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## FICTION AND REALITY

The power of cinema is a fascinating topic for cinephiles. Several films in this year's selection play with the idea of cinema as something seductive but also potentially dangerous. Our Chilean documentary title, *The Mole Agent*, and our Iranian fiction feature, *Careless Crime*, are two clear examples.

The films are very different at first sight. *The Mole Agent* is a non-fiction work, directed by Maite Alberdi, which follows Sergio, an 80-year-old who is hired by a private detective to infiltrate a Chilean home for the elderly, where unsavoury things are said to be happening. *Careless Crime* is Shahram Mokri's fictional work that takes as its starting point a 1978 fire at a cinema in Abadan, Iran, that killed 420 people. The perpetrators wanted to protest what they saw as the hegemony of Western values taking root (the act was part of what is now referred to as the Iranian Revolution, which replaced the Shah with Ayatollah Khomeini as the head of an Islamic Republic). Both films, however, use the language of cinema to add depth and perspective to their stories and morph from one genre into something different, as if to suggest that the complexity of their subjects can't be contained in a single genre.

Even though it's billed as a documentary, the first act of *The Mole Agent* is shot like a film noir, with its light-through-the-blinds atmosphere of secrecy and things that can't bear the light of day. This gives the film something a little artificial. The choice helps to give everything a defined style and some humour. Add to that the fact that the protagonist has no idea what to do with any of his 21st-century spy gadgets and the old man becomes an immediately endearing Luddite who doesn't seem ready at all for his vaguely described mission: impossible.

But *The Mole Agent* isn't a spy parody or even the story of what Sergio uncovers in terms of terrible wrongdoings. (**SPOILERS AHEAD** for this film in this and the following paragraph.) Instead, as the view widens and Sergio slowly integrates and ingratiates himself with the people living there, the film transforms into a bittersweet meditation on what it means to be at the end of your life and find yourself parked in a place full of people in a similar situation, often more out of necessity than any desire to live there.

It contains the kind of naked honesty rarely seen in fiction and might even be impossible to really capture as fiction without being accused of exaggerating or cheap manipulation. But because *The Mole Agent* is, in the end, a documentary, something close to the truth slowly finds a way to triumph over the artificiality of its more fictional beginnings. By the end, there's not a remnant to be

found of Alberdi's film-noir trappings and there's a sense that the almost gimmick-like set-up served mainly one purpose, beyond injecting some style and comedy, and that is to make the second half feel all the more real. What remains is a very lucid sense of what it means to spend the last days of your life surrounded by people who are also on their way out. A grim perspective only leavened by the fact that at least you're surrounded by people who understand your predicament.

In *Careless Crime*, the narrative complexity is even more complex. There's the story of the four men who wanted to set a cinema alight in the late 1970s, the story of people seemingly preparing to commit a similar act in the present and also the stories surrounding the films playing in the cinemas, which seem to reference each other.

The number of layers can be dazzling and indeed it's hard to write a straightforward description of how all the different elements are connected. But *Careless Crime* isn't a straightforward story. Mokri prefers a kind of highway stack-interchange approach to narrative, where roads all seem to converge in a single area and they then pass under, on top of and past each other. The dividing line between past and present turns out to be porous and fiction and reality start to mirror each other.

Is it possible to not get lost? The answer is yes and no. Yes if you're approaching *Careless Crime* as any classical narrative; it moves too fast and has too many unexplained elements. No if you consider it a movie about people's and especially a country's state of mind. Carelessness is an almost obsessive leitmotiv and people don't seem to consider others around them enough. Fictional stories are seducing the spectators in the cinemas but other types of fiction have caused the terrorists to be driven to their heinous acts.

How can you talk about reality when reality seems worse, more complex and more difficult to understand than any film? Mokri takes the language and rules of fiction to illustrate that our reality is infinitely intricate, that the present contains so much of the past that it feels like history keeps repeating itself with just minor variations and that any figment of reality that perhaps feels like it belongs in a fictional story has probably just been simplified in order to fit into a reasonable running time. And Mokri somehow manages to suggest all this in only 139 minutes. **BOYD VAN HOEIJ**