

# Work In Progress



Commentary

No love in “roma”: maids’  
representation as a language of class

Karina Vazquez

February 19, 2019



Yalitza Aparicio in “Roma”

A recent dossier on the website *Mediatico* with contributions from academics specialized in Mexican cinema leaves no doubts about the aesthetic attributes of the film. The black-and-white images, the large format framing, and the neorealist look make the character and story of Cleo, a

live-in maid based on Cuarón's own childhood nanny Libo, resonate emotionally with the audience in a unique way.

However, it might not be the film itself that needs closer attention, but rather its quick positive reception, a kind of urgency for approval that might be more related to a cultural industry that transcends national borders, and social class anxiety anchored in ethnic/gender/race identities. The film seems to respond to these anxieties, offering a visual and emotional soothing.

Centered on the life of a live-in maid and her loving relationship with the children of the family she works for, *Roma* captured the attention of critics, who have seen the film as a tribute, pointing to a visual rhetoric of love and memory that exhibits a recognition that surpasses time, social boundaries, and class distinction.

But, why *Roma* instead of other recent films such as *The Maid* (2009), by Chilean director Sebastián Silva, or *The Second Mother* (2015) by Brazilian director Anna Muylaert, among others? In these films, domestic workers, their work, and especially their relationship with their employers have been the main focus. In these other narratives, maids represent a threat to the employers' identity as they reveal themselves as consumers and women capable of owning their time and their emotions.

The characteristics of domestic service, such as the isolation of household work, the dynamic of invisibility (for the employers)/visibility (for the children), the emotional labor that is expected, the affective ambivalence between maid and female employer, are all portrayed in depth in these films, and *Roma* also epitomizes many of the observations that researchers on domestic service have pointed out.

However, despite the similitudes, some differences make Cuarón's film and *Cleo* more likely to receive such a warm reception. By making visible a historical situation of inequality embedded in a melodramatic language of affection, *Roma* ends up blurring that very inequality.

Although the film shows the tension between an abusive working situation and an emotional connection, *Cleo* is subjected to a constant depersonalization. Not only the sociohistorical conditions that make *Cleo* and her people the "other," as well as the household heavy tasks, but

her restricted inclusion in the intimate space of the bourgeois home make the “love” that flows through the film feel like a “cluttered love,” one that is an internalized demand rather than a natural feeling.

On one side the film exposes the abuse, specially by Sofía, the female employer, victim herself of patriarchal ideology, but on other it obscures, blurs it with the maternal love between Cleo and the children. It shifts attention from the vicious cycle of giving-Cleo and extracting-employers that leaves the maid with no choice, to the point of risking her life for love or to not lose the only thing she has: that family, that job. Critics have paid attention to this aspect of the film which is seen as Cuarón’s tribute to his nanny, a masterpiece of love and recognition for such priceless presence and devotion.

The Domestic Workers Alliance responded to *Roma* with the slide show “**There are millions of Cleos all over the world,**” in which numbers tell a less romantic reality of an unprotected and unstandardized job. Therefore, why does *Roma* receive such attention? Is it because Cleo and the story reinstate a certain class order?

**Ariel Dorfman’s analysis of the film** points out the imbalance between the devotion expected by the employers and their lack of sensitivity: How is it possible to be so restrictive, to impose so many rules over the women in charge of our most valuable and precious children? The film could be seen as a call to morally trespass the demarcated territories of food, clothing, etc. that keep maids included, but distant – “like family,” but still serving.

For Dorfman, the film calls out the hypocrisy of progressive sectors; why not let the maid enter our space if she has been giving all she has? Entering and crossing the boundaries of class and race is what, according to Dorfman, Cuarón’s Cleo does, while her Central American sisters are stopped at the border. Subjected to the institutional violence, and the violence institutionalized in a speech constantly criminalizing the “other,” unprotected and stripped from rights, as Cleo and her people, many women who will end up in domestic service are not able to cross the border. Therefore, Dorfman’s call is one for more “amor” (love) in Roma.

But maybe, to better assess the impact and the urgency of the film’s approval, it would be useful to shift Dorfman’s observation: The migrant sisters of Cleo can enter, cross the border in the

darkness, because Cleo enters in the same way, with no voice, no rights, no reciprocal material recognition for her work. Like Cleo, they will be paid only through the children's love, lacking rights, decent salaries, benefits, and retirement. In fact, maybe Cleo enters for all the other maids to keep entering into the same working conditions (of love and capitalist extraction) that leave unquestioned the social, economic and political structures that push them as a vulnerable workforce, stripped of autonomy and rights.

The film therefore functions as a visual discourse that reinstates the language of the master not because the story itself has that purpose, but because its contiguity with other social and cultural discourses stamped in the cultural industry, those in which love recognition does not mean or require material reciprocity, fair pay. Cleo does not destabilize any social order, but to the contrary, prevents the elimination of any social difference or distinction drawing her as "the other." Ultimately, with its emphasis on love, the film, as a vehicle for a language of class distinction, comes to reinforce otherness by privileging recognition rather than equality.

Then, why *Roma*? Is it because of the need to denounce progressive hypocrisy or because Cleo is the type of poor woman whose representation meets bourgeois emotional needs and anxiety with love and devotion? Contrary to other films, in which, in one way or another, maids become autonomous, reveal themselves as consumers and contradictory subjects whose identities threaten that of their employers, Cleo epitomizes the perfect maid.

### **KARINA VAZQUEZ**

Karina Elizabeth Vásquez is Professor in the Department of Latin American, Latino, and Iberian Studies, University of Richmond. She thanks students from her course "(House)Keeping Inequalities: Maids, Affect and Social Class Through Film and Literature" (Spring 2019) at the University of Richmond. Some of the observations such as "cluttered love," invisibility for employers/visibility for the children, and employer-employee vicious cycle come from the class discussions and their thoughtful reflections.

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