

Roma: a Portrait of Mexican Segregational Society

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Abstract

Through recent years, Mexican filmmakers have become very successful in international cinema contests, particularly in American Academy Awards, the Oscars. In 2018, the film "Roma" was pointed to be the new Mexican sensation, getting ten nominations for the contest. This movie generated many controversies in the Mexican, like an exhibition ban in theaters; the Oscar nomination in the category of Actress in a Leading Role for Yalitza Aparicio, a rookie indigenous actress; and some others caused by the social situation pointed inside this story located in the Mexico early 1970s, a very particular context. This essay analyzes some of these controversial issues surrounding "Roma", in order to explain how the post-colonial society in Mexico preserves many of their original values based in gender, class and race segregation, all put together in the narrative structure of Alfonso Cuarón's masterpiece.



Figure 1: Yalitza Aparicio. Photo: MX MM Proyección de Roma, Milton Martínez. Secretaría de Cultura de la Ciudad de México. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Introduction

Mexico has one of the most important movie industries in Latin America through history. The first cinematographer arrived at the end of the 19th Century, during the last years of Porfirio Díaz, the dictator who wanted all the French culture embellishing Mexico. The creation of the Lumière brothers become another important statement for modernizing the country. Paradoxically, the new invention becomes one of the most important icons for the Revolution that overthrew the dictator. With the revolutionary troops, there was always people carrying those huge and complicated machines that registered the common scenes of the war (García Riera, Breve Historia, 1998).

The great moment for Mexican movies came through the 1930s when the “ranchera” music started to crossover with the film industry. “Allá en el Rancho Grande” becomes the first stone of a very impressive building that was the so-called Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (García Riera, Breve Historia, 1998). Many important films are part of this epoch. In most of these titles, the movie is strongly related to very notorious actors, actresses, directors, photographers, musicians, and other ones. The most iconic figure is Pedro Infante, an actor that took part in films like “Nosotros los Pobres,” “Angelitos Negros” or “Dos Tipos de Cuidado”; followed by Jorge Negrete, who starred a remake of the classic “Allá en el Rancho Grande.” Great comedians like Mario Moreno “Cantinflas” participated in movies like “Ahí está el detalle” or the big Hollywood production “Around the World in 80 Day.”¹

The most famous actress of this time was María Félix, the big star of “Doña Diabla” or “Doña Bárbara.” In addition, the glorious Spanish director Luis Buñuel created some of his most important movies in México: “Los Olvidados” and “El Ángel Exterminador” (Monsiváis, Rostros, 1993). Many other names may be included in this list to make a complete statement of the splendid period of the Black and White Mexican movies, but this is not a paper about those times. The Golden Age dropped down with the oncoming color cinema, in the 1950s. Many of these important stars participated in very simple productions, which preferred quantity of products instead of quality. This slum extended for four decades.

The 1990s started a slow but constant renaissance of Mexican cinema, when directors like Guillermo del Toro –“La Invención de Cronos” (1993)–, Alfonso Cuarón – “La Princesita” (1995)–, and Alejandro G. Iñárritu – “Amores Perros” (2000)– delivered their opera prima and starting what will become a new great era of Mexican cinema (González Vargas, *Las rutas*, 2006). Today, these three movie directors are the new Mexican sensation in the Hollywood industry, winning 5 Oscars for Best Director in the last six years. The last movie of this important saga is “Roma” by Alfonso Cuarón, a story of a family indigenous house cleaner, a very uncommon situation in Mexican films. Through this statement began a very complex controversy surrounding many of the most archetypical figures in Mexican culture. In the following lines, I will analyze this situation.

The First Issue: the Netflix Situation

Even when the movie has not been exhibited, a huge controversy began through the company behind Cuarón and his movie. Netflix, the big monster of movie and TV series through Internet streaming, challenged the also enormous Hollywood industry by sponsoring the production of a movie that was conceived to be a masterpiece since the very first idea Cuarón has to film it.

The big problem initiated when the two big movie-exhibiting companies in Mexico (Cinépolis and Cinemex) rejected to project “Roma” in their theaters. These companies argued that Netflix and Cuarón required certain technical applications in theaters for its exhibition. The director denied this through his Twitter account: “It is not true. Even the 4K projection and Atmos sound is the best way to watch “Roma,” we are exhibiting the movie in many 2K theaters and 5.1 Sound Systems” (@alfonsocuaron, November 21, 2018). The real reason for this exhibition controversy was that common exhibitors are not ready to compete with a very different agent like Netflix. The common organizations in the cinema industry are specialized in just one of the many roles inside the business: there are companies that produce films, companies for distributing and others for exhibiting. Nevertheless, this is quite imprecise, because the big stakeholders like Disney, Fox or Universal owned companies in every single stage of the process. The big deal point with the master

of streaming is that they are catching new young audiences that preferred to stay a whole weekend at home watching a complete TV series. Netflix started as a distributor and exhibitor, both at the same time. However, in 2013, they started to produce their first TV series –House of Cards– and in 2015 their first own movie –Beasts of No Nation–. Many of these productions were nominated for Emmys, but the Oscar was not an easy deal to go for. Even “The Square” was the candidate in 2017, “Roma” become their very first Netflix’s bet to win an Academy award. In the Mexican context, the big exhibitors felt menaced by the consequent airing on the Internet, so they considered that the primary business, the exclusiveness, was not respected (Vértiz de la Fuente, “Cinépolis,” November 22, 2018). A concise argument in times of constant changes in the movie industry. The new era demands better answers and wider strategies to compete with Internet-based companies inside all cultural industries, not only cinema. The global companies developed new strategies for the streaming era, but in Mexico, companies like Televisa or Cinépolis are far from being true competitors for Netflix.

The Second Issue: Mexico City is Not Just a Scenario

This film is an autobiographical oeuvre. Cuarón made it as a tribute to his child nurse, “Libo.” For that reason, the film recreated the quotidian life in Mexico City in the early 1970s. Adding black and white cinematography, the whole film was seen as a nostalgic piece of art that transports the spectator to places, objects, sounds, and topics that were essential at that time. At the first exhibitions, controversies began running out in social media. Some people loved the film; some others hate it. One of the first arguments stated in these allegations was the city by itself. The supporters said this was a movie that “only ‘chilangos’² can understand”. Obviously, it is a false argument. As Sergio del Molino stated, “it could be that the ones that completely know Mexico City understand less about “Roma” than foreigners, because chilangos perceive too many details about the city that they are missing this is not a movie about them” (Del Molino, “No entenderá Roma”, December 19, 2018). Sergio del Molino has a strong argument about this controversy, but the main thing observing

the city is not if a native is really understanding the movie. That is just the symptom. The real sickness hides in this endogamic statement. Obviously, you don't need to be born in a certain city to have a full understanding of a film, a novel or whatever another piece of art is located at. The argument itself tells us a lot about the historical controversy between chilangos and "provincianos"³ during the 20th and 21th centuries in Mexico. Chilangos are considered overweening when they traveled around the country; on the other side, provincianos are seen as unwise people that can be easily cheated at the big city. Neither is correct, but it explains a lot of regionalism and ideology permeating through Mexican society since Pre-Hispanic times⁴. At the end, "Roma" is not a story about the city, but the presence of the city is quite important for the narrative. We must remember that "Cleo", the main character, is an indigenous woman that comes from some place in the Mexican "provincia" to get a job as a housemaid. Her battle is not only against maternity, she is struggling against the hostile and adverse urban environment. Therefore, the right part of the controversy is that we must consider the city not just as a scenario for "Roma", but as an antagonistic power, that confronts Cleo to her new reality. The city is not a passive scenario; it interacts with Cleo to build her battles throughout the film.

The Third (And Most Important) Issue: A Kaleidoscopic Segregation

The final controversy with "Roma" began in January 2019 when the movie received 10 nominations to Oscars, including Yalitza Aparicio for the category of Actress in a Leading Role. The problem now was if this woman is a "real actress" and if she "deserves this nomination". For haters, Yalitza was acting as she used to be in "real life", she will not be able to make a second acting job; the Oscar nomination was a clear excess just because Cuarón and the other filmmakers are "in fashion" at Hollywood at this moment. This part of the analysis needs a better separation of all the problematic issues interacting here. I am going to start with the basis of this argument: the acting situation and its conditions. This can be solved through the ideas of Jacqueline Nacache (*Le Personnage Filmique*, 2003), who establishes that the movie actor is more than just a person trying to be a different persona:

The film character, as a being who belongs to the diegesis, is built from a large amount of distinct and combined elements: light, color, shooting takes, editing, staging, sounds, and silences. Moreover, it is built in close interaction with actions and situations. In many films, the plot and its structure, the spectacle, the spectacular action, is made at the expense of character formation (Nacache, *Le Personnage Filmique*, 2003).

We can notice that the film actor does not depend on an academic formation that launches him or her to the movie industry. A good actor understands that he is part of a more complex creative system that includes cameras, lights, microphones, art design and many other essential things to create a film. Following these ideas, it is unnecessary to question if Yalitza has any further experience in acting. She was ideal for a role that is quite special in the Mexican film history. Cuarón needs a dark-skinned woman to recreate Cleo, so Yalitza was ideal for that; but even more, he needs that she can understand the whole situation that the director was trying to generate through this film. Acting in movies is not about shouting and exaggerating poses and faces; it is about recognizing where the camera is and what it is going to capture to put it on the big screen (Benjamin, *La Obra de Arte*, 2003).

The acting stuff is just an alibi whacking the true ideological problem behind Yalitza's nomination. The big deal is about a three-times-segregated person: female, indigenous and poor. All the big stars in the Mexican cinema history, from Pedro Infante to Diego Luna, they are male, young and racial dominant. A few women triumphed in the cinema industry in Mexico, and no one is dark-skinned. The major concern here is about the big historic segregations inside Mexican society: gender, race and class.

Yalitza is a victim of a very common crime that spectators do through movies or TV series: the substitution. People are not allowed to see Yalitza by herself, because they wanted to watch Cleo instead. They don't see the woman who partnered her sister to a movie audition and finally she got the role; they still watch the housemaid. They are not able to see an elementary school teacher who prepared herself to interpret a house cleaner in a movie; they still watch a person who speaks an indigenous language at first. However, the worst and most paradoxical part is that they see what they do not used to see; so that is why they feel that Yalitza did not do anything special.

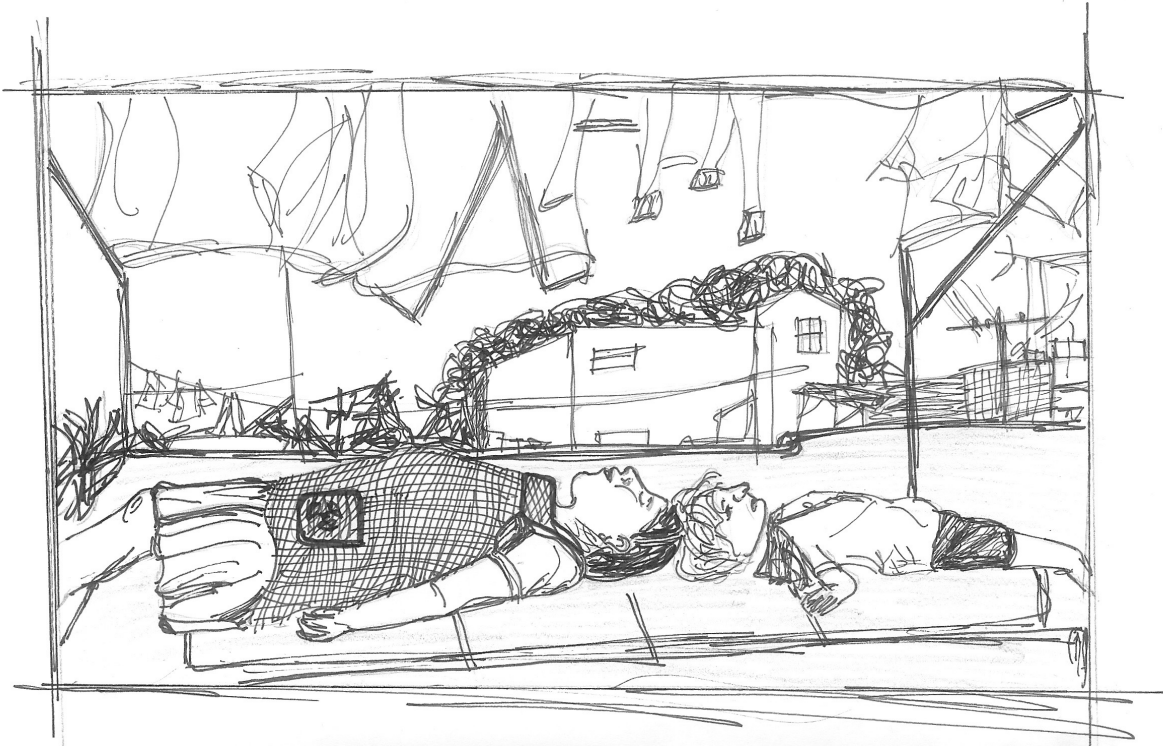


Figure 2: Illustration by Renata Elizondo, February 28, 2019.

Slavoj Žižek said about “Roma” that it left a bitter taste when he watched it (Žižek, “Roma”, January 15, 2019). The main reason for that is that is a fake celebration of Cleo’s kindness. Nothing really happens through this story. Cleo turns back to clean dog shit and prepare a milk shake for the boy. She can be apologized because she is in a kind of “ideological blindness”: she cannot see that she is condemned to be always the loyal servant for Sofía. I agree with Žižek in the main idea of the ideological analysis. The film is brutal because at the end, after all the enormous drama that Cleo must past through, she stayed as the same oppressed person.

The film would be very ambitious if it establishes a completely new reality for Cleo, something like she studied at college and become the new doctor that can save further risky pregnancies. The film makes a social proposition on the very first level of the struggle for segregated people: visibility. In societies where exclusion is widely practiced and shortly viewed, as it happens in Mexico, a film that allows the erased people to be seen by the others is a really huge victory.

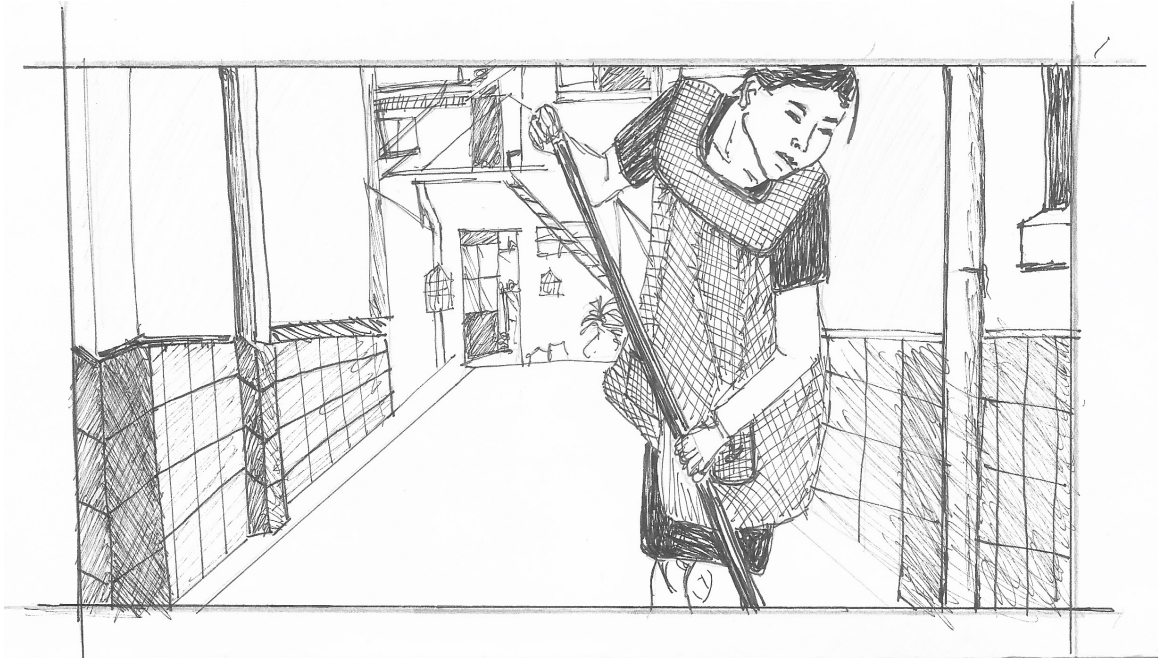


Figure 3: Illustration by Renata Elizondo, February 28, 2019.

Even more, we must see the film outside the film. Yes, Cleo was condemned to be a happy slave after 2 hours 15 minutes; but after a year and a half in rehearsals, filming, exhibiting and promoting the movie, we saw a real qualitative difference not in Cleo, but in Yalitza. She was at many fashion magazine's cover like "Hola", "Vogue" or "The Hollywood Reporter"; she was in a Hollywood red carpet and in many TV shows giving interviews. After this entire movie situation, she will never be just an elementary school teacher. If "Roma" has a bitter taste for Žižek, Yalitza will taste it sweet forever.

Conclusion

It's hard to say if the Mexican success in filming industry should continue ahead in further contests to come. Maybe, "Roma" will be the last of the masterpieces executed by Mexican filmmakers in Hollywood industry. That's hard to say and hard to predict. Nevertheless, what we are able to say is that this movie will be the most iconic of this Second Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. All other movies ("Birdman," "The Shape of Water", "Gravity" or "The Revenant") are American movies directed by Mexican filmmakers. "Roma" is the first one in this list that was entirely made in

Mexico, with Mexican crew, Mexican actors and in Mexican scenarios. There is no longer possible to ask if these awards are for Mexican cinema. We have here the first Mexican movie to win an Oscar for Best Movie in a Foreign Language. A real success for Mexican movies. However, "Roma" is successful not only because it deserved Oscar, Golden Globes and Palms D'Or. As we identified throughout this essay, there are other victories like shifting the movie market, promoting new people for performing in front the camera, but also being a polemic issue that turns back Mexican society to question how historically we watched to indigenous women (if we ever look at them). The big success is to reveal hypocrisy inside a society that prefer to watch other racisms, other classism, and other kind of women, instead of watching the unclean clothing wearing ourselves.

Cuarón and his masterpiece will become a very important icon for Mexican and Latin American movies history. Perhaps, in the near future, we will talk about Alfonso Cuarón at the same level as we used to do about Luis Buñuel; or we can mention Yalitza Aparicio as the most important actress in Mexican cinema, instead of the white gorgeous classic icon of María Félix. This are glorious times for Mexican movies. Perhaps the best ones we ever seen, and "Roma" should be the greatest piece of art delivered through it.

Author Biography

Omar Cerrillo Garnica is a Mexican professor and researcher, member of the National System of Researchers (SNI), Level 1. He is Ph.D. in Social and Political Sciences and a Master in Sociology at Universidad Iberoamericana, both times graduated with honors. He also made a post-doctoral research at the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos, where he searched about digital communication involved in social movements. Now, he is Director of Humanities at Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Cuernavaca. He is author and coordinator of the book "Cardinales Musicales, Music for Loving Mexico", published by Tec de Monterrey and Plaza & Valdés. He is specialist in social and political analysis of art, music and culture; subjects throughout he participated in national and international academic events with further paper publications in Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and France. In recent years, he has specialized on digital media and its cultural and political uses. E-mail: ocerrillo@tec.mx

Notes

¹ He won a Golden Globe for the Best Actor in a Comedy (1956).

² Chilango is a word used to name the people born in Mexico City.

³ Provincia, in the Mexican context, means the other places of the country that are not the big capital city. Therefore, provincianos named the people coming from all around Mexico to reach prosperity at the central place of the country.

⁴ One of the reasons that contributed to the fall of Mexico against Hernán Cortés during the Spaniard Campaign in the 16th Century was the allegiance of Tlaxcala to Cortés because they didn't want to be more Aztec vassals.

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