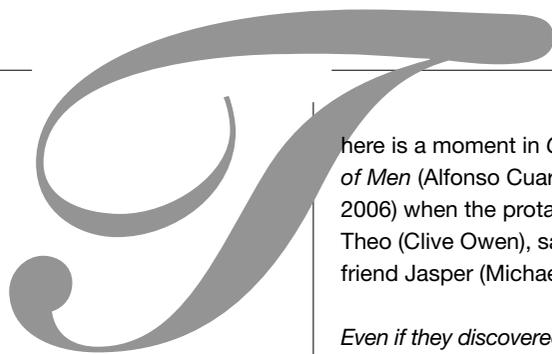




Hope in Children of Men



Here is a moment in *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) when the protagonist, Theo (Clive Owen), says to his friend Jasper (Michael Caine):

Even if they discovered the cure for infertility, doesn't matter. Too late. World went to shit. You know what? It was too late before the infertility thing happened, for fuck's sake.

This perception, that something was deeply wrong with the world, is more than an expression of Theo's cynical outlook. It is an expression of

a key world-view presented by the film.

Indeed, the opening scenes immediately locate us in a world that is profoundly dysfunctional. The year is 2027. Theo enters a coffee shop where distraught customers circle a television, listening to a news announcement. The youngest person on the planet, 18-year-old Joseph Ricardo, has been killed. It is a world in which humanity has become sterile; no children have been born since Ricardo. Shortly after

Theo leaves the coffee shop it explodes: terrorists have struck again in the centre of London. We later discover that Great Britain is the last remaining vestige of civilization. The rest of the world has descended into barbarism. There is social disintegration, terrorism, an authoritarian government and a massive refugee problem. It is a world crippled and teetering on the edge of the abyss.

Yet Theo's observation that the world was ruined before humanity became sterile is

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representative of only *one* of the film's two attitudes. The other is hope – hope in which Theo accompanies the pregnant Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey) to the safety of the Human Project, a group of scientists existing somewhere across the sea. In the Human Project, the film references the classic utopian text, where 'utopia' was always 'elsewhere', somewhere on an island in the Pacific Ocean perhaps, or in the distant future, a temporal form of the same narrative distancing. Part of the political function of this utopian move was to leave the old world behind, to have the utopia 'unpolluted' by the past. On the narrative level, *Children of Men* promises that Theo and Kee can escape to a world from where humanity can be reborn, a new generation rising to repopulate the world.

Theo's own journey goes from apathy and despair to a kind of temporal triumph. His own son having died as a child, he traverses the path

from a broken-down former activist to an alcoholic refusing to take responsibility. The film ends with Theo as Kee and the baby's sole support. Without him they will not survive, and the human race will not be reborn. Theo's lost hope has been rekindled.

Yet the question remains, what kind of hope does a child offer in such a bleak world? How, ultimately, can the rebirth of the human race resolve the nightmare that society has become? This moment of contradiction – where the film cannot resolve its various elements, where the narrative and the world threaten to dissolve into incoherence, where it remains ultimately silent on the question of hope – works its way through the structure of the entire film. And it's precisely here, at this antinomy, where the film is at its most interesting, as Pierre Macherey might have argued.¹ This antinomy re-engages us with our own world, showing us by its

technique of estrangement the very contradictions that reside in our own society.

Let's examine the issue more closely.

The end of children: a formal shift between character and environment

The central 'science fictional' element of *Children of Men* is humanity's inability to reproduce. This is never explained (in either the film or P.D. James' novel);² it is simply asserted. Despite claims to the contrary by some critics, this is a perfectly legitimate narrative choice,³ because the inability to reproduce is an obvious symbol: humanity has no future. Director Alfonso Cuarón describes this symbol:

It was not until I realized that the premise of the film could serve as a metaphor for the fading sense of hope, that it could be a point of departure for an exploration of the state of things that we're living in

*now, the things that are shaping this very first part of the twenty-first century, that I wanted to do it.*⁴

The sense of impending doom, then – of a world in which the great monuments of civilization will slowly be emptied of voices, of laughter, of people – embodies the entire film. Hence there is a link between the failure to reproduce and the state of the world. One is really a symbolic expression of the other.

How then does *Children of Men* portray the state of society in 2027? The most important thing to note is that the film employs a unique formal emphasis in which the *mise en scène* is as important as the narrative. The film is an almost visceral experience, where the background components of each scene – the sets, the music, the extras – tell the world's story. When Theo, Kee and Miriam (Pam Ferris) are taken into the refugee camp, for example, they join groups of people including



elderly Germans, Eastern Europeans and Africans. Each of these characters, in their brief moment on screen, asks us to imagine their stories. The fact that people from Europe are intermingling with people from Africa and elsewhere in the Third World neatly undercuts the racist overtones of much of the contemporary discourse about refugees.

The effect, then, is that the *mise en scène* tells much of the story on a subliminal level. To call on another example, we learn purely by the clippings on the wall at Jasper's rural retreat that his wife had been a photojournalist who had been kidnapped and tortured by MI5 for her opposition to the treatment of refugees. This formal mode was a conscious choice by Cuarón, who explains that he and his cinematographer:

... don't want to favor character over the environment, we want to keep a balance. And that means that

you don't do close-ups, because then you are favoring the character over the environment. So you do only very loose shots, because then the character, ideally, blends with the environment and, hopefully, has a conflict. So you can

newborn baby begins to cry. To calm the child, Kee and Theo take the child out of the building by walking down the stairs and onto the street. The combatants, who have not seen a baby in decades, cross themselves and fall to their knees before the

present. And yet it is a nightmarish resemblance, as if we'd awoken in the night, looked in the mirror and seen ourselves as we will be in twenty years. In *Children of Men*, terrorism and refugees are prominent political issues. Bombings, battles

Yet the question remains, what kind of hope does a child offer in such a bleak world?

have tension between background environment and your character.⁵

This conflict between environment and character, the disunity of the world and Theo's own hopes, finds its clearest expression during a battle scene in one of the great public housing projects. Military forces have surrounded Theo, Kee and the revolutionary group called 'the Fishes'. Kee's

messianic child. As soon as Theo and Kee pass, the fighting resumes with renewed vigour.

What, then, are the key elements of this world through which Theo and Kee must venture?

The world of the children of the end

The first thing to note is how closely 2027 resembles our

and skirmishes are everyday occurrences. What's more, the refugee question is profoundly related to the relationship between Britain and the rest of the world. In the film, these problems generate an increasingly authoritarian and militarized response. None of this will come as a surprise to the contemporary viewer. A quick survey of the political discourse being generated by the governments and



political elite in any developed nation shows an increasing isolationism, the ongoing dehumanizing treatment of refugees, and a strong shift towards authoritarianism (which is in important ways still democratic). Nations like the United States, Britain and Australia have passed

*suddenly a democracy starts to lose its meaning. Democracy used to be a point of departure – to challenge these things! To challenge tyranny! And now democracy is becoming an instrument to justify a system.*⁶

There is little doubt that the

ing the ‘war on terror’. A viewer cannot help but see shades of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay in the film’s representation of the camps. Gary Westfahl rather dismissively argues that:

The overall message seems clear enough: then, now, and

*Lennon’s ‘Bring on the Lucie (Freeda People)’, the Rolling Stones’s ‘Ruby Tuesday’, and King Crimson’s ‘In the Court of the Crimson King’, and by the code phrase Jasper gives Theo to identify himself as an ally to a friendly official named Syd (Peter Mullan) – ‘you’re a fascist pig’.*⁷

The most important thing to note is that the film employs a unique formal emphasis in which the *mise en scène* is as important as the narrative.

various laws enabling the detainment of refugees and alleged terrorists, thus eroding what once appeared to be established civil liberties. This trend concerns Cuarón:

Any tyranny now can have the makeup of a democracy, and then in a way, you can start to justify all the elements of a tyranny. And

film tends towards the politics of a radical Left. Presumably its critique of the treatment of refugees is close to the heart of Cuarón, who, as a Mexican, would be aware of the treatment and deportation of immigrants from the United States, while the critique of authoritarian government is an argument against the restriction of civil liberties by those prosecut-

in the future, you can be sure that governments will always gleefully seek to slaughter, brutalize and oppress their helpless citizens at every opportunity. It is an attitude straight out of the counter-culture of the 1960s, an era represented in the film by the pot-smoking and I Ching of Theo’s eccentric friend Jasper Palmer, by background songs like John

Children of Men is thus a closely argued dialogue with the present and a strident critique of contemporary affairs. Here it is important to remember that science fiction is not a predictive mode of writing. Though it appears to be about the future, it never really is – it’s always a dialogue with the present. P.D. James and Alfonso Cuarón aren’t suggesting that this is what the world will become in the year 2027, rather they are applying a method that Frederic Jameson calls ‘world reduction’, in which certain elements or ideas are distilled into a novel and thought through.⁸ Science fiction then is really a ‘thought experiment’ – let’s



imagine certain things, let's presuppose certain others, and let's excise yet other elements and see what happens. By developing this genre of estrangement, science fiction asks us to reflect on our own world.⁹ The specific issues in *Children of Men* are thus chosen precisely because they are contemporary ones, though interestingly there is no mention of global warming. Nevertheless, the world of the film is unimaginable without our current world. The film is thus a warning against what we are becoming.

Politics and the future

The solution *Children of Men* offers follows the same pattern as most of the traditional utopias. The Human Project remains nothing but a hidden, abstract symbol. The birth of Kee's baby might indicate a biological future for humanity, but it cannot offer a *social* future; unless the conflicts presented in the film are *caused* by infertility, its

resolution will have no effect on the world's various problems. Such problems can only be solved at a *social* level.

Interestingly, the one force for change in the film is also the principal antagonist: the Fishes, a revolutionary group. It is Theo's job to rescue Kee from them. Led by the sociopath Luke (Chiwetel Ejiofor), they are presented as a group similar to the Weathermen or the Symbionese Liberation Army of the 1960s: idealistic, not without sympathetic elements, but ruthless and violent. Cuarón does indeed have sympathies for political activists: we learn for example that Theo and Julian (Julianne Moore) initially met at a Stop the War Coalition meeting in 2003, a direct reference to the anti-Iraq War movement. Nevertheless Cuarón rejects a *political* solution. He says that he has:

... a very grim view of the present but I have a very hopeful view of the future.

*The reason is that I have a hopeful view of the evolution of human understanding. It's an evolution that I am certain is happening right now – maybe not with my generation, but with the youngest generation, and the generation yet to come. I don't think that any solution can come from the ideology of politics, but I think we can find new ways through different understanding.*¹⁰

And yet, somewhat incongruously, considering the general tone of *Children of Men*, he also rejects politics by asking:

*Why does cinema have to be a medium for making political statements as opposed to presenting facts, presenting elements and then you making your own conclusions – even if they are elusive? There's nothing more beautiful than elusiveness in cinema.*¹¹

The conflict between the general outlook of *Children of Men* and this statement is not surprising. This rejection

of political intent is, in many ways, a picture of contemporary consciousness in developed nations – at one and the same time individuals are concerned about the direction of the world and yet they show no interest in engaging with organized or practical politics. It is not that people are apathetic, but that politics seems to be incapable of influencing events. As Terry Eagleton describes it:

*It is rational to resist major political change as long as a system is still able to afford you some gratification, however meagre, and as long as the alternatives to it remain perilous and obscure.*¹²

It is the cul de sac in which we all find ourselves: how to challenge a world direction that seems unchangeable?

The very structure of *Children of Men* thus represents an apparently insoluble dilemma faced by those who seek to challenge the political dominance of



neo-liberalism, the direction of policies towards refugees, the increasing authoritarianism, and other social issues – broadly speaking, those who consider themselves progressive or on the Left. The constituent elements of this crisis include the destruction of radical political parties, the reconstitution of social democratic parties as neo-liberal ones,

social despair in *Children of Men*. The film remains silent on the issue, choosing to rely on the symbolism of messianism. The turn to the messianic, in the figure of Kee's baby, is not unusual in political literature, most especially science fiction.¹³ But the turn away from the political is, in fact, a product of the political deadlock of hope. What future? How to

written: 'Shantih Shantih Shantih'. These are, incidentally, the final words of T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. Shantih is Hindi for 'peace'. This phrase is uttered twice in the movie, once by Miriam over Julian's dead body, and once by Jasper after he realizes how to get Theo and Kee to the Human Project's boat, the *Tomorrow*.

a sympathetic character still alive. And we are left with a stark question: if infertility is a symbolic representation of social crisis, it makes no sense to resolve one (childbirth) but not the other. How, we might ask, is the ability to have children going to solve social ills, given that we know these problems predate humanity's sterility? Within the film's universe, the unrelenting force of the environment imposes itself again and again so that by the end of the movie, as the mildly eerie sound of children laughing is heard over a blackened screen, the question remains: what kind of world are they being born into? This is the very question we might ask about any child born today. •

Science fiction then is really a 'thought experiment' – let's imagine certain things, let's presuppose certain others, and let's excise yet other elements and see what happens.

the overwhelming declines of the 'social movements', and intricately related to these, a crisis of strategy unprecedented in the history of the Left. Never before has the political Left in the developed world been so unsure about what activities could bring about some form of hope. It is precisely this issue that underpins the contradiction between narrative hope and

change the world, or at least halt its destructive momentum? These questions lie at the heart of *Children of Men*. Underlying its silence is a larger and broader silence – our own.

Conclusion: a future for children?

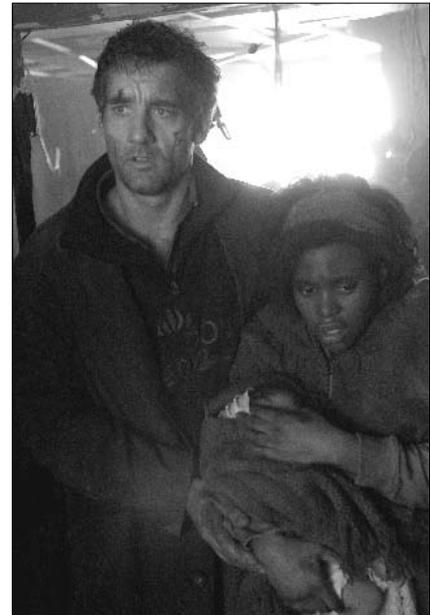
At the end of the film's credits, three words are

At the end of the credits, the same words reiterate the film's message of hope but, as in Eliot's poem, they sit in ambivalent relationship to the rest of the film. For although Kee is ultimately successful in reaching the Human Project's boat, the bulk of the movie moves from one tragedy to another, from one death to another. By its finish there is scarcely

Endnotes

¹ See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Routledge and Keegan Paul, London, 1978.

² The film is 'inspired' by the novel rather than 'based' on it, in much the



same way that the work of Philip K. Dick has spawned films which are departures rather than renditions of his work. In the case of *Children of Men*, this is something for which we can be thankful. James' novel is at best mediocre. One suspects that James was unfamiliar with the genre of science fiction, for she seems so enamored with the world she creates that the book is crippled with elementary narrative errors, beginning with the lamentable first chapter where she 'describes' the world and how it came to be. The chapter is thus nothing more than exposition. It's an error she repeats throughout the book, though it's not the ultimate problem – the rather naïve portrayal of

the characters: their lack of psychological depth, their seemingly immature rationalizations for choices and so on.

³ See, for example, Gary Westfahl, 'Dull Outcome, No Kids: A Review of *Children of Men*', <<http://www.locusmag.com/Features/2006/12/dull-outcome-no-kids-review-of.html>>, accessed 27 January 2007.

⁴ Kim Voynar, 'Interview with Alfonso Cuarón', Cinematical, <<http://www.cinematical.com/2006/12/25/interview-children-of-men-director-alfonso-cuaron/>>, accessed 24 January 2007.

⁵ *ibid.* The same point is made here: Devin Faraci, 'Exclusive interview: Alfonso Cuarón (*Children of Men*)', <<http://www.chud.com/index.php?type>

=interviews&id=8440>, accessed 24 January 2007.

⁶ Voynar, *op. cit.*

⁷ Westfahl, *op. cit.*

⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London, 2005, pp.267–280.

⁹ The classic definition is that of literary theorist Darko Suvin who describes science fiction as a literature of 'cognitive estrangement'. See Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Yale University Press, London, 1980.

¹⁰ Faraci, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Ray Pride, 'All His Children: Filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón on *Children of Men*, influences and "the Sept. 11 of sound"', <<http://www.thereeler.com/features/>

all_his_children_cuaron.php>, accessed 24 January 2007.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir*, Penguin Books, London, 2001, p.82.

¹³ See for example Michael Moorcock's novel *Behold the Man*, Millennium (Victor Gollancz), London, 1999 and Robert Silverberg's novel *A Time of Changes in Edge of Light: A Time of Changes, Downward to the Earth, The Second Trip, Dying Inside, Nightwings, Voyager* (HarperCollins Publishers), London, 1998.

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chapters

Each chapter of *Viewfinder* provides a distinct perspective on the cinematic process, both as a viewer and a creator.

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- The view behind the lens: image capture, technical nuts and bolts
- The view from the digital dark-room: flexible reality in post-production
- The view over the keyboard: blinking moves from words and text
- The view through the crystal ball: The digital future—where do we go from here?

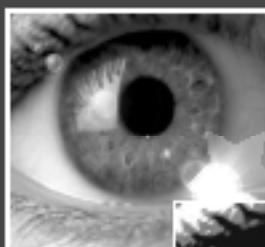
topics

Topics explored in detail in *Viewfinder* include:

- Mise-en-scène and montage cinema
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- Cameras, computers and editing systems
- The production process
- Framing and visual language
- Motion graphics, compression and animation
- Screenplay formats and narrative structure
- Digital archives, digital history and the impact of digital technology



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Viewfinder

AN INTRODUCTION TO
MOVIES AND VISUAL
MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

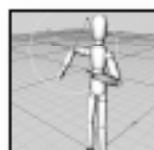
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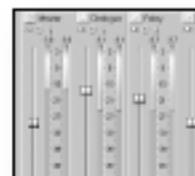
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