

On Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma"



On finishing a particularly annoying novel, a good friend of mine once gasped in exasperation: 'The author's fingerprints are all over this.' I can't say I remember now the book he was talking about, but the phrase has been with me ever since, because it encapsulates

certain writers so perfectly.

Take Ian Fleming, for instance. His books are bad – unutterably bad – but they are bad because they reflect so nakedly the vulgar psyche of the overgrown public school-boy who has written them. James Bond, his sadism, his love of killing for Queen and Country, along with his murderous xenophobia, his sardonic contempt for third world nations, the sense that those with darker skins and Slavic accents are inferior and disposable; his fascination with women which doubles as a hateful distrust – an ability to ruthlessly use and discard them; all of these elements adroitly combine the ethos of Empire filtered through the British public school system and the Etonian elitism on which the young Fleming was weaned. The old boys' network given a new, frenetic and murderous lease of life through the creation of an imperial superspy cum assassin *extraordinaire*. One cannot escape the feeling that James Bond was the man Ian Fleming would very much have liked to have been; a fantasy version, if you like, of his own idealised self. In other words, the author's fingerprints are all over his creation.

On watching the critically acclaimed 2018 Alfonso Cuarón film – *Roma* – the same phrase crossed my mind. Ostensibly, *Roma* is about as different from James Bond as you could imagine. *Roma* is the story of Cleo, an indigenous maid in 1970s Mexico, who works in a middle class 'white' household, taking care of Sofia and Antonio and, most of all, their four children. Cuarón himself grew up during this period in a middle class Mexican family and was cared for by the

indigenous help so *Roma* has a strongly autobiographical slant. It is a vividly political film and one with a worthy agenda; an attempt to describe the way the lives of indigenous servants pan out and the fashion in which those lives are exploited. Although Cleo, the protagonist, is often treated 'well' by the family she works for, and although the children have genuine affection for her and she for them – nevertheless she is regarded as less than a person, someone who can be shouted at as a form of catharsis, someone who can be ordered in an instant to go and make herself busy in the kitchen half way through a film she is watching. Despite all the niceties and sometimes genuine concern the family exhibit toward her, in the last analysis, Cleo remains inexorably alienated from them, she is there to serve. More generally, the film provides a colourful and vivid depiction of Mexico in the early seventies, the sense of social tensions building in the background, the rising tide of protest of the youth, and the crushing response delivered by a brutal, unreconstructed state.

And yet, despite these positives *Roma* is an utter failure. Most fundamentally this is due to Cuarón's depiction of his protagonist. Cleo is a character almost entirely bereft of character. She is sympathetic for sure; she is kind and warm and giving, this much the writer adduces. She also suffers, terribly. But beyond this, she has no real content; she lacks any type of idiosyncrasy or individualisation, any nuance or quirk which might mark her out as a unique personality in her own right. And this comes from the fact that Cuarón doesn't take the time to invest her with any kind of backstory, or to say the same, she is a character without historical content. Her relationships to the family she cares for are well described, but of her own family, her own background, we are told almost nothing. What are her mother and father like? Does she have siblings? What is the place where she comes from like? How often does she visit there? Does she send money home? The closest thing which comes to referencing any of

those things is a snippet of conversation which can't last more than thirty seconds. It occurs in a scene when Cleo's employers have taken time out to visit the *hacienda* of a family friend. While there, Cleo is reminded of her own village; standing in a soft breeze, gazing across the hilly meadows with church bells ringing gently in the background, she remarks dreamily: 'It's like my village. Without the mountain, of course, but it looks just like this...This is how it sounds...Just like this...This is how it smells...'

At this point in the film Cleo is pregnant, she touches a finger to her belly; she is glowing with the feel of nature all around, the fecund landscape, the new life burgeoning in her own body – the director/writer is clearly trying to craft a moment of almost transcendental power; here Cleo is in an authentic harmony with nature and her own past. But, once you look beyond the poetic inflection, the dazzling camera work, the wide panoramic views of the glorious landscape – you realise that this place has very little to do with Cleo's past. After all, none of her family or friends live in here. The people who do are all strangers to her. And she has never been here before. She is only here now because she has been brought here by the people she serves. The writer/director is either incapable of giving Cleo a real past or simply too lazy to bother with it; so the lacuna is filled with what is essentially a magic trick, an illusion – it is *like* her village, but it is *not* her village. This moment, this realisation of authenticity, is actually profoundly inauthentic, because it is all about the atmosphere – the superficial spirituality of the place relayed in and through its natural grandeur – but goes nowhere in terms of referencing the actual social relationships which truly underpin Cleo's existence.

Something similar can be said of the main dilemma Cleo's character faces. She is made pregnant by a lover who then brutally severs all contact with her – a man she has been

introduced to through the boyfriend of her best friend, another indigenous maid called Adela. But although Cleo is pregnant for most of the film, she doesn't make a single comment on her feelings about the pregnancy during that time. Does she consider abortion? Adoption? Would she like to keep the baby even if she is not in the best of economic situations? She lets slip not a word. After the baby arrives stillborn, there is a scene on the beach with her employers' children which is almost painfully contrived. The children's mother, Sofia, tells Cleo to keep an eye on the children (the sea is really choppy). Then she goes out of shot. Immediately the children run into the sea, almost drowning. The stage is set for Cleo to rescue them, which she dutifully does, dragging them out, panting and collapsing. The mother returns on cue and both the children and mother begin to thank Cleo over and over for saving their lives. At this point, under the strain of what has just happened, Cleo speaks of her stillborn child at last in a sobbing halting whisper: 'I didn't want her... I didn't want her... I didn't want her...I didn't want her to be born...' Again, there is the sense that this is supposed to count as some great existential moment, some all-encompassing dramatic revelation, but more than anything else it feels contrived and soap-operatic; Cleo has said not a word about her unborn child for all the time she was pregnant – so this seems like a rather hastily tacked on afterthought, a cheap trick designed to do in an instant the dramatic work which should have been done throughout the film previous.

Cleo's unborn child throws into relief the utter paucity of the social world Cuarón creates for Cleo. Cleo's lover (Fermín) treats her shamefully; having made her pregnant, he refuses all further contact with her and refuses any admission of responsibility on his part. But this man is part of Cleo's broader social circle. He was introduced to her by her best friend Adela, through Adela's own boyfriend (Ramón). It seems reasonable to assume that Adela would take some kind of stance in response to the mistreatment of Cleo by Fermín. Perhaps she

would take Cleo's side against Fermín. Perhaps she would berate her boyfriend, demand that he challenge Fermín for his awful behaviour. Or perhaps she would take the side of Ramón and Fermín against Cleo. Who knows? The audience certainly doesn't because although Cleo's mistreatment at the hands of Fermín and her subsequent pregnancy are perhaps the most important things which happen to her in the film – her closest friend and intimate does not even deign to reference them. For Cleo's social circle (outside the family she serves) it feels as though her pregnancy and mistreatment are virtually invisible.

At this point it is worth performing a thought experiment. Shift the character – Cleo's character – from being an indigenous American woman, to a white working class woman working in London or Paris in the same period. Imagine a novel or a film which told a similar story about this person, how she got pregnant, was abandoned by a particularly callous man. Only said piece of fiction did not have her or her friends reference what had happened; did not have her articulate her feelings about the pregnancy in any way, shape or form until the very end of the film/novel where finally she utters about fifteen words at best on the subject. Such a vast, gaping hole in plot and characterisation would probably have most critics scratching their head in bafflement and the work would have been unlikely to gain any glittering plaudits.

But *Roma* has been praised loudly and loftily across the board. The most charitable explanation for this, of course, is that indigenous people have such a slight presence in Hollywood, their stories are so seldom 'told', and so when a big director/writer comes along to 'tell' one of those stories – and in a supposedly 'truthful' light by referencing the genuine exploitation many indigenous are subject to as domestics – then we are possibly that much more inclined to believe we are seeing something gritty, real and profound. That's the more charitable explanation. The less charitable

explanation is that perhaps we don't expect the same depth of characterisation in the depiction of an indigenous character compared with their white counterpart, because we instinctively or unconsciously feel that indigenous lives don't contain such depths in the first place.

But what does this mean for the character of Cleo in the world which Cuarón brings to light? Because Cuarón fails to invest his protagonist with any history or substance, he fails to demonstrate what drives her character and gives rise to her beliefs, aspirations and dreams. She is kind and self-sacrificing; this much we know – but beyond that you would be hard pressed to say a single salient thing about her. She goes to the cinema but we are never told what type of films she likes. Or for that matter what are her hobbies more generally? Is she religious? What does she like about her job? What does she hate about it? Does she like living in the city? Where would she like to end up? The rather ordinary thoughts and hopes which infuse our daily lives are never even referenced when it comes Cuarón's portrayal of Cleo. Instead there is just a vast, blank page. And because of such blankness, such a lack of subjectivity, Cleo's character is rendered an empty vessel which is entirely beholden to the outside forces which impact her life. She becomes as a feather in the wind; an entirely passive, fleeting presence which is buffeted from one event to the next, without any will or direction. She seems to take no active part in the things which happen to her. When her employers are rude to her, she says not a word, she never complains, she never protests – not to them (understandable in terms of keeping her job), but not to anyone else either. Not even to herself. The same is true of her mistreatment by Fermín. She utters barely a whimper. It is as though she has become a passive spectator in the performance of her life.

Cleo's lack of subjectivity is significant within the context of *Roma* itself. The film has been praised because of its

political tone. *The Guardian's* resident film critic Peter Bradshaw, for example, lauds the way it describes the social and political conflicts sweeping the nation, '[t]he 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...' [1] while elsewhere he points out that '[t]he distinctions of race and class are everywhere in Roma.' [2] In a sense Bradshaw is right: Cuarón does give a very effective visual description of the protest and subsequent massacre, and, more generally he is careful to demonstrate how – when the family repair to the hacienda – there is an atmosphere of foreboding and aggression; indigenous movements are pressing their struggle for land, and, in turn, the elites are fomenting a militaristic response. These broader racial and class conflicts are on the boil in the background. But while this is conveyed with vivid and visual artistry, the same pervasive emptiness lingers, because such struggles are not given any concrete significance. And this is because they are not brought into alignment with the life of the protagonist, Cleo herself. With all of this going on, you would think that she might have a single opinion on some element of it. Perhaps the radical elements of the social movements exploding all around her might appeal to her in the context of her own exploitation. Or perhaps she demurs, perhaps she retreats behind the conservatism of her employers, a gentle misplaced loyalty which allows her to balm her fears in the face of such a rapidly changing and unstable world.

Again, we are given nothing. But this is inevitable. For Cleo is not a living human being rich in need – conflicted, hopeful and flawed. She cannot have any political views because she never for one moment attains genuine personhood. Instead she is merely a cipher, a cipher of kindness emptied out of all messy human content and contradiction. Who would see someone

like her in these terms? I'd like to hazard a guess. I think it's the type of viewpoint which might come from a child. A child's view of the domestic who looks after him or her. For that child someone like Cleo would appear day in and day out, with all the kindly regularity and beaming presence of the sun, projecting warmth and security into their young life. It would not occur to a small child that their indigenous nanny might have a complicated independent existence outside the orbit of his or her own home life. And so perhaps it is no great surprise to discover that Cuarón based the 'character' of Cleo on the ingenious nanny who looked after him from the age of nine months on, a Mixtec woman named Liboria "Libo" Rodríguez. It is important to state that Cuarón created this character as a way of questioning his own privilege: 'I was a white, middle-class, Mexican kid living in this bubble. I didn't have an awareness...' [3]

Roma, I think, is a film of good-intentions; it hopes to offer up a kind of reconciling; the ability of adult director Cuarón to recognise what his childhood self never could; that is the exploitation and hardship which his beloved, real life nanny would have been subject to. And yet, as much as Cuarón clearly does love his real-life nanny, he is never able to see her fictional counterpart with anything other than childlike eyes; as a figure who has no real life – no existence, no definition – beyond the immeasurable kindness, security and warmth she provides for the family she is paid to care for.

And it is in this way, of course, that one sees just how clearly the author's fingerprints are all over his creation. *Roma* poses as a radical film but is profoundly liberal at its core; that is to say, it very much expresses the sensibilities of an enlightened elite. It draws attention to Cleo's suffering. It even shows that the family Cleo works for are, at times, oppressive toward her. But the fundamental reason why the film is the equivalent of a conformist's wet dream is because it doesn't matter what happens to Cleo; it

doesn't matter how she is exploited or degraded – it doesn't matter how much of her life and time is stolen away from her – she will nevertheless remain absolutely loyal and devoted to her employers, come what may. She will never become politicised, she will never become angry, she will never become radical; all that she will be, she is; an eternal, unchanging archetype of beneficent kindness and meek subordination, someone whose *raison d'être* is to pour love and labour into the lives of the people who exploit her.

It is in this sense that the film offers up a fundamentally 'liberal' perspective; it allows for the emotional handwringing which goes along with the depiction of her suffering; but the end of the film is as the beginning; Cleo meekly assumes her place as servant at the heart of the family. The message is classically liberal; in terms of the structures and forms of the class and race hierarchy, 'we' at the top should learn to treat those at the bottom with more humanity, more respect – but the film's ultimate meaning is clear – that is, those same structures and forms of oppression are immutable and unchanging. Cleo is never more than a stereotype; that of the benevolent earth mother brimming with love and kindness, a stable bedrock, a fixed unchanging point around which the lives of the middle-class family flow before rushing on into the future, toward bigger and better things. And in this we see how decidedly unmodern and retrograde *Roma* is; Cleo's true movie ancestors hearken back to the black maids in the Hollywood films of the '30s and '40s, big bountiful women who have no stories of their own, and are called into being to provide a reassuring presence, maternal and domestic; a gentle and passive backdrop to the lives of white characters as their stories unfurl.

There is no doubts something profoundly comforting in this; in times of political and racial unrest, it must be nice for the privileged and powerful to know that their servants have all the slavish loyalty and autonomy of mind of Old Yeller. And in

a Hollywood which has been wracked by the #MeToo movement, you can expect *Roma* to pick up a bevy of awards, no doubts a strong candidate for the Oscar for Best Foreign Film. For there has never been a time when Hollywood has needed to look more radical, more progressive.

Roma purports to give its indigenous protagonist a voice, and then renders her mute; by fawning on it, the Hollywood establishment will be seen to exercise a progressive, radical and righteous agenda but will, in reality, be celebrating a film which remains wedded at its core to the values of the privileged and the status quo.

[1] Peter Bradshaw, 'Roma review – an epic of tearjerking magnificence', *The Guardian*, 29th November 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/29/roma-review-alfonso-cuaron>

[2] Peter Bradshaw, 'The 50 best films of 2018: No 1 – Roma', *The Guardian*, 21st December 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/dec/21/best-films-2018-uk-us-roma>

[3] Alfonso Cuarón cited in 'Alfonso Cuarón on the Painful and Poetic Backstory Behind 'Roma'', *Variety*, 2018: <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/roma-alfonso-cuaron-netflix-libo-rodriguez-1202988695/>