



THE FRONT ROW

“FIRE OF WIND” IS A BOLD AND INSPIRED DÉBUT


The first feature by the Portuguese filmmaker Marta Mateus, featuring nonprofessional actors in natural settings, explores and expands modern traditions of political cinema.

By Richard Brody

October 30, 2025



A still from Marta Mateus's "Fire of Wind." Photograph courtesy Clarão Companhia

 Save this story

It's a great relief to watch "Fire of Wind," the first feature by the Portuguese director Marta Mateus, and to see more than simply pictures of actors acting. Most of what gets released is more or less the same, in form if not in quality. The script dominates, the performers act out the script in realistic fashion, bringing out their characters' psychology, and the directors record the acting—sometimes imaginatively, sometimes less so—in a way that showcases the dramatic text, as if the movie were a play that just happened to be liberated from the stage. "Fire of Wind" is altogether different: there's certainly a story that involves people behaving plausibly and there is a cast of performers on view throughout, but this cast mainly features residents of the movie's southern Portuguese locale, untrained as actors, and their performances don't aim at the refined individuation of motives and manner that defines most movie acting. They're reciting lines and enacting gestures rather than developing characters; their sheer physical presences are

dominant, and their roles are more archetypal than psychological. What’s more, the substance of their scenes is as much a matter of Mateus’s images as of the action that’s depicted.

The drama of “Fire of Wind” is based on documentary-like observation. The movie takes place entirely on a big rural estate, whose lands include a vineyard. Workers—women and men of all ages—clip bunches of grapes, deposit them in plastic tubs, and then transfer the contents of the tubs to a tractor’s mechanical scooper. When one of the workers, a young woman named Soraia, is criticized by a foreman, she storms off indignantly; deep among the vines, she snips two more bunches of grapes and cuts her hand. A bull gets loose—perhaps attracted by her blood, though it’s possible that the estate’s owner may have unleashed it on purpose—and severely wounds a worker. Soraia and the others clamber into trees to avoid the marauding beast, and, while perched high above ground in these ancient-seeming branches, they tell stories of their lives and times, sharing photos and other keepsakes and discussing lore and legend.

Except when the characters are actually working among the vines, the cast’s performances are largely immobile and their speech declamatory. Yet this stylized manner isn’t merely ornamental—it makes “Fire of Wind” an imaginative and deep-rooted work of political cinema. The participants recite more than bits of their experience; they give voice to the full sweep of modern Portuguese history as it affected them and their families, including the First World War, the Salazar dictatorship and the long colonial war of the sixties and seventies, and, in 1974, the Carnation Revolution and the coming of democracy. They start off by recounting the exploitative labor practices that have kept workers poor and desperate. But there’s a hinge moment early on, when an older woman, hearing the litany of complaints against landowners and foremen, reflects, “The more we talk about them, the more we forget ourselves.” This reflection is what inspires the characters’ personal reflections, their detailing of the mythopoetic wonder of their

proximity to the land, their intense solidarity with one another, and their fervent attachment to their individual and collective past.

ADVERTISEMENT

There is a sense of replay in the heightened and artificial diction with which Mateus has her cast bear witness, and this sense is enhanced by the painterly compositions that frame the speakers. “Fire of Wind” is a movie of images, and its attention to light and shadow, to the texture of faces and of tree bark, of foliage and terrain, is among the most careful and most daring that I’ve ever seen. (Mateus and Vítor Carvalho did the cinematography.) Although “Fire of Wind” is drastically different from other films in recent release, it nonetheless harks back to a venerable tradition in political filmmaking. Mateus’s approach to the declamation of text by nonprofessional actors finds its roots in movies by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, while her mythic, loamy exploration of the lives of the poor through history follows in the footsteps of the Portuguese director Pedro Costa. (To accompany “Fire of Wind,” which is opening at Anthology Film Archives, Mateus has programmed a series of related movies,

including ones by Costa, Straub and Huillet, and many other notables, such as Chantal Akerman, Manoel de Oliveira, and Robert Bresson.)

In “Fire of Wind,” Mateus finds her own way through these mighty influences, including by locating her own sense of physical drama amid the abstract vectors of political and economic power amid the beauty and the lure of nature. While the workers, in the trees, stay still, the bull’s looming, drifting presence gives frozen stillness an unambiguous motive and makes moments when people shift and even leap from branch to branch terrifyingly suspenseful. Eventually the locals get active again at ground level: the workers go on strike, paramilitaries wander the grounds with rifles in hand, and one young soldier, wounded in war, bears arms alone. This action is no mere set of plot mechanisms but involves a layering of time, in which personal memories, public events, and shared experiences come to life in the place where they happened. The movie, at its most vigorous and most menacing, is also illuminated with mystery and wonder.

What makes “Fire of Wind” superior to the kind of topicality that passes for political filmmaking in the art-house mainstream—whether here (such as “Eddington”) or internationally (for instance, recent films by Radu Jude)—is its metapolitical essence. For Mateus, as for filmmakers in her personal pantheon, conflicts at hand stem inextricably from local and national history and also from oceanic depths of experience, too easily dismissed as folklore, from which individual identity and group identification emerge. In “Fire of Wind” as in the films in Mateus’s Anthology series, politics and aesthetics are inseparable. These filmmakers strive for a comprehensive vision, in which fine-grained observation of social specifics fuses with echoes and overtones of overarching powers at work in crises of the moment.

This aesthetic is inherently political—a mode devised in opposition not only to regimes of injustice and exploitation but also to the banality of mainstream political discourse and to the reductive rhetoric of commercial cinema, which, in the guise of treating politics, exploits it and hollows it out. This unity of style and

substance, of form and idea, is an artistic strength but also an artistic and political danger. Sometimes even the most sophisticated and original of cinematic methods, and the bold ideas that go with them, risk becoming as routine and as comfortable as the praise that greets them.

With this sense of permanent opposition, a particular art-house aesthetic risks becoming a kind of political credo and turning critical judgment circular: as defenders of a shared political viewpoint endorse a style, enthusiasts for a style assume its politics, and the filmmakers themselves get caught in a self-confirming circuit of content and form. (This has been true even for some of the filmmakers in Mateus’s selections.) The result may be as much a form of fan service as are the blandishments of blockbusters. Great political filmmakers, by confronting not only the complacencies of popular political filmmaking but the doctrinal comfort zone of the art-house audience, revitalize their own art. That’s why the challenging artistry of “Fire of Wind”—an audacious first feature that is also Mateus’s personal reckoning with the cinematic tradition that inspires her—has me impatient for what she’ll do next. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- In the weeks before John Wayne Gacy’s scheduled execution, he was far from reconciled to his fate.
- What HBO’s “Chernobyl” got right, and what it got terribly wrong.
- Why does the Bible end that way?
- A new era of strength competitions is testing the limits of the human body.
- How an unemployed blogger confirmed that Syria had used chemical weapons.
- An essay by Toni Morrison: “The Work You Do, the Person You Are.”

Sign up for our daily newsletter to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.



Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of “Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”

More: [Movie Reviews](#) [Portugal](#) [Portuguese](#)

The Goings On Newsletter

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week in N.Y.C, and beyond

By signing up, you agree to our [user agreement](#) (including [class action waiver and arbitration provisions](#)), and acknowledge our [privacy policy](#).

READ MORE

HUMOR

Daily Cartoon: Thursday, October 2nd

A drawing that riffs on the latest news and happenings.

By Elisabeth McNair

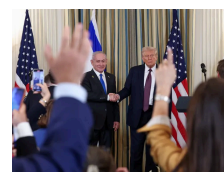


THE LEDE

Is Donald Trump's Sweeping Gaza Peace Plan Really Viable?

Many doubts prevail, but the deal is "political gold" for Benjamin Netanyahu either way.

By Robin Wright



HUMOR

Daily Cartoon: Wednesday, October 1st

A drawing that riffs on the latest news and happenings.

By Tyson Cole



BLITT'S KVETCHBOOK

Trump Has Seen the Enemy

And it is U.S.

By Barry Blitt



THE LEDE

Why We Know So Little About Medicines During Pregnancy

Trump's attacks on Tylenol come after decades in which many women were excluded from medical studies, which has created uncertainty about which drugs are safe.

By Rachel Pearson



THE POLITICAL SCENE PODCAST

Will the Supreme Court Hand Trump Another Slate of Victories?

The docket for the Court’s upcoming term includes major disputes that could reshape election law and redefine the limits of Presidential power.

Tyler Foggatt

in conversation

BOOK CURRENTS

Exploring the Intricacies of Memory with Ada Limón

The former U.S. Poet Laureate, who has a new book out this week, recommends five texts that interrogate how we narrate the past.



LETTER FROM TRUMP’S WASHINGTON

Donald Trump’s Shutdown Power Play

The President learned in 2019 how to undercut Congress in a funding fight, and he’s been making the same move ever since.

By Susan B. Glasser



THE LEDE

Why Democrats Shut Down the Government

Having the fight is the point. Winning it is a different matter.

By Jon Allsop



THE FRONT ROW

“The Smashing Machine” Pulls Its Punches

Despite Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson’s taut performance, Benny Safdie’s bio-pic about the mixed-martial-arts fighter Mark Kerr proves distanced and passionless.

By Richard Brody



HUMOR

Klutz Activity Books for Adults

This book comes with some quick-dry clay and instructions on how to make a shitty little ashtray that you can show your friends and say, “Yeah, I really love pottery—I’m thinking of starting a

business.”

By Katie Barsotti

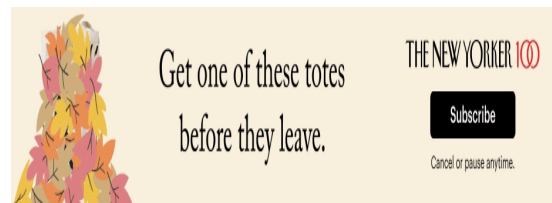


HUMOR

Daily Cartoon: Tuesday, September 30th

A drawing that riffs on the latest news and happenings.

By Chris Gural



Get one of these totes before they leave.

THE NEW YORKER 100

Subscribe

Cancel or pause anytime.

 Your Privacy Choices