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Mapping *Roma*

By Jessica Wax-Edwards

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=3klHibbO8>

Roma (2018) is a film about space and memory. Its very name – never directly mentioned throughout 135-minute runtime – refers to a neighbourhood in Mexico City where director Alfonso Cuarón grew up and where much of the plot unfolds. To this end, the film treads the tightly wound lines of representation, memory and location through its recreation of remembered places. This narrative exploration of memory and space extends to its production and promotion.

Indeed, the locations in this film are meticulously reconstructed and, where possible, filmed on site. For instance, all external shots of the “home” location are shot on the very street Cuarón grew up, facing his actual childhood home. In another location production design recreated the interior with 70% of the furniture original (sourced far and wide from family) and the remaining items reconstructed to specifications, based on photos and descriptions provided by the director. [\[1\]](#)

To complement this approach, Cuarón – who also served as cinematographer – shot the feature in 4k digital photography with an extra wide (2:39:1) aspect ratio. He explains, “I realized this movie is honoring real-time and space, and here we would have a larger scope in which the characters could flow. I wanted to shoot very wide, and balance foreground and

background with each informing the other.” [2] Cuarón doubles down on this choice in the behind-the-scenes documentary detailing the making of the film: “the story is about this universe, the characters only traverse it.” [3]

Thus begins *Mapping Roma* an embodied journey into the impossibility of visiting remembered places. The quest recalls that of Chris Marker in *Sans Soleil* (1983), chronicling in a short sequence his time in San Francisco visiting the filming sites of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). He moves within these spaces with his camera, narrating the locations' relevance to the plot and enacting the characters' actions. His compulsion is fuelled by the claim his lifelong quest spent "trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting but rather its lining". The film, the quest and his exploration of Hitchcock's filming locations all speak to a spatiality or structural substance to memory, its walls and its boundaries. As a spatio-temporal practice, cinema too reshapes understanding of space and time through a combination of montage, movement and mise-en-scene. And so, when I discovered a long-coveted piece of memorabilia – the *Roma Netflix Guía Roji* – at a garage sale round the corner from its filming locations, I too was compelled to try to traverse the film's universe, to absorb and connect with its visual spaces. [4]

I first became aware of the map following a special dossier on *Roma* in the journal *Mediático*. [5] A contribution from film scholar and long-term Mexico City resident Paul Julian Smith detailed the experience of being in the capital at the time of the film's release. Reading about it from my flat in London, I couldn't help but feel I was missing out.

So, when I stumbled across a copy of the guidebook, I knew I had to seize my chance. I took the document at face value, dutifully following its instructions to navigate around the city using the accompanying map. I went to six of the seven locations listed in the index (time didn't allow me to visit the last one), rewatching the relevant scenes and attempting to capture these spaces, my movement through them, in the same style.

The resulting work *Mapping Roma* visually conceptualises the rupture between physical and remembered spaces as captured on film. Via the palimpsestic quality of the layered footage, it exposes the tension between past and present. Via the inconsistencies and coincidences of these temporal traces, the viewer becomes a site-seer engaged in “a new geographical imagination”. [\[6\]](#)

The purpose of Cuarón's painstaking reconstructions is to locate the viewer firmly in Roma/Roma – not just the neighbourhood, but his memory of it. Through this practice, the film constructs its own map, one based on personal memory. It is this map – a meticulously formed interpretation of the liminal – that is co-opted by the marketing agency for promotional material. This process not only takes the audience “from voyeur to voyageur”, but via movement through time and memory they also participate in geopsychic time travel. [\[7\]](#)

The differing architecture and mise-en-scène of the equivalent spaces interact onscreen via superimposition. Map and movie then offer two complementary representations of space, both dependent on movement. Through my recorded tour I am able to inhabit and reinvent both. I traverse the city, like Cuarón's characters moving through his recreated universe. I

attempt to reproduce the motions of a scene both camera and human, simultaneously drawing me closer and further distancing myself from the memory sites; my low-quality interpretations, coupled with faded or entirely disappeared material resemblances of locations, offset the layers and emphasise difference. I am nonetheless connected to the world of the filmmakers and the characters through my intentional and semi-choreographed movement in these like spaces, a practice enabled and encouraged by the physical map.

When the guides were originally released, the production design team built magazine kiosks at the seven locations to distribute them, complete with an attendant dressed in the attire of the time. That is to say, passers-by or would-be film fans were absorbed into the contexts of production, transported to the 1970s onsite even at such a small scale. By contrast, my experience was both embarrassing (I had to capture myself running down streets many times) and oddly alienating (most of the places were closed off to the public). But the exercise, mapped alongside synonymous sequences from the film, raises interesting questions around memory, space and cinema as well as film production, digital distribution and the exclusivity of these spaces both online and on the street.

It is one thing to visit filming locations where the action is shot at a landmark site or where a street or facade take on new meaning after years of episodic viewing. The places in *Roma* are tied to personal memory, one that is perhaps partially accessible to those whose own history aligns with Cuarón's (as a Mexico City dweller born before 1965) but are by no means universal (and admittedly my own experience is even further removed as a European millennial). While the guidebook is a clever marketing technique, it does little to expand the exploration of space and memory so carefully conducted in the film. It is only via my

performative effort of remapping the locations that connections or dislocations between past and present can more clearly emerge and intermingle.

Notes

[1] Rebecca Ford, "Making of *Roma*: How Alfonso Cuarón Painstakingly Re-created His Youth in Mexico City," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 6 (2018), accessed July 25, 2025 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/how-alfonso-cuaron-painstakingly-created-his-youth-roma-1156147/>

[2] Mark Dillon, "Roma: Memories of Mexico," *American Cinematographer*, January 7 (2019), accessed Jul 23, 2025, <https://theasc.com/articles/roma-memories-of-mexico>.

[3] Andres Clariond Mourtzakakis and Gabriel Nuncio, dirs., *Road to Roma* (2020; Mexico: Netflix), film.

[4] Giuliana Bruno, "Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image," *Wide Angle*, 19.4 (1997): 15.

[5] Paul Julian Smith, "Special Dossier on *Roma*: Watching Roma In Mexico City" *Mediatico*, December 24, (2018), accessed Jul 23, 2025, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/mediatico/2018/12/24/special-dossier-on-roma-watching-roma-in-mexico-city/>.

[6] Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (London: Verso, 2002), 270.

[7] Bruno, "Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image," 10.

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Marker, Chris, dir. *Sans Soleil*. 1983; France: Argos Films. Film.

Mourtzakis, Andres Clariond, and Gabriel Nuncio, dirs. *Road to Roma*. 2020; Mexico: Netflix. Film.

Self-recordings in Mexico City.

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Biography

Jessica Wax-Edwards is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Postdoctoral Fellow at the University College Cork. Previously an Honorary Research Fellow at Royal Holloway University of London and Visiting Lecturer at Cambridge, her research interests include memory, violence and politics in twentieth century and contemporary Mexican visual culture. She has published articles on Latin American fiction and documentary cinema, graphic art and photography and her first monograph *Documenting Violence in Calderón's Mexico: Visual Culture, Resistance and Memorialisation* was published 2023. Jessica was also a selected participant in the 8-month AHRC-funded mentorship scheme Doing Women's (Global) (Horror) Film History (DWGHFH); her resulting short film *Storylines* ____ was published 2024.