



ISSUE # 4 | JULY 2023

## Just A Distant Memory: Cuarón's Long Take in *Roma*

*Piersen Maass*

*Roma* (2018), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, takes a loving yet distant look at his childhood memories of Libo, his family's nanny. To accomplish this ambivalent view of the past, Cuarón consistently uses the wide shot, long take to add a sense of stark realism to his recreated Mexico City of the 1970s. The use of the wide shot, long take forces the viewer to take a distant, objective view of the various events of the film—from the heartbreakingly tragic to the utterly mundane—and the experiences of its protagonist, Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), who represents Cuarón's memory of Libo. The wide shot, long take allows Cuarón to see his own memories in a loving, empathetic way, but with enough distance to avoid the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia. He asks his viewers to do the same—to peer into the story from a distance, objectively, yet with respect and empathy.



This subject of the film is particularly personal to Cuarón; it's a loose recreation of portions of memories through a realistic lens. Cuarón discusses his connection to the story in a *Variety* interview: as the interviewer explains, Cuarón wanted to “craft a film that peered into the past through the prism of the present, an objective experience seen from the understanding he has as an adult” (41). In the interview, Cuarón suggests that he originally had a subjective view of that period and of the people

in his life, especially his caretaker. But as he got older and worked on the film, it became obvious that his previous caretaker was her own person with specific problems and desires. “There is a charge of affection that taints everything,” Cuarón says. “You have a very utilitarian relationship with your loved ones. You’re afraid to stop and see their weaknesses. But it started to be clear she had another life” (42). His increasingly objective understanding of the past (as opposed to an idealized or nostalgic view) seems to come through in the film, especially with the continued use of the wide shot, long take.



A good example of the wide shot, long take occurs in an early sequence in the film. After watching Cleo clean the carpark of dog feces (an indicator of her status in the family), we see her climb the stairs to pick up the family’s laundry. We watch her strip the beds in a wide angle, long take that allows the audience a realistic, objective view of Cleo’s everyday life. For almost a minute, the camera pans slowly to the right and back toward the left without ever truly centering Cleo. These key shots establish Cleo as the caretaker of the house and family without allowing her to be the focus or allowing the audience to get too close to her. Rather, the audience sees how Cleo moves about the house and acts when the family isn’t around, before we see the family themselves. It establishes Cleo as a caretaker with a life and solitary duties of her own, separate from the part she plays when directly interacting with the family. The camera continuously flows back and forth as Cleo goes about her mundane tasks, singing to herself. Although the camera follows her, it lags behind her movements without ever really catching up to her. This cinematic choice seems to suggest that although she is established in the family’s lives, she’s never quite able to catch up to them; there will always be a lag and divide between them. We see this borderland between caretaker and family member even more clearly in another key scene that uses the wide shot, long take: the scene on the beach where two of the children almost drown.

Cuarón uses the long take in the beach scene to create a slow-burn tension as the two children, Sofi and Paco, almost drown while playing in the ocean. Then he uses that tension to create a realistic, stomach-drop moment before a cathartic release when Cleo drags the children back to shore. Using the wide shot, long take, Cuarón allows the audience to feel the gravity of the situation from a distance so they can have a more objective understanding of it. Drowning or water rescue scenes are a staple of Hollywood filmmaking. Often such scenes feature heart-pumping action: the

protagonist races in to save the helpless victims. Rather than long takes, these scenes feature fast-paced editing with plenty of cuts from the victims to the protagonist, to the onlookers, and back again. (The drowning scene in *Baywatch* [2017] perfectly displays this type of Hollywood scene.) Although this definitely allows for tension and excitement for the audience, it glamorizes instead of creating a realistic understanding of what's at stake in these unfortunately common occurrences. In his essay, "Reality Effects: The Ideology of the Long Take in the Cinema of Alfonso Cuarón," Bruce Isaacs describes the difference between these approaches.

The shot of marked duration exceeds not only the perceptual orientation of montage, but manifests its stronger, potentially more transgressive mark of excess in its unwillingness to conform to a generalized spectatorial regime. The long take is frequently, and certainly for Cuarón and Lubezki, a liberation from the constrictive spatial and temporal regime of tradition. The further Cuarón and Lubezki shift into the montage regime of contemporary Hollywood studio filmmaking, the more emphatic their subsequent departure from an aesthetic of classical montage. (476)

Isaacs puts together the contrasts between the accepted norm of the Hollywood quick-cut, action-packed scene and the "transgressive" break from Hollywood expectations when using the long take. Cuarón's long take allows the audience to create an authentic connection to the piece and characters in a far more objective way, and reflect themselves through the characters, even if it may take longer for them to realize it.



More than any other scene in the film, *Roma*'s beach scene features heartbreak, realization, and connection, not only for the characters, but also for the audience. In the scene, Sofi and Paco are told they aren't to go deep into the ocean because Cleo is not able to swim and therefore wouldn't be able to save them if they get pulled by the currents. They decide to swim farther and farther from shore, however, despite Cleo's constant calls to stay close. The camera follows Cleo this entire time as she walks away from the ocean with the youngest, Pepe, and then slowly goes back towards the ocean and into it to save the two. As she drags them both back to shore, Sofia (the mother) comes back and they all fall into each other in a circle formation, crying and consoling each other. The audience finally sees the barriers seem to break down between the family and Cleo.

Young people may see a person, idea, or event in a heroic light that continues to shine down on that subject in memory as they grow older. When self-reflection or new information contradicts that idealized memory, however, one can revise one's view of the past with less sentiment and more realism. Cuarón was able to do this during the filmmaking process by going back to the people involved, speaking with them, and altering his view as they contradicted his idealized memories. The long take sequence on the beach seems to reflect a similar process in the characters as they gather together and begin to break the barriers between the family and their housemaid. The family seems to gain a new, more realistic understanding of why Cleo hasn't been herself and why she's sobbing after rescuing the children. They gain a better view of Cleo as a person, an individual, rather than simply someone who caters to their needs. As Cleo tearfully confesses that she didn't want the baby (her stillborn child), Sofia responds to comfort her: *Te queremos mucho, Cleo*, "we love you very much." Cleo's heartbreaking revelation shows the family a new, more realistic side of her, and the family responds with a loving embrace. Meanwhile Cuarón's camera remains at a respectful distance, in a wide shot, with no close-ups and no cuts, maintaining a view of the past delicately poised between detached objectivity and overwhelming empathy. ☺

*Piersen Maass graduated with a degree in Film Studies from UW-Whitewater in May 2023. This essay was written for a Cinema Auteurs course in Fall 2022.*

---

Cuarón, Alfonso, director. *Roma*. Netflix, 2018. DVD.

Isaacs, Bruce. "Reality effects: The Ideology of the Long Take in the Cinema of Alfonso Cuarón." *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*. Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016. pp. 474–513.

Tapley, Kristopher. "A Life Examined." *Variety*. October 23, 2018.