

Employing a Reverse Process in Design and Performance with Emphasis on Time from Gilles Deleuze's Perspective (Case Study: 'Incendies,' a Play by Wajdi Mouawad)

Masoud Kazemi
Shahed University, Iran

Citation: Kazemi, M. (2025). Employing a reverse process in design and performance with emphasis on time from Gilles Deleuze's perspective (Case study: *Incendies*, a play by Wajdi Mouawad). *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 25(9). <http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea26n9>

Abstract

This article aims to provide a comparative study between theater and performance art, focusing on a particular approach to design and execution in theater. In this approach, everything happens collaboratively, and instead of individual directing and playwriting, design and execution are carried out as a group effort, with the author primarily guiding and directing the group. This method has been employed in several plays by Wajdi Mouawad, a French-Lebanese playwright, actor, and director. Using a close reading of the play *Incendies* by Wajdi Mouawad as a case study, this article examines this distinct style of design and performance in theater. Additionally, it delves into the qualitative aspect of time, considering the element of time within this play from the perspective of Gilles Deleuze.

Introduction

Performance art, alongside the art of curation, is one of the most significant contemporary art movements. Every year, it seeks to discover new talents, evolve, and develop its framework through the organization of various festivals worldwide. This has led to the emergence of diverse branches within the realm of performance art. In other words, since 1970, anything that combines form, music, and imagery can be considered a subset of performance art.

Similar to other contemporary art movements, there is not a precise definition for performance art; it can be spontaneous or premeditated, accidental or coordinated, and can be presented live or through media. Based on this, one can redefine a category of visual or theatrical works that have diverged from classical definitions as performance art. Although the foundation of this art form lies in Western countries, individuals in Islamic lands have also gained recognition in the last two decades, with their works being appreciated by critics and artists. Wajdi Mouawad, a Lebanese-born writer, director, and actor, who grew up in Lebanon and Canada and currently works in France, has recently been appointed as the head of the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris, one of the most significant French theater institutions after the Comédie-Française. Mouawad is among those who have taken a fresh approach to the design and execution of their performances. He has advanced his performances to a point that may have been unthinkable a few decades ago, similar to artists like Ariane Mnouchkine.

During the 2009 Avignon Theater Festival, Mouawad presented *Des Promesses et des Nuits* during a single day and night, consisting of four distinct plays united by a common theme. One of these texts is *Incendies*, which Mouawad designed and adapted after six months of rehearsal, with the assistance of actors. At the outset, there was no story or background for character design, and events were developed with the help of the actors and gradually formed into the current narrative. In the script *Incendies*, the element of time plays a crucial role in storytelling. Throughout the performance, time does not disappear but continues. This ongoing time is reminiscent of the theories of Gilles Deleuze, a 20th-century French philosopher, regarding performance and time. Deleuze believed that time is not tied to a specific place but is a sensual experience, always flowing, or as he puts it, “the past is always becoming” (Pourkasmaei, 2019, p. 47). Therefore, the aim of this research is to introduce and explain a novel performative-executive form in contemporary times by an individual who is less known (at least in Iran, where only one of his scripts has recently been translated), which can be an inspirational path in contemporary art. Therefore, the primary research questions are:

1. What are the components of Wajdi Mouawad’s performative-executive style, and to what extent does it conform to the definitions of performance art?
2. What is the role of time, as one of the essential elements of performance art according to Deleuze, in Wajdi Mouawad’s works?

In the following sections, I first explore the origins and development of performance art, then delve into Deleuze's perspective, and finally, introduce and analyze the components of Wajdi Mouawad's performative-executive style in his script *Incendies*.

Research Background

Based on the conducted reviews, there has been no specific research on Wajdi Mouawad's performative-executive style, especially concerning the aspect of time. However, there are related studies in the same field, which can be considered as background research for this study. These include:

1. *Analysis of the Concept of Time in Performance Art Based on Gilles Deleuze's Theories* by Pouya Pourkasmaei, Ahmad Nadalian, and Mohsen Morathi (2019). This work explores the concept of time in performance art, drawing from Gilles Deleuze's theories. The authors conclude that artists frame their works in a way that delays the audience's comprehension, opening up a realm of constructed vitality and prompting a reconsideration of matters imposed by regimes of truth governing society.
2. *Rahbardehaye Afarinesh Dar Performance* by Seyed Omid Hashemi (2015). This book discusses the strategies of creation in performance art and can be valuable in understanding the artistic process.
3. *Gilles Deleuze* by Claire Colebrook, translated by Reza Sirovan (2008). This book provides insights into the philosophical foundation of Gilles Deleuze, whose ideas are essential for understanding performance and time.
4. *The Performance of Identity in Wajdi Mouawad's Incendies* by Nicole Renault (2009). This thesis focuses on identity in Wajdi Mouawad's play *Incendies* and may provide useful context for understanding his work.

Although these works offer valuable insights into the field of performance art, none of them specifically addresses the performative-executive style of Wajdi Mouawad and his unique approach to time within this context. This research aims to fill this gap and provide a comprehensive analysis of Wajdi Mouawad's performative-executive style, particularly regarding the role of time in his works, contributing to a deeper understanding of contemporary performance art.

Research Methodology

This research is of a fundamental, objective nature and employs a qualitative research approach conducted in a descriptive-analytical manner. Data for the study have been gathered through library resources and modern survey tools using data extraction techniques. Additionally, the script *Incendies* has been selected as the primary research corpus and the

case study for this research, chosen purposefully and non-probabilistically.

Research Theoretical Framework

Background of Performance Art

Performance art, known as performance art or simply “performance,” emerged in the United States during the 1970s and has since remained one of the most prominent movements in contemporary art, existing alongside the art of curation. Performance art does not fit into a specific definition due to its multifaceted and medium-blurring nature, making it challenging to categorize. However, among the numerous definitions and labels attributed to performance art, “borderless art” appears to be the most concise and expressive description. Over time, performance art has evolved, distancing itself somewhat from its initial context, which was, in a way, a response to the Vietnam War and a protest against commercial art.

In fact, performance art emerged in contrast to, and as a product of, visual arts. Painters and sculptors attempted to create impermanent works using their own bodies, seeking to avoid commercialization. Today, performance art encompasses a broad range of works that incorporate elements such as space, time, the body, the audience, stillness, repetition, and events. “Performance art is a fundamental temporal art form that typically presents a live show to spectators or viewers and draws from arts such as acting, poetry, music, dance, and painting” (Wainwright, 2011).

Performance art, in its essence, presents a live experience to its audience and encompasses various artistic disciplines, blurring the boundaries between them. This form of art is in a constant state of evolution, reflecting the ever-changing artistic landscape and cultural context.

Deleuze and the Concept of Time

Gilles Deleuze, a 20th-century French post-structuralist philosopher, not only made significant contributions to philosophy but also offered insights into the realms of art and literature. Deleuze constructed his ontology based on the concept of “the whole” and emphasized that “if the whole is not given, it is because of the openness and dynamism it possesses, and its nature is grounded in perpetual change, which creates something new” (Deleuze, 1986, p. 9). In other words, Deleuze advocated for a departure from accepting fixed entities.

However, it is crucial to note that in Deleuze’s philosophy, repetition does not mean the repetition of a phenomenon. Instead, in his thought, life is built on the differences between phenomena. Life can be understood as a series of differences rather than something that remains unchanged and evolves. “Life can be considered as a kind of perceptual difference –

not life as something that changes and becomes different but life as the power of being different” (Colebrook, 2006, p. 1). Deleuze’s overarching idea serves as the foundation for various concepts, including his perspective on time.

Deleuze, influenced by the theories of Henri Bergson, challenged the conventional view of linear time. In Bergson’s philosophy, there is no fixed time that we can call the present; rather, it is an abstract presence, and we only deal with duration. Time is nothing but duration. Bergson views time abstractly and believes that time means nothing other than duration. “Two moments (in succession) contract or condense within each other, so when one is present, the other has not yet disappeared” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 51). He argued that time is not a linear construct but rather a sensory experience, meaning that the past is in a state of flux. In other words, Deleuze perceived time as non-linear, rejecting a fixed and linear understanding of time. He believed that time is marked by continuity and change.

This perspective contrasts with the ideas of philosophers like Immanuel Kant, who viewed time as linear and as a container in which events are sequentially arranged. Deleuze, in line with Bergson’s thought, contended that time is non-linear and that it is intrinsically connected to the concept of “the whole.” In this context, it can be generally said that “Deleuze’s ontology is temporal; that is, time is not something added to being, or being placed within time but rather being is temporal in itself, meaning that time and being are one – the primary meaning is continuity” (Parsa, 2014, p. 85).

According to this perspective, memories and dreams are not exclusively associated with the past and the future but can be seen as part of the present. The “past” is not what has already happened and is no longer present; instead, the “past” is an element that is part of the ongoing “now.” This view challenges the traditional understanding of time and existence, emphasizing the integral relationship between time and being.

Therefore, in Deleuze’s view, time is a qualitative concept, but it has always been approached quantitatively, which has led to its spatialization. Simply put, the quantitative understanding that measures time with a clock considers it as existing side by side in a sequence, thereby confining it to space. Spatialized time leads to distinctions between the present, past, and future. In contrast, Bergson and Deleuze presented time as a qualitative phenomenon that is continuously evolving and in flux, rather than sequential. This perspective gives time a non-linear aspect, freeing it from the constraints of past, present, and future. Deleuze refers to this concept as “Duration.” In his book *Bergsonism*, Deleuze explained the relationship between Duration, movement, and the open whole as follows: “Duration, in the precise sense of the word, is life as it unfolds in movement” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 94–95).

Mouawad and Incendies (Scorched)

Wajdi Mouawad is a 48-year-old Lebanese-Canadian writer, director, and actor with a remarkable background. At the age of 10, he and his family migrated from Lebanon to France and later to Canada during the Lebanese Civil War. After returning to France and gaining recognition at various international festivals, he currently serves as the head of Théâtre National de la Colline in France. Mouawad has created 19 plays, a novel, and a series of adaptations, most of which center around identity crises and disruptions (Renault, 2009, p. 10).

Mouawad has developed a performance approach that may have similarities with the methods employed by figures such as Ariane Mnouchkine in their works. His method commences with no preconceived storylines or character designs. Instead, events are shaped and developed through the collaboration of actors, gradually unfolding. In a reverse process, Mouawad ultimately writes the script, a method that starkly opposes the clear delineation of characters. In his works, a character with an undetermined destiny evolves through a series of detours that unfold on the stage (Hussein, 2014, p. 5).

In 2009, Mouawad staged *Scorched* (French: *Incendies*) at the Avignon Theatre Festival. This production, which consisted of four different plays sharing a common theme, spanned 12 hours and captured the attention of audiences. One of the four texts within *Scorched* is the play *Incendies*, which centers around a woman named Nawal Marwan. In her will, left for her two children, Jean and Simon, after her death, she instructs them to embark on a journey to their motherland to discover their true identities. This will includes two letters that each should deliver to their father and a brother of whom they had no prior knowledge (Renault, 2009, p. 10).

Mouawad crafted *Incendies* through six months of rehearsal, in close collaboration with the actors, and the element of time plays a significant role in the storytelling. Throughout the performance, time remains constant and uninterrupted, maintaining a continuous narrative thread.

Mouawad and the Art of Performance (Time, Space, Movement, and Event)

Events in the Play Incendies

As mentioned earlier, in the early 1970s, during the emergence of performance art, theater was in opposition to it. Figures like Antonin Artaud played a significant role in this contrast. Some of the main reasons for this clash were attributed to the characteristics of performance art, such as the absence of a fixed text, the audience's involvement in the performance process, the blurring of lines between performers and spectators, focusing on multiple issues simultaneously, and ultimately, prioritizing the presence of the performers over the actors

(Damood, 2006, p. 62).

However, over time, especially in the past two decades, artists in the field of theater have used elements of performance art to create works that deviate significantly from the classic definition of theater. Wajdi Mouawad is one of these artists who, through the use of various elements of performance art, has introduced a new approach to the world of theater. Mouawad regards his written works as a result of collective work and an outcome of events and improvisations by actors and technicians. He stated, "It is important to say, it is important to hear. The play *Incendies* is the result of a group effort, and I have only done the writing step by step, up to the last word" (Mouawad, 2016, p. 14). His works evolve from the events that unfold, as there is no predetermined text. The text is prepared during rehearsals, being flexible and devoid of scenic descriptions, allowing space for creativity and improvisation by the actors. This corresponds to the notion known as the "empty space" among contemporary thinkers in the field of theater (Khaki, 2017, p. 10).

Movement in the Play Incendies

Movement, repetition, or continuity are other elements of performance art that Mouawad has focused on in his works. Apart from employing this element, which is directly related to the element of time, in the text of his works, he has consistently used it in the form and execution of his works. In the performances of *Les Quatres Saisons* (The Four Seasons), continuity or movement can be observed in the ongoing nature of the plays. These plays are related, though not directly, and continue to develop. In the play *Incendies*, the experience of the mother's life is repeated twice, from the perspective of her son and her daughter. This repetition is performed in two parallel episodes (see Figures 2 and 3, Jean and Simon tell different stories in one scene). However, "the most movement in Mouawad's works can be seen in the characters themselves. In Mouawad's plays, individuals are mostly fragmented and torn apart, just like the structure of their lives. They hover over the scenes like ghosts, dissolving in the spatial-temporal explosions" (Hussein, 2014, p. 6).

In most cases, this movement occurs through the unconscious memory, and everything passes through the crystallized memories of the unconscious, creating a background for the undiscovered identities in *Incendies*. It is essential to emphasize that Mouawad's theater is not a mere reconstruction of a biography. In the play *Incendies*, we are confronted with a movement that takes shape through opposing forces and turns it away from a biography. Instead of reconstructing a biography, we witness an effort rooted in the early memories (L'Hérault, 2004, p. 99).

Space in the Play Incendies

Space is another component of performance art that Mouawad has explored in his works. In addition to the performance space, he has taken significant steps in the realm of text writing by creating different spaces within the text. This is a notable departure from the conventional constraints of theater, where a fixed stage and a specific space often limit the playwrights. In *Incendies*, temporal leaps that occur based on the memories of the characters demand various settings. Mouawad tackled this challenge during his performance at the Avignon Festival, making every effort to display multiple settings within a single location, using an expansive and fluid stage design (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The stage design for the play *Incendies*, directed by Wajdi Mouawad at the Avignon Festival in 2009.

This approach reflects Mouawad's innovative vision in transforming the conventional theater stage into a dynamic space that accommodates the multiple settings required by his narrative structure. Through this creative use of space, he achieves a unique and compelling storytelling style in *Incendies*, where the distinct locations are woven seamlessly into a unified stage, enhancing the audience's engagement and understanding of the story. Mouawad's artistic exploration of space goes beyond the boundaries of the physical stage and extends into the imaginative realms of his characters' memories and experiences.

Time in the Play Incendies

One of the most essential elements in Wajdi Mouawad's works, and also one of the primary components of performing arts, is time. Time in Mouawad's works never disappears; it endures, constantly affecting both the past and the present. It often intertwines with the past and the future. This continuous nature of time primarily manifests through the memories of the characters. Beyond its presence in the text, Mouawad pays special attention to time during performances. In his shows, the exact ending time is not specified, and sometimes his performances can extend for hours, as exemplified in his 12-hour-long performance at the Avignon Festival.

"Mouawad by no means constrains us or dictates how his works should be performed. He grants complete freedom to actors and the audience to shape the performance as they wish." (Khaki, 2017, p. 11). Another technique Mouawad employs in his works, especially in *Incendies*, is the simultaneous portrayal of two different temporal periods by two distinct characters. This approach, in contrast to traditional theater's focus on a fixed stage, aligns more closely with performance art and its emphasis on decentralization. Through intersecting events and connecting dialogues, Mouawad establishes a collective movement among individual text-bound characters in the past and present. Each character is called to engage in a battle and a quest for self-discovery and identity. In essence, Mouawad uses techniques like "collage, montage, and weaving" (Vinaver, 1985, p. 124) to reconstruct characters and narratives, fostering a collective approach in the quest for identity and self-discovery. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show examples of simultaneous performances by Jean and Simon, narrating their own stories at the same time, demonstrating Mouawad's focus on breaking away from conventional theatrical practices and emphasizing the freedom and creativity of actors and the audience. This unique approach aligns with his view that theater should transcend restrictions and allow for a deeper exploration of human experiences and identity.



Figure 2. The stage design for the play *Incendies*, directed by Wajdi Mouawad at the Avignon Festival in 2009.



Figure 3. Performance of the play *Incendies* directed by Wajdi Mouawad at the 2009 Avignon Festival, France.

Time in the Context of Deleuze's Philosophy in Incendies

As previously mentioned, time, according to Deleuze, is a non-linear and non-representational concept. Deleuze's perspective emphasized the combination of time with movement and space, defining "becoming" as "life existing in constant and perpetual motion with continuous differentiation" (Pourkasmaei, 2019, p. 43). This perpetual and ever-evolving motion is strikingly evident in the play *Incendies*. In this context, the audience does not follow a linear trajectory but encounters a fragmented line. In other words, the elements do not serve as sequential steps but rather manifest as broken and placeless lines that intertwine and merge throughout the performance. This multiplicity of elements or lines, without a logical linear progression, gives rise to intertwined spaces and times. In essence, the boundary between temporal and spatial dimensions becomes permeable, as the audience "moves from one piece to another irregularly, randomly, and non-hierarchically, rather than following a sequential, logical pattern" (Hussein, 2014, p. 267).

Mouawad extends Deleuze's concept of "becoming" or "time" beyond the text itself. He infuses this spirit of non-linearity into the performance and even extends it to the audience. Mouawad transforms the act of witnessing *Incendies* into an experimental laboratory, where every moment is an exploration for the actors, the audience, and even himself. This exploration infiltrates the audience in an irregular and non-systematic manner, and "becoming" unfolds during the performance. Deleuze's perspective emphasizes that in "becoming" or "time," there is no past, future, or even a fixed present; there is no linear narrative, but it is primarily about engagement. "Becoming' is neither a regression nor a progression" (Deleuze, 1996, p. 37).

Therefore, in the context of "becoming" or "time," one cannot establish a sense of precedence. Everything, much like in the play *Incendies*, is suspended between temporal, spatial, and existential dimensions. Within this suspension, a certain truth emerges abruptly and becomes evident, a truth resulting from the amalgamation of irregular fragments that ultimately coalesce into an ordered process. Consequently, what holds significance in *Incendies* is the art of creation, and Mouawad is uninterested in the finalized product. He, in fact, prefers to embrace the ongoing process, which is profoundly reliant on time, and this temporal aspect can lead to the creation of a multi-dimensional and multi-layered space. It facilitates continuous, non-linear oscillations between a lost and ruined life to depict an enigmatic identity. This condition reflects "an endeavor to reconcile the past through a similar situation in the present, with the anticipation of bringing about a change" (Garland, 2001, p. 170).

Discussion and Conclusion

In response to the first question, it can be observed that Wajdi Mouawad's approach to

performance has distanced itself from classical theater and drawn closer to the art of performance. Elements such as events, movement, repetition, space, time, body, and the audience are notably present and visible in his works. Additionally, while Mouawad still uses actors in accordance with the framework of classic theater instead of mere performers, his actors have the freedom to act differently in each performance and add or subtract moments or minutes. This is because in Mouawad's works, the constraints that the text imposes for the performance have been removed, and everything unfolds in an open space. This space offers a highly flexible canvas for the imagination of the audience and the performers. Furthermore, although Mouawad does not involve the audience physically in the performance, he engages their imagination and minds in the unfolding process of the performance.

In response to the second question, one can conclude that, in accordance with Deleuze's perspective on time, time holds a special place in Mouawad's works. In the play *Incendies*, time, in the form of memory, remains continuous and never disappears. In fact, memory is considered a part of the present time. This occurrence resembles Deleuze's concept of non-linear and intuitive time. In the performance, Mouawad also pays special attention to the element of time. Firstly, he does not fix a specific duration for his performances, and they may last for hours. Secondly, he utilizes temporal leaps in the narrative through the fluidity of the stage design, presenting different places, thereby influencing the audience's perception of time. Occasionally, he also presents two different places and times in parallel. In general, it can be argued that, in *Incendies*, the variations in presenting a consistent narrative (reviewing the mother's life from the perspective of her two children) are reminiscent of Deleuze's idea of "becoming" or "time," which is essentially about different repetitions of phenomena.

References

- Colebrook, C. (2006). *Deleuze, a guide for the perplexed*. Continuum, University of Minnesota Press.
- Colebrook, C. (2008). *Gilles Deleuze* (R. Sirovan Trans.). Markaz.
- Damood, A. (2006). Lecture on Performance Art. *Nemayesh Journa*, 81, 62–65.
<http://noo.rs/CKI3u>
- Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema 1: The movement image* (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.). The Athlone Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1991). *Bergsonism* (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.). Zone Books.
- Deleuze, G., & Pamet, C. (1996). *Dialogues*. Flammarion.
- Garland, C., & Loncelle, M.-J. (2001). *Comprendre le traumatisme: Une approche psychanalytique* [Understanding trauma: A psychoanalytic approach]. Hublot.

- Hashemi, S. O. (2015). *Rahbardehaye Afarinesh Dar Performance* (K. Khosravani, Trans.). Ghatreh.
- Hussein, M. M. L. (2014). Carrefours rhizomtiques de l'écriture dans le théâtre de Wajdi Mouawad le sang des promesses et seul [Doctoral thesis]. University of Alberta, Canada. <https://doi.org/10.7939/R3H98ZN2Q>
- Khaki, M. R. (2017). Interview with Shargh Newspaper. Year 14, pp. 10–11. July 31, Monday. <https://www.magiran.com/article/3601728>
- Mouawad, W. (2016). *Incendies* (M. R. Khaki, Trans.). Rouzbahan.
- Parsa, M. (2014). The ontology of Gilles Deleuze. *Ketab-e Mah-e Falsafeh*, 81, 82–87.
- Pourkasmaei, P., Nadaalian, A., & Morathi, M. (2019). Analysis of the concept of time in performance art based on Gilles Deleuze's theories. *Performance Studies Journal*, 31, 35–49.
- Renault, N. (2009). The performance of identity in Wajdi Mouawad's *Incendies* [Master's thesis]. University of Alberta, Canada.
- Vinaver, M. (1982). *Ecrits sur le theater* [Writings on the theater]. L'Aire, Lausanne [The Aire], Original from the University of Michigan.
- Wainwright, L. S. (2011, April 15). Performance art. In *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/performance-art>

About the Author

Masoud Kazemi holds a Ph.D. in Analytical and Comparative History of Islamic Art from Shahed University, Tehran, awarded in 2022, and a Master's degree in Theatre Directing from Tabriz University, obtained in 2018. Kazemi has authored two books of poetry and published several scientific articles on various art-related topics within Iran. Currently, Kazemi teaches part-time at the university and remains actively engaged in research and study within the field of arts.

International Journal of Education & the Arts

<http://IJEa.org>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Editor

Tawnya Smith
Boston University

Co-Editors

Kelly Bylica
Boston University

Rose Martin
Nord University

Laurel Forshaw
Lakehead University

Jeanmarie Higgins
University of Texas at Arlington

Merel Visse
Drew University

Karen McGarry
College for Creative Studies

Managing Editor

Yenju Lin
The Pennsylvania State University

Associate Editors

Betty Bauman-Field
Boston University

Amy Catron
Mississippi State University

Christina Hanawalt
University of Georgia

Diana Hawley
Boston University

Heather Kaplan
University of Texas El Paso

Elizabeth Kattner
Oakland University

Mary Ann Lanier
Groton School

Allen Legutki
Benedictine University

Alesha Mehta
University of Auckland

Leah Murthy
Boston University

Hayon Park
George Mason University

Allyn Phelps
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Erin Price
Elizabethtown College

Natalie Schiller
University of Auckland

Tim Smith
Uniarts Helsinki

Yiwen Wei
Virginia Commonwealth University
Zahra Bayati, Helen Eriksen & Gry O.

Ulrichsen
Solmaz Collective

Advisory Board

Full List: <http://www.ijea.org/editors.html>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).