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CURRENTS ~ A NON-THEMATIC STREAM

Filming the Flames: Forest Fires and the Limits of Realism in Óliver Laxe's *O que arde* (2020)

Justin M. Berner[1a]

[1] Spanish and Portuguese, New York University

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Óliver Laxe's 2020 film *O que arde (Fire Will Come)* has been recognized in the press and the academy for its realism, especially its engagement with some of the most recognized characteristics of Italian neorealism (nonprofessional actors, on-location filming, scenes of everyday life), but also for what appears to be its maximal realist gesture: the filming of a real forest fire for the fictional film's fire scenes. This essay interrogates this use of a real fire, considering how this choice affects the film's overall impression of realism in two, interrelated sections: the first looks at the use of the real fire on the film's photographic realism, while the second considers how this extratextual knowledge affects the narrative realism. What this analysis concludes is that, far from simply increasing the film's impression of the real, the use of a real fire for these scenes only adds further complexity to the film's fictional representation of this natural disaster. This complexity, I argue, does not undermine the film's realist depiction of a natural disaster in rural Spain, but rather allows the film to critically explore how film and realism represent the effects of anthropogenic climate change. Ultimately, the film's reflexive engagement with realist film offers a disquieting reflection on a global condition of contingency over which humans can no longer maintain illusions of control.

Introduction

One of the most intriguing aspects of Óliver Laxe's 2020 film *O que arde* (in Galician; distributed in Spanish as *Lo que arde* and in English as *Fire Will Come*) is the director's choice to record footage of a real forest fire for the film's scenes that include images of this natural disaster. As the Franco-Hispanic director recounts in one of the interviews that accompanied the film's release, doing so required that he and his crew train with the local firefighters in the remote, rural region of northwestern Spain in which the film is set, preparing for the eventual day when a fire would break out (LaSexta.com 2019). While they were able to get the desired shots of the flames and the charred landscape that was left behind once the fire

a Justin Berner analyzes film, literature, and digital art – focusing on the cultural production of the Iberian Peninsula – as a way to study the interrelations between humans, technology, and the environment today. Currently an Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow in the department of Spanish and Portuguese at New York University, he has published essays on the self-destructing electronic literature of Eugenio Tisselli for *electronic book review* and on the posthuman barnacles in Agustín Fernández Mallo's *Nocilla Experience* novel for *Romance Quarterly*.

was extinguished, doing so, as another one of the articles that anticipated the film's 2019 screening at Cannes tells us, nearly destroyed their camera equipment, with the heat of the flames almost melting the film stock used to capture these images (García 2019). These articles, for as much as they are quite sensationalist and at times seem more like marketing than journalism, are nonetheless intriguing for how they place the film within a contemporary discussion of environment and media: not only do they show how a film such as *O que arde* is as much *in* the environment as it is *about* the environment (Walker and Starosielski 2016, 3), but it also reveals the degree to which environmental conditions—especially the extreme conditions of a forest fire—determine the material limits of communication for a medium such as film (Starosielski 2021, 18). By focusing on the production details, they situate the film within a discourse on environment and media that emphasizes the embeddedness of the media through which we see and understand the warming world in which we live.

These articles also place the film within a much longer, more expansive discourse in the arts on illusion, reflexivity, and the boundaries of fiction. In the highly editorialized first line of one article, the author states that "Without using any tricks or special effects, the flames that appear in *O que arde*, the new film by Óliver Laxe, are real, they dissemble on the big screen, camouflaged as fiction" ("Sin trucos y sin efectos especiales: las llamas que aparecen en 'Lo que arde', la película de Oliver Laxe, son reales, y se cuelan en la gran pantalla camufladas de ficción") (LaSexta.com 2019; translation mine). In just its first few words, this brief quote places us within a history of cinematographic illusion and trompe l'oeil that goes back to some of the earliest works of cinema. By the same token, using a word like "trucos," or "tricks," obliges us to consider, conversely, what constitutes "honesty" or "reality" in filmic representation. The final clause of the sentence then evokes one of the most contentious, difficult questions in film as well as other modern forms of representation: what does it mean to represent the real and to do so through fiction? To say that these real flames "hide their true identity" (an alternative interpretation of "se cuelan") and that they appear on the big screen "camouflaged as fiction" offers two very intriguing metaphors for the modern conceit of fiction, as much as it reminds us of the inherent instability of these conceptual categories. This question is of particular relevance for *O que arde*, a film whose faithful depiction of rural life in Spain and use of local residents as amateur actors places it in clear dialogue with the aesthetic style of realism in general and with the legacy of Italian neorealism specifically. Interested in how this film explores the limits of realism from within this mode of artistic production, this essay

focuses on the use of a real forest fire,[1] analyzing how this cinematographic choice affects the film's overall impression of reality. To do so, I will consider how this extratextual knowledge affects the film's photographic realism and its narrative realism: defined, respectively, as how well the film's visuals faithfully represent the real-life scenes they portray and how coherently the film distinguishes between real events and its fictional narrative.

Inspired by a variety of recent approaches to the question of film and fire—from Weihong Bao's (2015) exploration of how contact with the elemental medium of fire upsets the conventions of film as a visual medium, to Hunter Vaughan's (2019) ecomaterialist analysis of *Gone with the Wind*'s famous fire scene and the resource-intensive industry of Hollywood spectacle, to Nicole Starosielski's (2021) interest in how visual media produces pleasure and attraction through conveying affects of thermal otherness—in this essay, I will consider how the confrontation between fire and film obliges viewers to reflect on the ontology and the limits of film, particularly in relation to contingency and the philosophical quandaries that arise when film seeks to represent a contingent event such as a forest fire. Although varied in their approaches, what these different theorists demonstrate in their studies of film and fire is how the symbolic, the images and the spectacle of fire on screen, cannot be separated from the material—the existence of the fire itself, the production of the filmic object, the spectators and their embodied experience of watching the film, as well as the media infrastructure that facilitates the screening of the film. Although I do not focus on all of these material aspects of the film here, this approach informs my methodology as I consider this interrelation between the material and the symbolic, analyzing how the details of *O que arde*'s production influence how viewers interpret the images, which in turn influences how viewers understand the material reality those images represent.

My contention is that *O que arde* is a film about anthropogenic climate change and disasters such as forest fires, one that comments on the human experience of climate change through its exploration of the ontology of film. In fact, if we approach *O que arde* as an environmentalist film, one that seeks to increase awareness of anthropogenic climate change or to elicit a meaningful response from viewers with regard to the many crises humans face as a result, then as viewers, we may be left wanting. The environmental politics of the film are unclear, at best, as the film ultimately seems to be much more about universal questions of guilt and redemption. In this way,

1 While many of the news articles about the film highlight this fact, this is not the case in the limited academic bibliography on *O que arde*, even though all the articles in some way offer a critical interpretation of the fire. The fire itself does not figure much into Moreiras-Menor's (2021) Lacanian analysis, which focuses instead on how the film represents the *extimate* relation between rural landscapes and the subjects that inhabit them. Likewise, Beilin and De Moya-Cotter consider the role of the fire "in... and within" the entanglement of human and nonhuman beings (2023, 118), arguing that the "fire breaks the 'rules' of all the relations" because of its act of destruction (2023, 118). Finally, Trevathan offers a political reading of Amador, arguing that the ostensibly reformed pyromaniac offers a scapegoat that distracts the community from the larger causes of forest fires: the monoculture of tree plantations (in Galicia, non-native eucalyptus) planted for private financial gain (2022, 15).

O que arde is not very different from two other recent Spanish films that have gained international recognition and have depicted the complexities of climate change in rural Spain: Carla Simón's *Alcarràs* (2023) shows the difficulties and contradictions inherent in individual actions in late capitalism through its tender portrayal of a Catalan family and their precarious organic farming operation, while Rodrigo Sorogoyen's *As Bestas* (2022) offers a tense portrayal of the complications, both environmental and social, that accompany the ostensibly virtuous transition to green energy in a Galician village not too dissimilar from the one depicted by Laxe. All of these films offer a measured approach to contemporary environmental issues that neither lessens nor simplifies the severity of climate change, showing the complex interplay between individual and collective responsibility in what is contentiously referred to as the Anthropocene. Similarly, by focusing on global problems that affect the small, oft-forgotten towns of Spain's depopulated interior, they all demonstrate what Ursula K. Heise (2008, 210) has denominated an "eco-cosmopolitan environmentalism" that presents the tensions and reciprocities between the local and the global today. Yet, in contrast with these other two films, what I find particularly intriguing about *O que arde* and its commentary on anthropogenic climate change is how Laxe so explicitly engages with the formal qualities of film and realism through the central figure of the forest fire. In particular, what the film offers through its formal experimentation is a disquieting reflection on a global condition of contingency over which humans can no longer maintain illusions of control, one that resists human control in the same way that contingency resists filmic representation.

Realism in *O que arde*

Laxe's film represents one of the most notable breakthroughs for the movement of New Galician Cinema (Novo Cinema Galego in Galician or, more commonly, NCG) with which he is affiliated, and whose films and works of video art share an experimental style and a focus on the Spanish region of Galicia.[2] Within Spain, the film has been recognized as much for its focus on environmental questions as it has for its depiction of life in Spain's sparsely populated rural interior, the so-called "empty Spain" that has become one of the most salient topics of debate—in academia as much as in popular society—in the country today.[3] In addition, it likewise represents

2 NCG, as described on their official website, considers the following criteria for the films that could form part of their very broad cinema project: developing modes of filmmaking outside the conventional film industry; using new film languages that tend toward experimentation; creating films whose value goes beyond the purely filmic (Novo Cinema Galego 2015). For an early study of NCG, see part 2 (especially chapter 7) of Colmeiro's (2018) *Peripheral Visions/Glocal Sounds: From Galicia to the World*.

3 This academic discussion of rural Spain has been occurring throughout the decades following Spain's *Transición* (the period of political transition from authoritarian dictatorship to democracy, following the death of Francisco Franco in 1975), often focusing on the poorly managed mass internal migration of citizens from rural areas to urban industrial centers that primarily occurred in the later decades (from the 1950s through the 1970s) of the dictatorship. Moreno-Caballud (2016a, 2016b) provides a comprehensive and critical review of this process. The discourse on rural Spain—now commonly referred to as "empty" or "emptied" Spain—has become even more prominent in the past decade, following the 2016 publication of Sergio del Molino's essay *La España vacía: viaje por un país que nunca fue*.

an international success—it won the Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes in 2019[4]—for the experimental style of film, somewhere between realist fiction and documentary, that has become prominent in Spanish art cinema in the past few decades. Today associated primarily with the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona and its Master's Program in Creative Documentary, of which Laxe is a graduate, this style is exemplified by the work of directors such as Joaquim Jordà, José Luis Guerín, Mercedes Álvarez, or Neus Ballús, many of whom have studied or taught there. While many of the practitioners and films associated with the program have dealt with topics related to the environment and anthropogenic climate change, its curriculum does not explicitly include study of environmental cinema or media theory. Nonetheless, it should not be surprising that the program, with its emphasis on the interconnection between the aesthetics and production of documentary cinema, produces works that can be easily analyzed through an environmental media framework that, as Janet Walker and Nicole Starosielski (2016, 3) explain, rejects a split between "the study of how films thematize environmental issues and the study of how media architectures impact the environment." With *O que arde*, as mentioned before, we can clearly see this interplay between the material conditions of production and aesthetics, given how production decisions such as using a real forest fire and including members of the local community as actors affect our interpretation—environmental or otherwise—of the film.

O que arde's narrative tells the story of Amador, a middle-aged man recently released from prison, having been convicted of arson in the case of a forest fire in rural Galicia, a verdant, rainy region in the northwestern corner of the Iberian Peninsula. Up until the outbreak of fire in the final thirty minutes, the film is composed almost entirely of scenes showing the tedious, uneventful life of the main character, who lives at home with his elderly mother, Benedicta. Not much happens in these scenes: they attend a funeral together, where other men from town make jokes about his pyromaniac past; they eat lunch and watch the local television channel; they enjoy a day in the sun, talking to one another about the invasive eucalyptus trees that now dominate the forests; Amador explores the local environs with his dog or tends to their cows; Benedicta walks through a rainy forest, waiting under a tree for a quick break in the precipitation. It is a simple, at times idyllic, depiction of a man trying to recover his former life while weighed down by an ever-present suspicion of guilt. There are, however, two subplots that emerge: the first is Amador's budding (though seemingly unrequited) romantic interest in a local veterinarian, Elena, who comes to their property at various moments to help rehabilitate a sick cow and,

4 It is difficult to accurately judge *O que arde*'s commercial success, especially internationally, given that its release—following a successful tour of the film festival circuit in late 2019—coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic.

unexpectedly, befriends the film's shy protagonist; the second is the efforts of another local man, Inazio, to refurbish a decrepit rural house and make it into a vacation rental.

The simplistic normality of the narrative, highlighted by the quotidian mundanity of the scenes described above, gives further indication of the film's affinity to Italian neorealism. Specifically, the scenes described above exemplify a type of filmmaking, celebrated by Italian neorealist Cesare Zavattini in his manifesto-like "Some Ideas on the Cinema," that resists a cinematic tendency toward the spectacular, focusing instead on the tedious quality of "everyday reality" ([1952] 1966, 217). Overall, the documentary-like appearance of the work and its on-location filming in the Galician countryside reveal further similarities with Italian neorealism (Lawton 1973, 11). Likewise, the film's focus on the social struggles of lower-class, marginalized characters, facing very real, historically analogous events or situations (for example, forest fires in northwestern Spain and the emptying of the countryside in Spain from the 1960s onward) and speaking a local, minority language situates the film in even closer contact with this movement, whose construction of a faithful depiction of reality was inextricably tied to its championing of the struggle of the lower classes (Lawton 1973, 11; Zavattini [1952] 1966, 228). And this is all in addition to the aforementioned use of local, nonprofessional actors whose names match those of their filmic characters,[5] a casting decision prominently associated with Italian neorealism.[6] By so clearly engaging in this widely known, paradigmatic technique of neorealist filmmaking, Laxe places his film within a cinematic tradition that has been as famously celebrated for constructing convincingly realist depictions of life as it has for its reflexive examination of that very construction of reality in cinema. This is the point that Bazin recognized in his early essays on neorealist cinema, when he wrote that they show how "realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice" (2005, 26).

In recognizing this aspect of Italian neorealist cinema, Bazin rightly situates the movement within a larger discourse on realism that has, at various times and in various contexts, considered the relative nature of the concept. Roman Jakobsen, for example, writes in 1921 that realism quite simply denotes an aesthetic of "verisimilitude" in fiction, but that it nonetheless is a polysemic and ever-evolving mode of artistic production (1987, 20–27). As a movement that sought to exploit the possibilities and instability of such verisimilar

5 This is made clear at the end of the film, in the credits: instead of two columns with character name and real name, there is one column with the familiar names of the characters we have just seen, now with their heretofore unspoken, real surnames.

6 The mythos surrounding this type of casting and its association with Italian neorealism has been exaggerated over the years, as has been prominently acknowledged in the decades since, during which we have been reminded of how many of the actors were not amateurs (Haaland 2012, 45) and that this type of casting had been employed in film since the earliest days of cinema, going back to the Lumière brothers (Bazin 2005, 22).

representations, Italian neorealism provided Bazin with objects that he could use to theorize the complex ways in which narrative film seeks to present a verisimilar reality through a medium that, as he claimed in his famous essay, "[satisfies], once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism" (Bazin 1960, 7). In fact, Bazin's essays on Italian neorealism allowed him to complicate his earlier ideas on photographic realism: in his "An Aesthetic of Reality" essay, for example, not only does he emphasize the role of artifice in constructing realism, but he also argues that the ideal of producing a verisimilar reality creates a "fundamental contradiction that is at once unacceptable and necessary" (Bazin 1960, 26) for the director's creation of a work of art. The photographic realism inherent in film as medium is neither the guarantor of nor is it an impediment to a more comprehensive impression of reality, but rather the very precondition for art. Bazin, in this way, offers a very capacious, paradoxical understanding of realism in film, as Jane M. Gaines recognized in the context of the late-twentieth-century wave of docufictions, mockumentaries, and other films caught in the liminal space between fiction and documentary: "André Bazin is then seen as one of the more adept negotiators of these concepts, simultaneously able to give the impression that realism is both achieved through artifice and unproblematically expressed, and able to create the sense that 'reality' is found as well as constructed" (Gaines 1999, 4).

Thus, by opening a dialogue with Italian neorealism in *O que arde*, Laxe is also entering into this very expansive, ever-evolving discourse on realism in film. Significantly in this respect, Laxe does not limit his exploration of realism to repeating many of the more famous gestures of this movement. Instead, exploiting its aesthetic potential, the director highlights the aforementioned paradox of realism by explicitly structuring the film throughout with moments that are—in stark contrast to much of the film—clearly stylized and expressionistic, disabusing the viewer of any notion that the work fully adheres to an aesthetic of illusionistic realism. At various moments throughout the film, for instance, the diegetic sound in a scene fades away, being slowly replaced by the crescendo of a strident, synthetic tone. In a similar fashion, the film begins with an obscure, nighttime scene of heavy machinery clearing trees in a dark forest; after some minutes of watching these mysterious movements in the dark, all the sound and motion stops suddenly, and the camera focuses in on the vaguely defined figure of a burned-out tree stump that we then examine carefully through a slow, meditative tilt. Bookending the work with an analogous moment of expressionist reflexivity, the film's final scene similarly tilts up to show a helicopter hovering in front of a smoke-clouded sun, surveying the newly charred landscape. Once more, the now-familiar strident tone overtakes the diegetic sound of the scene as the camera fixes its gaze on the helicopter and rays of sunlight produce a conspicuous lens flare, in this way obliging the viewers—in the last moment of the diegetic film—to reflect on the cinematic apparatus and the limits of realism.

But there is another, very significant aspect of these more expressionistic scenes. They are not just united by their seeming deviation from the film's otherwise realist mode, but they also share a common interest in both depicting the physical environment and displaying the capacity (or incapacity) of the camera to record extremes of light: from the brightness of the sun to the darkness of a blackened tree stump at night. In this way, they can be grouped with what I refer to as the film's maximal realist gesture: the filming of a real forest fire. Considered together, these examples from *O que arde* demonstrate what Nadia Bozak—invoking Bazin's indexical argument on the ontology of the photographic image—argues when she states that "embedded in every moving image is a complex set of environmental relations" (Bozak 2011, 5). What these moments in the film make clear, then, is how Laxe's film does not just generally explore the complications of filmic realism, but rather does so in a way that considers how the moving images of the film are embedded in environmental relations, both the physical environment it records and the material conditions of its production. The forest fire stands out as the most intriguing example from the film to analyze these relations, as its identity as a disaster brings this study of realism into a larger theoretical discourse on contingency in film as well as into the broader context of climate crisis.

Photographic Realism: Filming the Flames

If the words of the journalists cited earlier in the introduction are to be trusted, these scenes showing a real fire ostensibly augment the photographic realism of the film: the idea that the images we see bear a convincing, verisimilar relation to the reality they seek to represent. Yet, while this argument may appear convincing and logical at first, I ultimately argue in this section that this is not exactly the case. The scenes with fire may help augment the film's sense of photographic realism, but this can be attributed to the way in which the flames move on screen, and is not necessarily a consequence of their identity as the indexical filmic record of a real fire. To help further establish this argument, I then use Jordan Schonig's reflections on the wonder and amazement produced by certain types of moving images that depict natural phenomena. Overall, by analyzing some of the film's most dramatic images of fire together with Christian Metz's early writings on the importance of motion for film's impression of reality, I show that it is not the indexical nature of these images that makes them visually feel realist, but rather the movement of the flames. From here, I consider how the knowledge of it being a real forest fire might still have an effect on how we interpret the film's fire scenes and their relationship to the real fire that they represent. In particular, I argue that this extratextual knowledge leads viewers to reflect on how we comprehend concepts such as the real, the artificial, and the contingent today, in a world facing a climate crisis.

Throughout *O que arde*, there are various different ways in which Laxe depicts the forest fire: some showing the ominous advance of embers and smoke, others depicting the orange glow emanating from the brush in a dark forest, or others that show, from a very long shot, the plumes of smoke rising from the forest. However, the most impressive shots—and the ones that produce the most convincing impression of reality—are those that show the flames themselves, doing so from a close-up or medium shot that focuses the viewer's attention on their motion and their relation to other objects (humans, trees, etc.) in the field of view. One scene in particular, during which we witness one of the firefighters use a drip torch to carefully ignite the brush and create a *contralume*, or controlled burn, stands out in this respect. The fire produced in this instance is extremely bright, with flames igniting rapidly and quickly rising upward, soon filling up the entire screen as this intentional fire (one ignited not for the film, but to limit the spread of the larger fire) appears to burn out of control. Although the figures of the two firefighters are at times apparent in these shots, our attention as spectators is fully occupied by the movement of the flames as they expand across the surrounding vegetation. This specific way of showing us the forest fire is especially impressive precisely because it is so focused on the flames in motion. In contrast to these other shots of the fire that either have less motion or in which the motion is inherently slower, these scenes, with their emphasis on capturing the motion of the flames, lend the film an impression of reality in a way that was identified by Christian Metz in one of his earlier essays.

In it, Metz argues—in contrast to the Peircian, indexical argument—that the impression of reality is produced not through film's affinity with the medium of photography, but rather through its contrast to this static medium of visual representation (Metz 1991, 6–9). Metz forms his argument in contradistinction to Barthes's discussion in *Camera Lucida* of the way in which photography obliges us to contemplate a past moment: how, that is, in each photograph we confront the anterior future death of the photographed object, or, as Metz describes it, "a 'this has been there'" (1991, 6). Metz reads Barthes as ascribing very little "projective power" to the static photograph, but then, by expanding upon the latter's ideas, he himself asserts that this projective power is, in fact, what characterizes the moving images of film: that is, the filmic object is always (no matter when we watch it) moving forward (1991, 6). This, according to Metz, is what gives it the impression of reality, because, unlike the frozen tableau of the photograph, the filmic object is defined by its motion, and, as he emphasizes, the "spectacles of real life have motion" (1991, 7). This point is particularly relevant for understanding how these shots of the flames in *O que arde*—shots in which we witness little more than the spectacle of motion itself, aleatory and uninhibited—help augment the film's impression of reality. While part of this reality concerns the danger of fire (a point to which I will turn in the following section), what Metz's argument puts forth is that filmed images of movement are, by their

very nature, able to produce this impression of reality: "Because movement is never material but is *always* visual, to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its reality" (1991, 9; emphasis in original). Thus, the most significant effect from watching the fire, and one that is notably pronounced in these scenes, is this overall impression of reality. It endows the film with a greater sense of realism, and it does so in a way that, according to Metz, does not require the recording medium to be physically present in the moment this referent is recorded: in fact, this theory of audience reception of the images on screen proposes that there does not even need to be a "real" referent for there to be this impression of reality.

Sticking with the importance of motion in these shots, and examining the importance of the referent for how viewers interpret these images, Schonig offers a theory for why certain images of motion produce a sense of wonder or amazement. In particular, I see these shots in *O que arde* as analogous to what he refers to as the famous "wind in the trees" phenomenon, by which film spectators have, throughout the history of film, been amazed by incidental shots of simple natural phenomena such as the wind moving the branches of a tree or the ripples of a pond in a rainstorm (Schonig 2018, 31). Schonig, in an article that studies the persistence of this aesthetic experience throughout film history, from the earliest works of film up to contemporary works that use CGI to produce the same effect, argues that the attraction of these sorts of visuals comes from the fact that they offer moments of "*unplannable*" (as opposed to "unplanned") motion, "seemingly impossible to design, predict, or reproduce" (2018, 32; emphasis in original). Thus, similar to Metz, by arguing that this response can be effected by either recordings of the real phenomena or through CGI, he departs from the indexical argument to explain the interest in these moments of filmic wonder, instead emphasizing the role of movement: "the attraction ... is not a matter of capturing their contingent existence but instead is a matter of capturing the contingent manner in which they *move*" (2018, 32; emphasis in original).

What is offered to the viewer is a controlled version of what are contingent, uncontrollable movements, and the intrigue of these sorts of moving images lies in the paradoxical nature of this spectacle: "the interplay between the technological novelty of framed motion and the perceptual indeterminacy of contingent motion forms" (Schonig 2018, 50). Put differently, it is a controlled vision of something that appears uncontrollable. These moments are thus exemplary of the way in which film helps us "grasp the ungraspable" (2018, 43), offering a framed experience of the world that produces a sense of wonder not by "augmenting or extending our perception," but rather by "reframing our perception ... limiting ... and delimiting it" (2018, 53). The argument Schonig makes here is that this produces a twofold astonishment in the viewer: we are, at once, amazed by the natural referents themselves as they move in these unplannable ways and also entranced by the way in which the medium of film offers us a curated, controlled reproduction of

these movements (Schonig 2018, 42). While Schonig makes no claim to realism as such in his argument regarding the "wonder" and "amazement" produced by these images of contingent motion, one can easily see how this visual phenomenon, when included within a realist fictional narrative, could augment the film's overall impression of verisimilitude: specifically, by capturing a moment of unique, natural movement, the medium of film is able to do something that we associate exclusively with the contingency—precisely, in the language of Metz, the "live motion"—of the natural world. These "wondrous" visuals feel real insofar as they continuously, from each moment to the next, exceed the ability of the director to control them. Importantly, this realist visual is produced, as Schonig emphasized, by the interplay between natural referent and technology, through the framing of the natural phenomenon offered by different filmic techniques. It is a very precarious dynamic of (technical) control and (natural or natural-like) contingency in these moments that makes these images both astonish and give the impression of realism, exemplifying how filmic realism dwells in this liminal space between the natural and the artificial.

In this way, then, we can understand how these fire scenes can be seen as augmenting the impression of reality that is necessary for realism, but also doing so without the need of a real, visual referent. Thus, although one could still make a claim that Laxe's efforts to film a real forest fire make these images of fire appear *more* realist in some subjective way, Metz and Schonig offer convincing arguments that the photographic realism of this film can be seen as sufficiently verisimilar—and, extending the latter's ideas, impressive—without the extratextual knowledge that this was a real forest fire. This conclusion does not bring us back to square one, I hope, as this knowledge at the same time fulfills a different function, one that is related to this essay's larger questions on filmic realism and the environment, particularly in a contemporary moment of climate crisis. The effect of filming a real forest fire, as the ideas of Metz and Schonig make clear, is not the creation of the most realist image possible, but rather, I argue, it is a means of exploring the relation between filmic realism and how we visualize the natural world today, in a moment when anthropogenic climate change has thrown into question the stability of—and, in a related fashion, our human claims to control—this concept of the "natural," or, put differently, the idea of an autonomous, objective environment.

In this regard, Jennifer Fay, in her book on cinema in the Anthropocene, offers a way of thinking about the relations between film and the environment as well as the natural and the artificial. Studying a classical Hollywood cinema produced at least a half century before this new geologic

age was first widely discussed,[7] Fay contends that film offers a way to envision a world that is always inherently constructed, in which there is no clear or stable distinction between the natural and the artificial (2018, 3–4). Of especial interest is her contrast between Buster Keaton and D. W. Griffith in terms of weather and environmental design: whereas the former went to great lengths to create artificial weather conditions for an antinaturalist, slapstick aesthetic, the latter's dedication to a "naturalist" (Fay 2018, 33) aesthetic obliged him to wait for weather conditions to be suitable for him to film scenes of extreme weather (blizzards or bitter cold, in particular) in a manner that is reminiscent of Laxe and his wildfire. Fay's description of the two directors' respective production processes shows how both achieve cinematic environmental conditions that require a careful interplay of natural and artificial factors: Keaton's special effect wind and rain, for instance, required a day of ideally fair conditions to achieve his signature slapstick stunts (Fay 2018, 38), while Griffith's real blizzards required cinematographic expertise to be visually intelligible for viewers watching in black-and-white (Fay 2018, 31). Keaton and Griffith offer two very different approaches to representing extreme weather on film, but both ultimately construct their filmic version of reality through a complex combination of natural and artificial factors. In doing so, they both offer examples of cinema's capacity for making worlds that are, as Fay argues throughout her book, like the Anthropocene world in which we live: they are "artificial" and "unnatural" (Fay 2018, 4) insofar as they reveal to us that there is no stable concept of "natural" or "non-artificial." The point that Fay is making here is not that the Anthropocene finally shows us that the environments of film are inherently artificial and constructed, but rather that these artificial environments can tell us something about the Anthropocene. On one hand, then, *O que arde* can be seen as doing something similar to Griffith's cold, snowy nights: not only is the filmic version of this fire very much a constructed reality, but the fire that it records can also be seen as "unnatural" insofar as it is as much the result of human intervention as it is a "natural" occurrence.

On the other hand, *O que arde* does something slightly different than the films analyzed by Fay, offering an additional way to consider how film tells us something about this period Fay designates with the term "Anthropocene." As mentioned above in the discussion of Metz and Schonig, neither of whom makes a distinction between the real and the artificial in asserting film's capacity for realism, there is some effect of reality in film that similarly does not have to do with the referent: it is the *contingency* of movement, as seen through the medium of film, that produces this effect. Unlike the "natural," the concept of contingency is not imperiled by the effects of anthropogenic climate change, but our relation to it is nonetheless altered:

7 The idea of the Anthropocene—though not with that name—as a geologic period has, however, been posthumously credited to the 1938 writings of Vladimir Vernadsky, thus placing its original recognition firmly within this very same period.

our contemporary moment of climate crisis entails both heightened contingency (a world that is less predictable; more disasters) and the realization that humans can no longer claim to control this contingency. The appeal of watching filmed motion such as that of the flames in *O que arde*, as Metz and Schonig argue, is that it reproduces the contingency of the lived world in a controlled way. Quite simply, it provides a way to technically and semantically control that which is, by definition, uncontrollable. This is the sense of *wonder* attributed by Schonig. Laxe's film, even with its use of a real forest fire, still offers a controlled representation of contingency, but it nevertheless alludes to the fact that there are limits to this control. That is, because this uncontrollable movement is a forest fire, and because the film in which it is contained so clearly points to the real forest fire that provided these images, and because the disaster of the forest fire so clearly points to the anthropogenic climate crisis that is marked by this new relation to contingency, this sense of wonder comes to resemble a sense of *terror*.

Narrative Realism: Contingency, Death, and the Unwatchable

As mentioned earlier, the scenes of the fire and its aftermath take up the final third—that is, the last thirty minutes—of *O que arde*. During these scenes, we are introduced to new characters: a group of firefighters, who are—like Amador, Benedicta, and the other characters from the first hour of the film—portrayed by nonprofessional actors and depicted doing what we can presume are their normal firefighting activities. Not only are we first presented these new characters at this moment in the film, but the film also leaves behind the narratives of those main characters during this time. Specifically, roughly at the hour mark, when we see a suspiciously sweaty Amador driving downhill (in the opposite direction of a fire truck that we enter in the subsequent shot), the film departs from the narrative established during its first two-thirds: the location is the same, but all the characters are heretofore unseen, with an emphasis not on the life and relations of Amador but rather on the firefighters, the fire, and its effects. Thus, we see the firefighters sitting nervously in this fire truck, or we watch them obliging older villagers to leave their rural houses, or, as in some of the film's most dramatic images, we watch them in full protective gear fighting intense flames and creating a controlled burn to impede the progress of the fire. No mention or appearance of any of the prior personages is made until around the hour-and-ten-minute mark of the film, when the voice and then the recognizable figure of Inazio emerges from a crowd of villagers fighting back the flames, unprotected, with traditional brooms. Soon, the scenes with flames are gone, and we are shown a charred landscape in which the firefighters mill around, exhausted. In one of the film's most recognizable visuals, we see Benedicta walking through the smoky, barren landscape, in parallel with the earlier scenes that showed her walking through the verdant, rainy environs from before the fire.

In a narrative sense, the fire serves as a clear climax for the film. Structurally, the whole first part of the film, with its uneasy mundanity and its clear foreshadowing, leads up to this point when the fire will ultimately, as the English title suggests, come. It also quite significantly brings to the fore the major questions surrounding the character of Amador, such as his guilt and reintegration back into society. In fact, those last prefire scenes of him conspicuously perspiring, driving in the opposite direction of the firefighters, occur immediately after he is ostensibly rejected by a very sympathetic Elena, who approaches Amador—in one of the only scenes in which he spends time in public without the presence of his mother—at a local bar. In the moral interpretation of the film, we can understand this scene as foreclosing, at least from the perspective of Amador, the hopes of any societal acceptance of his rehabilitation. Even though he has legally served his time, society seems nonetheless unwilling to forgive, which serves as a reasonable motive for what may be his next act of arson. Ultimately, however, Amador's guilt in the case of this fire is left undetermined. As viewers, we see no direct evidence of him setting the fire, nor are we provided with any well-grounded accusations, even as we watch the community ultimately judge him culpable. In the film's penultimate scene, we watch as Inazio and friends approach a seemingly uncaring Amador, smoking a cigarette in the charred aftermath of the fire, and attack him. The convicted arsonist offers no alibi, does not physically defend himself, and is saved only through Benedicta's intervention; she approaches the men silently, and they begrudgingly refrain from injuring her son any further.

In general, then, the scenes with the fire can be seen as successfully structured within the fictional narrative of the film. However, there are other ways in which this fictional structuring of these images can be seen as failing or, at the very least, as not lacking a certain friction, which is most clearly evinced by the aforementioned sense of narrative rupture that occurs at the hour mark: for as much as the film's setting and style remain the same, the lack of recognizable characters and the abrupt introduction of these new fictional personages—who, it is worth mentioning, are never explicitly connected to any of the film's prior characters or storylines—make this almost feel like a different film. Put differently, these scenes feel much more like a parenthesis to the film's main narrative and far less like a subplot. The sense of narrative rupture here feels strange, both when we see the introduction of these new characters and when we then have the reintroduction of the recognized characters: it is a rather conspicuous parenthesis, that is. Yet it is nonetheless an inevitable effect of the director's choice to use images of a real forest fire, bespeaking the difficulties inherent in structuring an event such as this through the medium of film. This sense of rupture reveals how, although the narrative offers a way to make sense of these images, the contingency of the real event imperils the coherency of the realist narrative.

In one of the chapters in Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, the film and media theorist shows that the question of how film can record and represent an event is, inherently, a question of how the medium represents time itself. This is because, as she writes, the event, as a circumscribed period of time in which we have "pure indication" (2002, 140), stands out as "the most condensed and semantically wealthy unit of time" (2002, 141). Given the condensed meaning inherent in the event, it provides the perfect case for studying how cinema seeks to re-present temporality. Yet, for this same reason, it also stands as "the site of intense internal contradictions" (2002, 141). The example from film history that Doane uses to investigate this question is the genre of film known as actualities (or topical films), the predominant genre of film around the turn of the twentieth century that "dealt with current events or incidents of general interest" such as natural disasters or sporting matches (2002, 142). The importance—albeit fleeting—of this early genre of film showed how, "for a brief time the cinema seemed to be preoccupied with the minute examination of the realm of the contingent, persistently displaying the camera's aptitude for recording" (2002, 142). Doane's study of the actuality as genre is important for my argument here for a couple of reasons. First, it helps situate Laxe's filmic representation of a real disaster into an expansive history of film. Second, her analysis of the actuality shows how narrative, as a cultural form, provides a way for early filmmakers to make sense of these raw, semantically rich images by giving them a coherent structure.

The goal of recording an event on film is more elusive than it may seem, because, as Doane explains, the act of representing something as an event—the fundamental premise of the actuality as genre—is always caught between the contradictory poles of construction and contingency: the concept of the event delimits, demanding a structure through the very denotation of "event"; the contingent is, however, that which by its definition resists structure and meaning (Doane 2002, 144). The very act of representation thus betrays this inherent contradiction: once given a structure, the contingent is no longer contingent, even though this is the allure of the actuality as filmic object. In the most basic sense, the contradiction is borne out of the fact that every actuality film requires some structuring of time: whether that is enacted through cuts that elide "uneventful time" or through the temporal framing by which the filmic object is created as such, there is some inevitable structuring of time that betrays the genre's "aspiration to convey the 'real time' of the event" (Doane 2002, 159). What the actuality ultimately reveals in its failed aspiration is that film, as a representational medium, "is destined to produce only the *sign* of time" (Doane 2002, 159; emphasis in original). It cannot give us the time of the event; rather, it can only point to the referent of lived time as experienced in those contingent moments.

Ultimately, the ontological quandaries that arise with regard to the actuality are never resolved because they are, as Doane states, insoluble (2002, 163). Yet, in a comment that is especially useful for the study of *O que arde*, she writes how the cultural form of narrative can provide a way of "displacing" the questions regarding the ontological status of the filmic image that are brought to the fore by the actuality (2002, 158–59). Narrative, argues Doane, provides a structure around which we can make sense of the images, ignoring these irresolvable questions: within the discursive realm of a fictional narrative, everything is inherently a sign for some referent in the real world, the viewer never confuses himself with a bystander, and the time of the film does not need to structure itself so closely to the real time of an event's unfolding in the real world. With regard to the event of the fire in *O que arde*, the narrative structure of the film, in this way, offers a way to "tame" or "secure" these images of a real forest fire from the "instability of the cinematic image," to use the language of Doane (2002, 159). However, my contention here is that, in *O que arde*, the contingency of the event nonetheless resists its complete taming within the fictional narrative, which leads to the film's sense of parenthesis or rupture. In order for the images to make sense within the film, Laxe must fictionalize them: he must find a way for them to cohere within the fictional diegesis that he has established through the first hour of the film. And although he does so with some success insofar as the film does not wholly unravel at this moment, what this sense of narrative rupture signals is the resistance of the event and its contingency to being structured within the narrative. In a general way, this is manifest through the abrupt introduction of the characters of the firefighters: in order for them to make sense within the fictional narrative, they must seem verisimilar (though not real) in the same way that Amador and Inazio are. Hence how they are rapidly introduced into the film's larger narrative: they are given a fictional story, and many of these earlier scenes—such as the ones in which they nervously talk in the fire truck or when they help older villagers leave their houses—make sense within this fictional film. Yet, once we get to the scenes of the fire itself, this clear distinction between the real and its fictionalization becomes precariously muddled.

A first example of this is apparent in a scene that shows one of the firefighters, who, having decided that their leaky hoses are no longer enough to hold back the fire's advance, ignites a controlled burn in the brush beside a path. Referenced in the prior section's study of photographical realism, these are, once again, some of the most impressive shots in the entire film, producing images of the flames that are not only incredibly vivid and engaging, but also appear dangerously close to the firefighters as well as the camera itself. For a little over ten seconds, this shot presents a close-up from the waist down of a firefighter walking along the side of a path carrying a handheld drip torch that he uses to ignite the brush. The camera then zooms out and tilts upward to show the full figure of the firefighter, as well as a companion who follows him some meters behind. As a viewer, approaching these scenes as part of the

fictional narrative that has been established up to this point, there is a certain discomfort, as there appears to be a very real, imminent danger threatening both the firefighters and the camera crew. Likewise, this action of igniting the brush similarly feels uncomfortable: it is too risky, and arguably unethical given the contingent nature of fire, for this action to be fictional.

A similar rupture in the film's narrative occurs right after this scene showing the ignition of the controlled burn, when the voice of Inazio emerges from a crowd of unprotected villagers who are shown beating back some embers with traditional brooms. The appearance of Inazio, together with other characters we recognize from before, signals to us clearly that this is not just any fire we are watching, but rather a fire whose path of destruction crosses with one of the main plotlines of the film: Inazio's attempts to rehabilitate an old, overgrown family home and make it into a rural vacation rental. In other words, in contrast to the prior scenes with the recently introduced personages of the firefighters, this scene confirms the fire's coherence within the fictional narrative of the film taken as a whole. Yet as much as these scenes represent moments in which the film's realism is at its most convincing, this is also when the narrative world carefully constructed through this realism is in its most precarious state. Placed between two scenes showing firefighters battling these very same flames, managing the operation as it begins to become too much for them to control, to all appearances, this scene places Inazio and the other villagers in danger. Once more, then, we are faced as viewers with a certain degree of discomfort, as the film is caught here between fictional realism and a very real fire. Either these scenes are so carefully constructed that there is no real danger, or the fire and the mortal danger it presents are real enough that they threaten the film's identity as a work of fiction. What the fictional film must present us, to paraphrase Doane, is not the contingent, mortal danger itself, but rather the *sign* of this contingent, mortal danger—yet here, these two are dangerously close to overlapping.

This contradiction demonstrates clearly how contingency and the threat of death are very volatile moments in cinematic realism, capable of augmenting the film's impression of reality while at the same time threatening its precarious coherence. Approaching this limit of the representable, these aforementioned scenes in *O que arde* function very similarly to a death scene that not only imperils the film's realist conceit but also seems to endanger the lives of the real actors. Death scenes show, as Rachel Price and Akira Lippit have discussed in relation to animal deaths in film,[8] the limits of any realism: they are "the ultimate test of realism" because "in the moment of death the audience is reminded of the theatrical nature of the production" (Price 2012, 160). Lippit, who studies the explicit assurance provided in fictional films by

8 Animal death in fictional film, specifically, is particularly instructive—as Lippit and Price demonstrate—in this way since harming an animal is more ethically plausible and permissible than harming a human would be (the mythical snuff film notwithstanding).

the "no animals were harmed..." disclaimer, understands this legal promise against injury as suggesting that "cinematic realism... is not contiguous with outside reality" (Lippit 2002, 9). He understands the disclaimer and the credits as a whole as functioning like a *parergon*—or "frame"—that separates the world of the film from the outside reality it portrays (Lippit 2002, 10). What Price, by focusing on the diegetic moment of animal "death," then adds to Lippit's proposal is the fact that the death scenes themselves similarly point to this discursive frame: the moment when something impermissible ostensibly occurs within the fictional diegesis, we as viewers become aware of the way in which the film offers us a "framed" vision of the world. In *O que arde*, we become strikingly aware of this when we watch these fictionalized firefighters ignite the brush (possibly endangering their real selves as well as the real people who may be affected by the resulting conflagration) and when Inazio—the fictional personage—is depicted fighting back the real fire: there is a threat of death strongly implied in these scenes, but, more generally, they consist of watching something that appears ethically impermissible within the realm of fiction.

It is in these moments that I would argue that Laxe's film becomes "unwatchable" in terms of the category theorized by Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen in their edited collection of the same name: the *unwatchable* as an aesthetic category generally describes a filmic object that "negates"—or an audience reaction that rejects—the "scopophilic pleasure" traditionally associated with film (2019, 3–5). Of particular interest for Laxe's film, these authors describe in their introduction to the *Unwatchable* volume that "the unwatchable [can be] that which exceeds traditional aesthetic frames, infringing on our reality" (2019, 3). Further elucidating this concept, the authors put forth its roots in an Aristotelian aesthetic theory:

> In Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle argues that we experience pleasure not through indulging our base desires, but rather by bringing our cognitive capacities to bear on identifiable material, even if the content is unpleasant in nature. ... Crucial here is that the images are enjoyable as long as the viewer recognizes them as mimetic representations enclosed within the aesthetic sphere, separated from the realm of historical reality. (Baer et al. 2019, 9)

This idea, whose influence can be seen clearly in the recently discussed approaches to filmic death, is especially useful in explaining the reaction to the scenes in which the fire seemingly endangers some fictional characters in Laxe's film. We may be incapable of watching raw footage from a real forest fire in which local residents appear to be in mortal danger, but we would not have such a serious problem with—and may even enjoy—watching a film that depicts this very same scene within a fictional narrative. The problem with *O*

que arde is, once more, that the knowledge that it is a real forest fire leaves us as viewers in ambiguity; it muddles the distinction between the aesthetic sphere and historical reality and thus confuses the experience of scopophilic pleasure with something that is uncomfortable or even unwatchable.

If narrative provides—to bring this discussion back into conversation with Doane—a way of taming the semantic plenitude and ontological uncertainty of the filmed event, then these scenes are unwatchable precisely because they resist the coherence and sense of security that is ostensibly provided by that narrative structure. What is at stake here, as Doane recognized in her study of the actuality, is the tension between construction and contingency in the filmic object. As with the earlier discussion on photographic realism, we are back to the same questions of distinguishing between what is real and what is constructed, here between the contingent threat of real death and the constructed, discursive realm of narrative realism. Caught between these tensions, what *O que arde* offers viewers is neither the real event of the forest fire nor a fully coherent representation of that event through the mode of realist fiction, but instead a reflection on that which precludes the realization of either of these possibilities: contingency. But it is not just a general meditation on contingency and film, but rather one that is firmly situated in the context of anthropogenic climate change: the contingent event that poses so many irresolvable questions for the film is, of course, a disaster, and one whose very nature functions as synecdoche for the larger threat of global warming. As viewers, we almost certainly do not see the fires as a threat to us personally, nor would most of us truly fear that Inazio or any of the other actors were put into actual danger at this moment, but the epistemological confusion, the feeling that the film breaks with what is ethically permissible in representing the contingent event, obliges us to reflect on how we comprehend and manage that which resists control. The sense of unease that pervades much of the film is borne out of a general sense of inevitability, of a disaster that is yet to, but eventually will, come; yet, when the fire does finally come, this fear of inevitability becomes a fear of control, as the film, through its formal experimentation that is most apparent in these moments of epistemological confusion, points to the limits of that control.

Conclusion

Film, as every theorist heretofore mentioned has argued in one way or another, can never just be *about* the world it portrays; it is also *of* that world. Unlike in literature or painting, the realism depicted by live-action film such as *O que arde* is, at once, a sign or representation of reality as well as material evidence of some real moment, regardless of its degree of fabrication or artifice. *O que arde* is thus both a record of the real disaster and an artistic meditation on that disaster. This situation, and the many contradictions it imposes for filmic realism, is—to once more invoke Bazin—the very precondition for the act of artistic creation, of which Laxe clearly takes advantage to create a film that not only reflects on climate

disaster today but also reflects on how we see a disaster and how we understand the larger context of climate crisis in which it occurs. In doing so, the film adds another example to an ever-growing list of films (as well as a growing list of critical commentary on such films) that considers what film, and in particular filmic realism, can do given the gravity and the complexity of climate change. Although I argue throughout this paper that *O que arde* does something different, something innovative and important through its exploration of contingency, there are nonetheless many issues that this particular film does not and cannot resolve with regard to the many paradoxes of film and the film industry's approach to climate change.

On the one hand, there are many possibilities for being hopeful that a film such as *O que arde* can do something positive in the face of climate change. At the very least, we can see the film's focus on forest fires in a small village in a sparsely populated region of Spain as raising awareness of environmental issues, natural disasters in particular. Even if, as mentioned in the introduction, its politics are unclear and it does not clearly present the scientific case for increased wildfires, it does do a notable job of portraying the intertwining scales of the global (vacation rentals; invasive species; warmer, drier summers) and the local in accordance with Heise's (2019, 283) eco-cosmopolitan provocation. And by focusing on the effects of a warming world in such a small town, with its regional idiosyncrasies and local politics, the film—much like the aforementioned Spanish films *As Bestas* and *Alcarràs*—exemplifies how international cinema can, in the words of Kääpä and Gustafsson (2013, 210), explore "the multiple ways in which anthropogenic climate change seems different from specific cultural perspectives," thus complicating "any notion of a simplistic or homogeneous idea of the Anthropocene." Stylistically, if we consider *O que arde*, with its formalist experimentation and art cinema posture, within the category of ecocinema as studied by Scott MacDonald in his early article in the field, then the film would clearly be seen as a success. As Kääpä and Gustafsson (2013, 4) summarize, MacDonald's ideal of ecocinema proposes a "Brechtian challenge to spectators who are confronted with complex cinematic material that forces them to think differently and asks them to use this cognitive invigoration for politicized purposes." In this regard, we can clearly see how Laxe's film challenges viewers in this way, retraining how we see and understand our human relation to the environment in a way that can (hopefully) catalyze political action. Similarly, by reflecting on the technical aspects of production, and the limits of the medium to transmit such images of the forest fire, Laxe's film provides an opportunity to critically reflect on the resource-intensive technical means through which moving images of the environment—especially extreme environmental conditions such as a forest fire—are produced: a point brought up by Willoquet-Maricondi (2010, 7–8, 13) in her introduction to an early volume on ecocriticism and film, Cubitt (2005, 50–60) in his discussion of the technical virtuosity required to show pristine nature in the *Blue Planet* series, and Bozak (2011) throughout *The*

Cinematic Footprint. If we choose to focus on the details of production, we could even see the director's decision to film a real forest fire, and thus not use any additional resources to artificially construct scenes of destruction, as a sustainable production choice and an example for other films: together with the film's dedication to work with the local community to produce the film, the use of a real forest fire demonstrates an effort to involve the local region—human as well as nonhuman—in the film production process.

Yet, on the other hand, there are also quite a few reasons to be less sanguine about these possibilities. The film's uncertain politics could be just as easily seen as ignoring the larger, urgent issues at hand, with its impressive images of fires aestheticizing disaster and leaving viewers without an understanding of how the film industry and disasters such as forest fires are all connected to a capitalist, hydrocarbon economy. In this respect, the film does not directly engage with the pertinent question of whether a work of art created in an industry that is itself so resource-intensive and destructive can truly be able to critique the environmental complications of filming in a warming world. That is, even though it participates in a resource-intensive, global industry of film production, marketing, and distribution, does *O que arde*'s interest in the ontology of cinema and its reflexivity toward the cinematic apparatus mean that it sufficiently recognizes the *cinematic footprint*, as Bozak calls it, of the filmmaking process? What is more, as Vaughan writes in relation to cinema's explosions and conflagrations, the spectacle itself often distracts from the material reality of its creation as well as the larger political context in which fires, such as the forest fire in *O que arde*, exist today: for as much as I and other critical voices might hope that images of fire can produce a moment of reflexivity or an awakening of an ecopolitical consciousness in the audience, Vaughan (2019, 35) is much more realistic in arguing that the fiery spectacle more commonly "seduces us, lures, and deflects us" from the greater environmental context. Although there is perhaps a psychoanalytical perspective absent in his analysis, he is right to point out that explosions and conflagrations often serve little other purpose than to excite a public's desire for "watching things burn and blow up" (2019, 26).

And perhaps the excitement of the flames does more than just satisfy a primal, visceral desire, but is exploitative of the climate change–induced suffering of others. Offering an opposite example of the "coldsploitation" films studied by Starosielski (2021, 91), we could see how the filming of the real fire and the involvement of a real community in *O que arde* might be more exploitative than reflexive, with these scenes allowing the audience to "achieve pleasure in the sensation of thermal Otherness" by bringing us closer than is normally safe to the extreme heat of the flames. Likewise, even what I argue is so essential for the film's disquieting reflection on contingency—that is, the larger sense of epistemological confusion and terror that is produced in these fire scenes—could be interpreted in a more cynical, less hopeful light. In fact, many films thrive on and exploit the epistemological confusion

that comes up in a moment of danger and contingency, as when a character comes face-to-face with the threat of death. For many such examples, the more real the perceived danger, the greater the attraction, the more watchable they become. In this way, and bringing together the ideas of Vaughan and Starosielski, it is productive to ask to what degree films that feature natural disaster aestheticize the disaster and naturalize the audience's reaction to disaster as such, even when it is a real disaster seen in the media. Finally, even if the film was successful in producing these scenes of terror in viewers and even if this terror was directed toward the disaster and the larger sense of contingency, the appeal to fear in cinema without hope or without accompanying information about the disaster is perhaps a misguided strategy, as Inês Crespo and Ângela Pereira (2013, 181) hypothesize in their study of audience reaction to climate change films.

Many of these questions are extremely complex, with the paradoxes they bring to the table being, ultimately, insoluble. There is, of course, no singular, perfect strategy for film—or any other art form—to engage with issues of climate change. This analysis of Laxe's *O que arde* not only proposes that the film's reflection on contingency provides a way to confront the philosophical experience of climate change, but it also argues that realism, at its best, can be an aesthetic tactic to better understand and to critique the world we live in. As a genre, realism has, throughout its history and across different media and art forms, been an artistic mode that seeks to not just reflect the reality of its time but also shape that reality. It is, at least in its most hopeful form, prescriptive as much as it is descriptive. It is also, or at least it should be, reflexive and aware of its own artifice, showing us that the world in which we live is both artificial and real, as constructed as it is given.

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