

*By Roberto Ortiz

It is a cold Friday morning in Mexico City and a handsome dark-skinned young man stands on the Alvaro Obregón avenue strip costumed like a priest. I turn to him and ask: "What are you publicizing?" "*Diablero*," he answers, "the new Netflix series. Do you want one?" I nod and he hands me the free daily *maspormás* covered with an ad for the series. A few weeks ago, on that same strip, a young (mestizo?) woman gave me another piece of Netflix advertising: a Roji guide to the locations of *Roma* with beautiful black-and-white stills of Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), the young indigenous protagonist. Months ago, there were multiple posters for *La casa de las flores*, the series that brought back 1980s & 90s Televisa star Veronica Castro. Earlier in the year, metro stations carried ads for *Luis Miguel, la serie*, a weekly Netflix marketed and distributed series that was such a hit I saw "I Hate You, Luisito Rey" T-shirts. A poster for *Roma* carried the tag line "Remember" (Recuerda). Some ads for *Luis Miguel, la serie* invited people to fill in the blanks of lyrics to his songs. What to make of these nostalgic Mexican media images all associated with the Netflix brand that have gone from Luis Miguel to indigenous nannies, with an aging telenovela star and Mexican *Narcos* in-between?

I saw *Roma* in a Mexico City art house theater (actually cheaper than commercial venues). Ten minutes before the screening, an older man walked out angrily calling some audience members monkeys (changos). His outburst had been triggered by the noise of two hipster-looking couples behind him, eating popcorn packaged in cellophane bags. Later, a young female employee offered paper bags to replace the noisy cellophane. There is a lot of silence in *Roma*, she explained. The invitation to silence was the latest suggestion on how to "properly" experience *Roma*. Critics recommended watching it in a movie house rather than streamed at home. Reviews and marketing campaigns appealed to the personal (Cuarón's interviews, the memories of film critics, the hashtag #MiRoma) and collective ("Roma unites us," the *cinemóvil*, the screening at *Los Pinos*, the hashtag #Romatón).

There was also that “Recuerda” tag line, though clearly not aimed at me – a light-skinned Puerto Rican living in Mexico City –, which made me wonder: what am I to remember?

Roma reminded me of a close male friend who moved to Mexico City to work and send money to his family. Despite his financial need, he recently rejected a work offer from the middle-class owners of the restaurant in which he worked. The couple had been nice and allowed him to stay for “free” in an apartment they used for storage. My friend, however, knew their niceness came with obligations. After the restaurant closed, “el señor” assumed he would agree to work during irregular hours and didn’t understand why my friend no longer wanted to live in a “free” place filled with equipment from a shut-down restaurant.

Roma triggered cinematic memories, though not necessarily of the [European auteurs](#) that Mexican reviewers have favored to praise the film. *Roma* unexpectedly brought to mind [Aquarius](#) (Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2016), a Brazilian film that also deals with memories and centers on a woman whose beauty and charisma largely carry the movie. Despite their aesthetic differences, and the casting of an older movie star instead of a young indigenous “non-actor,” both films have been acclaimed for addressing class and race differences from the viewpoint of an enlightened and sympathetic light-skinned/white (upper) middle-class.

This viewpoint is shared by some Mexican film critics whose rave reviews Alfonso Cuarón has shared through Twitter. They link their visual and aural pleasures to memories of growing up middle class in Mexico City. [Enrique Krauze](#) writes his family history “is as typical as his [Cuarón’s]. It is the history of the Mexican urban middle class.” Ricardo Raphael enthuses *Roma* “is an immense mirror from which it is impossible to escape.” [Miguel Cane](#) states: “We all had a Cleo in our life if we were middle-class Mexicans in that period.” An interview with [Fernanda Solorzano](#) starts with the critic and Alfonso Cuarón bonding over their nannies while discussing *Roma*’s connection to *Y tu mamá también*. Memories of having domestic workers and nannies have been normalized by a certain class and generation. When I talk to a female acquaintance, who works in a Roma art gallery,

about my mixed feelings about *Roma*'s viewpoint and Cleo's storyline, she matter-of-factly counters "but we all had them. That's how it was."

Roma also reminded me of some classic Mexican films. In the interview with Solorzano, Cuarón condemns the Manichean vision of most Mexican Golden Age cinema films: "I cannot stand the folkloric (folclorismo) of films like those of Indio [Emilio] Fernández, where in addition indigenous people (los indios) were interpreted by whites." Despite the casting of an "autochthonous" female lead, *Roma* does not avoid altogether the aesthetic and ideological ties to the Mexican cinema it ostensibly rejects. Tellingly, and unsurprisingly, those rave Mexican reviews I previously mentioned connect Cuarón to Luis Buñuel instead, as well as to other European auteurs (Fellini, DeSica, etc.).

What to make of *Roma*'s intersection of two modes of Mexican "authenticity": Yalitza Aparicio as a dark-skinned indigenous "non-actress" representing "true" Mexico and Alfonso Cuarón as a light-skinned transnational auteur presenting his "most personal story"? Media coverage of Yalitza Aparicio, the performer, has arguably had a much stronger impact than Cleo, the character, especially her glamour shots at film festivals and her groundbreaking cover in *Vogue Mexico*. The star discourse around Yalitza Aparicio invites reflection in relation to actors like Mónica del Carmen, Ariel award winner for *Año bisiesto* (Michael Rowe, 2010), or Tenoch Huerta, star of *Güeros* (Alonso Ruizpalacios, 2015), who both spoke out against Mexican racism in a 2017 [video](#). The uncritical love some have shown for Alfonso Cuarón and *Roma* also invites reflection on the (unbearable?) whiteness of Mexican film studies, whether the scholar is Mexican or not.

*Roberto Carlos Ortiz is an independent scholar and regular contributor to Mediático. He lives in Mexico City.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [More](#)