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When One plus One equals One: Truth and Blindness in the Oedipal Myth and Denis Villeneuve's Film *Incendies*

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Introduction

"We become what we agree to suffer" (Wilfred Bion in Grotstein, 2018).

Much like poetry, the art of cinema can distil some of the universal truths of our psychic life in two short hours, greatly adding to our psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious. In our eyes, the film *Incendies*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (2010), is one that does so in a particularly interesting manner, as it embodies a fundamental psychoanalytic construct — the Oedipus complex — while situating it in a real, present-day, sociopolitical setting.

The film depicts the journey of two twins, Jeanne and Simon Marwan, to an unnamed Middle Eastern country torn by a civil war between Christian and Muslim fanatics. The twins set out after their mother's will leaves them a pair of envelopes: one addressed to the father they thought was dead, the other to a brother they did not know existed. This enigmatic inheritance sheds light upon their mother's unexplained silence during the final weeks of her life. The twins gradually piece together the story of the woman who gave them life, discovering the tragic fate and the extraordinary courage of this exceptional individual.

Throughout the film, a deeply moving story is fleshed out, portraying the extremism and violence of today's world as well as the uncanny power of the will to survive. As we see it, the film offers its own version of the Oedipal myth,[1] and deeply resonates the intricate quest for knowledge and truth, alternately driven by love or hate, or in Bion's words, by the life or death instincts: 'In the personality where life instincts predominate, pride becomes self-respect, where death instincts predominate, pride becomes arrogance' (1958: 144). This interpretation of the Oedipal myth emphasises various themes which converge around the relation to truth: the quest for truth versus the denial of truth, blindness, and enigmatic messages; arrogance as a fundamental impediment to the discovery of truth; and the search for truth in the process of becoming a subject. In discussing these materials, we are following in the footsteps of theoreticians such as Bion (1958), Ogden (2004), Symington (1990), Laplanche (1995), Britton (1989), and Kristeva (1988), rather than embracing Freud's

[·] **Note:** The three authors played equal roles in the research and publication of this paper. We are grateful for help of Shira Dushy in editing it.

[1] We are here referring to both the myth and its adaptation into the tragedies by Sophocles: *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

interpretation of the myth, which overstresses sexuality and the incestuous sexual wish.[2]

The film's two alternate titles, *Incendies* and *The Woman Who Sang*, accentuate its tragic aspect. It is a tragedy in which everyone ends up scorched, living with acute psychic burns; a tragedy which precedes and succeeds the revelation of truth. Our aim in this paper is to demonstrate the elaborate dialogue the protagonists engage in, vis-à-vis the search for and denial of truth, as well as the branding this significant process leaves on the psyche of those taking part in its drama. Although the film depicts a certain time and place, and recounts a very specific story, it also transcends these particularities and attains an eternal and multidimensional quality by embodying the reactions to the Oedipus complex, which is manifest across different ages and cultures. In the following pages, we will discuss the various ways in which the film corresponds to the Oedipal myth, highlighting the intrapsychic conflict between the desire to know and the desire not to know.

First, a few words about myth. Unlike any other kind of story, myths depict what was, what is, and what is yet to be. They portray the order of things in nature, in society, in the relationship between human beings and their gods, even in the psyche. One might say that myths are the treasure trove of human wisdom and experience, formed over millennia as oral traditions passed down from one generation to the next. These stories lay down the coordinates of human existence, serving as a compass for social and personal orientation. In psychoanalysis, as in other disciplines, myths serve as organising structures, ordering fantasy life and transcending the personal. They function as a kind of narrative articulation of cardinal themes in the psychic and social lives of human beings.[3]

We will focus on three themes as we look at both the Oedipal myth and the film. First, we will focus on truth and knowledge versus blindness and ignorance. Following that, we will focus on the struggle between the life and death instincts, and finally, we will discuss fate, the freedom of choice, and personal responsibility.

The painful truth and the "bliss" of blindness

> Where life instincts predominate, pride becomes self-respect, where death instincts predominate, pride becomes arrogance.
>
> (Bion, 1958: 144)

The myth of Oedipus can be briefly depicted as a traumatic sequence of incestuous relations: Laius, Oedipus's father, kidnapped and raped the son of King Pelops, himself a victim of incest. Pelops then placed a curse on Laius, decreeing that if Laius were to

[2] The Freudian interpretation nevertheless eventually weaves the two strands of sexuality and the pursuit of knowledge into a single organising principle. Similarly, the film juxtaposes images of the search for and denial of truth with those of patricide and incest.

[3] This can be seen as a parallel to Jung's 'collective unconscious' (1959) or Hopper's 'social unconscious' (2002).

have a son, that son would kill him and marry his wife. In awe of this curse, Laius avoids intercourse with his wife, Jocasta. Still, having slept with her in a drunken stupor, Laius eventually sires a son and decides to get rid of the baby, piercing his legs with a long needle and then handing him to a servant, to be left for dead. In a moment of compassion, the servant gives the baby to a passing shepherd and the latter presents the child to Polybus and Merope, the childless king and queen of Corinth. They name the child Oedipus on account of his injured foot (Oedipus literally means 'swollen foot').

When Oedipus discovers that he may have been adopted, and in spite of his parents' denial, he sets out for Delphi, to consult the Oracle. The Oracle responds enigmatically, leaving Oedipus, still in the dark, with sombre intimations about marrying his mother and murdering his father (Sophocles, 1982: 205). Trying to avoid this fate, he leaves Corinth. At a crossroads, he comes across a group of people, including King Laius. Laius commands Oedipus to make way for his "superior". Oedipus arrogantly replies that only the gods are superior to him, and the group then tries to run him down. Defending himself, he kills all of them, including Laius. On the outskirts of Thebes, he encounters the Sphinx and succeeds in solving her riddle, which refers to the secret of living along a timeline and the natural order of things.[4] Its riddle solved, the Sphinx commits suicide. In the absence of King Laius, the grateful people of Thebes make Oedipus their king, marrying him to Jocasta. After this royal couple have two boys and two girls, a dreadful pestilence scourges the city. Once it is consulted, the Oracle at Delphi reveals that the plague is caused by the presence of Laius's assassin within the city. Determined to find the assassin, Oedipus meets with the blind seer Tiresias, who warns him about pursuing the truth at any cost (Sophocles, 1982: 176-7), but Oedipus only scorns him and his words. Jocasta also begs him to desist from his inquiry, but he ignores her request as well. Finally, when he is discovered as the killer, Jocasta commits suicide, and Oedipus gouges his own eyes out and exiles himself from Thebes.

Freud uses the Oedipal myth to ground his notion of psychosexual development (1905). However, he also notes that the desire for knowledge is related to the child's initial curiosity regarding how children are born and the concealment or enigmatic answers they encounter (Ofer & Durban, 1999). In his introduction to the *Little Hans* case study, Freud states that 'the thirst for knowledge seems to be inseparable from sexual curiosity' (1909). Laplanche, who continues this line of thinking, argues that the basic precondition for the development of the desire for knowledge is the seduction inherent in the very act of concealment. According to Laplanche (1995), the enigmatic signifier presents the child with a secret and a riddle that they feel they must decipher.

While Freud highlights and elaborates on the sexual dimension embodied in the Oedipal myth, Bion (1967) uses the same myth in elucidating the development of thinking, and the conflict inherent in knowing and searching for truth. Bion essentially claims that the ability to think and to know expresses a continuous motion between two

[4] A prominent medieval theological notion portrays this order as 'the great chain of beings'.

poles: psychic growth — stemming from thinking, which entails the capacity to bear psychic pain; and the desire to dispose of painful experiences and their significance — a psychic process which is tantamount to 'anti-thinking'. For Bion, the sexual sin is not the key element of this myth; rather, he focuses on Oedipus's sin of arrogance (hubris). This arrogance is manifest in the vow Oedipus makes to uncover the truth *at all costs*. Paradoxically, such arrogance may manifest itself as an unrelenting search for truth, as well as a denial of truth and a wish to avoid knowledge at all costs. According to Bion, these two psychic processes emerge in the wake of a catastrophic 'psychological disaster' (Bion, 1958: 144), giving rise to the wish to avoid pain no matter what. In other words, all these distortions of truth originate in a psychic disaster and its concomitant indigestible anxieties or 'nameless dread' (Bion, 1962: 309). It is equally important to stress that 'having knowledge at all costs' is another form of avoiding knowledge, as any truth thus attained is absolute, final, and exclusive, leaving no room for further questions. It is a truth that admits no question marks, an unequivocal knowing, the pursuit of which has no room for doubts, enquiries, or ambiguities. Thus, avoiding knowledge as well as seeking it at all costs both result in -K (Bion, 1963).

We suggest that the film *Incendies* employs the Oedipal myth as its organising metaphor: emphasising the understanding of the myth as a conflict between knowing the truth and being blind, seeking the truth and rejecting it, self-knowledge and self-deception, the desire for truth and the fear of the pain involved in knowing it.[5] Just as the original myth has its inception in the enigmatic messages of the Sphinx and the Oracle, so does the film commence with a similar enigma — the delivery of sealed envelopes. The executor of the estate reads the twins, Jeanne and Simon, their mother Marwan Nawal's will, handing them a pair of sealed letters, containing a two-fold riddle. Confronted by this enigmatic missive, the twins discover that they have a brother and that their father was not killed in war, as they had been led to believe. In itself, this message already exposes them to a catastrophic disaster. In addition, the mother demands to be buried face down and without a headstone, a request that leaves her void of both face and identity. Only once they have uncovered the truth, by delivering the sealed letters to their brother and their father, may she be buried facing the world and accept a headstone bearing her name. As we see it, this is the only way for her to become a subject with a face. This is Marwan's way of attaining reparation — of completing the task she could not accomplish in life — finding her son, as she had vowed to do. Thereby, her children could relate to her as an authentic subject, rather than a false-self, as they did when she was alive.

The reactions of the twins to this will are diametrically opposed: despite the harsh and threatening tidings it holds, Jeanne, the daughter, is ready and willing to look for her father and brother, that is, for the truth. In contrast, Simon, the son, reacts in a way which combines rage, arrogance, and a determination to know nothing, a psychic state which Bion calls stupidity (1958). The radical difference between the two persists throughout most of the film. Simon, who has no desire to meet his father, explicitly

[5] As Ecclesiastes (1:18) suggests, 'in much wisdom is much grief'.

wishes for the father and brother to turn up dead, so that no new information can surface to unsettle the pseudo-security of his not-knowing. Simon fails to realise that not finding his brother and father also means that psychic aspects of himself will remain dead, in need of revitalisation.

The Sphinx is personified in the film by Jeanne's professor of mathematics, whom she meets after being handed the sealed letters. The professor presents her with the mathematical riddle — 'one plus one equals one' — which anticipates the discovery made at the end of the film, but also alludes to the infinite loneliness of the mathematician, emphasising the painful nature of the pursuit for truth. Nevertheless, the encounter with the professor does not discourage Jeanne, but pushes her forward on her quest. Simon, on the other hand, has a change of heart only when his twin sister calls him from half a world away: crying out to him in despair, she shares her discovery that their mother was raped and tortured in prison. It is only at this point that Simon begins to undergo the slow process of developing the capacity for containing pain. This process reaches its peak when Simon, who swore not to know the truth, travels from Canada to the Middle East, joining his twin sister in the search for their brother. Eventually, he is the one who uncovers the catastrophic truth: blindfolded, he is taken to meet the old commander of the militia which Nawal and Abou Tarek had joined, who reveals the mystery's dreadful solution: that Marwan Nawal was raped in prison by her own son, who thus became the father of the twins.[6] Simon then presents this truth to Jeanne in her own mathematical language: 'one plus one equals one'.[7]

One of the fascinating questions this film gives rise to is whether this difference in their attitude towards the discovery of the truth is a result of *choice*, or rather, *fate*. We can imagine that Marwan's attitude towards her children was a highly ambivalent one: they were conceived through a violent rape she had undergone in prison; she had tried to terminate the pregnancy and failed. It is reasonable to assume that her disposition towards Simon, as a male child, may have been even more negative and distant. With Jeanne, the daughter, she may have been more intimate, as demonstrated by their joint visits to the pool. This essential divergence in the mother's relations to her children may account for the gap between the two, in terms of their capacity to contain pain and bear knowing the truth. First, on the surface, being rejected by his mother may have kept Simon from being more empathic towards her and her life story.

Second, on a deeper developmental level, when Bion describes the emergence of the capacity for thinking and containing frustration and pain, he describes a situation in which the mother functions as her infant's psychic digestive system, absorbing its fragmented and chaotic sensations (β-elements) and giving them back after they have been worked through (α-elements). This process allows the infant to internalise his or her own psychic digestion system (Bion, 1962), which is the precondition for symbolisation and thinking. It is possible that the mother's distant and rejecting attitude

[6] Simon's temporary and artificial blindness is analogous to that of the prophet Tiresias in the myth, as well as to that of Oedipus, who blinds himself upon uncovering the truth.

[7] To make the riddle explicit: the father and brother are in fact one and the same.

towards Simon hindered the development of his capacity for symbolisation, thinking, and containing pain, thereafter contributing to his reluctance to discover the potentially catastrophic and unsettling truth. More specifically, throughout the film we can see Simon's difficulty in accepting his mother's otherness: Marwan is a woman from a different culture and with a distinctive mentality, whose choices he fails to understand. It appears that Jeanne had been able to internalise more aspects of the mother, in a way which enabled her to accept her mother despite her otherness, and to feel intimacy and empathy towards her, even when she is more of a mystery than a parent.

We may also view the two twins as embodying Bion's notion of the intrapsychic conflict between the desire to know and the desire to remain blind. Regarding the tendency to turn one's back on knowing, Freud recounts that when he asked Lucy, one of his first patients, why she had not told him something she had known, she replied: 'I didn't know — or rather I didn't want to know. I wanted to drive it out of my head and not think of it again' (1893: 117). Freud, in this context, mentioned that he himself was 'afflicted by that blindness of the seeing eye' (Ibid.). Nearly a century later, Steiner (1985) coined the phrase 'turning a blind eye' in his paper about Oedipus. Steiner rephrases the insights presented by Freud, depicting this tragic hero as a complex individual, whose quest for self-knowledge is a dramatic psychic conflict. Kristeva (1988), on her part, relates this conflict between the desire for truth and the denial of truth to Eros and Thanatos, love and hate, accordingly. She portrays these as twin forces that are present in the human psyche from birth. These two forces can be seen represented in the film by the twins Jeanne and Simon. Alongside this internal conflict regarding the attitude towards truth, yet another conflict between the death and life instincts is portrayed in the figure of the mother.

The struggle between life and death instincts

> Eros and Thanatos came into the world as twins.
>
> (Kristeva, 1988: 106)

In the beginning of the film, the mother appears as Nawal (her given name): a daring and passionate woman who is full of emotion. Nawal witnesses the murder of her beloved by her brother and his friends, who act on behalf of a cruel and narrow-minded society (Brenman, 1985), a society that advocates extreme conservatism, misogyny, and the maintenance of the prevalent social order at all costs. Forced to give her son away to an orphanage, Nawal is left injured and hurt but still has the strength to try to keep the vow she had made: to find her child and bring him back into her arms. With the strength of a mother's love, she overcomes countless obstacles in her attempt to locate him. However, the catastrophes she lives through — the murder of her lover before her very eyes, being forced to give up her son, the atrocities of war, and finally, the news (eventually found to be false) that her son was killed — led her to answer the calling of Thanatos, the death drive, exploited as it is by her society. Her rage is utilised by the local militias; she goes on a blind rampage of murder and revenge against the nationalist separatists who murdered her lover.

The conflict between the life and death instincts is also manifest in the song Nawal sings in prison: a monotonous lullaby which she repeats like a mantra. Repeating it puts her in a kind of meditative trance, a protective shell, sealing her shut against her torturers and keeping them from breaking her. For her captors, the song is a sign of her survival, of her unbreakable spirit, despite the fact that her life is miserable and wretched. It is designed to provoke and mock those who believe that a concrete dungeon could imprison her. It acts as such a powerful provocation that her jailers decide to name her after it: 'the woman who sang'. In order to break her, they send for the cruelest of torturers, but to no avail. In our opinion, it is the death drive and its derivatives — masochism, vengefulness, hatred, and aggression — that compel her to defy these bodily torments and bring more suffering upon herself. This is the manifestation of an ego-destructive superego, as Meltzer would have put it (1973). The death instinct makes her invincible, as she is trapped in an inner world of unmourned loss.

The song also symbolises, however, her connection to the life instinct. It is a lullaby for her son, whom she has not seen since his birth, whom she had buried in her heart, refusing to let go. Her song holds a spark of life and love, its soft melody suggesting a melancholy lament for her many losses and her dead son. Paradoxically, the song expresses both a vengeful and defiant refusal and the emergence of her process of mourning her son, which keeps her alive. Grotesquely, the cruel torturer who rapes her is her own son, who unwittingly hears the lullaby his mother never had a chance to sing to him.

Nawal, having fallen prey to the cruelty of her society, having been tortured and humiliated by rape, is released from prison with her forces of survival still intact. However, her psyche is shattered: Nawal has been unable to keep the vow to find her son and she is overwhelmed with guilt and shame. She feels herself to be a deserting and worthless mother, who has no right to enjoy life or her children, who are the product of rape. She turns herself into a non-entity, a joyless woman who only goes through the motions of "being alive". After moving to Canada, she changes her name and becomes Marwan, a sombre secretary, without so much as a trace of the passionate and vivacious woman she once was. When she eventually discovers the shocking truth — that her son is indeed alive, but that he is the same man who raped her in prison — she becomes catatonic, a living-dead. Her one remaining wish is for posthumous reparation: for the twins to find their lost father and brother, and for Abou-Tarek, her son and her tormentor, to know that she had found him, and not only that — that she had forgiven him. Her forgiveness allows her to heal the broken pieces of her psyche, bringing together the mother and the victim.

As for the son, Abou-Tarek[8] begins his life with a psychic catastrophe. Like Oedipus, he faces certain death, but is saved by his grandmother, who pricks his heel

[8] "And Atè tarries long, but at the last
The sinner's heart is cast
Into pervading, waxing pangs of pain."
(Aeschylus, 1996: 70)

with a needle so that his mother could later recognise him. He is taken from his mother and sent to an orphanage. Throughout his life, he is guided by the wish to find his mother, a wish born of the search for love. Like his mother, Abou-Tarek concludes all too soon that he will not be able to find her and gives up the search. Abou-Tarek cannot live with uncertainty and ambiguity. Psychic catastrophes curtail the capacity for containing ambiguities and unknowns. Both cannot tolerate not knowing; they have no negative capability (a term coined by Bion, following John Keats [Bion, 1970: 125]) — the capacity for bearing ambiguity and uncertainty. After losing all hope of ever finding his mother, Abou-Tarek becomes a pawn at the hands of a violent and fragmented society; he too is left soul-less, void of emotion. Having quit his search, he becomes an emblem of evil, even in a notoriously cruel prison. Both Marwan and Abou-Tarek are left alone in the world, incapable of bearing the pain of the loss that had afflicted them and of mourning it. They are overwhelmed by uncontainable feelings of hatred and rage (H), with which they can only deal through acts of murder, sadism, or rape.

In the Oedipal myth, knowledge can save an entire city from pestilence: in solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus indeed saves Thebes. However, throughout the myth, we witness Oedipus's characteristic arrogance, for which the chorus repeatedly rebukes him. His arrogance is manifest in searching for the truth at all costs, stimulated by the death drive. Violence recurs throughout the chain of generations: in his biological parents, who send him to his death, and in his adopting parents, who keep silent, refusing to tell him the truth about his past. It is reasonable to assume that the psychological disasters of his early childhood rendered Oedipus incapable of containing not-knowing and pain, leading to the construction of an armour of arrogance and stupidity. Bion argues that truth is to the psyche as food is to the body; on the other hand, he claims that being arrogant in one's search for truth posits one into the realm of stupidity and psychosis. This is the human paradox tackled by both the myth and the film.

As mentioned above, Marwan and Abou-Tarek both lacked a containing environment that could digest difficult feelings, enabling a healthy process of mourning that is free of self-blame. Both Marwan, having been unable to save her lover and having abandoned her son, and Abou-Tarek, having forsaken the search for his mother, are plagued by a ruthless guilt. The intensity of this guilt and their inability to contain it or work through it, enslave them to a persecutory superego which compels them to commit crimes in order to justify their feelings of guilt, turning both of them into murderers. This is where the film departs from the myth: the protagonists are driven to commit crimes not by fate or some primordial prophecy but by their own feelings of guilt.

While the film reiterates the Oedipal myth, with its message of predestination, it is set within a social context in which society commits atrocious crimes in the name of blind principles. Society oversees the murder of the father by "truth-knowing" fanatics and sends Abou-Tarek to rape his mother in prison, stripping her of her dignity as a woman. These acts position the violent social context at the very heart of the story.

Nevertheless, the Oedipal tale unfolding throughout the film still harbours some hope and compassion, even within its landscape of psychic death: the grandmother who saves Nawal from her brother helps her deliver her baby and thrice pierces his leg, giving him an identity and saving him from oblivion; the old nurse who saves the twins and is later so glad to meet them; the warden who frees Nawal, convincing her to take the twins with her. All these add a tinge of hope to the tragic condition of the film's protagonists.

The language of hate turns Abou-Tarek into a ruthless man, exhibiting perverse behaviour and raping his own mother. As Stoller (1975) suggested, 'perversion is the erotic form of hatred'. This demonstrates that the price of not knowing the truth can be heavier than that of knowing it. But everything changes in retrospect, once the truth — through the influence of the language of love — is revealed. Everything is turned around. Past, present, and future are rewritten. Finding the truth saves not only the twins, who rediscover their mother, but also Abou-Tarek, by allowing him to love and be loved, by bringing him face to face with his mother at the cemetery.

In the final part of this paper we have chosen to focus on the theme that appears in both the myth of Oedipus and within the film: personal responsibility versus the dictates of fate and the development from an object who lives according to the path laid out by the gods to a subject who is personally accountable for their choices.

The literary lens: Fate and personal freedom[9]

> Where objects were, subjects must be.
>
> (Benjamin, 1990: 34)

Bollas (1989) makes a distinction between fate and destiny. Fate is predetermined; being only human, we are compelled to accept it. This is the inherent tragedy of human life. In the face of fate, or the destructive forces of our society, we are objects. Still, we are free to become subjects, seeking our own destiny through the search for our personal truth. This is a painful search, but when it is conducted under the auspices of the life instincts, of love and compassion, it enables us to influence our destiny.

A further interesting distinction between fate and destiny relevant to our discussion is made by Lacan in his Seminar VII (2013). According to Lacan, fate is not essentially predestined, but is in fact determined by what is out of our control in the real, rendering us helpless in its face as its objects. Destiny on the other hand refers to what is done by us with reference to our helplessness, pertaining in particular to the extent to which we dare to be subjects of the unconscious, i.e., objects of powers beyond our control, becoming thereby subjects. While fate has to do with the real—our mortality and death, destiny has to do with the symbolic order—language and the social sphere. In crystal-clear fashion, the film presented us with this tension between our existence as objects and as subjects, between fate and destiny.

[9] We appreciate Sharon Hass for introducing us to the ancient Greek culture and mythology, and for helping us to formulate some of the ideas expressed in this section.

The tension between fate and destiny, between being an object and being a subject, vis-à-vis the search for personal truth, can be depicted by tracing three moments in the history of literature that portray the historical development of the human subject. One finds some striking differences between three distinct historical periods and the ways in which their literary and cultural representations embody different notions of human beings and their ethical existence: the *Homeric Age*, manifest in the heroic epics — *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; the *Age of the Great Tragedies*, manifest in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*; and the *Modern Age*, whose inception can be marked by the writings of William Shakespeare and which is equally present in the film *Incendies*. Other cultures and historical periods have their own understanding and experience of human nature.

In discussing the differences between these three ages, we will present the development of human subjectivity and ethics on a spectrum ranging between being an object — which is experienced as externally controlled and lacks moral responsibility and self-reflection — and being a subject, internally controlled, able to deliberate and make intricate choices. This development of the literary representations of human experience throughout history runs parallel to the personal psychic development we all undergo throughout our own lives — from the experience of being an object to that of being a subject and from a give-and-take morality to the emergence of guilt, shame, and universal law, guided by the superego.

It is readily apparent that each of the works we are discussing — *The Iliad*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Incendies* — embodies the developmental stage of its age, as well as a personal course of development undergone by its protagonists. *The Iliad*, which is confined to an objectivist and external notion of human beings, essentially remains on this basic level. *Oedipus the King* represents the transition into an intermediary notion of humanity, halfway between object and subject, and also demonstrates the development of its protagonist from being an object, completely determined by fate, to a quasi-subject, capable of consciously reflecting on his fate and his choices. Finally, *Incendies*, which represents a culture in which human subjectivity exists fully, presents a more complete process by which its protagonists — Nawal and Abou-Tarek — are transformed from objects, through the partial intermediary stage, into full, conscious, and intricate subjects.

In examining the development of the literary representation of human beings as subjects and as moral agents, we seek to indicate actual differences in how people experienced and perceived themselves in these three different ages — the Homeric (eighth century BC), the Tragic (fifth century), and the Modern one (starting with Shakespeare in the sixteenth century).

Homeric literature takes place in an age of godlike heroes. In the world of *The Iliad*, gods play the lead roles and men, along with their desires, choices, and responsibilities, are confined to a very limited space. The Trojan War, in which thousands lose their lives, is waged because of a conflict between two gods: Apollo, who defends Troy, and Athena, who despises it, all under the watchful eye of Zeus. Troy's eventual demise only happens after Zeus grants Athena permission to go ahead and defeat it. The human protagonists — Achilles, Agamemnon, and Hector — are all

pawns in the hands of the gods, who enjoy toying with them. Moreover, the gods themselves are represented as exceptionally childish in terms of their morality: when Athena tries to convince Zeus to let her destroy Troy, he refuses, stating that the city is dear to him. In response, she offers him the future opportunity of destroying a city precious to her in return — and Zeus assents. This embodies a very basic moral system, which conceives of morality as nothing more than a give-and-take negotiation of personal interests, void of any notion of law or good and evil and lacking any superego or conscious.

When everything is the result of some god's capricious decision, it proves difficult to view human morality as having any substantial significance: men comply, either voluntarily or involuntarily, with divine decrees, pleading with the gods to steer events in their favour. The outcome of this is at best a combination of human will and action and the foreign 'not me' element of deity or fate. For this reason, the human beings portrayed by Homer may feel some responsibility for their actions, but not guilt as we understand it today. The Homeric world lacks a clear notion of reward and punishment; no guilt or impurity taints the culprit. The dominion of fickle fate or capricious gods is often so overwhelming, that the notion of human accountability and agency is reduced to an extent which undermines moral responsibility and thinking.

The moral existence of man is still at a very primary stage, and so is the conceptualisation and understanding of his existence as a subject. *The Iliad*, which focuses on the rage of Achilles, treats this motivating force as something virtually separate from Achilles, as some external entity which visits him and departs. In other words, human beings are not experienced as integrated, as a 'self' or an 'I'. This early Greek world view has no notion of any kind of internal centre of the personality. Rather, personality is viewed as stemming from various bodily organs, such as the chest, the stomach, or even the elbows. Moreover, the body itself is not construed as an entire object but as an assortment of parts and organs. The closest thing to a psyche is the *thumos*, pectoral respiration, which serves as a kind of raw vital force for the *psyche* which is encountered at the moment of death as it exits through the mouth. In other words, the notion of human beings as possessed of an interior and an autonomous centre, as having a self, is utterly alien to Homer.

This lack of integration and interiority is also manifest in Homeric literary representation. First of all, Homer always represents conflict by using two different characters, rather than presenting one person's internal conflict. Second, epic Homeric writing is an external writing: it focuses on the aesthetic exteriority of things, without creating subjective depth or a feeling of human interiority. In fact, *ethics is sacrificed in favour of aesthetics*: the dramatis personae, magnificent as they may be, have virtually no inner space for deliberation and conscious choice. Finally, the objectification of man is expressed in the supreme aspiration of Homeric heroes — gaining eternal fame by being reduced into the subject of a poem that would be sung for generations. That is, to be transformed into an aesthetic object. They view death, the instant in which one turns into an object, as the pinnacle of heroism, the moment in which one is closest to the eternal existence of the gods.

The dawning of the age of tragedy is heralded by thinkers such as Heraclitus and Pythagoras, who developed Greek thinking concerning human interiority. Heraclitus, for example, describes the psyche as an abstract and unlimited space, which transcends previous notions of it as an organ or a concrete essence (Khan, 1981: 126). Pythagoras, writing about the phenomenology of friendship, presented the friend as a kind of alter ego (Riedweg & Rendall, 2008: 39) through which one learns about oneself and which can be experienced as one experiences oneself. This view attests to a new and different notion of interiority, awareness, and reflection. Indeed, the tragic genre offers us our first encounter with human interiority and guilt, in the form of a responsibility that man bears within. If the Homeric world view depicted man not as a three-dimensional entity but as a being controlled by external elements (gods and fate) rather than internal ones, in Oedipus we already find a combining of this objective state with subjectivity.

Oedipus presents us with a grand dilemma, opening room for thought: is he truly responsible for his fate, even though it was predetermined by a curse cast before he was even born? On the one hand, Oedipus is presented as a puppet, controlled by forces beyond his reach; on the other hand, his quest for truth, his ability to face inwards towards the self and into the past (which is also related to the Socratic dictum 'know thyself') express a different form of thinking than that of Homeric protagonists, one which includes a certain layer of reflection and working through. This is true despite the fact that at crucial moments, Oedipus is denied the option of choosing — as when he is overcome with rage and kills Laius, an act that would determine his fate. Furthermore, in the age of Sophocles, it appears that the gods have also developed a more intricate ethical system which involves reward and punishment, as Oedipus is punished for his sins, whether through the plague which infests the city due to his impure presence as a murderer, or through the blindness he inflicts upon himself, serving as his own executioner, a role which may be conceived of as the birth of the superego. In psychoanalytic terms, until the superego is formed, one cannot be considered a fully mature human being.

The most prominent proponent of the modern age is Shakespeare, who presents us with characters the likes of Hamlet (1609): Hamlet is not only acted upon but also acts; he not only acts but also self-reflects about his actions and his identity. For the first time, we see a man capable of creating himself, of choosing his identity in a way which is not dependent on the edicts of fate and whose moral responsibility is fully grounded in his internal moral decisions. In other words, the control seat is internal. We have already witnessed the addition of the layer encompassing space for deliberation and reflection in Oedipus — this layer was emphasised through the literary representation of an internal investigation of memories and moments of insight and choice. Shakespeare brings this process to its peak in Hamlet's famous soliloquy, which offers us, as it were, pure interiority, a refined reflection divorced of any external influence and utterly free to make its decisions and bear the consequences of its actions. In a way, we can see that the formation of a coherent internal space, which serves as that platform for conscious deliberation and choice, parallels the emergence of moral responsibility, which is derived from human agency and the ability to react

and form one's own opinion concerning one's life events, rather than merely being their victim or puppet.

Discussion: The healing power of truth[10]

In and of itself, *Incendies* manifests the course of development which proceeds from the object pole to the subject pole through the three stages discussed regarding these three historical periods. We can trace the motion throughout this course by examining the development and the choices made by two of the main characters — Abou-Tarek and Nawal/Marwan. Villeneuve fashions Abou-Tarek as a modern and more extreme version of Oedipus: abandoned by his parents, he remains at the orphanage rather than being adopted by new parents; he kills in rage but goes even further, making murder and torture his profession; he sleeps with his mother, though not as her husband and saviour but as her rapist and torturer. Finally, save for the search he conducts as a child, Abou-Tarek does not play any active role in investigating and uncovering his own fate; these tasks are performed by the twins: his siblings/children. The film confronts him with his fate by means of the letters, which he receives without any warning.

Throughout the film, Abou-Tarek is portrayed mostly as an object — the trajectory of his life is depicted as a dead end, with no space for choice or for deliberation. In addition, he is depicted externally, and we have no direct access to his thoughts or feelings. Our first encounter with him as a character in which he is more than a mere object occurs after he moves to Canada. We see him standing alone on a bus (which earlier in the film became a symbol of unspeakable violence), carefully cleaning it, in a way which perhaps indicates that he wishes to cleanse himself of the violence which has so far steered his life. Moreover, we see his response to reading the letters: he reacts with gentleness, openness, and willingness, which are culminated in his decision to visit his mother's grave. While the film leaves this somewhat open, it is clear that Abou-Tarek is undergoing a process of acceptance and change, that he is embracing the difficult news rather than denying it or remaining blind to it. We might say that if, throughout the film, Abou-Tarek represents the schizoid-paranoid position, in Klein's terms, his choice to visit his mother's grave puts him at the threshold of the depressive position. While the film does not show this explicitly, we may assume that this change stems from an internal process by which Abou-Tarek accepts his responsibility, acknowledges the guilt, and embraces the painful truth, which allows him to create himself as a human subject.

Nawal/Marwan undergoes a similar, though more complete process. From the moment she sees her lover murdered before her eyes and has her son taken away from her, Nawal/Marwan functions as an object, with a narrow-mindedness that leaves her but two possible courses of action: searching for her son, or taking revenge on those she blames for killing him. During her years in prison, she exists as nothing more than an object, devoting all her resources to mere survival. When she sets out on her killing missions she exists at the heroic-Homeric layer: at this stage her entire being is

[10] Paraphrasing Tolstoy in his masterpiece, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886).

involuntarily focused on war and the arrogant need to defeat her jailers and her enemies. Much like the aspiration of Homeric protagonists, she reduces herself to a song, to the lullaby she sings in prison and which wins her fame as 'the woman who sang'. This Homeric armour is what makes it possible for her to survive.

Throughout the film, Nawal/Marwan is transformed from a person lacking any kind of conscience or morals, acting out of murderous and vengeful narrow-mindedness, to a person capable of unqualified subjectivity. This transformation is carried out through the intermediary stage embodied by her absent life in Canada. Although fate had tormented her, forcing her to have two children against her will, by her son who raped her, she accepts responsibility for her children and for the suffering she had experienced and caused. This is the layer added by the tragedy of Oedipus: the capacity to assume responsibility for those vicissitudes of fate that are beyond our control. Her acceptance of this responsibility and this guilt is manifest in her will, in which she demands to be buried facing the ground: her intense shame and persecutory guilt over her actions and the choices she made throughout her life have led her to strip herself of her humanity and forego her right to be a person among people, resonating Oedipus's decision to blind himself and exclude himself from human society.

Still, it is important to stress that this is merely the intermediary stage, rather than the culmination of this process, as we witness in *Oedipus the King*. The new perspective offering the fullness of human subjectivity opens new ethical and psychic possibilities, which go beyond the assumption of responsibility. These are embodied in the letters Nawal/Marwan writes: once the letters are delivered, her splitting will be healed, the disparate parts of her life will be acknowledged and assembled by her children, she will once more become a complete person and can finally be buried face-up. In other words, this is a process of reparation (Klein, 1948), that enables integration once certain conditions have been met, making her whole yet again. This process, made possible by the potential for change embedded in interior psychic space, allows her not only to transcend her existence as an object into the layer of responsibility, but also to rise above the obligation to bear her guilt as some branded and wretched object-subject, and become a whole subject once more, resuming her place within human society.

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