The Anti-Hero Perspective of Sebastián Silva’s The Maid

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Many contemporary Latin American films portray a character or a protagonist that strives to bring in an audience in order to emphasize the concept of the “underdog” and their role in society. In Sebastián Silva’s Chilean film, *The Maid* (2009), Raquel is a maid and nanny, who achieves a perspective on an antihero underdog throughout the movie. This servant’s societal perspectives concerning distinct classes and gender roles are shown through her photographs and passive aggressive actions towards some of the family members and the other women, who are hired to help lighten the burden of housework in the home. Raquel’s attitude, mistreatment and tricks demonstrate her apparent desire to consider herself a member of the Valdes family, whom she works for. The vision of an upper class family that she wishes to construct with selected members of the family is established through her performance and in scenes such as the one when she scratches off certain faces in the portraits of family photos. She has secluded herself from her own family and some of the family for whom she works for, mainly the mother in conflictive interactions and daughter whom is ignored and treated coldly. She reveals this through her preferential treatment for the sons, her meticulous care for the husband’s space, and through segregation, personally and via the family itself. This essay will analyze how this atypical representation illustrates a novel type of underdog that is isolated in the Latin American social hierarchy, in that which is characterized by anti-heroic qualities and actions that are represented through a reverse hero perspective in comparison with other similar Latin American films.

Before explaining the film, it is important to give contextual information about Chile, the social class division and a nanny or maid’s role in a typical Latin American household. Karina Elizabeth Vázquez’s essay “Trabajo doméstico: un largo camino hacia el trabajo decente”
outlines a brief explanation of the change in division of social status in the country after the end of Pinochet’s thirty-year dictatorship. Not unlike other Latin American countries in the Southern Cone, this country has surpassed a massive transformation when taking into account sociocultural, economic and political aspects. The Chilean democracy has been differentiated from others because of its efficiency in applying “neoliberal recipes” and the institutional passivity with which it has confronted crimes against human rights during the dictatorship. This resulted in a class-conscious structure that benefited domestic workers from its social economic and repressive politics brought on by the dictatorial regime, whose characteristics have manifested today into a crisis in the educational system.

When referring specifically to the maids’ roles in society and their rights under the government, María Elena Valenzuela’s article “Esfuerzos concertados para la revaloración del trabajo doméstico renumerado en América Latina” in 2009 focuses on joint efforts in the reevaluation of paid domestic work in Latin America. According to the author, the domestic work is a crucial component for not only the household, but also for society and national economies. This type of occupation has been developed by women and, despite its known worth, has been traditionally undervalued and insufficiently regulated. These types of jobs are generally categorized as being feminine not only because 90 percent of these jobs are occupied by women, but also because they are deemed as daily tasks, such as caring for the family, hence they have generally been recognized as a condition that is typically related to women. Domestic service is a gateway of entry into the workforce in most of Latin America for poorer women with a lower level of education. These women also live excluded from most of society. Demands in this profession tend to be invisible because there is a consensus that the required responsibilities and skills are simple and innate in women and this only accentuates the undervaluing of their career.
It is common for these workers to live with the families that they work for and to arrange all the necessary tasks for everyday life in exchange for a salary. Since they live with the families, their personal space is often invaded by the work environment. Domestic work has been classified as one of the professions with the worst conditions for employees. The shifts are longer than normal, especially for those that live in the household and not on their own. There is a high level of employers defaulting on their obligations when dealing with legal obligations in their contracts, their job searches and their contribution to society. The previous mentioned facts cited in this article are the cause for certain syndicates that focus on labor rights for these workforces and have led several countries in Latin America to incorporate diverse initiatives to improve these working conditions and increase the execution of the law that supports and equips these salaried employees, especially those in domestic service during the previous years. In 2008, Chile modified a law that would permit a progressive raise regarding the minimum wage for workers with salaries. Valenzuela also discusses cultural factors and traces of premodern relations that have placed these domestic workers into an ambiguous environment. These workers generally band together with their employers as if there is a family-like link that connects them. This causes a cross in social classes and unbalances the relationship between employee and employer even more. This is the reason why most families impose a rigid separation between themselves and their maids or nannies in respect to their personal lives. This issue is directly related to a loss of identity for these maids because not only are they unable to form their own families and friends but they are somewhat secluded from this family as well when dealing with personal interactions. The only interaction they have is limited to the family that they work for and the people that visit the household.
The topics mentioned beforehand have all been common themes in cinema and television. Directors have utilized their cameras to communicate a message to the world about what is going on in Latin America and raise awareness about the social differences that continue to endure in these regions even after several years of transitioning to a democratic system. These fictional works speak out against the injustices and what these groups of underdogs deal with on a daily basis.

Sebastián Silva’s movie *The Maid* is a drama with a twist of humor that focuses mainly on the protagonist Raquel and the Valdez family. This character has worked for this upper class family for more than twenty years as a maid and caregiver of the children. [I would like to show a short clip from the movie]. This first scene in the film is of a tired looking woman walking into the kitchen and sitting down to eat alone, all while listening to the family argue and talk loudly in the dining room. The personal division between herself and the family is clearly apparent from this first scene. This woman is depicted as sick, tired and worn out from taking care of the entire house basically by herself. Though most would think that she would welcome help to be hired in assisting with the chores, she vehemently disputes the idea of her boss, Pilar hiring another girl to accompany her in cooking, cleaning and tending to the four children because this would be reflected on as being a breach of her territory in an already unstable social stratosphere for her place inside the household. Throughout the movie, layers of this tough looking woman are peeled away, revealing a woman who is suffering from a lack of identity behind a mask of emotionless expressions and cold interactions with the daughter Camila and the other maids in the picture.

On the day of her birthday, Pilar’s husband Mundo is shown telling Raquel that they are very happy that she is still working for them and her response is “Yo feliz. No sé que haría sin
“I am happy. I don’t know what I’d do without these children”. Pilar later comments that they think it would be a good idea to hire another maid to help her with cleaning because she looks weary, the house is very large and the children require more attention each day. An expression of panic crosses Raquel’s face as she considers the possibility of losing her place in the household. She has constructed her own family with handpicked members of the Valdez family, mainly the sons. There is a marked difference in her treatment of the sons and the daughter. The three sons are overindulged by her with treats and she covers up for them or does not inform the parents when there is a possibility of them being scolded. Meanwhile the daughter, Camila, is treated coldly and Raquel seems to go out of her way to instigate arguments with her by vacuuming early first by her room, when asked not to, hiding snacks from her and causing problems with her mother. Camila then confides in her mother that she thinks Raquel hates her, and although Pilar denies the idea, she does take it into account. She decides to go into Raquel’s bedroom after several arguments between the maid and her daughter. Here it is made apparent that there is a clear division between Raquel’s mother-like love for the boys and her seeming hatred for Camila with reasons unknown. The mother picks up a photo album and finds that all the pictures with Camila’s face have been scratched off. [show next clip]. This demonstrates how Raquel is erasing Camila from her own constructed family where she has chosen mainly the sons to be a part of it.

Besides the failed relationship that Raquel has with Camila, there is her mistreatment of the maids. She does not try to hurt these women, but she does commit tricks and acts that openly show her dislike for them and clear desire for them to quit. She noticeably washes the bathroom with an obscene amount of bleach and washes the dishes that they use, even after they have already been cleaned. These passive aggressive behaviors demonstrate her perspective of them as
if they are unsanitary and will cause her or the family a disease. These actions appear to be a means of offending them and instigating that they will quit. The first two do quit after the mentioned actions and being locked out of the house numerous times. Sonia, the second maid and cook treats Raquel sternly and from a cold manner. Through an interaction, she ridicules her for making snacks and drinks for Lucas, the oldest son, and his friends. Raquel reacts towards her passive aggressively, similarly to how she treated the first maid, Mercedes. She behaves as if she belonged to a different social class than the others. [Show next clip]. The true sentiments and fears of Raquel are not revealed until the third maid, Lucy is hired. She tries the same tricks on her but is surprised by returned jokes and friendly conversation at a difference from the other maids that did not try to relate to her personally. After breaking down because of Lucy’s worry over her health despite her mean actions, she reveals the complete state of solitude in which she exists because she is between two worlds. On one hand, she is treated better than most domestic staff but she is not truly a part of the family. She exists in a limbo-type world where she cannot locate her position in the world. She has clung to this family and never started one of her own. She desperately loves these children that she has raised, but are not hers. This represents the underdog, who cannot truly find their place in society and ends up isolated from the world, separated from their own families and unable to start a family because of economic hardships. A lack of education deeply limits one’s options for employment and many of these families will only hire maids or nannies that agree to live with them, mainly because of the convenience of having them close by when needed.

According to an interview with Silva, this movie is dedicated to two nannies that worked in his parents’ house. Although the movie is not based on these two women, it is dedicated to them because of their collaboration in its creation and production. A similar situation occurred
with two nannies and this appeared unjust to him and caused him to decide to depict a movie that portrayed the solitude that a housemaid and nanny may suffer in these types of situations, of not being able to orient oneself in society or in a household, of isolation like that which Raquel suffered.

In short, this film illustrates the pain and solitude that women in domestic jobs face daily. Although their political situation is not favorable, this movie does not touch upon that fact so much. This protagonist with antihero characteristics, an underdog, demonstrates a common perspective about how women in these professions are sequestered without a clear position in society, which is represented by the Valdes family. This character portrays a nanny peering in on the family from the exterior, feeling like she does not belong and does not have a stable position in the household. Her principal concern, especially if and when another nanny or maid is hired is the possibility that she will lose her job and ultimately this abstract family that she has generated in her mind. Similar to Raquel, domestic workers, especially those that live in the households where they work, find it difficult to identify themselves in an established societal role. As previously stated, they emerge from a lower class and have generally grown up in poverty or at least in a house with less commodities than the one that they work in. This causes a misconstruction of identity and uncertainty about which social class they can or should relate themselves with. Hence, they are isolated underdogs of society.
Bibliography


