

Roma [15] 2018 | Mexico | 135 mins

UK release date	30 November 2018
Director	Alfonso Cuarón
Screenplay	Alfonso Cuarón
Cinematography	Alfonso Cuarón
Music	Various
Cast	Yalitza Aparicio (Cleo); Marina de Tavira (Señora Sofía); Diego Cortina Autrey (Toño); Carlos Peralta (Paco); Daniela Demesa (Sofi); Marco Graf (Pepe); Nancy García García (Adela)

“No matter what they tell you – women, we are always alone.” The cry echoes through writer/director Alfonso Cuarón’s gently sweeping epic. Inspired by memories of his childhood in Mexico City, and bristling with historical upheavals that mirror the domestic traumas (the Corpus Christi massacre of 1971 is shockingly restaged), it’s a bravura evocation of time and place. But at its heart are two women – both embattled yet resilient, and from very different backgrounds – who are left to clean up the mess after being abandoned or betrayed by the men in their lives.

Newcomer Yalitza Aparicio makes an astonishingly natural debut as Cleo, domestic worker for a well-to-do family headed by Doctor Antonio (Fernando Grediaga), at their spacious townhouse in the Colonia Roma neighbourhood. The life of his wife Sofía (Marina de Tavira) seems increasingly ruled by anxiety about her husband’s growing absence.

Also in the house are Sofía’s children, her elderly mother and their bouncingly frustrated dog, Borrás. Cleo spends her days tending to the family – looking after the kids, preparing food, constantly washing floors, dishes and clothes. She confides in best friend Adela (Nancy García), and strikes up a romance with handsome buck Fermín (Jorge Antonio Guerrero). But like Antonio, Fermín proves an inconstant partner, leaving Cleo to fend for herself when things get complicated, refusing to take responsibility for his actions.

Acting as his own director of photography (he also edits), Cuarón conjures widescreen monochrome images that combine eerie beauty with startling authenticity. Long takes allow conversations and interactions to play out in real

time, the camera panning sedately back and forth through the impressively choreographed action. More than once, the image glides slowly through a full 360 degrees, as if to show us the entirety of the world Cuarón and production designer Eugenio Caballero have created.

However frenzied or frenetic events may become (riots and earthquakes feature), these images retain an almost impassive serenity. Cuarón's camera seems to have a weightless quality, drifting inexorably through turbulent environments.

At times there's a carnivalesque quality to the drama, with marching bands and circus performers being shot out of cannons invoking the ghost of Federico Fellini, whose 1972 classic *Roma* was similarly self-reflexive. But for all its eye-catching visuals, it's the audio design that really sells Cuarón's story. With its bewilderingly intricate tapestry of distant street sounds, ambient noise and close-up conversations, this really is a film that you can watch with your ears.

Fittingly, water is a recurrent motif – from the soapy suds of the opening credits (signalling the “woman's work” that is never done?) to the breaking waters that prefigure a harrowing scene of unblinking sorrow, to the poignant Veracruz beach finale in which strong thematic undercurrents are given literal physical form.

Occasionally the almost showy virtuosity of the film-making can prove a distraction, making a very personal project seem more like a technical tour de force. But it's a minor quibble, and one that I suspect may seem foolish on the second viewing that such a multilayered work demands.

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