

Peter Bradshaw's film of the week Roma

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|Review|

Roma review – an epic of tearjerking magnificence

★★★★★

Alfonso Cuarón's intimate family drama, set in 1970s Mexico, is a triumphant blend of tragedy, comedy and absurdity



📷 Sublime mystery ... Roma. Photograph: Carlos Somonte/Netflix



Peter Bradshaw

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Alfonso Cuarón's new film Roma is thrilling, engrossing, moving – and just entirely amazing, an adjectival pileup of wonder. He has reached back into his own childhood to create an intensely personal story, and this is the second time I have seen it since the

premiere at this year's Venice film festival, hoping to get a clearer view of those later images that on first viewing were made wobbly by tears. Same problem, though. Those coming to see this film had better prepare themselves to be emotionally wrung out.

Cuarón has an extraordinary way of combining the closeup and the wide shot, the tellingly observed detail – humorous or poignant or just effortlessly authentic – with the big picture and the sense of scale. At times, it feels novelistic in its sense of character development and inner life: a densely realised, intimate drama developing in what feels like real time. In its engagingly episodic way, it is also like a soap opera or telenovela. And at other times it is resoundingly epic.

The film is dynamically shot in a pellucid black and white, which has perhaps made it easier for the director (who is also the cinematographer) to use digital techniques for exterior shots, modifying and fabricating period details with an ecstatic, dreamlike certainty. The streetscapes in 1970s Mexico City are worthy of Scorsese, and Cuarón stages stunning crowd scenes, especially his evocation of the Corpus Christi massacre, when around 120 people were killed by the military during a student demonstration. Very often, Cuarón's tracking shots slide and snake us through the crowds to the doors of a cinema, where in one scene an audience is shown enjoying John Sturges's 1969 sci-fi picture [Marooned](#), which we can now assume to be an influence on his own deep-space masterpiece, [Gravity](#).

ROMA Official Trailer (2018) Alfonso Cuarón, Netflix Movie HD



Now, a note of reservation. This movie is produced by the streaming giant [Netflix](#) – yet far from being praised for having bankrolled a masterpiece, Netflix is widely attacked for intending this work to be consumed mostly on digital platforms, and permitting only a relatively small cinema release in exclusive partnership with one chain. It has effectively been accused of suppressing the big-screen identity of its own product.

Well, it's an old story. Many great films here only get a tiny cinema release, restricted to a couple of cities, and [Roma](#) is getting a wider showing than others in the past. Some of the accusers are behaving as if they have never deigned to watch a movie on TV or DVD in their lives. But there is a point here. Roma has to be seen on the big screen. Isn't it possible for Netflix to widen the big-screen release in the UK and also Ireland for awards season and the New Year? Doesn't the prospective box office bonanza attendant on its prizewinning success make this economically viable?

Anyway, the year is 1970: posters for that summer's World Cup, held in Mexico, are still seen in one child's bedroom. The title refers to the city's Colonia Roma district and to the director's belief that Mexico City has been evolving in the four decades since into a non-imperial grandiosity, a quasi-Rome in its commotion and sprawl.

Roma is fundamentally the tale of two women. One is Cleo (played wonderfully by non-professional newcomer Yalitza Aparicio), a young woman of Mixteco Mesoamerican heritage working as a live-in maid for a beleaguered upper-middle-class family in [Mexico](#) City. Cleo's personal life is beginning to unravel in tandem with that of her employer, Sofía (Marina De Tavira).

Cuarón shows how the household, though placid enough, is under pressure. There are signs of tension and dysfunction. The tiled courtyard driveway, which is shown being mopped clean over the opening credits, is habitually covered in the excrement of the family's much cherished dog. The man of the house, Antonio (Fernando Grediaga), parks his car in this space with a wearied yet fanatical care that hints at his own unhappiness.

His wife Sofía presides over four boisterous children, but the real work is being done by Cleo and her fellow maid Adela (Nancy García García), who are always eligible for the condescension of class and race but are nonetheless well treated. Antonio keeps going away for what are supposedly business trips and a stressed Sofía one day tells the children it would be a good idea to write to their dad, imploring him to come back. Meanwhile, Cleo has to explain to her dodgy, martial-arts enthusiast boyfriend Fermín (Jorge

Antonio Guerrero) that she has missed her period. It is the prelude to disaster.

There is tragedy, comedy and absurdity here, along with sublime mystery in its extraordinary setpieces. At the heart of it all is a wonderful performance from Aparicio, who brings to the role something delicate and stoic. She is the jewel of this outstanding film.

Roma is in select cinemas from 29 November and [on Netflix](#) from 14 December.
