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Yalitza Aparicio as Cleo, Marco Graf as Pepe, Carlos Peralta Jacobson as Paco, and Daniela Demesa as Sofi pictured in a scene in "Roma," written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón. (Netflix/Alfonso Cuarón)



by Antonio D. Sison

View Author Profile
asison.cpps@gmail.com

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The scene is uneventful but strangely hypnotic. In crisp black-and-white, we see a fixed close-up of the ebb and flow of frothy water on a tiled floor. It's hard to tell what and where this really is. The sound is more amplified than normal, evoking a tidal flow … a beachfront porch, perhaps. The tiny image of a passing airplane is mirrored on the wet floor, noticeable only to those who pay attention. As the aperture widens, it becomes clear that the scene is far more mundane than what it had seemed. A diminutive young woman is simply washing the floor of a residential garage.

From the very opening scene of "Roma," gifted Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón invites the audience into an experience of visual poetry unfettered by formulaic Hollywood conventions and spoon-fed expository narrative. The film's meaningful layers unfold significantly through the poetics of the characters' facial expressions and bodily gestures, recurring visual and auditory motifs, and thoughtful symbols and masterful camerawork. These creative options conspire organically to tell an intimate, deeply moving story.

Official trailer for "Roma"

Set in the period 1970-71 in "Colonia Roma," a neighborhood of Mexico City, "Roma" revolves around the life of Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), an indigenous Mixtec woman who works as a maid in an upper-middle-class household of the physician Antonio (Fernando Grediaga) and his wife Sofía (Marina de Tavira). She is the consummate multitasker, at once nanny, cook, laundrywoman and house cleaner. Good-natured and serene, she fulfills her daily duties with earnestness and dignity; in return, her young wards love her like a second mother, and her employers, albeit inconsistently, appreciate her service.

The household dynamics are reflective of the class and gender inequalities that persist to this day, not just in Mexican society, but also in a few other cultures marked by pronounced social hierarchies. In one telling scene, she serves snacks to the family as they watch TV, and then sits on the floor next to the sofa. No sooner had she taken her spot to join the viewing when Sofía asks her to make some tea for

her husband. Cleo is part of the family but keeps within an invisible boundary that demarcates her place — she is the maid.

Unfairly, she is also at the receiving end of Sofía's pent-up anxiety over Antonio's increasing coldness sublimated by his whining about the mismanagement of the household. Sofía snaps at Cleo a few times for her failure to keep up with the task of cleaning dog droppings, something Antonio had grumbled about earlier.

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As the head of the family, it's apparent that Antonio is the entitled one. Cuarón establishes this early on in a garage-parking scene that plays out like a much-anticipated event. The entire household watches with great expectation as a muscular Ford Galaxy maneuvers inch by measured inch into the narrow garage. Intercut with close-ups of the car's slick interior, a burning cigarette from the hand of the unseen driver, and punctuated by pontifical music from the car radio, the scene's phallic allusions are hard to ignore.

And then ingeniously, Cuarón subverts all expectations — the car tire runs over dog poop (a continuing visual motif), and out comes the unsure, nondescript Antonio who looks nothing like an alpha male. The sequence is a visual presaging of Antonio's gutless inauthenticity, his failure to live up to his role as husband and father.

Clearly, the heart of the film is Cleo. Played by the luminous Aparicio, who had never acted before, Cleo's emotions find eloquent expression in her soulful eyes; every glance, every expression, renders the spoken word superfluous. We learn that she is dating a village macho named Fermín (Jorge Antonio Guerrero), who, after coaxing her into a make-out session in a hotel room, shows off his precise martial arts moves while stark naked. Her reaction, loving but with a hint of ambiguous bemusement, is telling; for sure, she is not simply an adoring fan.

When Fermín learns that he has gotten Cleo pregnant, his displays of focused virility fail to translate in real terms. He abandons Cleo and at a later turn, heaps verbal abuse on her. At this point, a scarlet thread links Cleo and Sofia — their shared trauma in the face of male egocentrism and patriarchal injustice.



Yalitza Aparicio as Cleo, and Marco Graf as Pepe in "Roma." (Netflix/Carlos Somonte)

Without resorting to overt political commentary, "Roma" pulls out enough to reveal the wider sociopolitical tensions that hover around Cleo's world. In the riveting scene when Señora Teresa (Verónica García), Sofía's elderly mother, accompanies the pregnant Cleo to shop for a crib for her coming baby, a student protest erupts into violence and a protester is pursued inside the store and shot dead. Although not commented upon, the event references the 1971 Corpus Christi Massacre* where paramilitary forces killed 120 student protesters. Juxtaposing the granular with the epic, Cuarón layers the characters' dramatic turns with an external mirroring of their internal turbulence; amid the chaos, Cleo's water breaks. Similarly, when Sofía senses that Antonio is about to desert the family and hangs on to him, a loud brass band moves into the frame, further externalizing the dissonance.

Much of the narrative plays like a cinematic diary of Cleo's day-to-day life; the camera, a compassionate observer thoughtfully taking note of the moments of transcendence within the ordinariness of a life of devoted service. Theologically, this

meaningfully resonates with what Ada María Isasi-Díaz and *mujerista* theologians understand as *lo cotidiano*, the spirituality that emerges from Latinas' lived experience, which is often marked by the daily struggle for greater human flourishing.

The ebb and flow of ocean waves, already alluded to in the opening scene, and also unobtrusively symbolized in a painting midway through the film, serves as the dramatic crescendo for the emergence of Cleo as a fully realized character. In a manner of speaking, the waves baptize her as *una santa de lo cotidiano*, "a saint of the quotidian." Of course, this is never literally spelled out in "Roma"; it is simply one of a number of interpretive dividends kindled by an engaged viewing of what, to me, is the best film of 2018.

[Precious Blood Br. Antonio D. Sison is associate professor of systematic theology at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, and author of the book *The Sacred Foodways of Film* (Pickwick, 2016). "Roma" is available on Netflix video streaming from Esperanto Filmoj/Participant Media.]

**This story has been updated to add the correct massacre that is referenced in the film.*

Read this next: Ada María Isasi-Díaz encountered God in the messiness of life
A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 8-21, 2019** print issue under the headline: A saint of the quotidian in Alfonso Cuarón’s film ‘Roma’.