

By Belén Vidal*

Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* is much more than the newest sensation from Latin American cinema, more than 2018's film-event, topping end-of-year polls such as those compiled by [Sight and Sound](#) and [The Guardian](#). *Roma* has already become an emblematic case-study in the paradoxes inherent to cinephilia in an era in which VoD is rapidly gaining ground over theatrical exhibition. Netflix's step up into production has erupted onto a world cinema scene that has up to now been largely the preserve of cinephilic film culture, raising anxieties around the downgrading of the kind of diverse cinematic images in most need of careful handling to just one type of narrative image adrift in a sea of *content*.

Since (and even before) the unveiling of *Roma* at the 2018 Venice Film Festival, where it scooped the Golden Lion for the Best Film, *Roma* has generated exactly the right kind of cinephile buzz. The autobiographical nature of the material, alongside Cuarón's involvement in shaping its every aspect enhanced the auteur credentials of the film that most resembles his 2001 breakthrough hit *Y tu mamá también* in its look over an expansive social landscape via a tale of intimate class and gender conflict. Not only did Cuarón fulfil the double function of screenwriter-director but he also took on [DOP duties](#) when Emmanuel Lubezki proved unavailable for the duration of the inordinately long shoot (108 days). Add to this the [heroic casting](#) of Yalitza Aparicio: in the hands of Cuarón, Aparicio, a non-professional actor, becomes not only the subjective and moral centre of the film but a carefully controlled element in the complex production design, her moves carefully orchestrated within the bold pans and lateral tracking shots. Aparicio contributes her labour (but not, some might say, her agency) to co-create Cuarón's lovingly executed memory world.

While Cuarón's auteur credentials are asserted right, left and centre, one key aspect escapes directorial control: how the film will be viewed, and by whom.^[1] This is where the director's symbolic agency ends and the producer's agency begins. Netflix's acquisition of *Roma's* rights at production stage can be seen as a bold move towards expanding the reach

and exposure of non-Anglophone cinemas in the all-important English-language global markets, as suggested by [Deborah Shaw](#). *Roma*'s triumph in Venice, and the string of prizes it has subsequently reaped in its seemingly unstoppable progression to Academy Award glory seems to confirm that Netflix's mixed distribution strategy is handsomely paying off. The cultural capital accrued by the film along the way will in turn enhance the value and therefore the potential revenue *Roma* is able to command as a Netflix property. But the limited theatrical release accorded to *Roma*, which has placed the film in the eye of a storm of competing interests, is also creating its own paradoxical side-effects.

In Mexico, the large chains Cinépolis and Cinemex refused to screen *Roma* on the terms dictated by Netflix, i.e. an ultra-short window before online release. The situation has been replicated in the United States and in key European territories: In the United Kingdom, Netflix's exclusive deal with Curzon Cinemas forced independent cinemas across the country to negotiate screening rights before its online release. In London, the film played for about two weeks in the centrally located Curzon Soho. Only a handful of alternative screens (the British Film Institute, and Manchester's HOME cinema among them) have been able to negotiate additional single screenings. In Spain, a "natural" territory for the film, all exhibitors but two chains (Verdi cinemas in Madrid and Barcelona and the Albéniz cinemas in Málaga) refused what they considered to be an exploitative screening deal offered by Netflix. While the film is playing reportedly to sold-out screens, the information about box-office revenue that would enable us to evaluate *Roma*'s actual scale of success—and, by the same token, make an argument for its continued theatrical exploitation—remains unavailable to Rentrak/ComScore. This is out of line with sector practices that treat box-office revenue as public information but falls in line with Netflix's non-transparent handling of user data.

Netflix's tight control over the film has nevertheless failed to dim the appetite of independent exhibitors. [Variety](#) has reported the progressive rolling out of copies of *Roma* to Mexican independent cinema chains asking to screen the film. What started as a strategy

to ensure *Roma* would qualify for a seat at the critical/award table, shoulder to shoulder with 2018's most influential films, is now driving a cinephilic backlash, with voices such as Bristol Watershed's cinema curator [Mark Cosgrove](#) raising doubts over the ability of films bypassing theatrical exhibition to command the same kind of cultural impact reserved to cinema releases. Cosgrove's familiar argument refers to a film culture model founded on public exhibition, film criticism, and the film's entering a wider cultural conversation that sustains cinephilia's discourse. And yet, the curtailing of exhibition in theatres has created a response not dissimilar to early manifestations of cinephilia. Seeking out a screening of *Roma* in the knowledge this may be a one-off opportunity to enjoy the cinematic experience *as intended* is nothing if not a throwback to a past moment of scarcity, in which the cinematic was experienced, as Marc Vernet has noted, as a 'series of phantoms that the cinephile was trying to capture at out-of-the-way venues, at odd hours or at distant festivals.' (Vernet 1999: 93)

Is Netflix taking the commerce of auteurism (to borrow Timothy Corrigan's pioneering formulation) to its logical end, promoting a cinephilia without (cinematic) films? Hardly so. Watching *Roma* on the big screen and in the intimacy of one's own laptop are not necessarily opposed, but rather complementary experiences. The film's play with background and foreground, the minimalist, non/expositional nature of dialogue, and the sculpting of space through the rich aural atmosphere are elements designed to be noticed and appreciated in the concentrated viewing mode one expects from a visit to the cinema. And yet it is on repeated online viewing, my whole body plugged into the morose rhythm of the images in close proximity to the screen, enhanced by the use of headphones, where I can perhaps better savour the extreme precision of camera movement and production design in sequences such as the one in which Cleo turns off the lights of the family home one by one, as the whole household gets ready for the night. *Roma* is currently and noticeably featured as a Netflix original on its website; as a brand new, high-profile release, it is hard to miss. The question is, which and how many world films are we missing due to Netflix's practice of bulk-buying and burying dozens of films?

At the time of writing, Netflix has begun offering a rollout of 70mm screenings in selected American theatres, with Cuarón saying (as reported by [IndieWire](#)): “The 70mm print of *Roma* shows unique details not available on any other version. Being shot in 65mm, these prints bring live detail and contrast only possible using a big format film. It is for sure the most organic way to experience *Roma*”. It is difficult not to read between the lines of this statement the suggestion that the online experience of the film is predicated on a degree of (aesthetic, affective) loss. The same article also highlights that these screenings have been scheduled in cities with a high number of voters before the January 14 deadline for submitting ballots for Academy Award nominations. A more cynical reading of Cuarón’s positioning of the film as part of Netflix’s overall awards strategy is thus entirely possible.

Should *Roma* fulfil its promise and be showered with Academy Awards come February 2019, wouldn’t further theatrical rollover be the logical next step? Delaying and thus eliciting desire for the cinematic experience may be, in the end, another way of keeping the cinephilic flame alive. If *Roma* exposes the paradoxes of cinephilia in the age of Netflix, its protracted commercial life within and *beyond* Netflix screens may also be indicative of further shifts to come, as world cinema filmmakers seize new alliances and opportunities as they arise.

*Belén Vidal is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at King’s College London. She is the author of *Figuring the Past. Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam UP, 2012) and *The Heritage Film* (Wallflower Press/CUP, 2012), and the co-editor of *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (AFI Film Readers, Routledge 2014). She has published on the films of Isabel Coixet, Pablo Berger, and Isaki Lacuesta; she is currently working on a project on cinephilia and Spanish cinema.

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[1] Except not completely! <https://miromapelícula.com/best-viewing-practices> (how to change your TV settings by Cuarón & co)

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