Cuarón's Children of Men: Despair and hope in the near future

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Children of Men, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, screenplay by Cuarón and Timothy J. Sexton, based on the book by P.D. James

Children of Men, directed by Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón (*Y tu mamá también*, 2001, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azbakan*, 2004), takes place in the year 2027. Women have become infertile, and the world has not known a birth for 18 years. Britain is a bleak, repressive, chaotic place where illegal immigrants, known as "fugees," are locked up without remorse.

The air and water are befouled. Strange, desperate cults have arisen such as the Renouncers (who flog themselves) and the Repenters (who repent collectively in public). "The world has collapsed," Orwellian broadcasts and slogans announce, "Only Britain soldiers on." The government also offers a suicide kit, called Quietus, to the aging, despairing populace. A group known as the Fishes is waging a resistance struggle against the authorities. In the first few moments of the film, a bomb goes off in a café on a London street.

Children of Men's protagonist, Theodore Faron (Clive Owen) was a radical in his youth, now he simply carries a flask. He looks worn and beaten. "I can't really remember when I last had any hope," he explains, "and I certainly can't remember when anyone else did either. Because really, since women stopped being able to have babies, what's left to hope for?"

Abducted on the street by masked men, Theo is taken to meet a leader of the Fishes, his former wife, Julian (Julianne Moore), who asks him to obtain a travel permit from his cousin, a high-ranking government official. A girl needs to get to the coast for reasons unnamed. For a significant amount of money, Theo agrees.

The girl, Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey), turns out to be pregnant and Julian's group (or so it seems) is attempting to get her safely into the hands of the "Human Project," a mysterious organization that remains the best hope for humanity. The film follows Theo's effort to keep Kee and, eventually, her baby alive while terrorists, angry mobs, desperate refugees and the brutal authorities battle it out around them.

Helping Theo out is an aging, cheerful hippie, Jasper (Michael Caine), who lives in seclusion in the woods with his catatonic wife. An opponent of the existing set-up, he remarks caustically that "every time the government gets into trouble, a bomb goes off."

The film is based on a novel written some years ago by P.D. James, a devout Anglican. The 'messianic' overtones are unmistakable. ("Your baby is the miracle the whole world has been waiting for," says Caine's character.) The global infertility, we learn, may be the result of pollution or disease, or it may be God's wrath applied to a sinful and disappointing humanity.

Screenwriter Timothy Sexton and Cuarón, with Owen's collaboration apparently, have redirected James' work, adding commentary about the post-9/11 world, some of it quite pointed.

The mistreatment of undocumented immigrants remains in the foreground throughout. The "fugees" are herded about, beaten, kept in holding pens on street corners. As part of their effort to reach the ocean and a supposedly waiting boat, Theo and Kee are obliged to 'break into' a detention center, where horrific conditions prevail. As Theo and the girl arrive by bus at night, they enter a building where, again, a series of cages has been set up—and here the filmmakers have deliberately placed their performers in poses made notorious by the Abu Ghraib photos. The buses transporting the detainees are conspicuously marked "Homeland Security."

Theo's and Kee's savior proves to be a Roma woman, another pointed comment. In one of the film's final scenes, Theo hunts for Kee and her infant in an apartment building, full of civilians, as well as "insurgents," which comes under attack by government troops. The extended sequence is disturbingly convincing and clearly intended to bring home what it must feel like to come under attack by a heavily armed enemy, for example, by US troops in a Baghdad or Fallujah housing complex.

Some of the images have real value, they're moving and affecting. They come out of a real concern. *Children of Men* is forcefully directed and performed. Cuarón seems confident in what he's doing.

"I've seen those beautiful photographs of Earth taken from outer space," Cuarón comments in the film's production notes, "and you see clouds and you see the shape of continents . . . but what you don't see are the colors of each of the countries you

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see in maps. These invisible lines are created by ideologies, sometimes absurd ones—I have to ask what right do we have to close the door on people that are in need? These complex issues are being thought about in America and Europe, and looked at very differently—how are immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers going to be treated? This is something happening now—the near future is now. I think all of us working on the film thought that you have to get the human experience to get to the social and political—it's something that needs compassion more than an ideology." Compassion is certainly something we could use.

In an interview with *MovieWeb,* Cuarón explains, "You see those things, Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib; that is the same reference as concentration camps in the Second World War" He goes on to say, "I have a very grim view, not of the future, the present; I have a very hopeful view of the future . . . I believe an evolution is happening; together with all this greenness [as in the Greens?] an evolution is happening, an evolution of the human understanding that is happening in the youngest generation. I believe that the youngest generation, the generation to come, is the one that is going to come with new schemes and new perspectives of things."

It's good to be hopeful, but it's even better to be hopeful on the basis of something substantial and fully thought out. The difficulty is that the film's various elements do not fully cohere. The remarkable fragments remain fragments and thereby lose much of their impact.

The filmmaker takes great pains in his public comments to argue that *Children of Men* is not a science fiction work, rather that it's a consideration of the present or the possible near future. He further argues that a repressive regime need not be a dictatorship because "being a democracy doesn't mean people are choosing the right things or what is just."

On the issue of repression against immigrants and asylum seekers, Cuarón calls the policies of the various governments, "again—democratically chosen. It's not that there is this bad guy doing it like Hitler, it is a democratically chosen position. And the idea of tyranny—a democratically chosen tyranny—that as a humanity, we are making our choices."

Economic insecurity, the effort by the media to encourage every ounce of backwardness, the deliberate whipping up of national and ethnic divisions—all this has an effect. To describe the assault on immigrants and refugees, however, as a "democratically chosen" course misses the point badly. The voting public has no real say in the matter whatsoever.

Children of Men makes no effort to explain how British society has become so oppressive. Repression of immigrants appears to have little or no connection to generalized economic difficulty. It simply seems malevolent. Unfortunately, this is not a unique failing. Neither *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg) nor *V For Vendetta* (James McTeigue) could provide a plausible explanation for the dismal future each envisioned. The artists' intuition as to the possibility and quality of a military-police regime is far more advanced than their understanding about the driving forces of such a process.

The strengths and weaknesses of *Children of Men* have a great deal to do with a social process. Elements within the global film industry are responding to events, to the cruelty of colonial war, the increased repression in the name of the "war on terror," the coarseness and viciousness of the various regimes, "democratic" or otherwise. They feel a real but vague sense of urgency. The political situation in Mexico may be particularly offensive, where a corrupt and widely hated political establishment, which rigs elections at will, is indifferent to the vast suffering of the population.

The filmmakers turn to pressing matters, however, without jumping out of their skins. They are politically and historically untutored for the most part—they hold all sorts of contradictory and inconsistent social views: bits of pacifism, some Green thinking, more radical phraseology handed down by their parents or older brothers and sisters from the generation of 1968. Eclecticism sometimes allows the window to be left open an inch or two (or more) for the afterlife and other such nonsense.

The filmmakers, who were more or less content in the 1990s, are now made unhappy by this or that feature, or perhaps many features, of the present society, but a thoroughgoing rejection of the social order is for the most part unknown to them. Also, to be blunt, the contemporary film artists are often a little complacent and intellectually lazy. And they receive, in many cases, vast amounts of money for their efforts, and that has been known to have an impact.

So compassion and sincerity combine with dramatic sloppiness or the desire to show off. Some moments strike deeply, too many are merely glancing blows. Technical marvels compete with one another. Stories are designed to the hilt, perhaps over-designed, but the ideas are not particularly strong. The writers and directors are satisfied when they've hit upon one or two insights and leave it at that. Action scenes can be brilliantly done, yet when the pace lets up, there's not too much there. Dialogue about ideas is not expressively or convincingly done. So the action has to be cranked up again, because the filmmakers have only a limited number of things to say.

The films are overactive and underdeveloped. And this incomplete, half-accomplished quality infuses the art in a complex fashion. Images flicker in and out in one's memory, because the works are about genuine and compelling problems, but not yet done with either a life-and-death commitment to truth or a deep knowledge of the social process. This is the situation with the *better* films so far this autumn and winter.

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