, “You threw them in the river like always.” From this exchange, viewers know enough to understand that rape was used repeatedly on women imprisoned during the civil war.

As with many cases of sexual violence, this case of rape occurs in the margins of society.²² In *Les Silences du Palais*, for example, the sexual violence was forced on women who had little agency and few contacts outside the palace who could help them expose their situation or affect change. The victims were isolated, which made them easier to exploit. Nawal, similarly, is cut off from the outside world during her time in prison. However, Nawal (like Khedija) is rarely treated as a hapless victim over the course of the film. Instead, she is a strong female character, who retains a strong sense of self and through her own

²² In *Incendies*, the rape occurs within the context of the ongoing civil war. However, even within this wartime, the rape scene occurs in the marginal space of the prison, rather than in a city or a more common or less regulated space.

determination is capable of transforming her life time and time again. Throughout her entire life, Nawal's existence has not been steady; she is often depicted in the midst of uncertain and changing circumstances. From her childhood home with her grandfather, she was sent to Daresh after the birth of her son. She left Daresh and wandered in search of her son for an unspecified amount of time until she joined Chamseddine's rebels. After working as a tutor and assassinating the Christian right wing leader, she spends time in prison before she once again is forced to reinvent herself and create a new life for herself and two children in Canada. All of these things are not enough to silence her, until she realizes the truth about Nihad/Abou Tarek. In a departure from Mouawad's original play, the moment when Nawal recognizes Nihad/Abou Tarek in the film occurs at a swimming pool in Montreal. She recognizes her son by the three dots on his foot, which she knows her grandmother tattooed onto her baby before he was sent to the orphanage. She recognizes Abou Tarek when he turns around and she sees his face; in that moment, she realizes who her son became. From this moment forward, Nawal does not speak. Despite her silence, Nawal is reminiscent of Khediya in *Les Silences du Palais*. Both women carved a life for themselves out of terrible situations, and were able to survive the systematic abuse they suffered. Further, the two women directly and indirectly provided a better life for their children, helping them move beyond the dilemmas they faced even after they died.

Another important point in Villeneuve's treatment of sexual violence is the treatment of the rapist himself. In far too many popular depictions of rapists, the perpetrators are reduced to madmen or psychotic individuals, monstrous and unnatural beings. While mental disorders are a possible motivation of the culprit in some instances of sexual violence, it is certainly not true for all cases of sexual violence. Continuing to represent perpetrators of

sexual violence in such a way only serves to further marginalize both rapists and their victims, as well as to negate the prevalence of sexual attacks. In the prison scenes, it is reasonable that the initial reaction to Abou Tarek is to view him as hideous figure. If his status as the prison torturer and serial rapist is not enough to condemn him, his character is worsened by the knowledge that he impregnated his own mother. This renders him an even more unnatural figure, and it is easy to condemn him. It is certainly an understandable desire to wish to see this torturing and killing machine punished for the pain he caused Nawal, and presumably many other men, women, and children. However, this is not the only possible interpretation of his character. Viewers are made to understand, via the warlord Chamseddine's story, Nihad's tragic life. In choosing to explain Abou Tarek/ Nihad's background and personal history, *Incendies* achieves a rare balance between explaining and condemning his actions. While he was the child of two parents who loved each other, his father was killed before his birth and he was immediately taken to an orphanage. The situation is not enviable under the best of circumstances, but was made worse by the civil war, during which he, like many other orphans, were recruited by various militia's and trained, and forced to fight for them.

From this perspective, he comes across as a more pathetic and pitiable figure, because it is clear he had no agency in his personal life for many years. He was trained for war, used and abused by different factions for their own purposes with little regard for the human being behind the role of soldier, assassin, or torturer. Even in his later exile in Canada, his job is menial and his life is not privileged. Instead of being reduced to the status of a human anomaly, an crazy individual to whom it would be impossible to relate, Nihad was carefully humanized at the end of the film, when Jeanne and Simon deliver the mother's two letters to

him. These letters are crucial to the narrative, as they finally break Nawal's silence, which viewers now understand as being rooted in her realization of the unintentionally incestuous situation. She addressed the two letters to "the father" and "the son", her way of distinguishing between her long-lost and much loved son, Nihad, and Abou Tarek, the torturer and rapist. This also complicates viewers' understanding of the character, since Nawal's division of the individual into Nihad and Abou Tarek encourages viewers to do the same. Complicating the viewer's reception of this individual is critical to the depiction of the rapist as a non-marginal figure, and a figure whose flaws are humanized instead of dismissed as monstrous.

The moment when Jeanne and Simon hand Nawal's two letters to Nihad are tense, as viewers know what is coming and await his reaction. He is shown returning home from working as a bus cleaner in Canada. While he is certainly not a pitiable figure at this moment, it is at least reassuring to know that his Canadian exile is not a glamorous one. Nihad appears to be distressed and frantic at the moment when he reads that the twins who handed him the letters knows who he is, and dashes out to the street and tries unsuccessfully to locate them. Tormented by his past, Nihad is clearly haunted by his actions and the threat that others know what he did. As he reads the letters and discovers the truth, the news clearly has a destabilizing effect, increased by cinematographic choices. The camera pans from his face, across to the wall, and down to the letters in his hands. His heavy breathing is clearly heard, and his hands tremble as he reads Nawal's words. At this moment, Nihad is humanized in his sorrowful reaction to the news. This is crucial to the depiction of Nihad in the film, as viewers realize they might be able to have pity for this man. Finally, his shaken and alarmed reaction to the news that he raped his mother seems to suggest that he is more

human than machine. He reacts as one might expect, seeming to be stunned by this knowledge, and helpless before the truth. In this scene, Nihad might not be the unknowable Other, completely removed from the realm of “real life”, but a wretched or pitiful individual.

The film concludes with Nawal’s own voice. Her final letters to the twins and Nihad are read in a voice-over sequence. Her last letter to Jeanne and Simon functioned as cathartic tool for healing for the twins, who are relieved their journey is over. Nihad’s reaction is anything but cathartic, and the repeated phrase, “Rien n’est plus beau que d’être ensemble” has a different effect in his letter than in the letter of the twins. The film’s opening shot shows a young Nihad getting his head shaved, presumably for military purposes, and closes with him at Nawal’s grave. Bookending the film with shots of Nihad in these vulnerable positions makes it that much more difficult for viewers to condemn him. Furthermore, Nawal finally addresses her son and her torturer on her own terms, and in her own voice. Viewers see very little of the older Nawal and her Canadian life, but her letters make her voice clear and her will to end the cycles of violence are unambiguous. The suggestion of healing hinted in the letters seems to be confirmed when Nihad visits Nawal’s grave. The film’s ending proposes an end to the systematic intergenerational violence that has plagued this family for many years and across different countries. Nawal’s final insistence on ending the violence is clearly voiced, and it seems possible that Jeanne, Simon, and Nihad might be able to reconcile themselves with their past and restore their present lives.

Like *Les Silences du Palais*, the power of this film stems from how the sexual violence shown onscreen was depicted as being a part of a larger, structural system of exploitation of women. In *Incendies*, the entire wartime setting is intentionally nameless. The violence is widespread, and it is impossible to isolate any single instance that is disconnected

from the others. Like Mouawad's original play, Villeneuve chose to place the civil war in a fictional country, though it is presumably Lebanon. There are references made in *Incendies* to events that occurred during the Lebanese Civil War, events which would be recognizable to a public familiar with the conflict. For example, Fisher cites Elizabeth Dahab's clarification that the guide showing the Kfar Ryat prison-turned-museum refers to the real-life genocides committed in Sabra and Satilla refugee camps in 1982 (Dahab 152, qtd. in Fisher 99). However, the guide uses fictional names for these places, Kfar Ryat and Kfar Matra. The changes to names of cities and camps purposefully blurred the line between fiction and reality. This allows the film to address a more universal set of situations, rather than limiting analyses to the Lebanese Civil War.

Additionally, many elements of this particular story are likely applicable to other individuals and families who experienced the conflict. Nawal was not the only daughter to give birth to an illegitimate son, and Nihad was not the only boy at the orphanage. He was not the only orphan kidnapped and conscripted into militia service, and not the only torturer working in the civil war. Nawal was not the only individual who worked as an assassin during the war, and she was certainly not the only political prisoner tortured during her imprisonment. *Incendies* is a film that speaks to a problematic much wider than the individuals and story it presented onscreen, and therefore does not permit a narrow interpretation of the violence it illustrates. Villeneuve's treatment of questions about violence and violence against women force viewers to consider these questions from a complicated and complex point of view. There is no clear beginning to the violence viewers witness, and no depiction of a singular or solitary violent incident. Instead, viewers witness individual occurrences as part of a much larger causal chain of events that presents a schema of violence

that is arguably more authentic and realistic, even within the fictional framework of the film. Further, the pain that various characters witness in the past and in the present timelines is not reduced or dulled, which allows viewers to see how greatly individuals are affected by violence in their life or in the lives of loved ones. Villeneuve's film, therefore, does not present violence as glorious or even as a necessary evil. Instead, his approach demonstrates pain and trauma, in what can be considered a plea for peace and an end to the suffering wrought by violence.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

Violence against women is a topic haunted by a history of silence. For centuries, many forms of violence currently recognized around the world were considered socially acceptable, and far too many modes of gendered violence continue to be inflicted upon women around the world.²³ News outlets report incidents of sexual assault, forced marriages, stoning, and cases of female genital mutilation around the world. In the United States, sexual assault remains strongly skewed towards female victims, and many feminists discuss rape culture, a permissive system that normalizes, minimizes, or disregards rape crimes entirely. As Michele Perrot suggests, then, it is imperative to include women's perspectives not only into current discourse, but also into contemporary discussions of history, to incorporate these female perspectives that have long been marginalized and overlooked. "La difficulté de l'histoire des femmes tient d'abord à l'effacement de leurs traces, tant publique que privées" (Perrot 9). A coming to terms with experiences of gendered violence necessitates a study of

²³ While both films discussed here are at least partially set in a Middle Eastern/North African country, I do not wish to imply in any way that violence against women is a problem specific to that region of the world. Recent media attention to crimes of sexual violence in the United States, including here at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, should serve as ample evidence that sexual assault affects the West just as much as any other part of the world. The two films were chosen for a variety of reasons, as discussed in the introduction. Because I am working with French-language films, the vast majority of American films were precluded from this study. There are, however, American films that would be relevant here, as Sarah Projansky's 2001 book *Watching Rape* demonstrates in an excellent review of rape in American films from 1903-2000.

Additionally, there is no link between violence and religion in either case, though Islam is a small part of both films. Reader will notice, however, that it is rarely mentioned in my analysis of both films. This is precisely because religion is only mentioned in *Les Silences du Palais* in passing references, and the perpetrators are not presented as particularly religious or irreligious. The violence in *Incendies* affects all parts of the society- Christian and Muslim alike, as occurred in the Lebanese Civil War. Films produced or set in the Middle East and North Africa that feature violence do not prove that Islam is a violent religion any more than an American action or horror film proves that Christians are prone to shooting, violence, or explosions.

women's history, in the public and the private realm, and a re-examining how popular perceptions might be influenced by a male-dominated public rhetoric. This is not without debate, as Perrot allows:

“L’histoire « des femmes » pose de très nombreuses questions, à commencer par son titre, constituant les femmes en objet. Est-elle légitime ? Ferait-on l’histoire des hommes ? Les femmes ont-elles une histoire ? Est-ce possible ? Le déferlement des images permet-il de faire autre chose qu’une histoire des représentations et des perceptions ? ”

The purpose of writing a “histoire des femmes” is not to negate any and all male voices in History. Rather, Perrot argues that allowing women's voice to be heard, permitting women to speak out for themselves about their lives and their histories is crucial. If women's lived experiences are different than men's, then their voices must be considered equally legitimate to their male counterparts, both in discussion of the past and the present. Specifically, forms of sexual and gendered violence that disproportionately victimize women should not be seen as a separate or isolated category of violence. Gendered violence cannot be viewed as too far outside most conventional definitions of personal violence to be discussed. Rather, all forms of violence, and especially violence against women, need to be understood in their diverse incarnations and in all of their complicated manifestations, as well as being discussed in tandem with structural systems of systematic violence in Western and non-Western contexts. To do otherwise would be to oversimplify and reduce the issue, which only serves to further marginalize victims of these crimes.

Discussions of violence also necessitate a discussion of spectatorship, particularly how the public consumes images of violent crime. This issue that is always and implicitly present in discussions of violent actions and how they are represented, in both fictional and non-fictional forms. In 2003, Susan Sontag published *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a

monograph in which she discusses how the public receives and responds to images of violence. In an examination of photography and film shown on various news programs in the United States during the 1960's through the present day, she writes:

“Ever since [the Vietnam War], battles and massacres film as they unfold have been a routine ingredient of the ceaseless flow of domestic, small-screen entertainment. Creating a perch for a particular conflict in the consciousness of viewers exposed to dramas from everywhere requires the daily diffusion and rediffusion of snippets of footage about the conflict. *The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images*” (21, emphasis mine).

Sontag's argument here about how perceptions of war are shaped by the public's daily, mediated encounters with conflict on the internet or on televised news can be applied to a broader range of mass media. Fictional depictions, including novels, television shows, and films, also nuance our perceptions of and reactions to violence. For this reason, films like *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies* are important to discuss, because of the way they achieve a more realistic and complex demonstration of how violence affects individuals and societies as a whole. The films do not achieve this demonstration in an identical manner. *Les Silences du Palais* presents a narrative that unfolds in the margins of society, and gives a voice to servant women by telling the story from their point of view. The violence viewers witness serves as proof of the systematic isolation and exploitation of the women by the more powerful and wealthy class. *Incendies* differs from Tlatli's film in that individuals are depicted as both perpetrators as well as victims of violence. Rather than depicting a clear-cut delineation between aggressor and victim, Villeneuve shows how all parties can be abused and abuser, depending on the situation. However, viewers of both films are allowed to understand and even experience the lives of the individuals involved in violence situations, and this makes the films all the more powerful.

Despite the voyeurism inherent in any project of representation, it is necessary to discuss the role spectators play in these situations. And if it is possible to create and watch films that incorporate physical and/or sexual violence, and other forms of horror or exploitation, it is also necessary to examine the role of the filmmakers. Filmmakers influence and nuance spectatorship in the message they intend to convey with the film, both through the narrative itself and in their cinematographic choices. The shocking, sensational, and stylized violent scenes that are prolific in Hollywood movies contrast strongly with *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies*. Whereas Hollywood films and film franchises often feature glorified explosions and exaggeratedly violent sequences,²⁴ Tlatli and Villeneuve focused on individual stories and personal reactions to the trauma they endure. As such, viewers often “live” these experiences with them, which renders incidents of a sexually violent nature less graphic way. Revisions made by directors like these two to filmic traditions offer means to both subvert viewers expectations for filmed productions as well as the archetypes that continue to present themselves in the postcolonial era. Voices such as theirs are, therefore, crucial additions to the cinematic register made all the more valuable for their subversive and unconventional approach to violence in the filmic genre.

While they address controversial topics, both films ended with a positive note offering means for the characters to overcome the cruelty and exploitation of the past. Though some might say this renders them less realistic, the endings remain true to the pattern of complexity established throughout the film. They offer the possibility of hope for a

²⁴ Popular Hollywood films and franchises that are dramatically violent include, for example, most if not all of director Quentin Tarantino’s films; action films like Christopher Nolan’s 2005 reboot of the Batman franchise, which included *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), or the entire *Die Hard* franchise (1988-2013); horror films like the *Saw* franchise (2003-2010); and the perennially popular war genre, which range from World War II-era films to their contemporary counterparts about past wars or current conflicts, like Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*(2008) or *Zero Dark Thirty*(2012). Both *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are Oscar-nominated films about the current American war in Iraq.

resolution, internally and externally, rather than any sort of concrete method to end the cyclic violence imposed on the characters. Both filmmakers address the importance of breaking the silences of the past as a means to achieve conflict resolution. Tlatli's film exposed the systems of violence present in the palace, as well as Tunisian society as a whole demonstrated the complexity of familial relationships. Alia's final declaration at the end of the film, in which she refuses to get another abortion, leaves the viewer with hope that she will be able to truly make her own choices in the future. The final scenes of *Incendies* follow a similar pattern, in that they offer the hope for a resolution for the twins and for Nihad. However, Villeneuve focused on the possibilities of open resolution to a greater degree than Tlatli, because all the characters involved finally had the same information about the past. This knowledge forced all characters to come to terms with the past more palpably than in *Les Silences du Palais*, in which Lofti's sentiments, for example, remain unknown. Instead, Villeneuve places Jeanne and Simon at Nihad's home, forcing all three siblings to meet and acknowledge each other's presence in their lives. The cycle of violence has been starkly addressed, throughout the film as well as in its conclusion.

This link between violence and art is the subject of much debate.²⁵ Fisher discusses the work of Mieke Bal, who argues that violence in art does not necessarily reduce or diminish the potency of the violence, and can serve instead to inescapably preserve the memory of cruelty and violence in society's collective historical memory (98). Otherwise, many violent incidences risk being minimized or forgotten. This, as Fisher notes, is linked to the relationship between shocking images and their ability to move spectators and force them

²⁵ In a discussion of violence and art, literature is an obvious link that I do not address in this discussion. A plethora of monographs and articles that discuss the link between violence and literature analyze a variety of literary genres and authors from around the world. These works are too numerous to cite here, though a discussion of the differences in violence in literature as compared to film would be an interesting continuation of the present project.

to react in a more concrete way than they might otherwise have to do (98). In the case of *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies*, the films serve to both preserve memories of the past, as well as increase spectators understanding of the past. By controlling the flow of information to the spectators, Tlatli and Villeneuve create scenarios of tension and dramatic irony throughout their films, which increases spectator's investment in the outcome. Especially in cases in which a Western audience watches a film like *Les Silences du Palais*, made by a Tunisian director in Tunisia, audiences are likely faced with a scenario that is very different from their own lives. As spectators come to care about the fictional individuals presented onscreen, they might also acknowledge how the situations these characters faced might be more realistic than they had ever before considered.

It remains to be seen in future investigations how the relationship between violence and art continues to manifest, in local and global contexts. Further study can be conducted into the relationship between the intentions of the filmmakers and the techniques used to portray violence and violent incidents. For example, Villeneuve could be considered a feminist filmmaker, due not only to his treatment of violence against women in *Incendies*, but also how he explored topics like femicide in his 2009 film, *Polytechnique*. Related to this, future study could be conducted in a deeper exploration into the ethics of visually representing exploitation, both in film and print media. Representations of other forms of gendered violence, of genocide, and of war often arise in the popular culture, and questions raised here about graphically exploitative images and prolonged victimhood are relevant to these forms of violence as well. Additionally, examinations of other films that also treat the topics like violence against women, or sexual violence against men and women would offer a

deeper analyses of patterns or divergences found across films produced in the West and elsewhere.

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