



Roma

(Alfonso Cuarón, 2018)

Component 2 – Section A: Global Film

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response**
- **Contexts of film**

Rationale for study:

- *Roma* is an emotional, exciting and poetic drama by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón, who also wrote, shot and edited the film. It follows the life of Cleo, a live-in maid, and the wealthy family that she works for in the Roma district of Mexico City.
- The film is far from dour and depressing and uses remarkable cinematography to show how the dynamics of the household reflect the wider social unrest and division in society.
- In 2019, *Roma* was nominated for ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture. It went on to win the awards for Best Director, Best Cinematography and Best International Feature Film.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings

Cleo at work / Opening scenes
In: 00:00 Out: 08:29

Department store / Massacre
In: 1:33:24 Out: 1:35:49



Image by PictureLux / The Hollywood Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- Cuarón is the first filmmaker to win the Oscar for both Best Director and Best Cinematography for the same film.
- The film combines the widescreen format and ultra hi-res black and white photography to add extra dimension and epic quality to the ‘quiet’ stories of the characters.
- Cuarón said his inspiration was the American landscape photographer Ansel Adams, especially his ‘Zone System’ where – in Cuarón’s words – “every single frame has to have information in every single inch.”
- He also uses extended takes to immerse the viewer in the environment. One of the shots of Cleo moving around and cleaning the house has 45 different camera positions but no cuts. These lengthy shots create a feeling of emotional flow between one scene and another, but also reflects the confines of Cleo’s life – moving fluidly around but only within a particular space (the house, the street etc.).



Mise-en-scène

- The set for the family's home is paradoxically both expansive and claustrophobic. The long tracking shots that follow Cleo around the property emphasise the spacious rooms and stairs – and yet the strict limits of the camera's movement show how trapped Cleo feels. The scene near the start, when Antonio's car barely fits in the drive, also creates this feeling.
- By contrast, the world outside – in both the Roma district and the rundown district where Fermín lives – is bustling, chaotic, but also full of vitality. This expresses a familiar theme for Cuarón: that the narrative we are watching is just one in a whole tapestry of human experience that exists, just out of shot.
- A repeated motif is that of a plane flying overhead, a reminder of the freedom Cleo will probably never experience.

Editing

- Extended shots through chaotic environments are a trademark of Cuarón (e.g. the climactic battle scene in *Children of Men*), but in Roma he balances these tracking shots through busy streets with quieter more meditative moments (e.g. Cleo's domestic routine).
- One remarkable single shot is the visit to the department store that erupts into violence. The shot begins on Cleo's reaction as the sounds of the tumult outside grow louder, then the camera pans around the store, drifting past a window and a view of the massacre outside. Instead of cutting, it continues on its trajectory around the store, back to Cleo's face. This emphasises the emotional intensity of the scene rather than the spectacular carnage outside. It also makes the disruption more impactful when the protester and *Los Halcones* burst into the scene.

Sound

- There is no score or non-diegetic sound in the film. This creates a sense of realism and immediacy. The sound design immerses the viewer in Cleo's experiences.
- During the scene in the department store, the sound effects intrude long before the physical

presence of the rioters. The noise of the turmoil outside increases in volume (drawing the camera from Cleo's face towards the window), and gunshots foreshadow the more visual violence to follow.

Performance

- Yalitza Aparicio (Cleo) had never acted before. Cuarón wanted an 'innocence' that he thought professional actors from Mexico City did not have (the casting director saw 3000 women for the role). Aparicio is from a rural, very poor Mixtec background, similar to the character she plays.
- Marina de Tavira (Sofía) is an experienced actor both on stage and on screen. Cuarón hoped her presence on set would support not only Aparicio, but also the many child actors in the film.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representation of gender

- The two main female characters, Cleo and Sofía, are both similar and different in the way that they represent women's roles in Mexican society.
- Cleo is from a deprived Mixtec village and is forced, along with many young women, to move to the city to take a job as a live-in maid to serve wealthier White families due to the economic hardship.
- Cleo is trapped by her circumstances in an extremely traditional domestic role: a life spent shopping, cleaning, cooking and raising the children. This household labour isolates her from her peers and community, and the dependence of the children emotionally drains her.
- Sofía is somewhat more liberated by her wealth and education. She has friends and relatives to confide in when Antonio deserts her, whereas Cleo is alone and silent after Fermín's abandonment. There is little solidarity between the women – Cleo will always be an employee, 'the help', separated from Sofía by her class and ethnicity. At the end of the film, the suggestion is that Sofía will flourish in the face of her



adversity by getting a full-time job and gaining financial independence. Cleo on the other hand continues to be confined to her domestic role, losing her own child and almost dying saving those of her employer.

- The men in the film are portrayed extremely negatively. Antonio is obsessed by status (symbolised in the first scene by his car that is too large for the driveway) and abandons his family for a younger woman. Fermín is like a personification of male aggression and violence, and his response to the news of Cleo's pregnancy is full of misogynist hatred for anything that challenges his *machismo*.

Representation of ethnicity

- There is a clear class distinction between the Indigenous people (Mixtec) and the White, European community they serve (or in Fermín's case, attack).
- Mexico was colonised by the Spanish in the 15th century, and since then there has been a clear socio-economic disparity between the two ethnic groups.
- All the servants in the household are of Indigenous heritage. They are portrayed as being silent (Cleo barely speaks and even her communication with the children is through cooing noises and lullabies) and almost invisible to their employers.
- Even after saving the children from drowning, the film ends with Cleo climbing the stairs to do the washing – she was a hero briefly, and now she returns to domestic drudgery, with no children, or future, of her own.

Representation of age

- The children in the film are portrayed in an interesting way. They are completely dependent on Cleo and in some ways, they are closer to her than their mother (e.g. the scene on the roof with Cleo and Pepe).
- They are completely trusting of Cleo, and treat her as a surrogate parent. Writer Keshia Naurana Badalge described the role of the maid in families like this as a "*patchwork parent*,

balancing menial chores with the hard emotional labour of filling the gaps in the family unit." The film is semi-autobiographical, and in the final shot Cuarón dedicates it to 'Libo', the maid from his own childhood.

- The children also seem somewhat jaded by the adult turmoil both in and outside the home. They casually refer to the police murdering a boy, and also seem to have inherited some of their parents' prejudices e.g. they despise it when the maids talk in Mixtec.

Aesthetics

- Cuarón combines crisp black and white photography with a widescreen format mostly associated with big budget blockbusters. This combination makes the personal stories of *Roma* take on a kind of grandeur, the intimate made spectacular and epic. (This format also suits the dual release strategy, suiting both film theatres as well as home viewing on increasingly large televisions or projectors.)
- To achieve this effect, Cuarón shot in 65mm digital camera in colour, then turned the film black and white using grading software in post-production. This led to a grain-free, high-resolution depth to the images.
- One of Cuarón's typical approaches is to remind the audience there is more happening in the world of his films than just the protagonist's story. In *Y tu mamá también*, the camera regularly drifts away from the main narrative to focus on a background character or location, a voiceover concisely explaining their story. In *Roma*, the depth of focus means there is always something significant happening in the background (e.g. a circus performer fired from a cannon!), reminding us of the different strata of this society.
- There are some references to other film styles in this aesthetic. The black and white and focus on subtle power dynamics recall the dramas of Ingmar Bergman, whereas the bustling street scenes have been inspired by Italian neo-Realist directors like Roberto Rossellini.



CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social

- Mexico remains an overtly patriarchal society, where women are often confined to the domestic space, especially in lower class or rural communities. Traditional gender roles are encouraged and supported by right-leaning politicians and the Catholic church.
- One social expectation of men is to display *machismo*, an aggressive kind of hypermasculinity based around physical strength, sexual dominance, and competition/loyalty with other men.
- Cuarón has repeatedly dissected *machismo* and traditional gender roles in his earlier Mexican film *Y tu mamá también*, and his English-language movies like *Children of Men* (2006).

Political/Historical

- Mexican politics in the 20th century was dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The party came to power in 1929 and remained until 2000. It has been accused of maintaining its power through widespread intimidation, fraud and corruption.
- Political opposition to the PRI increased from the 1960s onwards, and the government responded by violently suppressing dissidents. This was known as ‘*Guerra Sucia*’ (Dirty War).
- As part of their crackdown, the PRI recruited (many from poor or Mixtec backgrounds) and trained a para-military youth group called *Los Halcones* (The Falcons). Their task was to infiltrate student protests and suppress them. This is the group that Fermín joins in *Roma*.
- The protest-turned-massacre where Cleo and Fermín confront each other is the real-life 1971 Corpus Christi Massacre, where *Los Halcones* attacked students and killed over 120 people.

Cultural

- Cuarón came to fame in the early 2000s as part of the New Mexican Cinema movement, for his coming-of-age drama *Y tu mamá también* (And

Your Mother, Too), 2001. Directors Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006) and Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Amores perros*, 2000) were also part of the same movement.

- New Mexican Cinema was characterised by higher budgets and a more ‘arthouse’ aesthetic, that made them popular on the global film stage. These films daringly explored social, political and economic divisions in Mexico, whilst appealing to more universal themes of identity, sex and crime.
- Almost all the filmmakers of the movement have gone on to make big budget Hollywood movies (Cuarón made *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* in 2004, and *Gravity* in 2013), whilst regularly returning to Mexico to make smaller, more personal films.

Institutional/Technological

- *Roma* is a Mexican-US film. It is a co-production between director Alfonso Cuarón’s own production company, Esperanto Filmoj and three others, including Participant Media (a US TV/film production company specialising film that ‘spurs social change’).
- Cuarón famously sold global distribution rights to streaming platform Netflix, and the film was dual released: in theatres in summer 2018, and digitally in December (after it had received Oscar nominations). Between January and February 2019, *Roma* was watched online by 3.2 million U.S. households.
- The Netflix collaboration caused controversy and the business models of the film industry have been severely challenged by video on demand (VoD). *Roma*’s entry into the 2018 Cannes Film Festival was refused because the festival does not acknowledge streamed films, but it did go on to win the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival a few months later.
- It is rumoured that Netflix also spent an extra \$40 to \$60 million on the film’s Oscars’ campaign, the highest for any Netflix-backed film.



KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

Opening scene – In: 00:00 Out: 08:29

- The titles are played over the image of a simple tiled floor, with no score or theme music. The only sound effects are a mop in a bucket and scrubbing. Cleo is introduced by the sounds of her labour before we even see her.
- Water swills over the tiles, reflecting the sky and a distant plane flying overhead. This is a consistent motif that represents both freedom and how far away Cleo is from achieving it. The movement of the water also resembles the tide on a beach, perhaps a foreshadowing of the climactic scene near the end of the film.
- After nearly four minutes (an introduction to the meditative pace of the film), the camera pans up to show Cleo in long shot, reduced to tiny stature by the scale of the driveway around her. The scale of the location makes her appear small and insignificant.
- The following shots are slow pans across the different floors of the house, as Cleo goes about her chores. The spacious set (and lack of any other characters) makes Cleo seem isolated (reflecting her disconnection from her people and heritage).
- The camera does not follow Cleo using a dolly or Steadicam – instead it just pans dispassionately left to right, with Cleo bustling in and out of fore/background. This makes it seem like her experience or point-of-view is subservient to the rhythms of the household, a clear indication of her low social status.
- Filmmakers would conventionally use a series of close-ups and medium shots to introduce a protagonist. This is so we can see their face (to identify them) and expression and body language (to help us empathise). But Cuarón deliberately avoids using these simple devices in this sequence and throughout the film. Instead, his camera observes events in long shot, from a seemingly dispassionate distance. In some ways, this adds realism – the viewer feels like an observer in the scene, but it also shows how insignificant Cleo's life and story are deemed by her employers.
- When Cleo goes to answer the phone, we are given a hint of her personal life outside the household (the other servant is eager to know the gossip). But instead of showing us the call (and humanising Cleo), the film cuts away to Cleo in the kitchen, emphasising again her domestic role over her personal experience.
- Cleo and the other servant talk in a different language to the children of the household, much to the son's displeasure. This introduces the theme of ethnic divisions in Mexican society.
- In some ways, the class, gender and ethnic dynamics within the house could be seen as a microcosm for the tensions and divisions in wider Mexican society – or in any country, in any historical period.