

# track + pan

analysis of urban spatial representation in Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma"



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# track + pan

This project is a visual and spatial analysis of how the 2018 film “Roma”, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, produces scalar and spatial narratives. The use of the camera as an agent in the creation of distinct types and qualities of domestic and urban spaces reflects the shifting socio-political structures, both physically and culturally, that Mexico City was undergoing during the film’s 1971 setting.

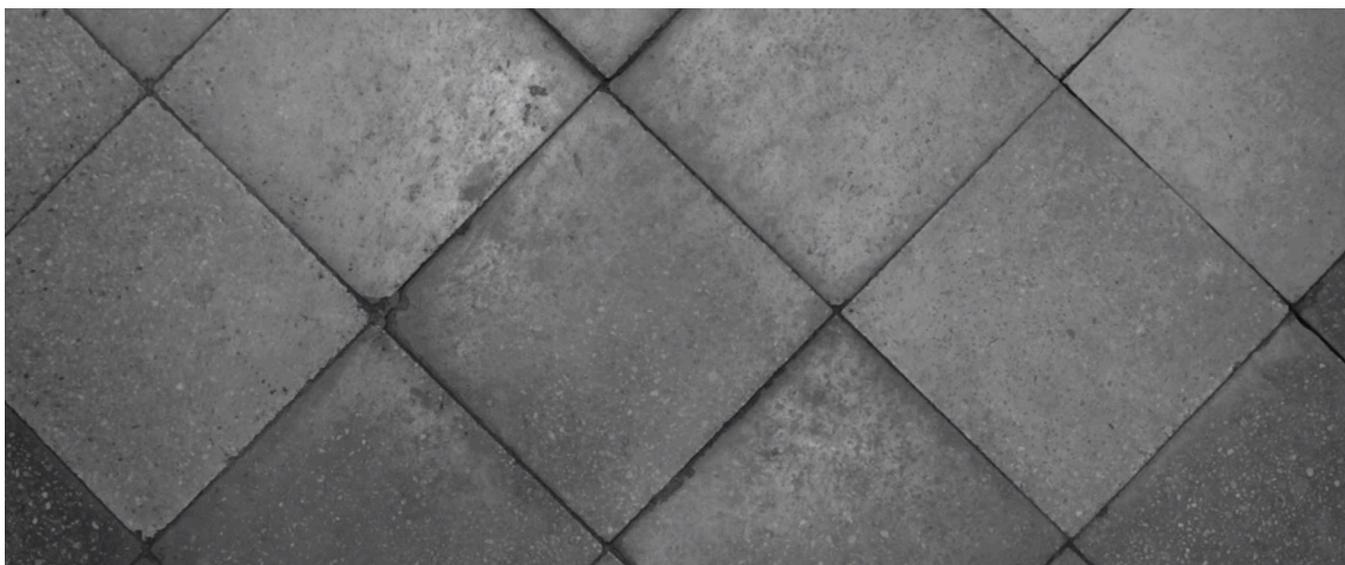
Specifically, the film produces a set of cultural contrasts, constructed through careful recreation of domestic and urban spaces and controlled camera movements. The film employs two distinct, repeated, and noticeable shot types: tracks and pans.

**Tracking shots**, or tracks, are shots in which the camera follows its subject in a direction, often laterally, without rotating from its base point. Tracking shots, in which the camera itself moves, allows for the entire shot to maintain the same scale and focus during the sequence of movement, and often act as transitions between two distinct places or other shots.

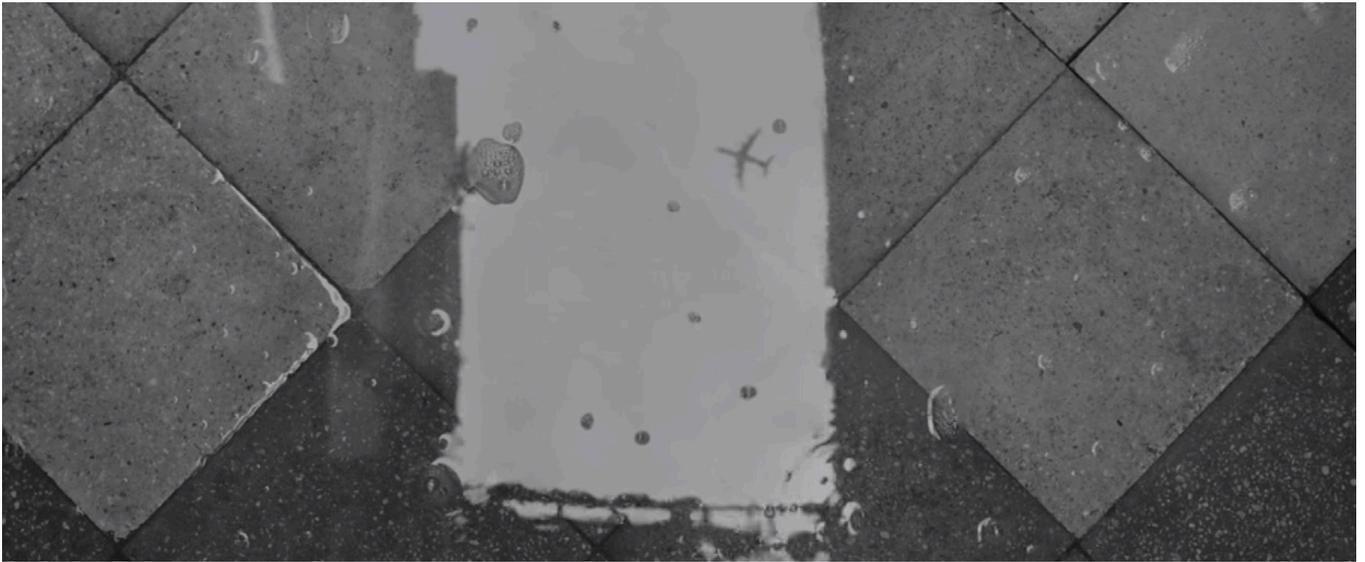
**Panning shots**, or pans, are shots in which the camera remains fixed in place at its base point, but rotates about that point to follow its subject. Panning shots allow for the primary subject to remain in focus while the scale, angle, and depth of the background can change, depending on how, and in which direction, the camera pans.

Cuarón, who served as his own Director of Photography (DP) on “Roma”, employed these two shot types in heavy amounts throughout the film to produce various contrasts between spatial and cultural conditions, reflecting the relationships between domestic and urban life, interiority and exteriority, modernity and tradition, and masculinity and femininity.

The scenes analyzed herein represent the architectural, or urban elements of the film, and focus entirely on exploring those scenes rather than the entirety of the film’s personal dramatic narrative.



**00:01:06** - the film opens on a close-up shot of the tiled floor of a posh family's gated driveway



00:02:25 - the sky and a plane - one of the film's primary symbols of Modernism - is revealed through the labor of Cleo, the protagonist



## pan 1 // 00:04:26 - 00:05:20

The opening shot continues from its close-up of the floor tiles to a wide-angle panning shot of Cleo, the protagonist, walking her bucket through the portico into the back patio, where it hangs on her in the washroom for over 10 seconds. After this, the shot reverse pans back the same way as Cleo enters the house, transitioning from the *interstitial* space of the patio to the domestic space of the interior.

**pan 2 // 00:05:27 - 00:05:38**

The first of a series of slow pans across the public domestic space of the main family's home.  
This shot establishes both their comfortable wealth and educational status.



**pan 3 // 00:05:38 - 00:06:32**

The first of a series of near identical slow pans across the private domestic space of the main family's home. Here we begin to understand the spoils of consumerism underlying their lifestyle



**pan 4 // 00:12:50 - 00:06:32**

Housekeepers wash clothes on the rooftops of adjacent homes. This “back of house” scene showcases what a Modern Mexico City looks like to the working class.





**00:13:51** - the foreign car, here a Ford Galaxy is used as a motif to represent the “Modern Man” throughout the film, often re-contextualizing spaces previously shown in the film

The car is often shot symmetrically, rarely in a pan or track. Here an extended montage shows the importance of this object relative to the Doctor’s status.





00:14:08



00:14:14

the Doctor's difficulty parking his Ford Galaxy reveals his difficulty in truly embodying the "American" Modernism he aspires to reproduce



00:14:10



00:14:45



**pan 5 // 00:18:30 - 00:18:57**

The second of three similar shots illustrating the private domestic space of the family's home. This time, Cleo prepares the home for the children's bedtime.



## **pan 6 // 00:18:57 - 00:19:52**

The second pan through the downstairs space of the home. This fully panoramic shot follows Cleo as she turns down the lights.



## **track 1 // 00:21:53 - 00:22:25**

The first tracking shot is also our first experience of a truly urban scene. Cleo and her friend run through the streets to reach a local restaurant, passing bustling shops, almost getting run over by a car, and passing propaganda posters for Mexican President Luis Echeverría Álvarez.



LA CASA DEL PAVO



Political propaganda posters on a wall:

- ARENA MEXICO
- GO 1970
- ECHVERRIA
- JARRIBA Y ADELANTE!
- VERRIA
- JARRIBA Y ADELANTE!
- PR I
- MEX I C
- MEX I C
- LUCKA LIBRE, PROFESIONAL
- NOTA ABO
- PPS
- Y ADELANTE!
- Y ADELANTE!
- LIC. LUIS ECHEVERRIA
- VOTA ASI
- HEVE
- ALOMAS
- HACIENDA PINAS
- AZTECAS
- Gobernador

00:22:25 - the first tracking shot ends with an extended pause on these political propaganda posters

EL PAVO  
NO NUEVO Y  
LOS POLLINOS  
DE VIRCHINA Y  
DE CERDO Y  
DE VISITA

RICAS  
TORTAS Y TACOS



ARRIBA Y ADELANTE

ARRIBA Y ADELANTE

ARRIBA Y ADELANTE

DE  
EHEVERRIA

DE  
EHEVERRIA

DE  
EHEVERRIA

T.M.

T.M.





00:24:21 - large structures are always presented asymmetrically and statically



00:24:30 - even this closer two-shot uses a similar angle to present depth and movement



## pan 7 // 00:34:46 - 00:35:05

The first of a few similar slow pans from the front gate toward the street, signaling shift from domestic (safe) space to public (unsafe) space. Here a small military parade marches down the street, connecting the Doctor's leaving with the military danger soon to unfold.



00:38:24 - as in previous shots, the interior of the theater, municipal space, is shot at off-centered angle



**track 2 // 00:42:00 - 00:42:10**

This scene entirely re-frames our perception of the interior space of the home, a corollary to the complete re-framing of Cleo's life now that she has discovered her pregnancy.





00:47:03 - shot, interior of Ford Galaxy



00:47:23 - reverse shot, exterior of Ford Galaxy after traffic accident



00:47:30 - Centro Médico Nacional Siglo XXI, a 1951 masterwork of Plastic Integration, features dramatic reliefs on its front facade, and large murals integrated into its interior lobbies

This shot places the Ford, until this point the film's main symbol of the globalized "Modern Man", in contrast with Mexican Modernity, and as a wrecked object, removed from its idealized bourgeois context, seized by the film's female protagonists



## **track 3 // 01:06:39 - 01:07:49**

The only tracking shot in a rural area, this shot brings Cleo close to the camera, and reveals a longing for a non-urban, non-Modern experience.





## **track 4 + 5 // 01:10:50 - 01:12:54**

One of the longest sequences of the movie, tracks 4 and 5 mark a major transition between the first and second halves of the story. Here, Cleo re-experiences her lateral journey through the Modern urban context. This time, however, rather than experiencing the joy that density can provide, she is anxiously searching for the children who have run off ahead and become lost within the noise, lights, and people of the cityscape.



01:19:47



01:22:00

the airplane plays a critical role as a Modern symbol, appearing here to question the 'tradition' of the ex-urban martial arts militia group



01:20:03



01:22:12





**pan 8 // 01:26:15 - 01:27:05**

Another pan through the domestic first floor, lingering on the Doctor's bookcase, something he has left behind alongside his family.





**01:30:40** - our two female protagonists, one left alone with her baby, the other destroying the symbol of her husband in the same space we once saw him meticulously park the vehicle



## track 6 // 01:32:55 - 01:33:20

The sixth tracking shot fills the once open public space with military and para-military personnel. This scene precludes the recreation of the infamous “*El Halconazo*”, a student protest that turned violent when paramilitary groups descended upon the protesters, killing over 120 people.

The scene itself is rendered as a claustrophobic, overburdened space, placing the protagonists in the back of the shot, lost behind scores of armed men.





## **track 7 // 01:33:50 - 01:33:57**

A short shot that sets up a direct contrast to the military tracking shot immediately prior, wherein Cleo looks at baby cribs before the violent protests erupt.

**pan 9 // 01:34:35 - 01:35:05**

This scene depicts the “*El Halconazo*”, as seen from the windows of the houseware store.





## **pan 10 // 01:36:15 - 01:36:40**

Some of the most brutal images occur in this shot, as we see the car, an object of “Modernity” being used as cover from incoming fire, and being destroyed by the man on the right. As the camera pans past Cleo, we see a student clutching the dead body of her friend.



01:38:03 - another angled shot of the municipal “Modernism”, this time the beauty of the hospital is exchanged for the violence that has caused its plaza to become overrun with wounded





## **track 8 // 01:59:22 - 02:03:30**

The longest shot in the entire film, track 8 is the most non-urban shot in the film as well, set entirely on a deserted beach. Cleo marches up, back down, and then back up the beach, helping and protecting the family's children throughout the process.

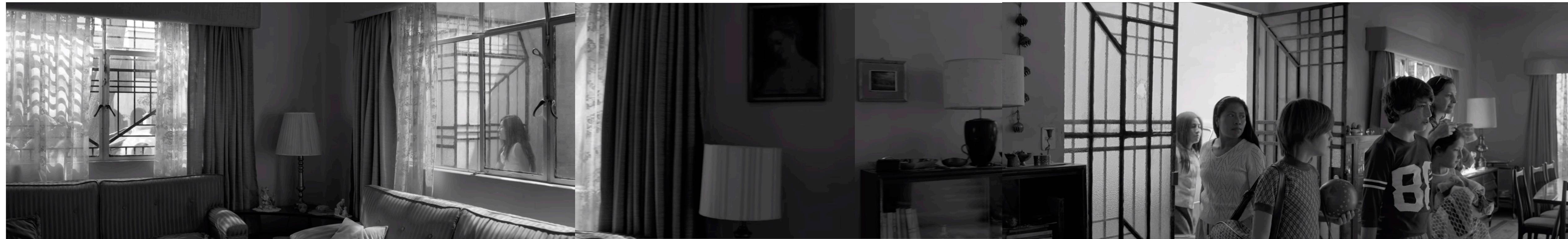
**pan 11 // 02:05:20 - 02:05:35**

Mirroring the shot when the Doctor drives away, this time the family, renewed, returns home to the sight and sound of another small military parade.



**pan 12 // 02:05:36 - 02:06:08**

Our final look at the ground floor of the home, after the Doctor removes the bookshelves.





## **pan 13 // 02:06:30 - 02:07:40**

The final shot of the family, recalling previous pans across the upstairs. Here we see the family return, and Cleo too returns to her life before the film began. The film uses this shot to re-establish us in real space and time, and frames the narrative by mirroring a sequence at the start of the film.



00:07:08



00:07:26



00:13:51



00:28:26



00:33:37



00:36:10



00:47:23



00:53:50

symmetrical shots establish and re-establish spaces of isolation and community



01:23:04



01:33:42



01:36:25



01:42:37



01:47:36



01:47:55



01:54:56



02:06:10



02:08:35 - the final shot returns to the beginning with an airplane flying overhead

