

Urban Space, Politics and Socio-ethnic Relations in Roma.

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Abstract

Roma, written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón, has been one of the most successful Latin American films of recent decades, while also widely recognised as an important piece of social commentary, and a window on Mexico City in the early 1970s. The cinematography and storyline of the film offer insights into social change in the city, as well as the use of private and public space, and what this says about social and ethnic relations, as well as how business is carried out within the city. This developmental paper sets out a project to explore these themes.

Roma as a snapshot of Mexico City

Roma is a snapshot of Mexico City in the early 1970s. While the focus of the film is on the city itself - the suburb of Roma, as well as the city centre and peripheral areas - there are also sections that occur outside the city, both in undetermined rural areas and in a tourist resort in the coastal state of Veracruz. The appeal of Roma is a nostalgic view of a Mexico City that no longer exists. However, the symbolism in a number of scenes is also extremely significant, including the way the film portrays the use of space, which people occupy particular spaces, and how they do so.

PRI omnipresence throughout the film

Political imagery representations are present throughout. For 71 years until the year 2000, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) dominated the country's politics and maintained a grip on the presidency that only really started to slip following a series of economic crises and corruption scandals during the late 1980s and 1990s (Camp, 2007; Oppenheimer, 1996). The period in which Roma is set represented the height of PRI dominance of Mexico's political system (Smith, 1979) in evidence throughout, for example through repeated images of election posters.

In many ways the early 1970s was a golden age for Mexico (Oppenheimer, 1996; Smith, 1979), and this comes across in the film. There are allusions throughout the film - through imagery rather than speech - to Mexico's experience of hosting major sporting events such as the Olympics in 1968 and football World Cup in 1970. It is made clear that living in a country that has hosted such events is important (Camp, 2007; Oppenheimer, 1996), particularly for the children in the family at the heart of the story. There's an undertone of national pride, which comes across in the film having hosted these events.

The PRI is a presence throughout. While the party is never spoken of by name, and images of the party's logo rarely appear, there's an unspoken omnipresence, which clearly touches on all of the characters in the film, major and minor, despite little if any actual discussion about politics by the family that's the focus of the film's story. The state is represented and reproduced in everyday social performances, for example the PRI logo appears in the sequence that takes place in a newly founded area on the edge of the city dominated by a martial arts lesson and demonstration.

As Dunn (2010: 88) argues, performativity in relation to the state should be considered as practices that link discourses of sovereignty and 'stateness' to the structural/structuring effect. There's a sense of acceptance of the status quo - perhaps grudgingly alongside the impression that the subservience - or acquiescence - of the family and its friends is taken for granted. "They're" looked after by the Mexican state - employed by the state in hospitals.

The coercive state and resistance to it

The inhabitants of such areas are portrayed in the film both as the primary consumers of the PRI's message, at the heart of resistance to it plus recipients of the state repression that this provokes (Camp, 2007; Smith, 1979). One of the most powerful sequences involves the main character, and a member of the family for which she works, finding themselves caught up in a political protest, based on the Corpus Christi student massacre. It's not clear who the protestors are, possibly a coalition of middle-class students and residents of poorer neighbourhoods in the city, some of which are organised into pseudo-political movements. The ferocity of the state response - primarily through an army that is similar in age and background to the protestors - is intensified in the way the repression of the protestors is portrayed. Cuarón explores how the state claims a monopoly on the legitimized use of organized violence and what Mitchell (1991: 94) terms 'the powerful metaphysical effect of practices that make structures appear to exist'. The horror of the scene is further highlighted through a secondary sequence involving a woman screaming for help as the main characters drive off to hospital, and it being followed immediately by a tragic and quite bloody sequence in which a baby is stillborn.

The birth scene...relatively impersonal and clinical, is an example of the characters in the film engaging with the Mexican state. Given that the PRI and the Mexican state were to a large extent fused during the early 1970s, it's perhaps inevitable that, like the party, the state is an underlying presence throughout the film (Camp, 2007; Smith, 1979). The coercive power of the state is illustrated both very directly through the student massacre, as well as more subtly through the military parade down the street where the family that's at the centre of film lives. In addition, key characters in the film engage with the state in the form of the Mexican health service during the pregnancy and subsequent still-birth. In these interactions, we see a relatively benevolent state that offers modern hospitals and good quality of care (Smith, 1997). However, it's made extremely clear that the maid receives preferential treatment because of her employers' contacts and that the estranged husband of the family is a doctor. This is extremely typical of the sort of clientelism that has dominated the provision of public services throughout Latin America (Foweraker et al, 2003), and in Mexico has gone hand-in-hand with the corporatist co-option of key socio-economic groups under the PRI (Smith, 1997).

Use of public and private space

The presence of the state is a theme throughout sections of the film that take place in public spaces, such as newly developed urban areas, hospitals and more generally the streets of the city. It's a theme that goes alongside another key element of the film, namely the use of space by different characters, which offers a sharp commentary about the social and ethnic norms of the early 1970s. Roma demonstrates a 'critical sensibility to the spatiality of social life' (Soja 1989:11). An important space throughout the film is the house itself, which is part of a small compound that's typical of the residences of middle-class Latin Americans. The house itself is the domain of the family, while the two domestic servants have their own quarters. In

the house, they are expected to be subservient and almost invisible. In their own space they are able to gossip and - significantly - speak the indigenous language Nahuatl, rather than Spanish. This offers a stark insight into the relevant social and ethnic status of the 'white' family versus the indigenous domestic workers. The scenes in public and in the hospital also illustrate the transitions between private and public space, and with them, between family and engagement with the state (Smith, 1979). Inequalities in the use of space remain both current and topical. These include the role of place and class interaction in shaping urban segregation (Bayón and Saraví 2018) and the exploration of what a "social value architecture" could look like in the context of the privatisation of public space. (Matouskova and Tomlins 2018).

It's a recurring theme of the film that the 'white' Spanish-speaking characters appear in formal and mainstream settings, such as within homes and working as doctors in the hospital, whereas indigenous origin characters, such as the domestic workers, from the main family and their friends; but also the residents of the peripheral area where the martial arts scenes take place, exist on the margins, either of the home or of the city as a whole. The exception is the scenes that take place in the bustling city centre areas. It's made clear in the film that these have become more of a melting pot for the large and diverse variety of inhabitants of Mexico City, an allusion to trends of migration and changes of the use of space in the city, which were starting in the early 1970s and have intensified since then (Bayón and Saraví 2018). These are creating an urban environment that is clearly dynamic and exciting, albeit there are scenes that allude to the disorder and chaos that Mexico City and other large Latin American metropolis have come to represent since the 1980s (Hernández, 2011). The scenes representing the use of private and public space, social and ethnic relations, and engagement with the services and repressive forces of the Mexican state, all reveal an overarching theme of power relations and the exercise of power, whether through the accumulation and use of social and cultural capital, or through the more coercive medium of the repressive force of the state.

Transitions

A further key overarching and interlinked theme is "transitions". While the PRI's decline was over two decades away the early signs of discontent with the party, and with Mexico's political and socio-economic system, are already in evidence in the film. It is clear throughout the film that Mexico City, and indeed the country as a whole, is changing, most clearly visible in the changes in who's inhabiting the city, what spaces they are occupying, particularly within the city centre, and the incorporation of new space into the urban metropolis. Alongside this, Mexico's indigenous population, and its languages and - to some extent - customs are entering the urban space and changing its character. As the film ends, we don't see the extent to which these transitions will continue. However, the fact that the film is in black and white looks back as we look forward.

Conclusion: Developing the paper

We will further develop the theoretical contribution that an exploration of these ideas will provide. Consistent with Cuarón's cultural analysis approach, we'll provide an in-depth analysis of Roma's representations, discourses, performativity, and practices. For example, we will explore the precarity of domestic workers in 1970s Mexico, reproduced through dual discourses of race and gender and access to public space. An evaluation of micro-scale practices, practices of state power, and discourses (e.g., machismo, 'muchachas' (little

maids), and the state), reveal much about 1970s Mexico. Perhaps more fundamentally, such an evaluation provides a unique perspective on the transition into present-day Mexico.

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