

FILM REVIEW

L'autre maison : What living environments are we preparing for our elderly?

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ABSTRACT

This review discusses the movie *L'autre maison*, the story of a Quebec family shaken by a very common disease: Alzheimer's. Henri suffers from Alzheimer's and his sons, Eric and Gabriel, do not agree on the best care for him. The film, which is full of tender moments, also raises fundamental ethical issues related to the well-being of vulnerable populations. What are the living environments available for people suffering from Alzheimer's in Quebec and are they well adapted to their needs? In addition, the film highlights the difficulties associated with the notion of free and informed consent in the context of dementia.

Some alarming statistics as a preliminary note

More than half a million Canadians have Alzheimer's disease. At this rate, experts predict that in 25 years, 2.8 % of the Canadian population will be affected by Alzheimer's disease, requiring annually, 756 million hours of care on the part of family caregivers (Société d'Alzheimer, 2010). Alzheimer's affects the identity of the individual, their welfare, and their control over thoughts and actions. Over 90 % of individuals with dementia will cease to recognize their loved ones and have behavioural or psychological symptoms such as crying, sobbing, and asking for help without obvious threat (Passmore, 2013).

L'autre maison

L'autre maison is the first feature film by Mathieu Roy (*Surviving Progress, François Girard en trois actes*), produced by Roger and Felize Frappier (Max Films Production, TVA Films distribution). *L'autre maison* is a drama about a Quebec family shaken by a common disease: Alzheimer's. Henri (Marcel Sabourin) has

Alzheimer's and his sons, Eric (Émile Proulx-Cloutier) and Gabriel (Roy Dupuis), do not agree on the best care for him. Henri lives with his son Eric who takes care of him. They live in a home facing a beautiful lake in the region of Morin Heights. Despite the enchanting scenery and the good personalized care by his son Eric, Henri escapes from his home daily. Henri is searching for his house: not the house he currently lives in, but the house that he used to live in, the other house. Gabriel, Henri's other son, is a war reporter who regularly travels to armed conflict zones. Gabriel is torn between two worlds with very different needs. The armed conflict in Afghanistan needs him as a reporter, to keep the public informed. At the same time, his father needs him to face the tyrannical and repetitive daily needs in this new world where dementia eliminates Henri's points of reference. Gabriel wants to relocate Henri to a supervised residence to ensure his well-being, to relieve Eric from his obligations and enable Gabriel's own career advancement. This fictional film is a tribute full of tenderness to the director's father, the journalist and diplomat Michel Roy who recently died from Alzheimer's disease; and it raises fundamental ethical issues related to the welfare of a particularly vulnerable population.

L'autre maison is not the only Quebec film dealing with Alzheimer Disease. *La brunante* (2007), a film directed by Fernand Dansereau, presented the story of Madeleine, who had just learned her new diagnosis. Madeleine deals with this terrible diagnosis by wanting to see all the people and visit all the places that were important to her. Madeleine reproduces and lives through her happy memories, with the hope of encapsulating them, and fights to preserve what is left of her as she progressively loses control.

Henry (2013) is a short film (21 minutes) directed by Yan England. *L'autre maison* and *Henry* have in common the name of their protagonist and the fact that both directors were paying tribute to the experience of a close family member. Henry is a pianist, and the short film is about his own perspective: his confused memories, his paranoia, his suffering, his quest for a new sense of coherence. Has he been a good man? What is left if he forgets people and events that are part of who he is? *Henry* and *La brunante* both adopt the perspective of the individual with Alzheimer's disease, at different phases of their illness.

In contrast, *L'autre maison* is centered around the family perspective. This film shows that there is a huge problem for Quebec families: determining the best living environment for their family members. What is the best living environment available for Henri: with his son Eric or in a residence? This film also highlights the difficulties associated with the notion of consent in the context of dementia. Gabriel believes that his father may give his approval to move into a residence. He visits one with Henri, hoping to detect the approval or consent of his father. Eric, who lives daily with his father knows that he is no longer able to make decisions even for the small things of everyday life. Confronted with the failure of Henri to make an informed decision about the choice of his living environment, it is up to his sons to make the decision. So the sons are asked to make a substituted judgment (Dunn et al., 2013). How does one determine the best option for his/her family? What does Henri want in this situation? Which option corresponds to his wishes and values? Should the sons consider the wishes and values of their father as he was or as he is now? The criteria of quality of life for individuals fluctuates over the course of the disease. What are the clues that Henri gives to express his well-being and happiness? Gabriel and Eric are making a decision based on Henri's best interests, following a careful assessment of his quality of life and the disadvantages associated with each option (Dunn, et al., 2013). The film illustrates real tensions as the two sons have different opinions regarding the best living environment for Henri. Eric insists that Henri needs familiar faces, common places, routines, and appropriate care at his own pace. This is only possible at home, with Eric as a caregiver. However, Henri leaves his home and wanders into the forest every day, so there is an imminent risk that he will get lost or that a more serious incident could occur. Gabriel, aware of these risks and worried about the fatigue of his brother, believes that the safest and best option would be for his father to be placed in a supervised residence.

Currently, Quebec residences are not free of scandals. In January 2009, Mr. Wilson died at age 94 after being scalded in a bathtub in a nursing home; he tried to get up after a fall and clung to the hot water tap (Rioux-Soucy, 2010). Mr. Gibeau died after an orderly had disconnected the call system without monitoring the residents in an assisted living residence (Le protecteur du citoyen, 2012; Radio-Canada.ca, 2010). In 2010, Ms. Brykowycz died in a private residence following the worsening of pressure ulcers (TVA nouvelles, 2011), while another woman died in a nursing home because of issues related to restraints (Lacoursière, 2011). Lapierre's Residences (Oka) was the subject of a damning report from the Ombudsman for the provision of substandard care, including malnourishment and lack of stimulation for residents (Le protecteur du citoyen, 2010). Unfortunately, these cases are not isolated (Association québécoise de défense des droits des personnes retraitées et préretraitées, 2011). Gabriel wants to protect Henri by relocating him to a residence. However, Henri could potentially be another silent victim of a poor care provider.

In recent years, facing public health system problems, privatization has become the dominant response (Champagne, 2007; Lamarche & Trigub-Clover, 2008). The Quebec government is progressively withdrawing from the operation of assisted living or long term care homes, leaving room for private care or public-private partnerships. Privatization involves delegating activities traditionally handled by the government (such as health care for seniors losing their autonomy) to a private partner (Champagne, 2007). Privatization

follows the ideology of economic liberalism, where the private system is presumed to better contain the costs through market competition, through liberation of bureaucratic constraints and through shareholder monitoring to maximize profit (Champagne, 2007). The pursuit of profit (economic rationale) may affect the social rationale, thereby impeding the goal of providing high quality care (Lamarche & Trigub-Clover, 2008). Indeed, "for profit" health organizations have a higher financial return than the public system; but this is attributable to the fees charged to patients and the fewer personnel with lower levels of professional training (Lamarche & Trigub-Clover, 2008). So the quest for profit and economic efficiency can have a dramatic human impact by encouraging institutions to adopt behaviours that are contrary to the standards of care provided to beneficiaries (social rationale) (Lamarche & Trigub-Clover, 2008).

Quality of care is defined as compliance with professional standards of practice, to provide appropriate care based on the patient's needs to help improve the quality or quantity of life (Lamarche & Trigub-Clover, 2008)(12, 14). Reports on the quality of care in the private care system are worrying. Patients on dialysis may be twice as likely to die if they receive dialysis in a private health care center (Champagne, 2007; Rosenau & Linder, 2003). A meta-analysis comparing seniors' residences revealed that non-profit institutions provide better care, with more and better trained staff. Residents in public not-for profit establishments also had fewer pressure ulcers (Comondore et al., 2009). Many residents, like Henri, are in a position of physical, cognitive, emotional and financial vulnerability (Comondore, et al., 2009) so they are rarely able to complain about their care. The economic rhetoric seems to mask the evidence (Evans, 1996). The rhetoric is as follows: with privatization of care facilities, and based on market principles and competition, everyone wins. The private partner makes a profit and government spending is reduced while providing greater accessibility to all. But the evidence is as follows: everyone wins, except the patient who loses (Evans, 1996). Mrs. Brykowycz, Mr. Gibeau and Mr. Wilson lost their lives. This raises an important question: Are current residences in Quebec best suited to the needs and well-being of seniors and their caregivers?

In conclusion, the magnificent film *L'autre maison* clearly shows the direct consequences of provincial government disengagement from seniors' care. This increases the burden on caregivers and leaves them with an almost impossible choice – opting for relocation of their loved one to a care residence or themselves creating a favourable environment for their loved one, with very limited support from community care services. These caregivers put their careers on hold, and often they experience their own health issues. Facing the drama of Alzheimer's, each family will have its own journey, according to the strengths and abilities of each, and depending on the direction that the disease will take. Some centers have been able to innovate and create successful living environments for individuals with Alzheimer's disease (The Myosotis house in Trois-Rivières is one example).

L'autre maison is a tribute to a family that was involved and that mobilized its collective resources. But this film is also a call to action: How can we provide the best possible care to our parents and friends?

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