

The Eternal Memory [12A]

2023 Chile 85 mins

UK released	10 November 2023
Director	Maite Alberdi
Screenplay	Maite Alberdi
Cinematography	Pablo Valdés
Music	Miguel Miranda; José Miguel Tobar
Cast	As themselves - Augusto Góngora; Paulina Urrutia; Javier Bardem; Gustavo Cerati; Pedro Lemebel; Raúl Ruiz

Augusto Góngora wakes up in bed next to a woman he has no memory of. Happily, both see the funny side – they’ve been around the block a few times. She’s an actress, Paulina Urrutia, she tells him – and she has been his partner for the last 20 years, his wife for the last three. The house he’s in is the home they’ve made together. Augusto, who has dementia – Alzheimer’s, we’re later told – greets this marvellous news with wondering delight and astonished laughter; Paulina matches him.

Since her 2014 festival hit *La Once*, aka *Tea Time*, which presented the monthly café-meeting rites and camaraderie of a circle of ageing schoolfriends, Chilean documentary-maker Maite Alberdi has leaned in to stories of ageing, loss and what lingers – call them being-of-age stories. Urrutia and Góngora – who died this May, after the film’s award for best world cinema documentary at Sundance – were a Chilean power couple: she a renowned actor and unionist who served as culture minister under President Michelle Bachelet in the late 2000s; he a journalist and author who directed and hosted the underground reportage series *Teleanálisis* in opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1980s. True to his commitment to sharing the truth, he agreed to let Alberdi film his Alzheimer’s across 2018-22. Urrutia’s comfort on camera is also evident, whether the film is observing her at work with Augusto in tow – and invading her rehearsal stage to join a

dance – or in close-up set pieces, such as a delightful dinner date in which she quizzes his memory of their marriage.

Alberdi isn't concerned to itemise Augusto's decline in the fashion of recent fictional treatments of dementia: *Amour* (2012), *The Father* (2020), *Vortex* (2021). She frames Augusto's condition in the context of coupledom: it falls to Pauli, his lover, to be his round-the-clock carer and companion; we see few other characters. This situation was intensified by the coronavirus pandemic: the isolation of those months probably did Augusto no favours, and while much of the film basks in his smiles and positivity, we do see some of the bewilderment and horror of Alzheimer's in a few later Lear-esque scenes of lost rage.

But Alberdi is concerned to build a portrait in the round; to show Augusto in bloom as well as blight, looking backwards to the courage and conviction of his rebel TV broadcasts, and the long flush of his love with Pauli. If the film were only tracing Augusto's decline, it would carry a pinched irony – time and nature doing Pinochet's work, the erasure of oblivion. But in Augusto's own words, he has been a sower. Pauli reads him the dedication he wrote to her in a copy of Chile: *Prohibited Memory*, a defiant history of Chile's slide into tyranny to which he contributed: "Those who have memory, have courage, and are sowers." Alberdi intercuts a 1989 speech Góngora makes advocating the reconstruction of memory "not to anchor us in the past... but to be able to generously face the future". His words, his work, his images, including now this film, are all part of the house he built, the trace he left, and live on.

Nick Bradshaw, *Sight and Sound*, 13 November 2023 (abridged)

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