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Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*, like his previous two Mexican films, is troubled by class. This is a criticism and a praise. Class trouble has placed all three works into a central spot in their different historical moments. *Sólo con tu pareja* resisted lower-class tremendism by focusing on the emergent creative class. In doing so, Cuarón foresaw the reshaping Mexican commercial cinema after 1998. *Y tu mamá también*, conversely, engaged critically with this very bubble, by puncturing it, and rendering visible the class specters that haunt the neoliberal fantasy.

*Roma* is a far more complex endeavor. It is an archeology of Mexico's class trouble, focusing on the year of 1971, the time when President Luis Echeverría's authoritarian populism (present in the film from propaganda of the PRI to the recreation of the *Halconazo*) quashed social dissent.[1] *Roma*'s microcosm, the life of Cleo as a domestic and care worker in a professional middle-class household, is constructed upon the uneven modernization of the so-called "Mexican miracle." [2] The family's privileges are a direct outcome of State-funded professionalization (Antonio, the patriarch who leaves his family, is a physician at the government-run Hospital General). Cleo's position as a domestic employee, in contrast, results from the devastating effects of the failure of post-Revolutionary agrarian reform, including the mass migration of former peasants to the city. This is signaled when we learn that Cleo's mother had been ultimately expelled from her lands by government agents. The concurrence of urban development and rural failure became the infrastructure that led to the new ways in which social class was constructed through race, pigmentocracy and labor regimes.

Unlike *Y tu mamá también*, modernity here is not narrated (the way the voiceover narrates the future hotel development of Chuy's beach, for instance), but sensorially conveyed. While in *Sólo con tu pareja*, the creative class space is formalized in Emmanuel Lubezki's virtuosic nocturnal cinematography, in *Roma* it appears in the intersection of two notable formal

elements. First, Cuarón's visual language (which he controls by being his own DP) fluctuates between static long takes that equally capture the movements of the city and the stasis of the slums and the countryside (following Gabriel Figueroa's work not only with Buñuel and Emilio Fernández but also with Julio Bracho) and the tracking shots that convey the awkward dynamic of domesticity (Cleo moving around the house carrying out her tasks whilst the families private lives continue in the background). Second, the sound design, *Roma*'s most brilliant technical feat, building on the territory explored by directors like Lucrecia Martel in *La ciénaga*, turns the noises and utterances of everyday life, along with the mediascape of Mexican and global popular culture, into a constant set of signifiers related to the affective and social environment of 1970s modernity.

Through its self-presentation as fictionalized autobiography, *Roma* shows how the social order of 1971 was the condition of possibility for the class privileges of the present, [Enrique Krauze's](#) own self-reflecting review in the *New York Times* is a telling example of this. The cancellation of Cleo's own futurity, embodied in Fermín's role in Echeverrista political violence and, of course, in her painfully rendered miscarriage (including the brutal coldness of the physicians for whom her life is likely of little value), is what allows the futurity of the entire family to persist after the loss of their patriarch. As scholar Natalia Pérez pointed out in a Facebook comment, there is a nod to the idea that the feminism of the middle class is permitted by the domestic labor of women like Cleo. Sofia's new career and her ability to support her children require Cleo's loss.

[Detractors](#) of the film have noted that Cleo's submission and silence reproduce longstanding stereotypes. They also wish there was more of her voice and backstory and complain that the film is too sympathetic of the family's exploitation of Cleo. These critiques are fair, but also somewhat simplistic. Yalitza Aparicio's exceptional performance conveys Cleo's affective and emotional layers as inherent to the subjective erasure and dehumanization inflicted by domestic work. Cleo and Adela's Mixtec language are fading as their diglossic conversations are met with Pepe's demands to "stop talking like that." Cleo's

desubjectification is a central issue across *Roma*. It appears when Teresa, the grandmother, is unable to remember Cleo's age in the hospital reception or when Fermín disavows his paternity by calling her "gata" (the racialized derogatory term for a maid in Mexico), thus making Cleo's employment a condition of her unworthiness. And, of course, this erasure takes place at the very end of the film when Cleo's about-face on wanting her child to not be born is superseded by Sofía, when Sofía praises Cleo for saving Sofi and Paco. Her heroics are in turn erased when Cleo nonchalantly returns to her domestic duties. A film in which Cleo "had a voice," whatever that could have meant, would altogether miss the point of her constant dehumanization.

In its grandeur and its limitations, *Roma* has a legitimate claim to be one of Mexico's best and most important films of all time. But, more significantly, the phenomenon it has created—both the widespread praise and the passionate objections, as well as the social conversations on domestic work and the debate on Netflix and film distribution—show what Mexican cinema can be when it receives the financial support and creative freedom that nearly all other filmmakers are denied, and when audiences give Mexican films their attention instead of flocking to mediocre Hollywood franchises. I left the theater wondering what would happen if the latitude and support that Cuarón received was afforded to Carlos Reygadas, Amat Escalante, Fernando Eimbcke Natalia Beristáin or Yulene Olaizola, not to mention old masters like María Novaro and Felipe Cazals. That this film exists is also the indicator that Mexico can have a relevant cinema that is passionately debated and supported by producers, distributors and audiences. In spite of, and thanks to its class trouble, *Roma* is the first concrete example in years of what such cinema could be.

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[1] The “*Halconazo*” or Corpus Christi Massacre is a massacre of demonstrators (mostly students) that took place on June 10, 1971. The perpetrators were a government-funded group called “Los Halcones” or the Hawks, of which we learn that Fermín is a member.

[2] The “Mexican miracle” is a period of economic growth, roughly from 1940 to 1960, in which Mexico, fueled by Import Substitution Industrialization, experienced significant expansion. However, that expansion was unequal and mostly favored cities.

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