

Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*: Art and struggle

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Written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón

Roma is written and directed by Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón (*Y Tu Mamá También*, 2001, *Children of Men*, 2006, and *Gravity*, 2013). Shot entirely in Mexico City, in black and white, the work is a journey back in time and memory to Cuarón's childhood in the city's Roma neighborhood (he was born in 1961) and dedicated to Cuarón's own childhood nanny. The central character is Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), a domestic servant in an upper middle-class household.

The film takes place between autumn 1970 and mid-summer 1971, bracketing the unmarried Cleo's unwanted pregnancy.

Roma is a sensitive portrait of a family breaking apart within the broader context of a social crisis. It follows Cleo, a Mixtec Indian, as she performs her daily chores, which include caring for the family's four children.

The film is truly an important work of art. Cuarón has managed in the form of a filmed essay—a poem about a difficult period in a family's life and in Cleo's—to provide viewers a portrait of human strength and dignity. He has done so without sentimentality, excessive romanticism or hero worship. What is especially unusual in our day, the writer-director (who also photographed and co-produced the work) chooses to concentrate on the more painful and moving fate of the working class figure, Cleo, and not on the problems of the various family members, whose own conditions, of course, are worth examining.

In an early scene, Cleo washes the family's clothing on the roof while two of the children play around her. As the camera pans, one sees other women, on other roofs—each working in the same matter of fact manner. At the same time, one senses something unique about Cleo in this scene: she pauses in her work to participate in the fantasy life of the youngest child, an emotional give-and-take echoed in a dramatic episode toward the end of the film.

In another of *Roma*'s memorable sequences, Cleo takes a city bus to the outskirts of the city. The scene in the shanty-town, composed of cardboard and tin shacks built around a muddy field, provides a picture of the life of peasant migrants who have been expelled from the countryside by the suspension and reversal of Mexico's pre-war land reform and the resulting rural misery.

The wretched surroundings in this marginalized township contrast with the vibrancy and creativity of its inhabitants.

As Cleo walks to her destination, the township is being bombarded with political propaganda from an open-air loudspeaker, cynically praising the benefits that President Luis Echeverría is bestowing on the community. Interior Minister under the previous president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, Echeverría directed the infamous 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre in which 300 to

400 students were murdered.

An unknown number of students, workers and peasants died in the so-called Dirty War conducted by the Mexican authorities in the 1960s and 1970s against political opposition. In addition to those killed in the numerous massacres, 1,200 people “disappeared,” according to conservative estimates. Mexican human rights groups have collected evidence of some 650 cases of civilians who disappeared in the state of Guerrero in south-western Mexico alone, more than 400 of them from the village of Atoyac de Alvarez. The survivors of detention tell horrible stories of torture and suffering.

Other images in *Roma*, the shadows of men in paramilitary training, children in a field, the arid Mexican landscape and the militaristic parade of a high school marching band passing through Roma, are nodal moments in the story and effectively direct viewers' attentions to the underlying drama and tensions.

In regard to the history *Roma* treats, by 1970, Mexico had reached the end of its boom and was entering a long period of economic and social decomposition, from which it has yet to recover.

The phenomenon of the urbanization and proletarianization of peasants, from the villages and fields to the slums, throughout the postwar era, took place across Latin America and led to the formation of a series of megacities, Mexico City, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and others, creating, among other things, the army of exploited domestic servants, service workers, street vendors and street entertainers like those depicted in the film.

Between 1950 and 1960 there was an explosive growth in Mexico of landholdings of over 1000 hectares (2500 acres), and an equally volatile growth of very small farms of less than 5 hectares (12 acres)—fifty percent of peasants were left landless. In the film, Adela (Nancy Garcia), a fellow servant, whispers to Cleo that the government “took your mother's land.”

These changes did not take place without mass peasant resistance.

Of course, individual responses to social processes will differ widely. But if the character is intended to represent wider layers, to be “typical,” it may be somewhat misleading that Cuarón depicts Cleo as merely submissive and hard-working, the first to get up in the morning, the last to go to sleep at night. She is someone who knows her place in the home and does not need to be told twice about things.

Thankful that her boss, Sofia (Marina de Tavira), does not sack her for being pregnant, Cleo continues to do all the work expected of her: climbing the many steps to the roof to wash laundry by

hand, mopping the floors, serving meals, etc. Her tasks also include waking the family's children, with whom she bonds, and getting them ready for school. She is particularly fond of the youngest.

There is a suggestion, as the film evolves, of a special link between the women of the household—Sofia, struggling with a loveless marriage, her widowed mother and the two female servants. A drunken, unhappy Sofia tells Cleo at one point that “we women are always alone.” In any case, the lines of authority are clearly established. Cleo never complains, never has to be told to do something twice, and never talks back, even when yelled at unjustly.

The strongest emotional connection Cleo has to the household is through the children. As it turns out, her extreme devotion to them eventually forces her to go way beyond the call of duty.

Another element in the film is the baleful influence of the United States. Cuarón offers a cultural critique, depicting Yankees or those Mexicans who imitate them as gun-happy landowners, whiskey drinkers, philanderers and butchers of animals. In one scene, the physical training of a murderous paramilitary squad, collectively known as “Los Halcones” (The Hawks), is shown being overseen by a US (i.e., CIA) official.

Corpus Christi Day massacre

On June 10, 1971, Corpus Christi Day in the Catholic calendar, hundreds of university students protested in Mexico City, demanding political freedoms and democratic rights for workers and peasants, an end to repression of labor struggles and an educational system oriented toward the elevation of the cultural level of workers and peasants.

The demonstrators were corralled by the military, while the *halcones* brutally assaulted them. About 120 students were murdered. Wounded students who attempted to hide were attacked and killed, even in hospital emergency rooms. The Corpus Christi Day massacre is also known as *El Halconazo* (The Hawk Strike). To this day, no one in the Mexican establishment has been prosecuted for this horrendous crime.

To his great credit, Cuarón dramatizes that horrific event. Cleo and Sofia's mother, out shopping for a crib, witness the Corpus Christi bloodshed first hand and are deeply frightened.

In a powerful and moving moment, a student, cradling her dying comrade and crying out for help, demands to know why this is happening. Cleo has a personal connection to one of the brutal killers. She goes into labor.

The student's question demands an answer.

To assess the impact of *Roma* on young people, the Mexican webpage “*Reporte Índigo*” spoke to high school students who had just seen the film.

Referring specifically to the scene of the *halconazo*, 18-year-old Abigail Ardaín declared: “Normally our generation finds it difficult to imagine what happened in the past; it's like we cannot weave things together. When one sees how life was then, one can

begin to assess what has happened to our society.”

“There are parts that make you tremble. I think I liked the story. I am still processing the history *Roma* is great, great history,” added Jair Nieto.

The significance of directing the attention of young people in particular to important historical events, as Cuarón has done, can hardly be overestimated.

Though the two films are very different—products of distinct times and circumstances—Cuarón's approach and the film's name brought to this reviewer's mind another *Roma*, Italian director Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, 1945). Inseparable from the historical events that surround both films is the not so small change of human relationships. The use of non-professional actors gives both films a semi-documentary character.

Finally, it must not be lost on the viewer that *Roma*, spelled backwards is *Amor*, the Spanish word for love. The real heroine of this film, Libo, was Cuarón's live-in nanny, to whose memory the film is dedicated.

Roma has been highly praised and forecast to win an Academy Award in 2019. It is polished in its photography and sound and the skill of its performers. Cuarón is a justly celebrated director. It is worth noting that the filmmaker once explained that “My biggest source of inspiration was my uncle Alfonso Quiroz Cuarón, a world-known criminologist. He found [Leon] Trotsky's assassin, introduced me to people like Gabriel García Márquez and constantly advised me to work with topics that were personal, framing them in a sociopolitical context.”

However, the impact of the often tragic events in Mexico and throughout Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, when Cuarón was growing up, no doubt weigh on the director. *Roma* is picturesque, but its long takes in which events unfold before the often unmoving camera suggest a certain passive and fatalistic view of things. It would seem reasonable to suggest that this view is bound up with the representation of Cleo's unquestioning loyalty and that of all the servants depicted in the movie (no other section of the working class appears).

In that sense, the overall vision that Cuarón presents is at odds with the spirit of rebellion and resistance of Mexican workers and peasants throughout history, in the 1970s and today. The 1950s and 1960s in Mexico were years of intense class struggle, involving miners, railroad workers, teachers and other key layers of the working class. These struggles, which only intensified in the 1970s, surely would have had a profound impact on those who lived through them.

Unfortunately, *Roma* leaves out that part of the story.

Roma's theatrical release was limited to a few theaters in the US. It became available on December 14 on Netflix.



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