

Film Review

- *El agente topo (The mole agent)*, directed by Maite Alberdi. Chile, 2020¹

The mole agent is a Chilean documentary about an elderly “spy” who is enlisted by a private detective to report possible abuse in a nursing home. Through the lens of empathy, director Maite Alberdi introduces the audience to an isolated but dynamic world of colourful characters neglected by society. The director has been experimenting with this format since her 2004 debut shorts. Later, her documentary *La once* (2014) focused on a group of Chilean women’s tea time gatherings after fifty years of friendship. *The mole agent* is similarly warm and charming, and skilfully switches between light-hearted humour and pangs of heartbreak while capturing the intimate and candid moments between its characters.

In *The mole agent*, Sergio, a grieving widower, serves as the mole for a private detective hired by a client whose mother lives in a nursing home in Chile. Sergio needs to go “undercover” to reveal suspected crimes of elder abuse. As he examines the conditions in the institution, Sergio keeps a camera hidden in a pen – footage used in the film as well – and reports to the detective through WhatsApp. From among a slew of applicants, Alberdi persuaded the detective to choose Sergio, despite his unfamiliarity with the technology essential for communication and evidence collection.

The filmmaker’s approach is reminiscent of the “matrixial gaze,” a concept coined by feminist psychoanalyst, philosopher, and visual artist Bracha Ettinger. With this concept, Ettinger refers to a trans-subjective gaze that obscures the distance between “Self” and “Other,” allowing for witnessing through compassion instead of objectification. Initially, Sergio only interacts with the residents to find his “target,” but when he gets to know them better and starts to form friendships, he loses interest in the investigation. From that moment onwards, he does not objectify them anymore, but stands as a witness to their emotional hardships. In other words, he begins to look upon his *compañeras* with compassion. He even tries to use his connection with the detective to help one of the residents. Sergio asks his employer to search for the files of Mrs. Rubira, an elderly woman with onset dementia, with the aim to obtain photos of her children so that she can remember their faces. Finally, Sergio

looks into the camera at the hard-boiled detective – and, indirectly, at the audience – as he pronounces his final judgment on the “mission.” While he began his journey as a spy to escape his grief and find a sense of fulfilment, he ends it with some important lessons about the appreciation of family and friends.

As in much of Alberdi’s work, women are central in *The mole agent*. Not only are most of the residents female, but Sergio also mainly creates friendships with the senior women in the nursing home. In one scene Mrs. Rubira reveals to him: “Before I got sick, I did everything for my children, but as soon as I got sick, the old woman was of no use to them and they got rid of me.” In another scene, showing an anniversary celebration, several female residents gleefully take turns to dance with Sergio, with one disclosing that she has not danced with anyone for decades. The director uses these scenes to compel the audience to take a critical look at Chilean and, ultimately, universal patriarchy, i.e. the system in which women are abandoned and neglected as soon as they are not able to fulfil their “female duties” anymore and are considered undesirable.

The film’s core argument is straightforward. Sergio reveals that the purported elderly abuse is a foil and that the real crime is the neglect of the seniors by their family and society. Sergio laments that, during the months living in the nursing home, the residents’ children have not visited them once. The film is commendable for highlighting the alienation of these elderly from their families and the social causes that lie behind this reality. Notably, it is suggested that the dictatorial era’s policies, which privatized the healthcare system, have ruined the fabric of Chilean society and degraded the solidarities between the rich and the poor, the sick and the healthy, and the young and the old. In one of the most powerful scenes of the film, Sergio comforts Mrs. Rubira, who cannot remember if her family has ever visited her. He helps her by telling her the truth: they have not. Mrs. Rubira’s breakdown into tears marks a break from the happy-go-lucky tone of the detective storyline and steers into loneliness and rejection the residents experience on a day-to-day basis.

Here, the main shortcoming of *The mole agent* comes to the surface as well. In the bending of the detective thriller and investigative documentary genres, the film seems to have sacrificed some of its journalistic integrity in order to maintain the feeling of a 1950s noir detective story. The fact that Alberdi pushes the private detective to pick Sergio as the mole, because he shows his emotions during the job interview, raises doubt about how much staging occurred at the hands of the director. In addition, Sergio’s voice-overs are all later edited into the film. This makes one wonder, for example, if the close-up shots of Sergio, thoughtfully writing down notes for his daily observations, are genuine or manufactured.

Despite these concerns, *The mole agent* offers an innovative and introspective observation of varied forms of loneliness, and their impact on the elderly, both physically and psychologically. The main contributions of the film are its compassionate and intimate approach to the rejection of the aging population,

especially women, in Chilean society, and its subtle and respectful way of storytelling that reveals the psychological toll and social stigma these people face. Although these issues are often not explicitly addressed, Sergio, as a compassionate eye into the residents' lives, brings them to the surface while ensuring empathy. All in all, the film is a great effort that both highlights various social problems in Chile and ignites universal human feelings and values.

Yuxiu (Isabel) Wu, University of California, Irvine
yuxiuw@uci.edu

Notes

- 1 This 90-minute documentary can be seen on Hulu, PBS, Netflix, and Amazon in the United States, as well as Netflix Martinique, Netflix Latin America, Youtube, and GooglePlay worldwide.