



The Main Feature

Season 42 – Issue 11 – Screening 23 February 2023

The Mole Agent (El agente topo)

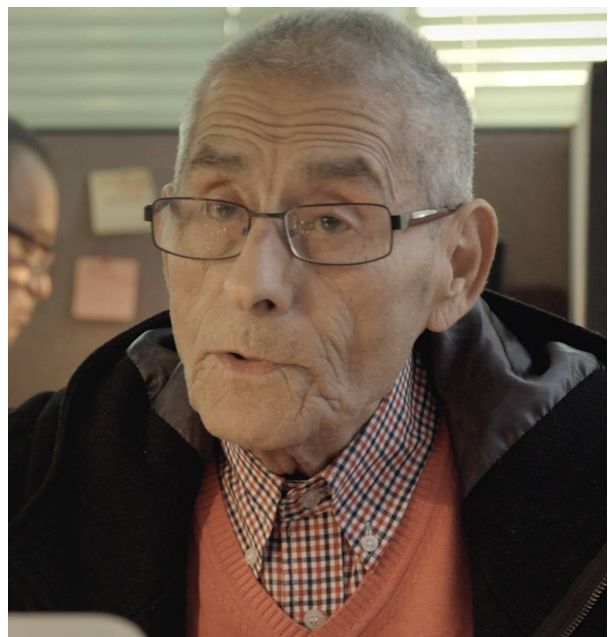
Chile 2020

84 mins. Certificate 12

Director	Maite Alberdi
Screenplay	Maite Alberdi
Cinematography	Pablo Valdés
Art Direction	Catalina Devia
Editor	Carolina Siraqyan

Cast

Sergio Chamy	Self/The Mole Agent
Rómulo Aitken	Self/Private Investigator
Marta Olivares	Self/Care Home Resident
Berta Ureta	Self/Care Home Resident
Zoila Gonzalez	Self/Care Home Resident
Petronila Abarca	Self/Care Home Resident
Rubira Olivares	Self/Care Home Resident



The Mole Agent is an unusual but warm-hearted documentary about late-life experience, described by the Daily Telegraph as a “cross between a film noir and Johnny English.”

It starts with an intriguing newspaper ad placed by a Private Investigator in Santiago. “Elderly male needed, retired, between 80 and 90 years old. Independent, discreet, and competent with technology.”

The successful applicant is Sergio, a softly-spoken and dapper octogenarian, recently widowed and seeking some purpose in life. The PI is acting for an (unseen) woman worried that her ageing mother is being mis-treated at a care home (The “San Francisco”). The plan is for Sergio to sign up as a trial resident for 3 months, undertake clandestine surveillance and report back. As it happens (and not by coincidence) a film crew are there already ostensibly shooting a routine documentary about care home life.

Sergio takes his responsibilities very seriously. He finds his “target” and regularly checks on her well-being, but sees little amiss. He grows tired of spying, falling out with his boss as he proves inept at managing the special kit he has been given. Instead, he gradually befriends the other residents (nearly all women), charming them with his comforting conversation. The

Club website: www.wncc.org.uk

documentary becomes a record of human connection alternating between humour and heartbreak.

The director (also credited as writer) noted that this was not a typical home. Usually in Chile elderly men are sent away while women remain with the children or grandchildren they raised. The San Francisco's clientele is largely made up of women who never married. There are some sad scenes, especially around one resident who constantly expects her (long dead) mother to come to collect her.

This is (I think) the second film from Chile shown by the club, following "No" in 2014. It was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature (losing to "My Octopus Teacher"), and was selected as the Chilean entry for Best International Feature Film making the shortlist of fifteen films.



Reactions were largely positive, criticism homing in on the somewhat contrived set-up (and nearly all the footage was shot by the faux-documentary crew, not least as Sergio manages to break the video-glasses he is supposed to use).

Peter Bradshaw in the Guardian was particularly scathing, noting "I couldn't make friends with this film because of its pointless and twee contrivance, which undermined its genuine ideas. Not fakery exactly, but an exasperating lack of candour

as to how this whole thing has been set up. Sergio himself has real gentleness and is a lovely character, and there is some amiable comedy about how he is starting to enjoy himself in the home. But he is marooned in a tricky, gimmicky film"

The New York Times was more positive, noting that "the film's people are moving, and the payoff is compassionate, humane and worth heeding." Empire weighed in with "a moving exploration of the realities of growing old" and the Telegraph commented "a delight...at the end I was left with the feeling that I'd been conned, a little bit, but it was so sweet and sad and funny that I forgave them."

The film is particularly poignant as it was shot before COVID lockdowns left care home residents even more isolated from family and friends. The world's population is ageing. The WHO reported in 2018 that (for the first time ever) the number of people on the planet older than 64 surpassed the number of children aged under 5. In 1960, there were just over 20,000 centenarians (people aged over 100) around the globe – by 2020 this had grown to 573,000. The Mole Agent may indeed be a "a tricky, gimmicky film" but it is a thoughtful and timely one.

Eugene Smith



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Eugene Smith picks five more films about the elderly and growing old

The Trip to Bountiful (1985/Peter Masterson/108 mins/PG)

Geraldine Page gives a vibrant and unpredictable performance as Carrie Watts, a widow who escapes the cramped Houston apartment awkwardly shared with her son and daughter-in-law to make a final visit to her childhood home. Page won the Best Actress Oscar (after 7 unsuccessful nominations).



Wild Strawberries (1957/Ingmar Bergman/91 mins/Not Rated)



Widowed, cold fish 78-year-old Dr. Isak Borg (Victor Sjöström) has largely retreated from any human contact. He drives from his home in Stockholm to Lund to accept an honorary degree, travelling with his daughter-in-law Marianne (Ingrid Thulin). Stops and encounters along the way make him reminisce about various parts of his life and missed opportunities. One of Stanley Kubrick's favourite films. Shown by the Club in 1984.

Amour (2012/Michael Hanneke/127 mins/12A)

The story of a cultured elderly couple, Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Emanuelle Riva). Anne, a piano teacher, suffers a stroke. Georges promises not to put her in hospital or in a home. The film traces both the deterioration of Anne's health and the evolving relationship between George and Anne as he cares for her. "The film is difficult – sometimes harrowing – to watch. But it is a masterly piece of film-making" – from Michael Hipkins' notes when shown by the Club in 2013.



On Golden Pond (1981/Mark Rydell/109 mins/PG)



Norman Thayer, a curmudgeonly retired professor (Henry Fonda) and his wife Ethel (Katharine Hepburn) are staying at their summer cottage. His estranged daughter (Jane Fonda) visits en route to her wedding, along with her boyfriend's son. A rapprochement ensues. Sentimental but moving. The 2nd highest grossing film at the US box office that year (after "Raiders of the Lost Ark") with both leads winning acting Oscars.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011/John Madden/124 mins/PG-13)

British retirees (including Judi Dench, Bill Nighy, Maggie Smith and Ronald Pickup) move to India for a variety of reasons, planning to stay in a newly restored hotel. Less luxurious than advertised, the Marigold slowly exerts its charm. Dubbed "Love, Geriatrically" on release, it's a multi-layered film with an exceptional cast. Topped the Club's ratings in the 2013 Season!



Honourable Mentions

Cocoon (1985), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Up* (2009), *The Straight Story* (1999), *The Last Bus* (2021), *My Afternoons with Margueritte* (2010), *Umberto D* (1952), *Tokyo Story* (1953), *Ikiru* (1952), *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), *Radiator* (2014).

Comments and reactions to: **The Band Wagon**

No of reaction slips received = 23

Average score = 6.91

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	~	3	~	5	6	7	1	1

Entertaining!

Creaking a bit but still not too bad

Not a fan of musicals generally – but an amiable inventive film

Brilliant dance numbers

Typical of its time but some good songs and an excellent quality print

A couple of good songs, and Dancing in the Dark is a remarkable sequence

Interesting to notice all the smoking

Very nice film!

Not at all good. I hope the second half improves

'Entertaining' ... frothy and classical

Enjoyed 2nd half. Preferred 42nd Street

Great entertainment – a classic

Position	Film	Average score
1	Belfast	7.96
2	The Duke	7.75
3	Seven Chances	7.61
4	Mandela and de Klerk	7.47
5	After Love	7.36
6	The Band Wagon	6.91
7	Flee	6.79
8	Day for Night	6.57
9	Son of Saul	6.00
10	Guardians of the Galaxy	5.53
11	L'Eclisse	3.00

Forthcoming attraction: 9 March 2023 – **The Perfect Candidate**



A determined young Saudi doctor's surprise run for office in the local city elections sweeps up her family and community as they struggle to accept their town's first female candidate. IMDb

The film, I think, has demythologising effect, too. It's a lesson to audiences in the west that behind the abayas and the veils, the women of the Middle East are modern citizens of the world. Guardian

The Perfect Candidate doesn't burn the veil, but it does lift it briefly, allowing us a glimpse of Saudi womanhood that is idiosyncratic and individual — in short, as we very rarely see it. Rolling Stone