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FILM SYMPOSIUM

Cinematic accompaniment and care in later life in Latin America

Jorge NÚÑEZ, *Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam,*
and *Kaleidos, University of Cuenca*

Comment on *Perpetual Person (Persona Perpetua)*. 2020. (104 min.) Javier Bellido Valdivia, director. Peru.

Persona Perpetua is a thoughtful and complex documentary about care in later life in Latin America. With a rich ensemble of filmmaking techniques, Javier Bellido Valdivia accompanies his grandmother, Amadea, to inhabit the enfeebling threshold where mental lucidity slowly gives in to elderly dementia. Bellido Valdivia's long black-and-white shots confide to the viewer how his family grapples with the disorienting and confusing experience of Alzheimer's disease. The film compassionately exposes a baroque configuration of Catholic devotion in which the religiousness of praying becomes entangled with the everydayness of eating, dressing, and walking.¹ The result is a powerful anthropological exploration of mental health and faith that reimagine the camera in terms of ethnographic accompaniment.

The opening scene places the filmmaker sitting next to Amadea in the dark. She is having nightmares and is screaming in her sleep. Her dreaming-self beseeches help

from humans and nonhumans, including her daughters, her late mother, and her God. This visual composition troubles prevailing views of consent, as Amadea's moments of lucidity are far between. The entire scene is hard to watch, but it is neither lurid nor voyeuristic. The camera provides accompaniment to a suffering person and supplies a reinterpretation of mental health challenges that draws attention to the power of images to preserve life in a medium hereafter.² Throughout the film the viewer is confronted with recurrent bad dreams that end with closeup photography of a mask-like, aging face vanishing under water. A disappearing Amadea needs the camera to stay present with and for her family. This style of filmmaking is what I call cinematic accompaniment, which is part of a multimodal turn in anthropology seeking to produce knowledge with more-than-textual forms of ethnographic scholarship.³

Veering away from his grandmother's distressing dreamworld, Bellido Valdivia then deploys the camera against the loss of memory associated with Alzheimer's

A compressed version of the film is available with this article in the online edition of the journal. To see or download the original, full resolution version of the film, please visit https://drive.google.com/file/d/1o3g_jZr_ExaUUSK-JySeV7F18HaSVdmB/view?usp=sharing

1. I use the term baroque in the sense Bolívar Echeverría (1998) conceptualized it as a specific form of modernity in Latin America.

2. I learned to think this way about the power of images in reading André Bazin (1968) and Alan Klima (2019).

3. The notion of cinematic accompaniment is at the heart of multimodal ethnographic platforms such as EthnoData and the Prison Observatory 593 (Núñez and Suarez 2023).



disease. Through photo-film, the viewer learns of the grandmother's past. As child or as youthful woman, Amadea appears as a person from another time. The moving camera guides the viewer across photographs populated with people, places, and religious statues. Photo-film sequences are situated next to extreme closeup shots exploring household objects such as a long-case clock that announces the passing of time and topics. At ninety-five, Amadea and her younger self reencounter each other in a perpetuity granted by the film.

In analyzing everyday long-term elder caregiving practices in northern Thailand, Felicity Aulino (2016) examines habituated ways of providing for others. Aulino focuses on what she calls "rituals of care" to highlight the emotional and physical work involved in maintaining other bodies. *Persona Perpetua* resonates with Aulino's anthropology of care. The film gives a great amount of time and space to documenting the embodiment of habituated actions of caregiving. According to Aulino, the academic literature tends to overemphasize moral aspects of care or overcontextualize socioeconomic inequalities of caregiving, relegating to the background daily routines enacting the preservation of life. Bellido Valdivia joins Aulino in pushing back against this tendency by documenting everyday rituals through which people become caregivers. Focusing on Thai rituals of care, Aulino argues, opens ontological pivots and epistemic possibilities. It moves the center of gravity in care studies from the analysis of physiological dispositions and moral imperatives towards the exploration of phenomenological realities. In *Persona Perpetua* this becomes legible in the relationship between Amadea and her caregivers.

The mother-daughter relationship portrayed in *Persona Perpetua* is a familiar story in Latin America. One could argue that the film shows Catholic-inflicted moral understandings of familial care: a daughter must take care of her mother because she is expected to do so. It is her religious duty. However, the film complicates the gendering of care by showing the collective labor put behind everyday rituals of care. For instance, in preparing Amadea to sleep, a thirty-something-year-old male nurse named Anghelo makes a bed in the scene background. He accommodates pillows against a wall and secures a bedrail. In the meantime, standing closer to the camera, a fifty-something caregiver named Catita talks to her boss, Mayela, Amadea's daughter. Both women are probably the same age, yet the camera engages differently despite a clear intimacy with both. Dur-

ing the entire painting-like shot, no one looks at the camera. In fact, everyone behaves as a professional actor in a movie set. They all know what to do and how to do it. There is a lot going on. Anghelo is reducing the risk of a fall. Catita is grinding sleeping pills. Mayela is getting Amadea ready. What the camera is capturing is a ritual performance of care. This bedtime routine looks flawless in the film because it is a well-rehearsed interaction, a habituated activity through which care is enacted daily.

Amadea's Alzheimer's agitates her mind and makes her have mood swings. Filmed with extreme closeness, *Persona Perpetua* makes the viewer witness her behavioral changes as though one is experiencing the rhythms and intensities of care work in the midst of mental health challenges. There are two moments in the film when one feels that Amadea's mind becomes stabilized and tranquil, and her caregiver, along with the viewer, is relaxed: when Amadea is praying and when she is being dressed up. Bellido Valdivia's cinematic accompaniment does a great job giving equal consideration to praying the rosary and putting on makeup. It flattens ontological differences between godly and worldly things and, by way of doing so, illuminates a hidden continuum between spiritual and mundane rituals of care. The praying scene is as an artwork. Mayela reads from a well-worn book a set of invocations. Amadea responds on cue and her face lights up every time she speaks. The camera framing captures a joyful atmosphere growing between the two. A somewhat similar calmness is felt when the film descends into the ordinary. Amadea is sitting on her wheelchair while her daughter Mayela works on her face as a makeup artist. Amadea follows Mayela's instructions and asks casual questions. Her room has turned into a beauty salon where mother and daughter are enjoying themselves away from the suffering of dementia.

These moments of serenity are exceptional and situated. What Bellido Valdivia's cinematic accompaniment illuminates is that his household's rituals of care are also entangled with otherworldly forces, which are not disembodied from everyday instances of peace and happiness. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Bellido Valdivia's film is the impossibility of reducing his grandmother's faith in God to a religious belief or a culturally contingent devotion. The cinematic connection between praying the rosary and putting on makeup captures a counter-secular moment that cannot be dismissed with dated anthropological theories of religion. Whether Bellido Valdivia meant to show this connection between the spiritual and the mundane is besides the point. It is



the camera accompanying Amadea what captured such correspondence.

If there is one shortcoming of the film, it is that *Persona Perpetua* struggles to find a cinematic language to problematize the inequalities of caregiving in Latin America. Although the camera follows interactions of Amadea and her care workers, the film turns to more traditional filmmaking techniques to portray care practices conducted by paid workers. For instance, one scene shows Catita watching a Catholic mass on TV with a half-asleep Amadea next to her. The filmography is still beautiful and insightful, yet it lacks the ritual complexity of the footage in which Amadea interacts with Mayela, Catita, and Anghelo together. It seems to me that Bellido Valdivia's camera is less attuned to capturing ambivalences and ambiguities transpiring from paid care work. There is a distance between the camera and Catita that is nonexistent between the camera and Amadea, or the camera and Mayela. Moreover, when dealing with care relationships divided by class and ethnicity, the film falls back into Latin American realism. Having said this, Bellido Valdivia's documentary is honest and raw, yet it remains difficult to pick up on the nuances of Latin American socioeconomic extractivism and racialized hierarchies as this is never problematized.

In closing my commentary, I would like to add that *Persona Perpetua* is an important contribution to both Latin American cinema and visual anthropology. On the one hand, it takes the long-standing tradition of Latin American family documentaries in a different direction, less concerned with identity politics and more attentive to ontological forms of inquiry. On the other hand, the

film resonates with current multimodal interventions trying to push the boundaries of ethnographic film and anthropological research. What is at stake in *Persona Perpetua* is how an accompanying ethnographic camera can produce cinematic languages that shed light into the gap between normative understandings of care and the experience of providing it. Javier Bellido Valdivia's work successfully shows that care and faith are particular ways of being with older adults and providing for their needs. It also shows that rituals of care in later life involving mental health generate context-specific ways of becoming a caregiver, and they can include producing an accompanying ethnographic film.

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