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DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Age, Care, and Identity in Maite Alberdi's Documentaries

Camilo Santos

Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, US
Email: cgonzalezsantos@tulane.edu

This essay reviews the following films:

El agente topo. Directed by Maite Alberdi. Produced by Micromundo Producciones, Motto Pictures, and Sutor Kolonko. Chile, 2020, 84 min. Distributed by Micromundo Producciones, Mandra Films, and Volya Films.

La memoria infinita. Directed by Maite Alberdi. Produced by Micromundo Producciones. Chile, 2023, 85 min. Distributed by Micromundo Producciones, Mandra Films, and Volya Films.

Los niños. Directed by Maite Alberdi. Produced by Micromundo Producciones, Mandra Films, and Volya Films. Chile, 2016, 82 min. Distributed by Micromundo Producciones, Mandra Films, and Volya Films.

Body and politics

In South American documentary cinema, the themes of historical memory, dictatorship, political violence, and collective traumas are preeminent. This focus arises naturally in a politically charged reality. Patricio Guzmán's three-part masterpiece, *The Battle of Chile* (*La batalla de Chile*, 1975–79), exemplifies how deeply political reality shapes the genre. Paradoxically, this relevance was achieved in a context where documentaries are often underrated. As Jacqueline Mouesca noted in *El documental chileno* (2005), Chilean documentarians have had to combat the perception that the genre is the "little brother" of fiction films.

Maite Alberdi's work challenges both assumptions in original ways. First, Alberdi elevates the status of Chilean documentary cinema, enhancing its global reach and placing it on par with fictional films. Her narratives explore the ambiguity between fiction and reality, as well as between private and public life. Alberdi achieves this by focusing on hidden stories and employing a poetic style that incorporates fiction into its discursivity about social reality. Second, Alberdi maintains a strong political commitment, offering a unique perspective on identity and body politics. She addresses themes such as age, self-perception, care, and empowerment within the broader context of political issues. For instance, she discusses the private life of Augusto Góngora, one of her subjects, and its relationship to Chilean history: "The issue is what happens with the psychic truth, versus the historical truth . . . . There are certain events in the history of his country, certain

painful events that he never forgets, that his body never forgets. The pain persists; it is often difficult to move forward with that pain."[1]

Alberdi's films avoid a naive postmodern apoliticism that seeks refuge in minimal or hidden stories. Instead, they contribute to public discourse by illuminating the potent connections between grand historical narratives and private lives. Alberdi traces public and political conflict within the individual body's domain, resulting in a collection of nuanced and compassionate portrayals of everyday individuals. These portrayals do not shy away from political tensions but rather address them with subtlety.

Biopolitics, the ghettoization of minorities, discrimination, and the relationship between power and subjectivity are central to Alberdi's poetic approach. Since her debut short, *The Trapeze Artists* (*Los trapecistas*, 2005), she has experimented with this perspective. For example, in *Teatime* (*La once*, 2014), Alberdi examines the fifty-year friendship of a group of women, presenting their vicissitudes as a rare "aged friendship" that offers a powerful reflection on aging and sociability. This focus is particularly notable in an era of age denial: Alberdi's films consistently highlight aging and "age minorities."

Building on this foundation, I analyze three of her documentaries to argue that *The Grown-Ups*, *The Mole Agent*, and *The Eternal Memory* are intrinsically connected by a central theme: the relationship between age and identity. These films delve into autonomy, caregiving, privacy, and otherness to explore this relationship. They illustrate how people grapple with age and aging as fundamental aspects of the human experience through acts of care, which are crucial for sociability. Alberdi states: "The only way to evolve as a society is for us to care for someone at some point in our lives."[2] If age as an element of identity impacts personal needs, political realities, and interpersonal relationships, care creates acceptance and bonds among age groups. Alberdi elaborates: "I think that I am interested in accepting the normality of a body's change and old age, seeing beauty in fragility and exploring finiteness and death normally. It is the passage of time. No one has taught us to grow old and die, and I am interested in observing it, normalizing it. Perhaps it will bring comfort to people struggling with that fear."[3]

Alberdi's approach to individual realities delves into anxieties explored by authors like Simon Biggs, who identifies the discomfort of aging as a major issue in modern individuality and defines it as the "mature imagination." Biggs argues that "notions of ageing have been radically affected by postmodern conceptions of identity. A heady combination of consumer culture and a need to be constantly recycling a sense of who one is suggests that it may be possible to choose not to grow old."[4]

Age resists any unitary understanding and remains open to varying valorizations in different contexts. In Fredric Jameson's terms, age functions as an "empty signifier," floating in the sea of biological deterioration as its symbolic outcome. Jameson explains: "Symbols and language become detached from the historical, social, or ideological contexts that once anchored them."[5] This detachment also characterizes how our bodies exist over time. Culture masks biological decay with age concepts that lack fixed meanings. Thus, age is the symbolic outcome of biological decline, instrumentalized within cultural narratives. Simone de Beauvoir notes: "Age changes our relationship with time: as the years go by, our future shortens, while our past grows heavier. The aged man may be defined as an individual with a long existence behind him, and before him a very limited

[1] Maite Alberdi, *The Eternal Memory*, press release (Santiago de Chile), 2023, 3.

[2] "Maite Alberdi: 'La única forma de evolucionar como sociedad es que todos cuidemos a alguien,'" CNN Chile, January 27, 2023, www.cnnchile.com/programas-completos/maite-alberdi-la-unica-forma-evolucionar-sociedad-es-que-cuidemos-alguien_20230127/.

[3] Alberdi, press release, 4.

[4] Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Open University Press, 1999), 94.

[5] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991); Jacqueline Mouesca, *El documental chileno* (LOM Ediciones, 2005), 26.

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expectation of life. The consequences of these changes influence one another and bring into being a situation that varies according to the individual's earlier history but whose constant factors may be isolated."[6]

Alberdi explores these "constant factors" as specific age narratives, focusing on bodily realities at the "extremes" of age that endure the influences Beauvoir describes. Her subjects in the three movies are too old or too young. These experiences are often hidden from mainstream perception, which is why Alberdi's work transcends a simple acknowledgment of otherness.

One: A question of age

Maite Alberdi adds new dimensions to the documentary genre by constructing her stories at the intersection of a director's narrative and the protagonist's own voice. As a result, the act of "narrating the other" and "being narrated" significantly influence the language of the films. This is an aesthetic and philosophical decision that impacts individual empowerment. A first problem is that it is evident that the recording process is allowed because of the age of the film's subjects: Given their age, they are not decision-makers; their age is something to be discredited. They are considered "too old" or "too young" and live in a community composed of older people, as seen in *The Agent Mole*, or are adults treated like children, as in *The Grown-Ups*, or are older adults perceived as incapable, as in *The Eternal Memory*. In this sense, the first thing all three movies reveal is how privacy is a privilege that belongs to individuals whose age is "validated" by specific social expectations. When age is confused with illness or inability, it redefines individuals' rights. Alberdi makes use of this to her advantage in a positive way: The objectification of age that permeates the privacy of the subject is solved by a director who opens her point of view and expands it with the subject's values.

Certainly, this doesn't nullify a series of questions about the ethics behind Alberdi's films: What is the value of privacy in these three films? What is the relationship of age, health, care, and power? How is ageism—discrimination against people based on their age—carried out? Does individual empowerment diminish through the process of aging? What conditions are necessary to ensure autonomy and respect? When one person assumes the role of caregiver of another, does the relationship become so asymmetrical that the cared-for individuals become unempowered? What happens to private life as a human right when aging and its impact affect subjectivity?

The impact of age and aging on a cultural level and in the process of individuation is evidenced by different means in *The Grown-Ups*, *The Mole Agent*, and *The Eternal Memory*. All three movies show how aging is a symbolic regime that affects people's psyches from birth. As Mike Featherstone theorizes: "The aging body is never just a body subjected to the imperatives of cellular and organic decline, for as it moves through life it is continuously being inscribed and reinscribed with cultural meanings."[7]

Alberdi reveals the dynamics of that "process of inscription" through the experience of adults treated as kids, older people losing features that used to "make" them adults, or those whose only problem is requiring some type of care. The fact that power is entangled with the symbols of aging is demonstrated by how the attributes of adulthood are hard to gain and harder still to keep. Alberdi reveals how the ambiguities around age become a battlefield, an open space in which meaning is assigned, either to resist power or to submit to it and guarantee sociability. But of course, age is not a mere abstract concept; it is, as Kathleen Woodward states, both a social discourse and a psychic reality that affects

[6] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (W. W. Norton, 1996), 16.

[7] Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick, *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (Routledge, 1995), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203397442.

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traumatic processes, primary relationships, and fantasies. Considering that tangible reality, old age often functions as a "sinister object" bound symbolically to death and as a transitional object in a moment of adulthood when ghosts of aging and decrepitude are a common fear.[8] The antidote to those fears seems to be, from Alberdi's perspective, the practice of empathy: "In order to evolve as a society we all have to take care of someone at some point in our lives. There are some who have cared too much, and others too little. Caring does not guarantee gentleness and delicacy; here I saw gentleness, love and delicacy."[9]

Two: Aging before the camera

The Grown-Ups (2016) was screened as part of the 2017 Miami International Film Festival, where it won the Zeno Mountain Award. The story follows the day-to-day routine at a Chilean school for people with Down syndrome. The students who are part of the institution struggle with having greater autonomy over their lives. Despite being in their forties, they attend school. They work in the kitchen as part of the catering department as if they were kids. And in fact, most of the time, they are treated as if they were kids. Alberdi poses a question that sparks her storytelling: "What is happening with adults with intellectual disabilities and what real opportunities are they given?"[10]

Many of the students attending Coocende dream about living as adults. They are mature enough to want to be treated as independent adults, but they are emotionally and financially ill-equipped to pursue their autonomy. They are ignored and failed by a system that considers them disabled individuals. It is hard to avoid the thought that they are stuck in a tragic state of limbo: They are neither children nor adults. The movie shows the problem of age as a perception game in a complex symbolic regime. The contradictions of what it means to be an adult appear in Alberdi's approach, always filtered by caring humor. But it is not merely humorous language; it is a contradictory—and at times, incoherent—reality about how institutions deal with individuals, a fact that ends up being both poignant and ironic.

The students, for instance, attend a class that is ironically named "Conscious Adults," in which they are supposed to "learn" what they would need to know to live a fully independent life. Yet they are consistently treated like kids or patronized in the best of cases. *The Grown-Ups* examines a population that the mainstream mindset infantilizes. People who live with Down syndrome are looked upon as kids, even when they are involved in long-term relationships, handle work equipment, and are allowed to drink alcohol, among other things that belong to the "adult universe." In this scenario, the staff at Coocende and even the families of "the kids" remain blind to these individuals' need to be considered adults. Alberdi's camera depicts this as a constant but blurred adult presence. The *adult* staff are omnipresent but fail to be part of the narrative, as they fail to consolidate a fair perspective about "the kids," as they call them.

So, not only does the film aim the camera at its subjects, allowing them to be the protagonists of their own stories; it also shows how the adults' role is invisible, present only as voices dictating the protagonists' lives. This reveals a powerful insight into the idea of what it means to live with Down syndrome, how it results in a contradictory regime

[8] Kathleen Woodward, "The Aging Body and Cultural Meanings," in *Cultural Studies of Ageing* (Routledge, 2006), and *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Indiana University Press, 1991).

[9] Alberdi, press release, 5.

[10] Maite Alberdi, "La incapacidad de comprender la adultez de las personas con síndrome de down: El cuarto largometraje de Maite Alberdi," *LatAm Cinema*, www.latamcinema.com/entrevistas/la-incapacidad-de-comprender-la-adultez-de-las-personas-con-sindrome-de-down-el-cuarto-largometraje-de-maite-alberdi/.

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between autonomy and care, and it demonstrates how age is, in many ways, a matter of ideological construction.

This is evident in Ana, one of the main characters in the story, when she confronts her mother, who is responsible for hindering her relationship with Andrés, her boyfriend. This confrontation reflects the inner struggles faced by these students when they encounter imposed limitations, ostensibly for their own well-being. Moreover, they encounter significant challenges, as the law prohibits their union. With warmth, Andrés suggests that if people could witness their everyday life together, they might broaden their perspectives. Ana adds: "What terrifies me the most is the brevity and complexity of life" (00:38:00). When the passing of a family member of one of the students at Coocende initiates a heartfelt conversation about grief, the narrative further explores the emotional depths of these individuals.

On a different note, Ricardo understands that the modest income from his catering job at Coocende is more symbolic than substantial for achieving financial independence in adulthood. Nevertheless, Ricardo finds fulfillment in another role where he assists elderly residents in a retirement home. He willingly takes on the responsibilities of a caregiver, an opportunity that seldom comes his way. His experiences shed light on the intricate dynamics of empowerment and caregiving that define adulthood. The presence of caring and nursing as a principal element in understanding identity in this retirement home anticipates Alberdi's next documentary.

Three: Filming and caring

Maite Alberdi filmed the documentary *The Mole Agent* in 2019, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic. This story, set within an institutional context of a nursing home, was screened at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival in the World Cinema Documentary Competition. It was selected as Chile's entry for Best International Feature Film at the Ninety-Third Academy Awards and nominated for Best Documentary Feature.

This semifictional piece tells the story of Sergio, an elderly man hired to go undercover in a nursing home in El Monte, Chile, to investigate allegations of resident mistreatment. Posing as a newcomer, Sergio gathers evidence of the alleged abuses while sharing his time with several female residents.

Despite the seemingly uniform setting of the nursing home, Sergio soon uncovers the varied experiences of its residents, most notably Berta and Marta. Berta, a longtime resident, develops strong feelings for Sergio and even expresses a desire to marry him. Marta, who suffers from dementia, frequently approaches strangers and asks them to take her home. Using sophisticated spy equipment, Sergio uncovers various details about the residents but no evidence of mistreatment. For instance, Marta's habit of taking others' belongings is more indicative of her condition than of any form of neglect. After completing his investigation, Sergio concludes that Sonia—the individual he was tasked with monitoring — generally receives proper care, save for one instance in which her medication was unintentionally misplaced. Sergio reports to his employer that there is no evidence of misconduct among the staff.

However, Sergio's observations extend beyond the institution's walls. He discovers that while the residents have desires, dreams, and an appreciation for life, they are often plagued by loneliness and longing for their families. The real issue, Sergio notes, is not mistreatment in the nursing home but neglect from the outside world. This shift in focus challenges the viewer's expectations, casting the filmmaking process itself into question. Director Alberdi remarks:

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> My detective film is really an excuse to look at a subject that, without that excuse, we might never see. If we invite viewers to watch a documentary about how lonely old people feel, we are probably not going to see it. But here it's the other way around. My "excuse," the film that I wanted to make at the beginning, ends up hooking you in, and holding the viewer's hand in order to confront issues that we don't want to talk about, that we don't want to look at. We don't talk about how we would like to experience getting older. As children we talk a lot about how we want to grow up. As a young person we think about the adult we want to be. But we never get asked about the old person we want to be.[11]

Rather than exposing violence or mistreatment within the facility, *The Mole Agent* emphasizes the indifference from the outside world that elderly individuals face. Alberdi's observational approach allows Sergio to develop his own narrative, simultaneously exploring the institution's inner workings and denouncing broader societal issues. Sergio's movements and decisions offer the viewer a glimpse both into the institution's inner life and into the private lives of its residents. His dual role as a spy and a subject of professional cinematography creates a *mise en abyme* effect, exposing the artificial nature of the documentary. Through Sergio's perspective, the viewer becomes aware of the director's presence and the film's constructed narrative.

The documentary provides profound insights into aging, challenging societal norms around the invisibility of older adults. Alberdi's work echoes scholars like Elizabeth Barry: "The standard observation about age—no less true for its ubiquity—is that our youth-oriented society does not want to look. Ageing is a taboo; old people are invisible."[12] By portraying the lives of elderly individuals, Alberdi dismantles cultural taboos surrounding aging and expands the visibility and ontology of older adults.

The film also examines questions of autonomy, power, and privacy through the lens of age. In *The Mole Agent,* the transition from adulthood to old age highlights the loss of privilege and autonomy that many experience. Early scenes, such as the recruitment process at the detective agency, underscore how older men are often patronized, creating "funny" but unsettling moments that reveal underlying societal biases. Alberdi acknowledges the ethical dilemmas involved in filming:

> Of course, there is a big ethical dilemma. They didn't know the specific story of *The Mole Agent*. But the idea that we presented to them, I think, is the subject of the film. We told them that it was going to be a documentary about the elderly, and that we wanted to film the good and the bad, all day long. Of course, they didn't know that I was filming a spy, and I feel that I went in without being transparent about the story. That was an ethical dilemma for me. But at the same time, when they saw the film, they felt that the film represented them. We showed what everyday life there was like.[13]

Sergio's initial mission is to interact with the nursing home residents to identify his target. However, the narrative shifts as Sergio adopts the role of a narrator, forming friendships with some of the women and losing focus on his primary objective of spying. Notably, Sergio resists adopting an objectifying perspective—a criticism that could be

[11] Camila Osorio, "Director Maite Alberdi: 'My Detective Film Is Really an Excuse to Look at a Subject We Might Never See,'" *El País*, March 17, 2021, https://english.elpais.com/usa/2021-03-17/director-maite-alberdi-my-detective-film-is-really-an-excuse-to-look-at-a-subject-we-might-never-see.html.

[12] Elizabeth Barry, "The Ageing Body," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 132.

[13] Osorio, "Director Maite Alberdi."

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leveled at both the detective agency and the film itself. Instead, in his role as a witness, he faces emotional challenges. While outsiders may expect a simplistic narrative of abuse and neglect, Sergio discerns that the facility's dynamics are far more complex.

Sergio's perspective, which advocates for openness and sociability, questions the asymmetries that necessitate espionage, treating the institution as though it were foreign territory. His views on the residents and their institutional conditions are reminiscent of continuity theory, developed by Robert Atchley in 1989. This theory suggests that maintaining consistency in social roles and relationships is crucial for psychological well-being as individuals age, even amid isolation. Alberdi's lens effectively underscores the alienation these elderly individuals experience from their families, shedding light on the societal forces behind their institutionalization. On a broader level, the film reveals how privatization policies in Chile's health-care system have eroded social solidarity, impacting relationships between the sick and healthy, and the young and old.

In the interviews, viewers frequently hear the residents say, "I perceive myself as young, and I feel young." However, this sentiment reflects less of an authentic feeling of empowerment and more of an idealization of youth tied to a distorted self-perception. The issue lies in a culture that assigns utility, power, and value to youth. A recurring motif in the film is the challenge of dealing with technology, which often leads to deeper reflections by older men, such as when one laments, "My children are always unconcerned about me" (4:05).

The Agent Mole begins with a close-up of a *Scarface* poster, introducing masculinity as a central theme. Sergio infiltrates a predominantly female environment and asserts control over his life with statements like "I'm the one who sets my own rules, my own field" (4:17)—a level of autonomy that the women in the nursing home can only aspire to. However, Sergio's employer, a younger man, subtly questions his cognitive abilities, repeatedly urging him to "concentrate" (9:18). This scene reveals the subtle patronization of older men, exposing broader societal attitudes toward aging. The film occasionally breaks the fourth wall, with Sergio revealing the director's presence and the performative nature of the narrative (10:25). Infiltrating the nursing home, Sergio also becomes a spy of the filmmaking process itself. Alberdi uses this narrative to reflect and expose the real issue: the neglect of elderly individuals and their potential to challenge their marginalization. As Amelia DeFalco notes in *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative* (2010), aging is a category of difference that shapes contemporary understandings of identity and alterity. Cultural texts construct multiple narratives of aging that sometimes conflict with prevailing social theories. Alberdi is attuned to these sociopsychological issues, as well as to the political realities.

The film highlights Chile's flawed pension system and the societal consequences of increased life expectancy without corresponding opportunities for older individuals to remain integrated into society. Old age, Alberdi suggests, continues to be associated with receding opportunities and discrimination. In this political moment, as new possibilities emerge for marginalized groups, including the elderly, the film challenges viewers to reconsider how they envision their own aging. The opening sequence, which depicts a group of older men in their diversity, complexities, personal abilities, and struggles, raises a poignant question: How do we want to grow old? Fundamentally, it is a question about the future.

Four: Age, memory and the art of questioning

The complexities of aging and its societal implications are central themes in *The Eternal Memory*. The film, which debuted at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, intertwines personal and collective remembrance through the story of Augusto Góngora, a journalist and

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television host who covered the Chilean political reality in the context of the Chilean dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s, and Paulina Urrutia, an actress and Chile's former minister of culture and the arts. Having been together for twenty-five years, their relationship faces a profound transformation after Augusto's diagnosis of Alzheimer's eight years before.

Augusto, once a celebrated television presenter, now grapples with the loss of memory—a poignant irony given his career centered on documenting collective memory. Paulina, his wife and caregiver, remains by his side, tirelessly finding new ways to preserve his identity and maintain their bond. Her dedication highlights the emotional and practical challenges of caregiving within the context of memory loss and aging.

This documentary, perhaps the most intimate of Maite Alberdi's works, explores the nuanced relationship between caregiver and recipient. Alberdi, discussing the production process, noted: "We were a small team of three people, me the director of photography and the sound engineer. We purposefully wanted to be a small crew. We needed to be a small team because we had to respect their privacy and not be intrusive."[14]

However, the question of privacy remains critical. While the couple gave their consent, the act of filming inherently reduces privacy. This reification is intrinsic to the storytelling process. Through Alberdi's lens and the protagonist's own filming, Augusto and Paulina face the dual challenge of navigating Alzheimer's while exposing their private lives. Their interactions, filled with mutual validation, love, and humor, reflect the resilience of their bond. Alberdi underscores this dynamic in her observation of Paulina's caregiving: "I saw how she made it part of her work and her life. He wasn't just sitting at home. He was accompanying her at work, and she let him participate. She was not ashamed; she even enjoyed having him there. I had never seen a person with dementia so integrated into a caregiver's life."[15]

Despite their loving relationship, Augusto identifies himself as "un viejo" (an old man). This perception of age is echoed by Paulina, who responds, "Lo sé, yo soy vieja también" (I know, I am old too). *The Eternal Memory* illustrates how caregiving reshapes the dynamics of a relationship as aging and illness alter established roles. By examining the couple's interactions and private moments, the film provides insight into how these changes can destabilize relationships while also reaffirming the symbolic bonds that define them.

The film navigates the ethical dilemmas surrounding privacy through the lens of consent. Augusto states, "I have no problem showing my fragility; I've made so many documentaries, why wouldn't I want to be filmed in this situation?" (01:04). While Augusto's clear stance reflects his autonomy, questions about his capacity to provide informed consent amid cognitive decline may linger for viewers. This tension highlights the complexity of documenting vulnerable individuals: balancing their agency with the ethical considerations of representation.

Director Maite Alberdi addresses this challenge, framing her decision as an effort to promote inclusion and care: "I would like us to think about how to integrate people who are usually isolated." Aging studies frequently emphasize the profound impact of isolation on older adults. In this context, the film positions caregiving as central to both physical and emotional well-being, challenging assumptions about aging as synonymous with separation from the community. Instead, it argues against the idea of a "voluntary and happy disengagement."

Elaine Cumming and William Henry's disengagement theory, introduced in 1961, suggested that withdrawing from societal roles could benefit older adults and reduce intergenerational conflict. This framework promoted the normalization of institutionalized care and implied that withdrawal was a natural part of aging. However, Paulina and

[14] Alberdi, press release, 3.

[15] Osorio, "Director Maite Alberdi."

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Augusto's story directly refutes this idea. Their relationship illustrates the value of connection and integration, demonstrating that withdrawal does not necessarily serve the interests of either individuals or society.

By challenging these assumptions, *The Eternal Memory* reinforces the importance of caregiving as a relational act that acknowledges the dignity and agency of aging individuals. Paulina and Augusto's bond exemplifies how caregiving can counter the isolating forces often associated with aging, presenting an alternative narrative rooted in mutual respect and shared humanity.

As in the first two films, *The Eternal Memory* delves into the intricate dynamics between caregivers and those receiving care, arguing against the inevitability of creating isolated "age ghettos." The process of caregiving and nursing is inherently complex, requiring a balance between assuming responsibility for others and respecting their rights to remain empowered individuals. In contemporary society, empowerment is deeply tied to ideological principles, psychological frameworks, and the strong emphasis on cognitive capacity. This theme is evident in *The Grown-Ups* and *The Agent Mole*, where maturity and awareness are central, and in *The Eternal Memory*, where memory becomes essential to maintaining individual identity. Alberdi articulates this perspective: "The concept of memory is broad. I think this film shows what remains when everything is forgotten, the waste. The identity of someone who is never lost, who until the end has a tone that characterizes him, who never forgets certain painful historical events, and who loves even when it seems he does not remember. The body remembers; it is a film about what remains."[16]

From Alberdi's perspective, memory is critical to preserving individual identity and a connection to history. However, as aging often diminishes memory as a cognitive function, the very notion of identity becomes uncertain. Throughout her documentaries, Alberdi emphasizes the power of questioning as a tool to combat prejudice, construct solidarity, and foster empowerment. This approach drives her narrative and thematic exploration, often interrogating the ethical implications of representation itself.

For Alberdi, storytelling cannot exist without critically examining her own methods. Yet as each film concludes, it becomes evident that questioning does not always yield clear answers. Instead, it serves as a method for navigating complex realities, offering insight without simplistic resolutions.

Questioning, much like communication and empathy, can play a critical role in addressing the challenges posed by aging, Down syndrome, or Alzheimer's. When age functions as a factor within systems that categorize individuals and assign roles based on a complex power structure, asking questions serves as an antidote to dismantle the "otherness" perpetuated by this societal framework. As the gerontologist Margaret Gullette describes, age operates as a "nice new evil,"[17] influencing how individuals perform their identity and reinforcing psychological structures that fulfill societal expectations about the aging process. In this context, *The Eternal Memory* examines how the loss of memory can strip away a person's life, reducing them to a state of profound vulnerability. This loss, coupled with the erosion of autonomy, emerges as one of the most significant impacts of aging.

In *The Eternal Memory*, questioning becomes second nature—not only as a narrative device employed by Alberdi but also as a philosophy embodied by Augusto Góngora. As a former journalist, Augusto's lifelong practice of inquiry endures, even as his condition progresses. He persistently asks questions about his identity, Paulina's identity, their location, and their circumstances. His illness fosters candid and existential reflections, underscoring the significance of questioning as a means of sustaining hope and

[16] Alberdi, press release, 5.

[17] Margaret Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

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empowerment. For Augusto, whether driven by innocence or insight, questions—ranging from the basic to the profound—become a vital anchor in navigating his altered reality.

In this framework, a striking contradiction emerges in Alberdi's films: While they delve deeply into the private lives of their subjects, they simultaneously question how age and illness diminish rights and reshape identities, responsibilities, and capacities. Alberdi's perspective, which seeks to analyze privacy and empathize with identity, inadvertently intrudes upon the very privacy it aims to explore and the identity it strives to connect with. This paradox underscores a profound response to the intertwined themes of care and identity. The films suggest that individuals within institutions or dealing with illnesses possess privacy as a fundamental right, yet caregiving often reduces privacy and identity to their most minimal forms.

Sergio's use of "spy camera glasses" in *The Mole Agent* highlights how identity and social roles have become part of a fluid dynamic, one in which privacy is no longer about exclusivity. Instead, the act of being seen and understood affirms individuality. Conversely, Augusto Góngora in *The Eternal Memory* laments the opposite experience of not being seen before the camera as a journalist, declaring, "Ya no soy" (I am no longer). This poignant statement, laden with meaning from a man whose career defined memory and storytelling, shows his fear of losing the essence of the Augusto Góngora once familiar to television audiences. His caregiver, Paulina, works to bridge this loss, empathizing with his self-perception as she states, "Yo también estoy vieja" (I am old too).

Augusto's vulnerability becomes evident when he introduces himself with childlike simplicity: "I am Augusto Góngora, and who are you?" Paulina responds maternally, striving to maintain his calm. Her caregiving evolves as she accepts that some aspects of Augusto's former self are irretrievable. Each day requires the active practice of identity, with memories retrieved from the recesses of a fading recollection. Paulina supports Augusto's efforts by saying, "This way, you can remember who Augusto Góngora was."

Filming these experiences, which ultimately form part of a documentary, raises significant ethical questions. Mental illness often impairs decision-making, and the subjects of these films challenge the boundaries of ethical representation. This may explain why Paulina reminds Augusto, "You are a journalist." This affirmation becomes necessary as illness redefines identity. Acknowledging another's identity enables them to remain subjects of external scrutiny, even amidst vulnerability.

Alberdi observes, "You learn to live with the pain in your body, and from there, it is commemorated, like a remembrance of Nietzsche, who said: 'What you want to remain in your memory is engraved in fire: only what does not stop hurting remains in your memory.' It can't stop hurting, so we can keep reminiscing." While pain occasionally surfaces in these three films, it is rarely emphasized. Psychological pain, in particular, is downplayed, avoiding any depiction that could contribute to the victimization or pathologization of the subjects.

One of Alberdi's subtle narrative strategies is to eschew a bleak portrayal of aging, institutionalization, and illness. Speaking about Augusto's condition, she notes, "I think that what happens to Augusto is a determinant of how history coexists with the psyche." The institutions depicted in her films, much like Paulina as a caregiver, function to alleviate and contextualize these challenges within a broader historical framework. A uniquely powerful response to these tragedies is the practice of care and memory. Simone de Beauvoir articulates this connection: "My past is the in-itself that I am in so far as I have been outstripped; in order to possess it, I must bind it to existence by a project; if this project consists of knowing it, then I must make it present to myself by means of bringing it back to my memory. There is a kind of magic in recollection, a magic that one feels at every age."[18]

[18] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (Putnam's Sons, 1972), 361.

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In Alberdi's work, memory not only creates a bridge to the past but also serves as a means of sustaining individual identity and dignity, even as illness and aging reshape the contours of the self. The camera, as a tool for creating memory, demonstrates its profound influence. For Augusto, whose memories are preserved in recorded tapes, filming provides a mechanism for forgetting while safeguarding the process of recollection. Alberdi observes: "Augusto has Alzheimer's, and there are certain events in the history of his country, certain painful events that he never forgets, that his body never forgets; the pain persists, making it difficult to move forward."[19]

This insight emphasizes the dual nature of memory: it can heal but also burden. Alberdi underscores our capacity to forget while simultaneously illustrating how memory serves as a means to "resurrect the dead." Philippe Ariès notes that cultural imaginaries surrounding death in Western societies are both fluid and evolving. In *The Agent Mole*, the older men express a perceived distance from mortality, often declaring, "Yo me veo joven." This statement reflects a disconnection between older adults and the narratives younger generations construct about aging, as well as a reluctance to fully engage with their own realities.

Within this framework, masculinity continues to wield influence. *The Agent Mole* exemplifies this through its exclusive recruitment of men, implying that those capable of action and decision-making are empowered by masculinity. This perspective reveals the enduring prominence of men in societal narratives, even as old age becomes increasingly feminized beyond the age of sixty. Initially, the film adopts a parodic tone, presenting itself as a humorous spy movie centered on a detective's mission to infiltrate an institution. Sergio remarks on a newspaper advertisement he has read and responded to: "Varones, parece que decía sí" (Men, it seems like they said yes), although this interpretation is imprecise. The advertisement simply used the term *jubilado* (retired), with the gendered nuance arising from the masculine grammatical form of the word. This linguistic detail highlights the societal construct of retirement as a gendered role.

These documentaries explore age as a fluid and often problematic concept. They suggest that aging unsettles identity, prompting a reconsideration of privacy as a fundamental right. Caregiving emerges as a vital element of identity, deeply intertwined with the experiences of aging.

Conclusions

Maite Alberdi's three documentaries, *The Grown-Ups*, *The Agent Mole*, and *The Eternal Memory*, offer a compelling exploration of age, care, and empowerment in the context of Chilean society. The films challenge conventional perceptions of documentary filmmaking, elevating the genre to a level comparable to fiction, as evidenced by the successful reception of her latest work in Chile. Through her nuanced narrative style, Alberdi uncovers hidden stories and blurs the lines between fiction and reality, addressing complex themes such as aging, self-perception, caregiving, and identity. Alberdi's documentaries are not merely accounts of overlooked lives; they illuminate the intricate relationship between grand historical narratives and individual experiences. By weaving personal stories with broader political contexts, she reveals how societal and political conflicts are etched into individual bodies and lives.

Central to Alberdi's work is the concept of age as a fluid and evolving construct. Her narratives highlight how age influences autonomy, caregiving needs, privacy, and perceptions of otherness. At the same time, care emerges in her films as a vital force for fostering connections across age groups and facilitating acceptance of the aging process.

[19] Alberdi, press release, 3.

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Alberdi's films challenge societal anxieties surrounding aging and offer a fresh perspective on embracing the inevitability of bodily changes and the passage of time.

These documentaries also underscore the complex interplay between narrating others and being narrated. Alberdi's subjects are active participants in shaping their narratives, influencing the language and discourse of the films. Privacy, as portrayed in her work, emerges as a privilege often afforded only to those whose age conforms to societal norms. Alberdi reveals how ageism frequently undermines the privacy of older adults, reflecting broader societal biases. However, she differentiates between aging as a physical process and age as a symbolic construct that shapes relationships and societal expectations. Her documentaries highlight the profound impact of age on identity and the power dynamics interwoven with the aging process. Alberdi captures the struggles of adults infantilized by society, elderly individuals grappling with identity loss, and those reliant on care as they navigate societal challenges. In her films, age serves as a framework for assigning meaning to power, sociability, and vulnerability while simultaneously exposing fears of aging and decrepitude.

Maite Alberdi's documentaries challenge preconceptions about aging, caregiving, and empowerment. Her work not only advances the documentary genre but also enriches societal discourse on age-related issues. Alberdi's films reveal the complexities of understanding age and aging, highlighting how these processes necessitate proactive care and nursing as essential social practices. She emphasizes that recognizing age as a critical factor is fundamental to dismantling prejudice and addressing systemic injustices.

As Stephen Katz asserts, adopting an age-centered perspective involves "advocating stronger ties to the humanities, endorsing reflexive methodologies, historicizing ideological attributes of old age, promoting radical political engagement, and re-signifying the aging process as heterogeneous and indeterminate."[20] Alberdi's work is aligned with this vision, advocating for age to become part of the broader agenda for social justice, solidarity, and inclusivity.

Camilo Santos is a PhD candidate in Spanish and Portuguese at Tulane University, specializing in the politics of aging and its representation in Latin American literature. His research explores the intersection of literary portrayals, depopulation, and social policies in Argentina, focusing on shifts from the welfare state to contemporary political movements. He holds a master of arts in Spanish and Portuguese (2022) from Tulane University, a specialization in aging studies from Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero (2018), and degrees in literary theory and Argentine literature, as well as education, from the University of Buenos Aires. Since 2014, he has taught and conducted workshops on age-based prejudice and its literary representations. His academic interests include cultural studies, post-gerontological and queer studies, decolonial theory, and the impact of aging on identity and demographics.

[20] Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (University of Virginia Press, 1996), 11.

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