

\*by Pedro Ángel Palou

It is a tough task for a critic to define a masterpiece, or to grant the stature of classic to a work of art: taste, the privileges of gaze and other sociological factors all play a role. *Roma* is indeed a significant work, one that defines new possibilities for Mexican cinema. Cuarón did something similar for the romantic comedy in Mexico with *Sólo con tu pareja* (1991) and for social satire and coming of age narratives in his depiction of the middle class in neoliberal Mexico in *Y tu mamá también* (2001). After *Gravity*, he could have rested on his laurels and continued working in Hollywood, but instead he decided to take a risk: choosing to make a film in black and white, in Spanish and Mixtec and produced by streaming giant Netflix. Yet, a supreme artist like Cuarón still chose to reinvent himself by continuing with his longtime obsessions.

*Roma* is mainly shot using long takes with lots of panning and lateral tracking shots. It is an intentionally slow movie, reflecting in some way the inevitable fragmentation of remembered lives (those of Libo - Cuarón's real life nana - and of the director himself). For one, the image of the father is shown through a series of partial views (a hand, a cigarette, a huge car that, like him, does not fit in the house). Cuarón is obsessive about detail not because he is channeling many of the tenets of Italian neorealism but because memory is partial and baroque, full of objects, like a crowded room.

Critics have been harsh about *Roma* because they misread the film. A piece in *The New Yorker* by [Richard Brody](#), who is tellingly a big fan of Clint Eastwood's latest film *The Mule* (2018), seriously misrepresents *Roma* and its actors. Everything that Brody thinks is missing in *Roma* (most notably Cleo's voice) is actually present in the film and only those unfamiliar with Mexican social and racial history would not perceive this. *Roma* is a subtle critique of classism, race and the role of women in Mexico. And it's because of its subtlety that *Roma* offers a more powerful take on these themes. The end of the film, in this regard, redirects the narrative of the film. The climax's displacement of Cleo (who, the film makes clear can

save Sofia's children, but who could not save her own child), despite the family's *love* for her, makes the viewer feel intensely uncomfortable. The film doesn't let the viewer escape these feelings, indeed the complex level of symbolic imagery that Cuarón has been using throughout the film is precisely designed to highlight Cleo's simultaneous subordination and elevation and consequently her position inside and outside the family.

But the most important question in regards to *Roma*, is the question of voice. In film -unlike the novel- voice can be left to dialogue or as in *Y tu mamá también* to a sometimes-disturbing middle-class voiceover that interrupts the flow of actions. In *Roma* however, Cuarón takes a different approach to create a voice through framing and point of view. Everything in the movie is seen through Cleo's eyes, not those of the family, not even those of Pepe -Cuarón's *alter ego*-, and it is her gaze that makes *Roma* so compelling. In at least two moments of the film, the hospital when she is delivering her baby and in the climatic scene on the beach, the drama of that gaze is seen in all its dimension.

Cuarón does not hesitate to quote himself, sometimes with humor and other times with intense seriousness about the possibilities of visual narration. He is a superb storyteller. He quotes his movies -even *Gravity*- but also some of the Mexican movies that he regards as important: *Redes* (Fred Zinneman, Emilio Gómez Muriel, Paul Strand 1934) in the shots of the waves on the beach and *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1936) in the scene in the basement of the hacienda when Cleo breaks her *pocillo* with pulque, foreshadowing the tragedy of the movie. *Roma* is a movie that needs to be seen many times in order to read each scene completely apart from the main narrative or the story that Cuarón tells.

After *Gravity*, audiences likely expected *Roma* to be an easier film, something more straightforward. A good deal of the film's publicity and press stories about the screening of the film -particularly the difficulties with Mexican exhibitors [editor comment, see Paul Julian Smith's piece in this *Roma* dossier]- made those expectations even more widespread.

For some of us who saw the movie early on, before the buzz, this publicity didn't get in the way of interpreting the film. I read, for example, a lot of comments on how *pretentious* the movie is. Again, people want *Roma* to be something different than the film Cuarón has made. As Mexican film audiences we should be grateful that an art cinema film like *Roma* can have the broad distribution that Netflix will allow it. I certainly hope *Roma* will open doors for other art cinema films that are being made in Mexico now.

In the meantime, we have Netflix to watch the movie again and again and to read it and interpret it fairly. In the meanwhile, I am grateful that we have *Roma*, a groundbreaking accomplishment that creates new ways of visualizing memory.

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