



# Hymn to the Human Spirit

Brian McClinton

**A**LFONSO Cuarón's *Roma* is shot in black and white, and has subtitles, no stars and very little storyline. For filmgoers attuned to cardboard characters, crass dialogue and cheap thrills, it hasn't much going for it. Yet it has been showered with awards, including the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, Film of the Year by *Sight and*



*Sound* critics ("all roads lead to *Roma*", according to Kieron Corless) and 10 Oscar nominations. When you read this, it may have won Best Picture.

At first glance, it seems to be a small-scale work – partly a snapshot of the director's privileged upbringing in a spacious house in the upper class district of Colonia Roma in Mexico City in the early 1970s, and also partly a paean to the family's live-in maid, who is the main protagonist. But I say 'partly' because to summarise this overwhelmingly beautiful film in mundane language is like saying that Michelangelo's *David* is 17ft of chiselled marble or that Beethoven's 7th symphony is a collection of dance tunes. Much of great art succeeds by lifting the ordinary up on to a higher, more spiritual, plane, and *Roma* is right up there: a stunning visual and aural hymn to the human spirit.

The spirit in question is Cleo, modelled on Cuarón's actual nanny Liboria Rodriguez, and brilliantly played by first-time actress Yalitza Aparacio. She works for a family comprising a biochemist mother, Sofia (Marina de Tavira), an unfaithful doctor father, Antonio (Fernando Grediaga), their three boys and a daughter, a grandmother, a cook, and a frustrated pooch called Borrás who leaves monster turds on the driveway which Cleo has to scrub clean. Yet she is not just a dogsbody. She is also a second mother to the children, wakening them up, cuddling them as they watch TV, singing lullabies to them at bedtime, and even rescuing two of them from drowning at sea on a trip to Veracruz.

Her own private life is also eventful. When she tells her boyfriend Fermin – who likes to practise martial arts in the nude after sex – that she is pregnant, he dumps her. She is comforted by Sofia whom Antonio has deserted for another woman. The director pokes gentle fun at both these men and their phallic obsessions: Fermin's stick fighting and Antonio's massive Ford Galaxie that barely fits in the driveway. "We are alone", Sofia tells Cleo, stumbling home drunk one night. "No matter what they tell you, as women, we are always alone".

We now grasp the symbolism of the opening dog poo sequence. The women are left to clear up the mess that the

self-centred men leave in their wake. In this patriarchal society, women of all classes are used and abused but nevertheless possess the strength, maturity and spirit to hold everything together. And Cleo is tragically tested to the limit after her waters break during a visit to a furniture store where she and the grandmother are looking for a crib.

While there, they witness, through the store's long window, part of the student demonstrations which led to the Corpus Christi massacre of 1971 during the so-called Mexican Dirty War when the government-supported Los Halcones, a black operations army group, gunned down about 120 protesters calling for educational reform. While the political drama unfolds outside, an intensely personal drama develops inside, and neither has a happy ending. The last thirty minutes pack a powerful emotional punch, so be prepared for tears at one heart wrenching tragedy and terror at a later oceanic struggle.

Although *Roma* is a semi-autobiographical film, it is first and foremost a homage to Liboria, so Cuarón blurs the focus on the children, making it difficult to determine which boy is his younger self. He has said that he's the one who receives the slap from the mother for eavesdropping. We do, though, get glimpses of his influences. The children watch *Marooned*, the 1969 sci-fi film starring Gregory Peck about three astronauts lost in space, which includes a scene of the astronaut's floating bodies. Clearly, Cuarón was inspired by it in his 2013 film *Gravity*, which has a similar story but is a richer work.

Other influences clearly include the Italian neorealists Rossellini and De Sica. Like them, he shows a humanistic concern (perhaps laden with guilt) for the struggles and stoical nobility of the working class in the face of the oppression by the privileged who love, need and abuse them in roughly equal measure. And, of course, he extends beyond neorealism, as did Federico Fellini. It is hardly a coincidence that this film has the same title as Fellini's *Roma* (1972) which is also a semi-autobiographical poetic comedy-drama, and there are set pieces reminiscent of Fellini's *8½* and *La Dolce Vita*.

Cuarón's other works include *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) and *Children of Men* (2006). *Roma* has the same technical mastery as these earlier movies but displays greater emotional depth. It is his masterpiece: a multilayered ode to his past which testifies to the power of film to depict the human condition.

*Roma* is available on Netflix