



1976

Director: **Manuela Martelli**

Country: **Chile**

Date: **2022**

A review by *Maria Delgado* for *Sight and Sound* magazine:

Set three years into Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, Manuela Martelli's unnerving debut feature presents a blistering portrait of the ways in which the regime realised its culture of intimidation and fear. The opening scene – emblematic of Martelli's approach, which is characterised by understatement rather than explanation – introduces the film's protagonist, Carmen, a wealthy middle-aged (grand)mother overseeing renovations to her family's summer beach home. As she stands in a hardware shop, the commotion of one of the Chilean junta's enforced 'disappearances' provides an ominous soundtrack to the camera's insistent focus on the salmon-pink paint being whisked up. The paint drips from a stick onto Carmen's blue court shoe – a symbol of the bloodshed of the regime. Once she's left the shop, a shoe lying by the door of her car remains as a trace of what just took place in the now empty street.

This visually suggestive sequence sets the scene for a film of impressive economy. Snippets of passing conversation point to Carmen's frustrated aspirations and past bouts of mental illness. In conversations with Elías (Nicolás Sepúlveda), the wounded political activist who is being sheltered by local priest Father Sánchez (Hugo Medina), and to whom she clandestinely attends, Carmen reveals that she was unable to study medicine because her father wanted her to marry rather than pursue a career – she has become a doctor's wife. Watching home movies, Carmen refers to a holiday where she “went crazy” and “took off”. The film charts Carmen's growing sense of agency as she aids Elías – and her gradual awakening to the horrors of the dictatorship.

Aline Küppenheim is outstanding as the enigmatic, chain-smoking Carmen, whose poised Jackie Kennedy-like exterior masks secrets and discontentment. Ringing her son from a hotel booth to request antibiotics for Elías, she suspects the line is being tapped. An uneasy encounter with a diver [sic] at a roadside café leads her to wonder if she is being followed. When identity documents stolen from her car are returned with a warning from neighbour Humberto (“Try to be more careful next time. You won't always be this lucky”), she cannot be sure how much he (or her own husband, Miguel) knows about her clandestine activities. Carmen lies to Miguel, hospital staff and strangers, Father Sánchez lies to his housekeeper and Carmen; both seek to protect Elías, but lies beget further lies as the pair create ever more elaborate fictions to cover up their actions.



The dictatorship is shown to be a pervasive presence, infiltrating all corners of society, with curfews and military checks restricting movement and cultivating a climate of surveillance. Workmen in Carmen's house speak in hushed tones of disappeared persons, and a radio programme that Carmen listens to in the car supports the crackdown on political dissent.

Gradually, the film's mood takes a more ominous turn. Tensions flare at the dinner table between Carmen's son Tomás and son-in-law Pedro over the regime's modus operandi. Out walking with her grandchildren, Carmen sees a woman's body washed up on the beach. On a boat trip with a hospital colleague of Miguel's, a barrage of pro-Pinochet propaganda from his animated wife literally makes Carmen sick. Soon Carmen is self-administering a daily cocktail of painkillers, alcohol and cigarettes just to get through the day.



In conversation with her housekeeper, Carmen refers in passing to Miguel as a “control freak”, suggesting a link between domestic and institutional patriarchy. The extent of Miguel’s involvement in cover-ups is not made clear, but he is part of an elite who, by looking the other way, effectively kept Pinochet in power. 1976’s exploration of the line between intervening and bystanding is undertaken through a lean screenplay (co-authored by Martelli) and an escalating sense of paranoia; violence may be off

screen but its consequences – the body on the beach, the discarded shoe by the car door – are all too visible.

Brazilian composer Mariá Portugal’s creepy electronic score operates in effective contradistinction with the film’s largely warm colour palette. Director of photography Yará Rodríguez, a veteran of independent Argentine production company El Pampero Cine, is evidently an expert at shooting films in which surface appearances camouflage conflicting realities; her previous credits include Laura Citarella’s *Trenque Lauquen* (2022) and Mariano Llinás’s *La flor* (2018). The red food colouring whipped into cream by Carmen at the film’s end echoes the dripping paint of the opening sequence – a signal of further bloodshed. Martelli uses allusion, metaphor, and potent, distinctive imagery with consummate skill to capture the pulse of a dictatorship that sought to silence its critics and conceal its abuses.

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