

may have been a sheer coincidence; on another level, it is conceivable that his inner rage may have manifested itself physically. The blurring of these modes of perception is further complicated by the intense actuality of the images: Laxe and his crew waited more than two months for an actual wildfire to break out in the drought- and heat-ravaged hills of Galicia, then plunged into the inferno to capture dazzling and terrifying footage of ash and flame. The sequence is like a document of the apocalypse, complete with some found surreality: two goats wandering in the kitchen of an abandoned house; a blinded horse stumbling through the scorched landscape.

In the film's final scene, Amador walks nonchalantly down the street in the village, where he is accosted by a local, Inazio (Inazio Abrao), who had once defended him to the other villagers but now furiously attacks him, along with some of the other village men. Amador doesn't fight back, uncomplainingly taking the beating until Benedicta arrives. Her silence alone is enough to make the angry men feel ashamed of themselves, and they relent in their assault. As mother and son walk away, Benedicta tries to console the tormented Amador. "If they hurt others, it is because they are hurt too," she had once said of the giant eucalyptus trees. Given the inscrutable but obvious depths of his pain, one can't help but wonder how Amador is ever going to mend his broken pride and sad, scorched heart. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

With *Fire Will Come*, Oliver Laxe, director of the highly acclaimed *Sirāt*, brings us to his ancestral home of Galicia. Here, in this remote Spanish region, where the grandeur of nature is both beautiful and terrifying, Laxe unfolds a story of the uncontrollable forces of nature on human lives.

After serving two years in prison for arson, Amador (Amador Arias), returns to his mountainside village in north-west Spain, where he resumes a serene, if mostly solitary, existence tending cabbages and injured cows with his ageing mother, Benedicta (Benedicta Sánchez). Life resumes for the two following the rhythm of nature despite the suspicious glares of the unforgiving locals—until one night a devastating fire ignites that threatens to engulf the entire region. Stunningly captured on 16mm by DP Mauro Herce, this quietly explosive drama was the winner of the Un Certain Regard Jury Prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. *Co-presented by MUBI*.

TRT: 85

In person: Oliver Laxe

Fire Will Come by Azadeh Jafari

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After two films set in Morocco—*You Are All Captains* (2010) and the Cannes Critics Week winner *Mimosas* (2016)—French-born Spanish filmmaker Oliver Laxe returns to his parents’ homeland of Galicia for his third feature, *Fire Will Come*, which the director has called a “dry melodrama.” The narrative is certainly simple enough: a middle-aged man, Amador (Amador Arias), recently released from prison after serving two years for setting fire to the woods, returns home and resumes his solitary, monotonous life with his aged mother, Benedicta (Benedicta Sanchez), on the small farm that they share with a dog and three cows. “Dryness,” however, could also connote combustibility, and as the camera repeatedly surveys the strikingly beautiful yet menacing landscapes of the Galician heights—thickly forested with trees charged with the potential energy to burst into flame, whether from natural or manmade causes—Laxe draws an analogy between nature and human nature, both of which carry within them the power of destruction, and self-destruction.

The film opens with a breathtaking, nightmarishly nocturnal prologue, as the camera slowly moves through the trees, their leaves blowing in the wind to the sound of crickets. Suddenly, the tall eucalyptus trees start falling one by one as if being crushed by some unseen force; a few seconds later, the rumbling on the soundtrack and the dim light entering from frame left announces the appearance of a bulldozer, moving inexorably through on its destructive course. As the machines pass through the frame and their sound gradually fades away, DP Mauro Herce’s camera begins to move directly into the heart of darkness that remains on screen, closely observing the bark of an old tree as Vivaldi’s setting of “Nisi Dominus—Cum Dederit” begins to play, the combination of sound and image conveying amorphous but powerful feelings of sadness, fear, and grandeur. The sequence feels otherworldly, and is certainly more stylized than the rest of the film that follows. What Laxe achieves here,

however, is an elegant, metaphorical fusion of physical and mental landscapes. The forceful imagery could, perhaps, be read as a representation of a damaged person’s psyche, sombre, unreadable, and vulnerable to attack by mysterious forces beyond its control.

Following this brief glimpse into (what could be) his protagonist’s inner life, Laxe returns to the signature mode he developed through *You Are All Captains* and *Mimosas*: an exclusive use of non-professional actors, which ties in naturally to the restrained, surfacely unemotional tone he favours, and an avoidance of overt stylization in favour of capturing the unrehearsed, slow-paced rhythms of everyday life. Through the careful application of these methods, Laxe is able to extract his fictions through documentary verisimilitude, constructing impressively detailed human portraits without overt excursions into his characters’ psychological depths or even any explicit detail about their pasts.

Of course, the success of this technique is predicated upon the precise selection of his subjects, and Laxe does exceptionally well with his two principals here. Evincing an innate affection for both his performers and the characters they play, Laxe patiently captures those singularities of gesture, expression, and posture that can elevate the simple “being-ness” of non-professional actors into expressive performance. Arias, with his taciturn face and sad, piercing eyes, is ideal as Amador, a man who at first seems incapable of the most simple of human interactions, even with his patient mother. By contrast, Sanchez, with her wrinkled, affectionate face, hushed voice, and childlike posture, wordlessly conveys the impression of an old woman who is at harmony with the world around her and imbued with an unconditional love for her troubled son, turning her tiny body into a towering presence within the film.

As noted above, Laxe is sparing with details about what happened to Amador and Benedicta in the past or what spurred Amador to his act of arson, apart from some vague mention from other locals about the fact that mother and son had suffered through great hardship. What ultimately ignites a new, burning fury in Amador, however, begins as a glimmer of hope: an opportunity to bridge the wide gap he feels between himself and all around him. That hope comes in the form of a potential romance with Elena (Elena Fernandez), a kind veterinarian who rescues Amador’s sick cow and then drives both the heifer and its owner back to town in her pickup truck. After exchanging a few words with her mostly unresponsive passenger, Elena plays Leonard Cohen’s “Suzanne” on the car radio. The music seems to deeply affect Amador, perhaps awakening a long-dormant well of emotion—but, true to his allusive method, Laxe cuts away to the cow rumbling along in the truck’s flatbed, the sun-kissed mountains in the background as the soft song continues to play on the soundtrack.

Some days later, Amador takes out a pair of new shoes from a box, puts them on with a clean outfit, and drives in to the town, presumably to see Elena. He sits in a café, shyly looking at her as she talks cheerfully with her friends; seeing him, she comes over to say hello, but doesn’t sit at his table. As the camera holds on his cold, hardened face, Vivaldi’s “Nisi Dominus” starts to play again. A cut takes us back to Benedicta in her home, where she suddenly seems overwhelmed and worried; she goes out to the meadow to search for her dog, as if she has anticipated some approaching disaster. We then see Amador driving as fire trucks speed past him in the opposite direction, heading towards the blazing wildfire in the distance.

The meticulously prepared ambiguity of the wildfire sequence, our inability to ascertain whether Amador is guilty or not, emerges organically from the potential blurring of material and mental spaces in Laxe’s prologue. On a literal level, Amador’s presence near the blaze