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Arcs of Fire: Pyrophilia in *Iracema*, *O que arde* and *Huachicolero*

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Abstract: This essay examines three films that express a particular affinity with fire: *Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica* (1974), *O que arde* (2019) and *Huachicolero* (2019). While focusing on disparate socio-political settings, all three share an improvised, amateur style, utilizing raw and vulnerable filmmaking, involving risks for the cast and crew. Each film's arc of fire has its own tempo unique to a time and a place, constructing an idiosyncratic representation of a novel fire regime, characterizing flames in terms of pattern, frequency and intensity. The protagonists in all three films possess forms of pyrophilia as they negotiate life on the screen burning in front of our eyes. The fires these films show us are the feral spawn of extractive economic practices at the core of modernity: logging, monoculture farming and oil extraction. In this regard, the wildfires analyzed here do not carry out a vital metabolic function for biomes but rather harm or possibly erase ecosystems and the biodiversity they sustain. In turn, such pyrotechnics have enabled different forms of fugitivity, insofar as the protagonists in these films are in flight from their own entanglement within these combustible landscapes.

Keywords: environmental humanities; fire ecology; Brazilian cinema; Galician cinema; Mexican cinema



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1. Introduction: Filmic Combustion as Spectacle or Specter

Consider the following triad of fires. The first Rio de Janeiro newspaper story about a theater fire dates back to 9 August 1898, when the Animatographo Super Lumière Salão burned down after a projector failed and caught fire. Luckily, there were no fatalities (Asterito Lopera 2019, p. 68). On 27 May 1912, in Bilbao, spectators at the Teatro Arriaga were not so fortunate. The film *Little Moritz*, *reporter fotográfico* caught fire and subsequently burned down the entire structure, killing 75 of 280 spectators. Most of the victims were women and children (López Echevarrieta 2012, p. 34). On 14 February 1909, in Acapulco, a film projector caught fire in the overcrowded Teatro Flores during a screening of seven different short films. Though the inexperienced projectionist attempted to extinguish the flames with his shirt, additional film reels in the room quickly exploded like bombs, causing flames to quickly fan out across the pine-built walls and ceiling. That night, the entire theater burned down, killing at least 300 people who were unable to escape the building. There are estimates that the casualties were as high as 2000 (Martínez Castellanos 2011). Such fires haphazardly punctuate the first 53 years of film history, taking the lives of countless spectators while destroying hundreds of theaters as well as several prominent film archives. Absent any government regulation of building codes, it was a dangerous time to go see a movie due to the combustibility of film itself.

When stories like these made headlines—and they did internationally—fear was an understandable response. As Pedro Asterito points out in his treatment of cinema fires in Brazil, a fear of fires becomes an essential modality of the modern experience (Asterito Lopera 2019, p. 68). To put a finer point on it, modern pyrophobia is predicated on the perception that there would be no way to escape such a fire. There is, moreover, no way out of the socio-political surroundings that engender such destructive flames. For fire historian Stephen Pyne, pyrophobia is indicative of urban fire suppression, which not only eradicated open flames inside modern cities but also in suburban, periurban and, to some degree, extrurban spaces (Pyne 2019, p. 166). Urban fire suppression is a consequence of industrial

fire, that Pyne classifies as Third Fire, referring to the internalization of domesticated flames at the heart of industrialization, particularly the burning of fossil fuels. These are fires distilled down to their chemical essence, theoretically for safety and efficiency. At the same time, however, suppression sought to eliminate wildfires that served as a vital ecological process for a variety of biomes.

Prior to this shift, First Fire refers to the patchy wildfires that burned freely prior to human existence and, therefore, prior to the domestication of fire for cooking and agriculture (Pyne 2019, pp. 11–14). Second Fire refers not only to domesticated flame but also to the burning of entire landscapes for agricultural use (e.g., swidden) (Pyne 2019, pp. 34–37). Pyne observes that “fire [is] not only an object for inquiry but a means of organization” (“Pyroocene” Pyne 2021). In this essay, I take this observation seriously and use these categories as subtitles for each of the films treated here. However, this homage is not to suggest a neat correspondence to Pyne’s categories since these filmic fire regimes overlap and disembark from the distinctions Pyne makes in his work. In fact, the fires I examine disclose three modes of the extractive economies working at the core of modernity’s Third Fire. Given the realities of fire suppression and the internalized combustion of Third Fire, wildfires are most frequently visible when something has gone wrong, causing tamed fire to become feral. This visibility often involves the spectacle of filmic or televised representations that are not unlike the flickering reflections of fires inside Plato’s allegory of the cave. Left to endlessly burn before the spectator’s eyes, these filmic representations might remain mere spectacles of enmity caught up in some trite drama.

If cinema house fires were periodically sporadic, their cause would be straightforward. From 1895 until 1948, the chemical compound nitrate was used as the substrate for film, causing it to be unstable and highly combustible. Nitrate can ignite with a spark from a cigarette and will burn underwater. Though nitrocellulose film is no longer in use, it is far from a historical curiosity since the cellulose used today is still heat sensitive, flammable and sensitive to sunlight (Groo 2019, p. 4). The fragility of these film archives point to how vulnerable filmic memory is to metamorphosis, degradation and utter disappearance. Even today, such vulnerability is not radically distinct from that of digital archives, whose nonlocal presence ultimately depends on the vitality of networks and drives on which it is stored. Nitrocellulose discloses film’s ghostly pyrophilia, its gravitation towards fire, which is predicated on materiality, contingency and vulnerability. For Katherine Groo, film historians must not only accept archival fire as a part of the medium’s history but also consider how flammability is an *inescapable* element of film ontology. Like Pyne, Groo also argues that analysis should not consider fire as enmity, always as a threat to preservation, but rather as an indisputable mode of organization, which accepts material vulnerability as a filmic element (Pyne 2019; Groo 2019, p. 5). Drawing on Derrida’s formulation, “Il y a là cendre”. (There are cinders there. There only cinders.), Groo writes: “the living present is haunted by the remains of what has been” (28). In this sense, film is a medium whose flickering representations of historical cinders offer privileged vantage points from which to consider the surprising behavior of fire both visually and sonically. I contend that film has much to teach us about the political ecology of fire, whose agency has changed dramatically under the aegis of anthropogenic global warming and ecological collapse.¹ In current circumstances, the specific behavior of wildfires has become unpredictable and unprecedented in both frequency and scale within the short span of human history. The novel category of megafires, in particular, continues to surprise fire ecologists. They can expand unpredictably to a size that allows the formation of their own weather systems, developing pyrocumulus clouds that help spread a wildfire through lightning and wind. In brief, if anthropogenic wildfires have helped shape the biosphere historically, their acceleration and magnitude—alongside the intentional burning of fossil fuels—will continue to shape many future conditions of the biosphere. Pyrite films, then, not only offer us the spectacle of fire but also the specter of future fires.

This essay examines three films that express a particular affinity with fire: *Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica* (1974), *O que arde* (2019) and *Huachicolero* (2019). While they focus on disparate political and geographical settings, all three share an improvised, amateur style based on raw and vulnerable filmmaking, involving risks for both cast and crew. Amateur filmmaking and acting, as they relate to the French root of the word, are modalities of love and even devotion that give space to these filmic approximations of pyric destruction. Since the stories these films tell are caught up in fire, I describe their varying plotlines as arcs of fire. Each film's arc of fire has its own tempo unique to a time and place, constructing an idiosyncratic representation of a novel fire regime, a concept that helps characterize the flames represented on screen in terms of pattern, frequency and intensity (Pyne 2019, p. 19). The protagonists in all three films possess forms of pyrophilia as they negotiate life on the screen burning in front of our eyes. The fires these films show us are the feral spawn of extractive economic practices at the core of modernity: logging, monoculture farming and oil extraction, which all mobilize fire in order to realize economic value. As such, I describe these practices as pyrotechnics. In this regard, the wildfires analyzed here do not carry out a vital metabolic function for biomes but rather harm, or possibly erase, ecosystems and the biodiversity they sustain. In turn, such pyrotechnics have enabled different forms of fugitivity, insofar as the protagonists in these films are in flight from their own entanglement within combustible landscapes. My use of fugitivity as a concept owes a debt to Black and Indigenous Studies, in which the concept not only refers to crypto-histories of marronage but also identifies displacement, migration, and flight as elemental to living under the occupying sign of modernity and settler colonialism. In her work on photography, Tina Campt observes that fugitivity "highlights the tense relations between acts of flight or escape, and creative practices of refusal—nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant" (Campt 2017, p. 32). In this essay, the sex worker, the arsonist and the gas thief not only disclose the dangers inherent to feral fires but also offer up varying forms of fugitivity as they search for a way out of the destruction.

2. First Fire: *Iracema* as a History of Future Fires

In fire ecology, the myriad circumstances that determine the scope and scale of a wildfire breakdown to the three sides of the fire triangle: heat, oxygen and fuel. These components enable the chemical reaction of combustion to occur in the first place. The composition of these elements across cities, ecological reserves and hinterlands determines how a blaze will spread or die out. Following wildfire scientist Cliff White, Edward Struzik notes that the fire triangle is more accurately conceived as a square, given the ways in which sociopolitical structures determine not only wildfire strategies but also climactic and economic conditions favorable to fire (Struzik 2017, p. 26). A political ecology of fire, then, must also account for the rhetoric, policies and ideas that set the stage for novel wildfires that will reshape planetary conditions throughout the biosphere.

In Brazil, it was the politics of land or—more pointedly—landlessness that led to a dramatic increase in anthropogenic wildfires burning through the Amazon beginning in the early 1970s. For a country of 8.5 million square kilometers, landlessness remains an astounding problem, whose deep historical roots are tied to colonialism and slavery. Sader (2007) points out that, while only 70,000 properties occupy 43% of privately owned land, Brazil has never successfully carried out land reform that would encourage small-scale farming. Instead, neoliberal policies have reigned for decades, privileging industrial, large-scale agriculture, thereby deepening economic inequality in the later half of the twentieth century. Consequently, Brazil has become a major exporter of monocultures such as beef, soy and citrus while relying on imports for many other basic agricultural products (ibid.).

During the height of the military dictatorship in the 1970s, the Médici government manipulated this protracted problem of landlessness to institute a set of developmentalist policies opening up the Amazon as a new frontier for extractivist industries such as logging, mining and monocultural farms. As is the case today, much of this work was carried out illegally, although nominally encouraged by the State. Prevailing political rhetoric continues to characterize the Amazon as an *inferno verde* that needs to be civilized, tamed and populated (Trevathan 2015). To accomplish this internal colonization, often referred to euphemistically as “national integration”, the project presented the landless an opportunity to purchase small plots of land (Acker and de Oliveira 2017). Despite the populist rhetoric, major landholders would once again develop large-scale monoculture farms in the Amazon. Simultaneously, the government sought to build up infrastructure such as roads and hydroelectric dams. But one particular road has come to infamously symbolize the Médici project to colonize the Amazon: the Trans-Amazonian Highway (BR-230). The road was supposed to cut through seven northern Brazilian states, including Paraíba, Ceará, Piauí, Maranhão, Tocantins, Pará and Amazonas. In reality, it begins in Cabedelo and ends in Lábrea in the state of Amazonas. Originally, BR-230 was supposed to connect the northeast region of Brazil to Ecuador and Peru with over 8000 km of paved highway, but the project abruptly halted in Lábrea due to the difficulty of the work as well as the political and economic fallout of the oil crisis in the late 1970s. Workers were infamously left for months without outside communication or direction. Even today unpaved portions of the road are wiped out due to seasonal torrential rainfall (Johnson 2003, pp. 84–85). Although only a little over half of the original length was completed (4223 km), the road is the third longest in Brazil, the construction of which not only caused significant deforestation and social displacement in the region (Smith 1976, pp. 130–31) but also contributed to the ongoing genocide and ecocide in the Amazon. During this initial process of infrastructure buildup, 8350 indigenous people were killed (Fox 2019, p. 328). The construction also coincided with the burning of 300,000 square miles of forest, an area larger than Texas. Such staggering figures remind us that infrastructure itself can frequently manifest itself as a form of planned socio-ecological violence (Rubenstein et al. 2015, p. 580). The Trans-Amazonian Highway has become emblematic of economic development predicated on what Rob Nixon has called unimagined communities that must be rhetorically and physically displaced for the project to be successful (Nixon 2010, p. 65). In this case, indigenous communities and their territories must be rendered a sacrifice zone in order to make way for the highway, its fire regime and the extractive economies it intends to foster.

Co-directed by Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna, *Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica* (1974) is significant because Embrafilme (established 1969), the dominant production house in the 1970s, did not produce it. Consequently, its message did not go through the normal channels of approval, which tended to favor optimistic visions of Brazil. Instead, a small production company in West Germany was initially responsible for its distribution, at first, in various venues and festivals on the world cinema circuit and finally in Brazil itself in 1981, although there were unofficial screenings at the directors’ houses in Brazil prior to its official release (Aldana 2013, p. 367). *Iracema* contemplates the abrupt regional paradigm shift as highway construction displaces communities and ecosystems. It is also the first feature film to capture anthropogenic wildfires that, though novel to the region, would become commonplace along the highway. Unsurprisingly, then, a decade’s worth of deforestation and displacement is visible on either side of this road. Moreover, as Mariana Bedran has observed, the novel flames captured in *Iracema* unfortunately serve as a preview for the fires that are unfolding in the region today (2018, p. 33).

Shot in 16 mm with a handheld camera, the film presents itself as a pseudo-documentary with an amateur sensibility. While there is a dramatic arc loosely following Iracema as she hitchhikes with Sebastião da Silva along the developing highway, the film allows for long conversations with locals about the price and stakes of development in the region. In fact, Paulo César Peréio, who plays Sebastião (aka Tião Brazil Grande), is the only professional actor in the film, while amateur actor Edna de Cássia plays Iracema, a 15-year-old sex

worker who starts traveling with Tião early in the film. In many scenes, Peréio—and sometimes Cássia—simply posed as journalists interviewing locals about the regional development projects. Though carefully constructed, the film has a raw and improvised feel to it, especially as it offers space for locals to speak. In this regard, its amateur approach is an admirable attempt to represent the collision between the regime’s political rhetoric and the burning of the Amazon and the displacement of its peoples.

The film’s title is a reference to the eponymous nineteenth-century indigenous novel by José de Alencar, which offers itself as a foundational fiction for the Brazilian nation. Based in the Ceará region, Alencar tells the origin story of Moacir, the progeny of a white colonialist Martim and his indigenous lover, Iracema, whose name is an anagram of America. Bodanzky’s work, intending to update the sanitized telling of Brazil’s founding, offers the subtitle as a play on words: “uma transa amazônica” (Trevathan 2015; Bedran 2018). On the one hand, the subtitle indexes the name of the highway while also twisting the name to crudely disclose the perversity of the extractivist project as the screwing (over) of the Amazon along with Iracema herself. It turns out that this colonizing *transa* is enacted through fire and fugitivity.

The opening shots begin quietly with a series of tracking shots following a boat taking Iracema, a small group of people and their açaí crop to the busy port of Belém (in Pará). As the opening credits roll, the only sound is the diegetic, repetitive whir of the boat’s engine. This ensuing short sequence of riverine scenes offers a glimpse of the regional economic system and culture already in place. Yet there is no attempt to characterize this river way as original or Edenic. After all, when they arrive to sell their crop, the indigenous farmers are notably underpaid for their crop, compensated with cachaça and some “change”. At the same time, these opening scenes undermine any political rhetoric that characterizes the Amazon as the empty interior of Brazil. Bodanzky has noted that the film is about the meeting of two worlds, which offer two distinct modes of colonization: river ways and highways (Bedran 2018). If hydraulic flow is pivotal to the success of the former, fire is the preferred tool for the latter.

Though Iracema does not state her intentions in these opening scenes, it becomes clear that her visit to Belém is a means to leave behind her past and her childhood. She has become itinerant, only set to wander from place to place. The film documents Iracema’s transformation to child sex worker against the backdrop of the Catholic festival of *O Círio de Nazaré*, including religious officials overtly celebrating the colonization of the Amazon. As she states during hard times later in the film, the contextually perilous vocation offers her the option to “roam without direction”, indicative of a fugitivity enabled by fire, even if Iracema herself is not aware of her own pyrophilia. In her treatment of the film, Erin Aldana notes that autonomy, defined along the highway that Iracema now roams, requires absolute mobility predicated on hitching rides in others’ automobiles (Aldana 2013, p. 367). It is also during these Belém scenes when Iracema first meets Tião, a middle-aged truck driver with whom she hitches a ride along the Trans-Amazonian highway as he goes in search of illegal lumber. Notably, Tião himself frequently exhibits a series of colonizing behaviors when he misremembers Iracema’s name and insults her. He also predicts—perhaps correctly—that she will not live to see her sixteenth year. Tião fashions himself with the nickname of “Brazil Grande” and presents himself as a cutthroat, self-interested capitalist and disseminator of the dictatorship’s ideology. Indeed, as a mouthpiece for developmentalist rhetoric, Tião serves as a conduit for these policies to collide with moving images of conflagration, exploitation and displacement.

After their meeting in Belém, the film turns to their first trip together on the Trans-Amazonian highway. Tião’s truck follows the camera at a close distance as they travel down a paved portion of the highway newly carved into the earth with dried earth and sparse vegetation on both sides of the road. As the camera lingers on the front of the truck, it is hard to avoid contemplating the phrase emblazoned on the truck’s bumper: “Do destino ninguém foge” (No one escapes destiny). The fatalist prediction speaks against Iracema’s own itinerant *modus operandi* while also gesturing at the grim events occurring

alongside the road itself. As the pair travels further from Belém, smoke begins to envelop the truck from camera right; the scene then cuts to a minute long tracking shot focused on a massive wildfire burning on the side of the road. The scene is sonically structured in parallel to the riverine shot during the opening credits. It lingers only with the sound of the truck engine and the faint crackling of burning wood. At the immediate margin of the road, small brush fires occasionally produce flames licking up toward the road. The cleared land beyond the brush offers a view of massive columns of fire, dust and smoke burning in the distance, which completely obscure the sky beyond. Bodanzky noted that these fires were so commonplace in the early 1970s they almost chose not to film them (Bedran 2018, p. 33). The inflamed backdrop offers a sense of the fire's scale but only through the image's incompleteness. In this sense, the scene serves as a metonym, indexing a new anthropogenic fire regime operating along the side of the highway.

If viewed in isolation, these fire scenes might remain on the level of pure spectacle. Yet the feral fire's source is revealed a few minutes later during a scene featuring a crew of lumberjacks working with axes, chainsaws, bulldozers and gas cans to clear out dense vegetation and harvest old growth trees. (These are, of course, extractive tools built to use internal combustion). Tião and Iracema then arrive at a nearby lumberyard where Tião is interested in acquiring illegal lumber. As he waits for his piece, one logger speaks with him about the difficulty of the work because they have to make their own roads. The "government roads are not where they need them" in order to extract lumber. This conversation offers a glimpse into the ecological impact of the highway. It is not merely the ongoing construction of one road but rather an entire network predicated on a burning extractive logic of colonization and its subsequent socio-ecological erasure.

Meanwhile, Iracema engages in a conversation with a woman who arrived at the site two months prior with her children. She relocated with her husband with an interest in the lumber trade, as well the prospect of acquiring land. The woman is quick to tell Iracema that, despite the money, the place is "a living hell" because everyone who has arrived with the hope of acquiring land has found it impossible to do so. While it is only legal to buy deeded land, no one knows who owns the land in the area. In sum, it is impossible for her family to establish themselves beyond the itinerant labor her husband has found in logging. The desperate woman goes so far as to inquire if she and her children might flee with Iracema and Tião. The highway, then, has indeed brought development to the region. Yet it is ultimately shortsighted, predicated on fire and the exploitation of landless, itinerant laborers, including Iracema herself.

The pair finally split when Tião abandons Iracema at a "legit" bar owned by a friend of his. Subsequent scenes find Iracema in increasingly remote and destitute places, as well as in trouble with the law, further emphasizing her fugitivity. She is eventually flown with a friend to a farm deep in the jungle to entertain a man from the United States who owns the property (though he never appears in the film). These scenes are also punctuated by wildfires and the cinders left in their wake. The aerial shots of the plane ride offer views of the Amazonian development, showing a dramatic break between dense jungle and a barren zone of landscape burned to the ground. It is an astounding tracking shot that discloses the expanding frontier of extractivism underway at the time. Upon arrival at the farm, the film abruptly cuts to a nocturnal landscape shot of a wildfire burning through dense forest. The only sound is the thick crackling of wet wood set ablaze. At first, it feels out of place and sequence, yet the intensity of the burning punctuates Iracema's own peril, as her wandering has now taken her to a place of greater precarity. Though the pilot had promised to fly them out again the next day, the two women are predictably abandoned at the remote site, left to hitch a ride with a group of desperate migrant laborers. It is also at this juncture when her friend and the driver hauling the workers abandon Iracema on a dirt road in the remote jungle. Discarded and without means of transportation, Iracema has been effectively stripped of her autonomy, which is, again, predicated on auto-mobility. In sum, she has been left to die out in the elements. While it is unclear how she escapes this

situation, the final part of the film shows her increasingly injured, wearing dirty and torn clothes.

The final scene of the film encapsulates Iracema's desperation, when Tião arrives at a rundown roadside café where she is working. Iracema inquires if she can hitch another ride with Tião—or at least get five Cruzeiros from him—two prospects he instantly rejects with laughter. Iracema reacts rather ambivalently, at once shouting a series of insults at Tião and, all the while, laughing at him and perhaps at her own desperate situation. She is reactive to the forces of destiny from which she cannot escape. Even as she refuses to stay in her place, the scene is devastating as she is trapped within the limits of the highway. The final shots grimly place her in the middle of the unpaved road as she continues to hurl insults at Tião as he drives away. She exits camera right leaving the final shot to dwell meditatively on the road itself. Tragically, without an abrupt change in direction, Iracema will become another victim in the socio-ecological violence enacted inside the Amazon's novel fire regime.

During its construction, the Trans-Amazonian Highway coincided with the loss of about one fifth of the forest. Since 2004, this expanding frontier has been curtailed by new legislation meant to protect indigenous peoples, their lands and the biodiversity that thrives there. Today, these fires have returned on a new scale of fury. Since he took office in 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro has romanticized and reaffirmed the Médici development project for the Amazon, repackaging the same extractivist economic policies pushed decades earlier. Illegal land grabs that transform forest into pastures have become routine once again, disrupting the regional climate in the western Amazon. There have been more than 600 land-related murders in Brazil since 2003, with a 20 percent increase in 2018. As portrayed in *Iracema*, this novel fire regime is put to work to convert dense forest into pasture, dedicated to soy and cattle for export abroad (Zaitchik 2019). Moreover, such a project continues to act *as if* the territory is empty of people, flora and fauna. The result is not only a rekindling of the arc of fire presented in *Iracema* but also an intensification of that regime, which potentially constitutes genocide as well as an ecological state shift from rainforest to savannah that carries grave planetary implications.

Despite the consequences and the potential criminality of these policies, the Bolsonaro government has refused to accept responsibility for the wildfires and instead attributes the blazes to foreign invaders and NGOs, who apparently seek to use the wildfires as a pretext to assume sovereignty over the Amazon (Fox 2019, pp. 329–30). While this political reference is meant to justify further development in the region, it also points to a second kind of fugitivity: the arsonist as a scapegoat trapped inside a novel fire regime.

3. Second Fire: *O que arde* on the Scapegoating Mechanism

Though wildfires in Galicia are a common feature, in October 2017 they strengthened due to the unusual Hurricane Ophelia, whose winds swept across the peninsula as the storm moved north. At the time, Prime Minister Rajoy returned to his native Galicia and rightly noted that the “*sinfin de incendios*” (the endless fires) were not a matter of chance. Rajoy did not mention global warming, hurricane winds or droughts but rather attributed the fires to criminal arsonists (García 2017). In fact, these deadly fires are not only tied to climate change but also to poor forestry policies at work in the region, which—until summer 2021—privileged the monocultural production of eucalyptus. Given its papery pulp, eucalyptus also burns well, easily fueling the “*sinfin*” observed above by Rajoy. In this sense, eucalypts are pyrite species. It thrives after wildfires have cleared its habitat, giving credence to the description of these plantations as “green deserts”. In northern Spain, tree plantations of pine and eucalyptus began to take hold in the nineteenth century when a long historical trend of emigration began. As inhabitants deserted this mountainous rural area, plantations became a lucrative form to maintain rents for anyone who kept land but chose to live elsewhere. Depopulation, then, helped foster the growth of these monocultures. During the Franco dictatorship, the regime's forestry and rural development policies greatly expanded the terrain dedicated to tree plantations. The legacy of these policies is what Xabier Vázquez Pumariño describes as an industry of fire, which is firmly held in place by

an alliance between both major political parties, privately owned fire suppressing agencies, engineers, plantation owners and ENCE, a major multinational company that processes eucalyptus for paper and energy. With the right weather conditions, which are now in greater flux due to climate change, this political stranglehold has created a tinderbox that is ready to go up in flames with the smallest spark, whether set intentionally or not (Fita 2017).

Oliver Laxe's film *O que arde* (2019) meditates on these combustible landscapes, the socio-political conditions that give rise to these flare-ups, as well as the collective desire to attribute blame to *someone* for the blazes that put the community at risk. Like *Iracema*, *O que arde* was shot on 16 mm film. Laxe has noted in an interview that they were uncertain as to how the fire scenes would turn out, given the film's sensitivity to heat exposure (La Belleza Tiene sus Leyes 2019). At face value, *O que arde* might be a filmic representation of how Gaston Bachelard sums up the pyromaniac, the most unusual kind of arsonist. Bachelard writes: "Almost always a case of incendiarism in the country is the sign of the diseased mind of some shepherd" (Bachelard 1964, p. 13). The film follows Amador (Amador Arias) as he is released from prison and returns to live and work on their polycultural family farm with his elderly, albeit incredibly active, mother, Benedicta (Benedicta Sánchez). The film is also an homage to amateur acting, casting actors local to Galicia without any professional acting experience. In fact, all characters in the film share their first names with the actors who play them. Amador's name puts a finer point on this tribute as his name signifies amateur or lover. This style is all the more remarkable given that their performances lend so much to the quiet, elliptical beauty captured in *O que arde*, where the storytelling often occurs in the spaces between words or dialogue.

Though Amador served two years for criminal arson, and his community perceives him as a pyromaniac, his culpability is neither proven nor disproven in the film. His neighbors and family friends simultaneously express sorrow for him and label him an outcast. Upon release from prison, no one is waiting for him. He takes the bus and later walks in the rain to arrive at the farmhouse. Even if Amador is not a fugitive from the law, his character discloses a form of fugitivity from a community that has already cast him as a sick and criminal. Amador's fugitivity, then, is based on an unspoken urge to escape his own history as well as the history that others have created for him. At the same time, Amador *appears* to be Bachelard's diseased shepherd embodying "the contagion of lonely dreams" as Amador lives alone with his mother though he seems to yearn for other relationships, again, as his name suggests (Bachelard 1964, p. 13). Still, he *might be* exemplary of the arsonist as "the most dissembling of criminals", in Bachelard's words (ibid.) (In this sense the arsonist's profile itself is also fugitive insofar as it might evade overt criminality). Laxe's film is a thoughtful questioning of scapegoating and enmity in the face of a novel fire regime rendered out of control. What the spectator sees in Amador is less about pyromania and more about pyrophilia, similar to what Bachelard describes as a "fire [that] smolders in the soul more surely than it does under ashes" (ibid.). Though I want to sustain the ambiguity and elliptical character of the film's storytelling, it is possible to explore Amador's pyrophilia when the film is considered as a cycle of coalescence and strife. These two contrapuntal modalities bring to mind Anne Harris's treatment of the pyrite philosopher Empedocles, whose notions of coalescence and strife grant the element of fire "a formative role in all existence" (Cohen and Duckert 2015, p. 44). In *O que arde*, these modalities swell up and wane much like the fire that burns later in the film.

Prior to Amador's release from prison, *O que arde* opens with a somber tone not unlike that of the opening scenes of *Iracema*, which initially offer a tranquil albeit enigmatic meditation on a nocturnal forest setting. Then, as the eucalyptus leaves rustle in the wind, a spotlight focuses on the trees, giving way to a bulldozer as it plows down a number of trees for harvest. The loud crack of tree trunks snapping punctuates the progress along with the grinding noise of moving earth below the machine. A second bulldozer appears in the frame and then a third, mowing down rows of trees. Iterations of machine and tree underscore the monocultural uniformity that defines the essence of a plantation. The bulldozers easily progress through the plot for minutes until coming to a halt and pausing

at a much larger, old growth tree, which seems to indicate a liminal zone between the plantation and the greater forest outside. As the bulldozer lights dim, the camera lingers on the irregular contours of gnarly bark, which point to an ecotone—or zone of ecological transition—moving away from the uniformity of eucalyptus plantation toward the old growth forest. As *tonos* suggests in Greek, this ecotone is about tension, conveying a fraught contrast between the fast growing, young eucalyptus and the old growth tree.

This ecotone also speaks to the proximity of the nested ecologies and economies at work within the region. While tree plantations have taken the place of Galicia's historical "agrarian mosaic", polycultural farming remains, even if the number of farms has since dwindled (Goded et al. 2019). For some, tourism is a developing industry that could refurbish abandoned farmhouses to attract city dwellers desiring an escape. Each of these economies contains implicit forms of pyrophilia or pyrophobia. Indeed, Amador's neighbor and seemingly estranged friend Inazio is restoring old farmhouses to convert them into vacation homes for tourists, whose very presence would require policies of fire suppression. On the other hand, Amador's farm posits a controlled form of pyrophilia, embodied in the figure of the hearth. In contrast to the feral fires examined throughout this essay, the hearth nurtures a flame cultivated to inhabit the core of the farm. The hearth, then, is not only for cooking but also for meditation and decision-making. Amador's return home is a return to the hearth. Benedicta's first question is simply: are you hungry? Her inquiry of care cuts directly to a quiet interior scene by the hearth, whose flames offer a soft basso continuo, as Amador and Benedicta get ready for bed. The next day, the interior shots at the farmhouse continue as Benedicta fries some eggs while Amador toasts a piece of bread. Notably, he asks Benedicta to remove the stove cover, to expose the open flames so that he can better toast his bread. Amador's pyrophilia here focuses on a tame, cultivated fire contained within the hearth (even if this flame always holds the potential to escape and become feral). These scenes surrounding the hearth embody the film's modality of coalescence, marking the reunion of mother and son while also offering a glimpse of Amador's tenderness.

Shortly after Amador's return, he drives Benedicta to the funeral for their family friend, Xosé. While Benedicta speaks to his widow, Lidia, Amador waits alone by the car, smoking in uncomfortable isolation. Lidia inquires after him, also noting how much Benedicta has suffered because of what happened. As Amador waits, a man chatting with his friends shouts over to him: "Got a light?" as the group erupts in laughter. Even when another man explains that it is only a joke, Amador does not respond. (This turns out to be his *modus operandi*.) His notable isolation at the funeral as well as the firebug joke pivot the film back toward strife, a modality emphasized by long elliptical shots such as Benedicta silently waiting out the pouring rain inside an old tree. Amador also disappears later that night until Benedicta finds him sleeping in their car the next day. He only seems to recover a bit from his melancholy once he is sipping coffee by the warmth of the hearth.

Yet the film persists in strife as Amador searches for their cow Parda, who has become sick and refuses to leave a small muddy pond. Given the film's fire prone terrains, Parda's choice of refuge in water is stunning. Once found, Parda's illness actually pivots the film back toward coalescence. The local veterinarian, Elena, helps Amador rescue Parda from the pond, offers a diagnosis on the spot and gives Amador and Parda a ride. Significantly, Elena does not yet know about Amador's past. She asks if he had emigrated from the region and then decided to return. He simply responds that, yes, he had emigrated (a lie referencing to the historical trend mentioned above). Their conversation offers a chance for him to escape his past, constituting a fugue from his *persona* as arsonist. Once they finish talking, Elena plays a cassette of Leonard Cohen's classic song "Suzanne". She asks if he likes it, to which he says, yes, even though the words are incomprehensible. Elena poignantly notes that it is not necessary to understand the lyrics to get the feeling of the song. Her comment opens a tranquil scene emblematic of the film's elliptical storytelling, as both characters stop talking while the scene lingers on as the camera lingers on close-ups of Amador, Elena and especially Parda as she gazes out onto the *montes*, while the trio peacefully travels down the road.

This coalescence lingers after Parda's rescue. As Amador and Benedicta take their cows out to pasture with their dog Luna, they pause for a snack in a clearing along the edge of the woods. Benedicta notes that many of the oak trees seem to have dried leaves. Amador responds that they might have a kind of cancer that dries out leaves and branches in a variety of trees, including oak and eucalyptus. Tellingly, he also notes that this disease might have originated in Australia or in a laboratory. While this may be a nativist proclamation about the origin of a disease, eucalyptus is indeed native to Australia. (Yet today there is more eucalyptus growing in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula than there is in Australia ([Huete 2021](#))). Amador then poetically speaks about the species' will to reach toward the sky, noting how their roots also stretch for kilometers. He goes on to say that these trees are a plague because they choke out other species in the area. Amador's musings not only offer a critique of eucalyptus plantations but also serve as a careful meditation on fuel, one side of the fire triangle—or square. In other words, his chlorophilia appears to indicate his pyrophilia (a day later, another scene documents Amador carefully observing the harvest of eucalyptus). In response to Amador's critique, Benedicta muses that the trees only hurt others because they were made to suffer. Her observation is a stunning summation about the perversity of monocultural forestry policy and quite possibly about Amador himself.

A pastoral tranquility dominates these scenes prior to Amador's visit to a bar in town. He sits alone and has clearly dressed up in the hopes of seeing the veterinarian, Elena. Yet their encounter does not go as he hoped. As they exchange greetings, Amador intuits that Elena has now learned of his criminal past from others in town. Although she claims not be bothered by it, his fugitivity from the past, whether real or imaginative, has been curtailed. Despite the noise of the bar, it is a scene built on silence as their gestures convey a subtle, elliptical shift back to strife. Afterwards, as Amador drives home, he crosses paths with several fire trucks speeding toward a conflagration. Amador is, then, seen driving away from a fire that is quickly spreading out of control. After the emergency vehicles arrive, two scenes punctuate the spectator's entrance into the wildfire's path: a long landscape shot of a smoldering *monte* followed by a cut to another medium landscape shot of a fire line burning through the dry vegetation. Dense, crackling sounds accompany a sky completely obscured by smoke and the incendiary glow in the night sky. Overnight, the wildfire continues to threaten property as the firefighters deal with malfunctioning hoses. They desperately attempt to create a back-fire in order to eliminate fuel from the fires path. Unfortunately, the action is to no avail because the wind abruptly shifts, causing the back-fire to expand towards the firefighters and the houses, quickly burning down many of the structures. Given all the dry fuel and vegetation, it is a stunning illustration of how the nested ecologies and economies of the area are trapped inside this novel fire regime. In the end, many properties are destroyed as the firefighters themselves are forced to flee the flames.

Daylight returns as the fire wanes and smoke continues to obscure the sun. Benedicta enters the charred landscape, searching for Amador. As some of the firefighters stand around stunned from their night of devastating losses, a horse erratically stumbles through the same scorched earth. The firefighters note that the poor creature is not only badly burned but has also lost his eyesight. The difficult scene appears emblematic of the trauma and shock resulting from the fire. Indeed, the horse's eyes reach out as a spectral optics burned down to its cinders. The film then cuts to Amador smoking a cigarette as a group of angry men approach him. His neighbor Inazio attacks him, yelling that Amador does not care about anything. Amador sits bloodied on the ground, as everyone around him looks stunned by the smoke and destruction. Yet Benedicta appears at his side to help him up and walk away. The film concludes as the pair walks into the smoke at a distance while helicopters continue to dump water on the smoldering embers.

Given its indeterminacy, the film can be read in at least two ways. On the one hand, Amador is set to fill the shoes of Bachelard's demented shepherd turned pyromaniac. His pyrophilia would not only constitute an outburst reacting against strife and alienation that he faces but also lend itself to what he perceives as a cleansing rebirth of coalescence. However, the film's ambiguity also suggests that any portrayal of Amador as the only criminal element constitutes scapegoating. To follow Girard's (1986) classic elaboration, this mechanism responds to a collective threat by focusing anger and violence on one individual, Amador, in this case. Inazio's final outburst of violence shows up as desperation that knows no other release. Despite living inside a dangerous novel fire regime predicated on the tree plantations and climate change, Inazio lashes out at *who he perceives to have sparked the fire*. Inazio's enactment of the scapegoat mechanism is an instantiation of Mike Davis's formulation of the "incendiary Other", deemed responsible for pyric destruction (Davis 1998, pp. 132–33). In his analysis of fire suppression in Malibu, California, Davis observes: 'a "paradigm shift from "it" to "them"', as political discourse refused to address how real estate development had haphazardly and dangerously expanded into fire prone ecosystems (ibid.). Even if a majority recognizes that the problem is much larger than a single demented shepherd, or even a group of organized arsonists, politically speaking it is still easier to blame the demented shepherd. In the end, regardless of how one interprets the film's indeterminacy, *O que arde* does make clear that nested ecologies and economies entangled in a toxic fire regime will continue to burn as long as pyrite species thrive as dominating monocultures.

4. Third Fire: Huachicolero in a Petromelancholic Blaze

Pyne reminds us that the biggest fire burning today is primarily invisible, intentionally obstructed from view and dispersed globally through the practice of internal combustion (Pyne 2019, p. 194). However, when something goes wrong inside the infrastructure of petromodernity, feral fires are one possible consequence. The optics of such accidents helps expose the toxicity inherent in burning fossil fuels. This phenomenon has recently become visible in the Mexican state of Puebla, which has been designated as "the red triangle" of fuel theft (Jones and Sullivan 2019, p. 1). An extreme example occurred at dawn on 19 December 2010, when approximately 3.8 million liters of crude oil flooded the streets of San Martín Texmelucan (Puebla). A single spark then caused the entire town to go up in flames, producing major explosions and a cloud of toxic smoke that was visible from space (Harp 2018). Thirty people died, including 13 children; 50 others were hospitalized. Though the exact cause remains unknown, the oil leaked from a Pemex (Petróleos Mexicanos) pipeline, likely after a group of gas thieves perforated the line to illegally extract oil (Yangali 2020). At the time, gas theft was not recognized as a national issue even though it had been tolerated for decades inside politically corrupt institutions. Until recently, Pemex, the state-owned oil company and symbol of energy sovereignty, had failed to address the issues of corruption and theft, which have infected the highest levels of its structure. Since 2010, however, gas and oil theft have increased dramatically, due to organized crime's renewed interest in oil smuggling. Today, gas theft requires careful orchestration between bribed Pemex officials, police departments and the cartels themselves. From 2011 to 2016, gas thieves syphoned at least 5.5 million liters of fuel, accounting for 6 million pesos in losses (Jones and Sullivan 2019, p. 7). On average, Pemex has lost 19 billion a year since 2013 (Harp 2018). In the first 10 months of 2018, there were 12,581 perforations of gas and oil pipelines, each one involving the possibility of a leak or explosion. Given its scale and volatility, gas theft has become a direct challenge to state sovereignty (Jones and Sullivan 2019). The frequency and intensity of violence has also increased. Since 2017, reported violent crime has steadily escalated, surpassing the rate in 2011 at the height of the drug war. The area affected by gas theft has also increased, now including the state of Guanajuato, which has been designated as "the second red triangle" as cartels compete for influence and access to the numerous pipelines and refineries in the area. In this context, petrol functions as an accelerant added to the toxic cocktail of

drug trafficking and political corruption (ibid.). As Harp observes in his reporting on the issue, petropolitics in Mexico has produced a security crisis that runs parallel to the country's narcopolitics. In guises ranging from gun violence to pipeline explosions, feral fire has unfortunately become a barometer indicating the degree to which gas theft impacts municipalities across Mexico's hinterland.

In 2013, former President Peña Nieto's response to the overall corruption in Pemex was to privatize parts of the state-owned company, opening up gas and oil production to multinational companies (Harp 2018). Though touted as leading to lower gas prices, this process, still underway, has actually led to price increases, while also creating a perceived threat to Mexico's energy sovereignty, as President López Obrador describes it. In another twist, Peña Nieto's privatization has only expanded the bribery scheme, which now includes money from multinational corporations. Protests, in the name of energy sovereignty and against price increases, have become commonplace. Petropolitics also contributed to President López Obrador's victory in 2018. He has championed fossil fuel production while curtailing petroleum exports abroad (although the privatization policy of his predecessor remains in place). López Obrador has also sought to limit fuel theft and corruption, mobilizing federal troops to protect pipelines and rerouting gasoline shipments throughout the country. Though the government claims to have eliminated fuel theft by 90%, the cartel response has been fierce, threatening Pemex workers as well as the president himself. In Salamanca (Guanajuato), explosives were found outside the city's refinery. Though they were deemed fake in the media, it turns out the threat was real (Jones and Sullivan 2019).

Although Edgar Nito began to develop *Huachicolero* prior to national recognition of gas theft as a social issue, his first feature film enters into the immediacy of the crisis and explores its contours in the hinterland of Guanajuato. In interviews, Nito notes that he first learned about *huachicol* (gas theft) from locals in his hometown of Irapuato (Cruz Yáñez 2021). Of course, the word itself is curious. *Huachicol* or *guachicol* means a cheap alcoholic spirit made from sugarcane, metaphorically referring to discounted fuel in contemporary parlance. It can also refer to a pole and basket for picking fruit, or to the tools for syphoning gasoline. Yet *guacho* comes from the Mayan word *Wach*, meaning thief. In the Yucatán, "huach de mierda" means damn outsiders. *Huachicol*, then, contains a tripartite description of gas theft. Nito's *Huachicolero* is a 93-min film that was shot over a span of several days in a rural town near Irapuato in the state of Guanajuato. The film's atmosphere is tense, building a profound sense of precarity that lingers in the scenes alongside the perception of gasoline's toxicity. Though filmed in digital, the cinematography of Juan Pablo Ramírez mobilizes a variety of handheld camera techniques, emphasizing closed shots, extreme close ups and natural lighting. This last element is significant not only in relation to the film's limited budget and shooting schedule but also because much of the plot occurs at night. Nito also sought to cast many roles with amateur actors from the area, who had little or no professional experience. Eduardo Banda, who plays the protagonist named Lalo, was helping his father paint the school where a casting call was taking place. In subsequent interviews, Banda explains that he was not allowed to read the entire script and instead only received instruction from the crew prior to filming a scene (Huerta 2019). This amateur feel yields raw effect and energy throughout the film, which paints a sincere coming-of-age story trapped inside the extreme toxicity and violence of petromodernity.

Huachicolero begins at night in *medias res* as a crime goes wrong. The opening shot cleaves close to the road with the camera attached to the front bumper of a speeding car as it moves along a nocturnal highway setting. An extradiegetic soundtrack offers an accelerating percussive tempo, setting the pace that continues for the entire film. Two would-be *huachicoleros* have crossed over into someone else's territory, beginning to syphon gasoline at a remote access point on a farm. It is a decision that will cost them their lives. In a scene exemplary of Ramírez's use of natural light, the only light available to spectators and characters comes from the headlights of their van. The opaque darkness of the night underscores the clandestine activity in process as well as the location's remoteness. A

short time later, two other men arrive, clearly surprised to see the ongoing operation unfolding on their turf. The subsequent murders of the first two men are indicative of the growing presence of criminals vying to gain access to pipelines and set the price for the stolen commodity. The opening scenes conclude at dawn when one of the murdered *huachicoleros* is stripped of his clothing and dumped in front of seven gas flares at a refinery. The flames tower over the corpse in a haunting landscape shot that places the murders in an environment indicative of the combustible toxicity, economic precarity and corruption at work inside Guanajuato's petroleum industry. Though contained to their towers, Third Fire's ominous gas flares seem to have already unleashed a metaphorical feral fire of crime that will become incarnate in toxic flames later in the film. In *Huachicolero*, pyrophilia focuses on the consequences of our collective addiction to burning fossil fuels as well as the dangers involved when one gets too close to these flames.

Later that morning, Detective Loaeza (Leonardo Alonso) arrives as another police officer is taking photos of the body, which Loaeza quickly tells him to erase. The other smuggler is found murdered in the van days later, which Loaeza also investigates by calling Mariano (Pascasio López), the perpetrator, who is bribing the detective to keep things quiet. It quickly becomes clear that these deaths will not merit investigation and will not appear on any official registry, even as violence continues to escalate in the area. Corruption will only beget more violence. The next night, middle-aged Mariano and his young cousin Rulo (Pedro Joaquín), who are both responsible for the murders, quickly get back to syphoning gasoline in the same remote location. After they pierce the line, Mariano lights a cigarette as the gasoline quickly fills the tank in their truck. Once again, something has gone wrong. Gasoline continues to leak after they complete their work and depart. The police arrive on the scene the next day and discover a small crowd of people attempting to collect fuel from the bubbling pool that now surrounds the exposed pipeline. The spill has also killed a farmer's dog after the poor creature mistakenly drank some of the gasoline. The death of the dog, the murders and the severed pipeline speak to the untenable toxicity at play throughout the area.

Yet the history of petroleum production is not new for this part of Guanajuato. In fact, the oldest refinery built by PEMEX is still in operation in the city of Salamanca. A few years after its construction in 1950, folk singer José Alfredo Jiménez wrote the song, "Camino de Guanajuato" after his brother died from poisoning while working in the refinery (Stargardter 2018). Unfortunately, the lyrics still resonate within the toxic atmosphere of *Huachicolero*. Jiménez begs his listeners not to pass through Salamanca, writing in part: "Ahí, se apuesta la vida/Y se respeta al que gana/Allá, en mi León, Guanajuato/La vida no vale nada" ("There, one's life is a bet/respect is only for the one that wins/there, in my León Guanajuato/life is not worth anything"). Petromodernity's Third Fire will cheapen all life exposed to its toxicity. More than half a century after Jiménez's 1953 song, the petrol infrastructure that poisoned his brother remains in place while precarity and violence have only increased. This impasse is akin to Stephanie LeMenager's concept of petromelancholia, which she describes as an "unresolvable grieving of modernity" as it begins to fail (LeMenager 2011, p. 27). Though exposed to the risks inherent to burning fossil fuels, humanity remains transfixed by them, thereby connecting our destiny to the limits of burning fossil fuels on a finite planet.

Guanajuato's toxic history of petroleum and spiked trend of violence offer context for the film's arc of fire: an unrequited adolescent love story that quickly spirals out of control with tragic implications. Lalo, who lives with his mother (Myriam Bravo), is already participating in the informal economy. He buys gasoline from his friend and father figure don Gil, who is involved in *huachicol* (although his exact role is never specified). Lalo rides his bicycle hauling jerry cans of the contraband product to local farmers. In a film predicated on combustion, the bicycle is a pivotal object for Lalo. It not only gives him a degree of autonomy to sell gasoline but also stands out as a symbol for Lalo's innocence. Bicycles, of course, do not require internal combustion. Though Lalo and his mom are giving all their extra money to the boy's sick uncle, Lalo has become entranced by his

classmate Ana (Regina Reynoso) and has decided to save up the money he makes to buy her a smartphone. But the money is not enough to buy the right device, so he makes the moves to join a crew of gas thieves. *Huachicolero*, then, becomes a petromelancholic *Bildungsroman*.

In the scenes that follow, Lalo undergoes a transformation that unfolds like a classic triptych. After he makes contact with Rulo about the prospects of a new job, we observe Lalo praying and then contemplating his own image in his fractured bedroom mirror. Despite his youth and childlike nature, he mimics a set of machismo behaviors, flexing his muscles in the mirror, modeling the behavior that will determine his arc of fire for the rest of the film. Indeed, like Iracema, Lalo plans to leave behind his childhood and innocence. On the night of the job, Lalo rides his bike to an isolated road, the site where Rulo and Mariano pick him up. They chastise him for bringing the bike and make him abandon it on the side of the road. This abandonment marks the second transformative scene for Lalo, as he upgrades to transportation dependent on combustion. Finally, as Rulo and Mariano show Lalo the basics of gas syphoning, they show him how to open the line, theoretically to begin extracting the fuel into the containers in the back of their truck. Instead, as Lalo stands directly over the pipeline, gasoline spews directly into his face and all over his body. It is clear that the toxic substance has shot into his mouth and nose as well, causing him to choke and hyperventilate. Though there is no flame in this scene, it is clear that the gasoline is burning his skin, nasal cavity and esophagus. Inside and out, he is physically overwhelmed with the toxicity of the fuel, further entangling his fate with the combustible. This cruel and dangerous hazing marks the final scene of Lalo's literal transformation into *huachicolero*, the one holding—and saturated in—*huachicol*, stolen gasoline.

With his new source of income, Lalo sets out to buy the phone for Ana. As he makes his way to the store, he passes by a group of protesters, rallying against the rise in fuel prices set by the government. Again, the toxic entanglement with petrol is not unique to Lalo. It has engulfed the entire community through the inability to access affordable fuel. Despite this pervading sense of doom, Lalo is successful in purchasing the phone, which he promptly gives to Ana. Though she is confused by the purchase, it does spark what she clearly views as a friendship between them. Despite the film's tense and precarious environment, subsequent scenes show Ana and Lalo spending some time together riding his bicycle and taking photos with the new phone. The return of Lalo's bike marks a fleeting return to innocence for him as he snaps a few selfies of the two of them on Ana's phone. The scenes are remarkable in their tenderness insofar as the characters appear to temporarily escape the toxicity plaguing their surroundings.

The levity and tenderness cannot last. It turns out that Ana is already (tentatively) dating Rulo, Lalo's partner in crime. Once Rulo discovers the photos of Lalo and Ana on her phone, he becomes enraged. Later that night, Rulo confronts Lalo as they begin to syphon gasoline from the pipeline. The move from betrayal to physical violence is conveyed through a variety of extreme close-up shots. Rulo pushes Lalo down, initiating a fight just as gasoline begins to flow from the line into the containers of their truck. Lalo gets up and throws a rock, striking Rulo in the head. As they continue to fight, Rulo throws another rock, missing Lalo and consequently hitting their syphoning hose, which begins to violently gush gasoline as they continue to fight, saturated in fuel. Unfortunately, as the gas continues to spew all around them, Lalo fights back, hitting Rulo in the head with a wrench, killing him. The leaking gasoline eventually catches fire, unleashing a geyser of flame from the tapped pipeline and igniting the entire landscape in feral fire. In his death, Rulo's body has been sacrificed to Third Fire, this time incinerated by its feral offspring.

The percussive tempo of the soundtrack speeds up as Lalo tries to figure out how to proceed while he screams at his dead friend and rival. The only choice is flight. Lalo speeds off in the truck, badly pummeled but somehow intact. Meanwhile, his *huachicol* boss Mariano is calling him, hoping for an update on the fuel theft, unaware that his cousin is now dead. As Lalo drives off, he gazes towards the fields along the highway that are now burning uncontrollably ignited by their fight. In another stunning use of natural light,

this fire burns uncontrollably, creating a glow against an impenetrable black backdrop. Lalo's unrequited love has unleashed Third Fire making it feral, igniting a death spiral in its wake. Notably, Lalo is in flight from other criminals, who appear to control the entire area. In this regard, Lalo offers us a third kind of fugitivity: the criminal fleeing not only from other criminals but also from an atmosphere predicated on criminality. By the time he returns home, news has spread about Rulo's death. Unfortunately, Lalo's mom has already been murdered in retribution. Increasingly desperate, his final stop is at don Gil's, his paternal figure, who used to sell him gasoline to haul around town. While the old man is sympathetic to Lalo and does offer him temporary refuge, Lalo's actions apparently leave him beyond help and repair. The next day, Gil packs the boy a go-bag and gives him a ride out of town. They stop in a remote area that appears to be part of a mining operation or construction zone. As Lalo walks off in the distance with his bag, his old friend executes him, *coup de grâce*, with a gunshot to the back of the head. Combustion, instantiated in this case by Gil's firearm, has taken its final victim in the film. The credits roll as Gil slowly walks back to his truck as the camera zooms out to show the scale of the industrial landscape.

Internationally, President López Obrador's policies on energy sovereignty have received a fair amount of criticism. [Narvaez Garcia \(2021\)](#) notes that some of this rhetoric about Mexico's renewed "fossil fuel fixation" is disingenuous and hypocritical, coming from sources in the United States that continue to champion fossil fuel extraction in many other contexts. At the same time, she also points out that any form of energy sovereignty depending on fossil fuels as its foundation is ultimately shortsighted. Mexico's known reserves are estimated to last less than ten years. On a deeper level, Narvaez Garcia asks: "How can AMLO [President López Obrador] be anti-colonial or anti-neoliberal while replicating the Western modes of unsustainable, capitalistic exploitation of resources by burning fossil fuels?" Her question cuts to the core of what Nito's drama exposes on the ground in its representation of Guanajuato's hinterland consumed by petromelancholia and its feral fires. If *huachicoleros* constitute a threat to national sovereignty, it is only through the exposure of corruption and toxic infrastructure, which also constitute threats to energy sovereignty. In other words, Narvaez Garcia rightly points out that a transition to alternate energy regimes is one requisite for long-term energy sovereignty. Curiously, López Obrador himself raised a similar concern when he criticized previous administrations' approaches to fighting drug cartels: "No se puede apagar el fuego con el fuego" (One cannot fight fire with fire) ([Arista 2021](#)). Extrapolating from this observation, I suggest that Third Fire will only beget future feral fires.

5. Conclusions: Spectral Arcs toward Future Flames

The emergence of novel fire regimes offers a sense of how combustion will shape the future of the planet. Like the Amazon, ecosystems historically unfamiliar with fire will continue to burn whereas regions like Galicia will continue to face a greater frequency of extreme fires, given the uncertain impacts of global warming and the economic emphasis on tree plantations. Though effectively rendered invisible, oil and gas production will continue to create flare-ups and feral fires that could possibly affect any of us entangled in the infrastructure of petromodernity. Depending on their extent, the consequences of these future fires potentially include mass displacement, extinction as well the erasure of entire ecosystems. Current trends, unfortunately, point to a totalizing fire on a planetary scale. Drawing on Schelling's notion of combustibility, Michael Marder reflects:

The tragedy of the twenty-first century is that we have taken it upon ourselves to actualise this potentiality and to burn everything that is combustible, including, at some level, ourselves ([Marder 2015](#), p. 94).

Marder hints at an intensifying form of contemporary pyrophilia that not only involves burning on a massive scale but also self-immolation as all life is entangled with dangerous feral fire. In this way, planetary burn is a totalizing process that is changing our understanding of what is combustible in the first place (Trevathan and Viestenz 2019). Take for example the Siberian town of Oymyakon, the coldest place permanently inhabited by humans. The community is also inside a novel fire regime currently developing throughout the Arctic Circle. Though the outside temperature was -60°C , a lingering fire in May 2021 was still smoldering underground, burning through peat moss deposits in the soil (Liesowska 2021). Due to a warmer, dryer climate, wildfires in the area are burning through the winter, creating a phenomenon provocatively called “zombie fires” (Schwartz 2021). Along with the anthropogenic wildfires examined in this essay, this trend sheds light on the future of wildfires. The potential for combustion increases while the possibility to control or extinguish future fires will diminish. Pyric frequency and intensity will also increase in seasons that will become more prolonged and erratic. When asked about the name given to zombie fires, Merritt Turetsky offers another take: “It’s the past coming back to haunt the future” (ibid.). Her comment underscores the significance of film’s spectral fires insofar as they trace the spectral arcs of future fire.

Given the extreme dangers inherent to planetary burn, pyrophobia is an understandable reaction to future fires; however, there is growing consensus among fire ecologists that fire suppression is a failing strategy. Alternative forms of pyrophilia that favor controlled burns and community resilience would ultimately help us live with fire. The three films considered here speak to the latter strategies predicated on pyrophilia. *Iracema*, *Amador* and *Lalo* refused to stay in their respective places as they were searching for a way out. But there was no magical cinematic escape valve to be found in any of the three cases. On the contrary, film as a medium discloses a world ready to burn. As their filmic worlds burn before our eyes, one might characterize these representations of fire regimes as pure spectacle, meant to entrance curious viewers who may have little contact with the pyric element. However, in my view, their fugitivity is emblematic, pointing to the need for creative strategies of re-organization and re-invention. Such strategies bring to mind how Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes (Martineau and Ritskes 2014) consider “fugitive indigeneity” as a way to consider decolonial struggles in Indigenous artistic expression. In their editorial for a special issue on “Indigenous Art, Aesthetics and Decolonial Struggle”, the authors write:

The freedom realized through flight and refusal is the freedom to imagine and create an elsewhere in the here; a present future beyond the imaginative and territorial bounds of colonialism. It is a performance of other worlds, an embodied practice of flight. The fugitive aesthetic is not an abdication of contention and struggle; it is a reorientation toward freedom in movement, against the limits of colonial knowing and sensing.

While these three dramatized arcs of fire sketch out some spectral contours of future fires, one must remember that fire itself is, after all, a fugitive element that only acquires meaning contextually. Upon exposing the extractive pyrotechnics working at the core of modernity and neocolonialism, *Iracema*, *O que arde* and *Huachicolero* also contest these regimes, reminding us that future fires do not need to burn this way.

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Notes

- ¹ In part, my essay is an exploration in line with *Elemental Ecocriticism*, a collected volume edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen & Lowell Duckert (Cohen and Duckert 2015). Though their work focuses on the literary and the philosophical, I share an interest in “seek[ing] an elemental ecocriticism that discovers in imaginative and critical texts a lush archive for thinking ecology anew” (Cohen and Duckert 2015, p. 4). Moreover, the present work on filmic pyrophilia also investigates how “elements connect or wander” (Cohen and Duckert 2015, p. 3). In this sense, my essay is also an instantiation of the ecocritical methodology I laid out in “Submergence: On Transatlantic Ecocriticism, Islands and Archipelagos” insofar as it “shed[s] light on often forgotten ecological histories and forge[s] new exploratory routes between them” (Trevathan 2017, p. 17).

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