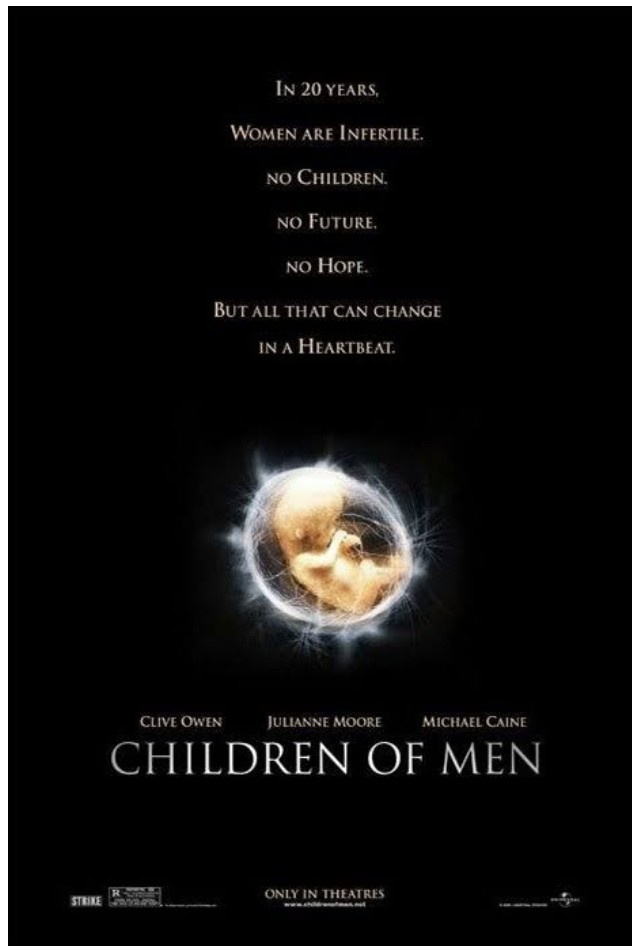


An Exploration of Dystopia in Alfonso Cuarón's Children Of Men

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Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 masterwork *Children of Men* (loosely based on P.D. James 1993 novel of the same name) tells the story of a dystopian near future in which women are inexplicably unable to have children.

This essay is intended to explore how the themes of dystopia in particular apply to the film, however it would be remiss not to acknowledge that it does, indeed, touch on themes of the apocalypse as it takes place in the middle of a decades-long apocalyptic event.

The film is a (and arguably *the*) example of a "Childless Dystopia", the lack of children dooming humanity to a slow but inevitable extinction and plunging the world into a state of violent frenzy. With Britain being turned into a xenophobic, neo-fascist police state, the unwilling refuge of vast swathes of people hoping to escape untold horrors unmentioned in the film (except briefly in passing).

In his essay, Samuel Amago identifies three central thematic elements that form the core of the narrative structure of the film, “an omnipresent media, the problem of anonymous terrorism, and a dire biological and ecological reality”, in his words (Amago, 2010). It is clear, however, that whilst the latter of these three points is the most present in the mind, through the film’s surface-level plot structure, the former, the existence of an omnipresent media (and indeed who the media serves) is of the most interest in our context.

It is often said that sci-fi, dystopia, apocalyptic fiction, etc., is designed to shine a light on current issues through the lens of implausibility and, more especially, the extrapolation of current trends. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the themes of *Children of Men*, wherein the British state’s xenophobic and protectionist values result in it becoming the only nation remaining with some semblance of “stability”.

At what cost, however, does this stability come? It is a common trope of the dystopic genre that the presence of a police state, whilst introducing a certain calm amongst the populace (outwith the conflict that tends to motivate the story) curtails individual freedoms to an unacceptable, and possibly insurmountable level.

The film is by no means an exception to this trend, Cuarón himself refers to the terrorist attacks of September 11th in his explanation of where the ideas for the film originated.

“[During the post-9/11 travel ban] we were stranded for three or four days, and I was (...) thinking about what’s going to happen, trying to understand what was going to shape this new century” – Alfonso Cuarón

“Our point of departure was, we’re at an inflection point. The future isn’t some place ahead of us; we’re living in the future at this moment” – Tim Sexton, Cuarón’s writing partner on the film (Riesman, 2016)

In this way the increase in surveillance and curtailment of freedom that resulted (rightfully or not) from 9/11 is a clear inspiration for the direction the director took the film in.

The protagonist, Theo, is kidnapped by The Fishes, a militant immigrant rights group who wish to see an end to the imprisonment and execution of “illegal” immigrants perpetrated by the British Military. Theo is subsequently tasked with taking Kee, the first expectant mother in over eighteen years, to the safety of a secretive group of scientists called the Human Project, with the aim of reproducing more babies and saving humanity.

Kee, however, is a refugee, meaning if the state were to find her, they would most likely separate her from her child and hand them off to another “posh British family”, whilst sending Kee herself to Bexhill, a refugee concentration camp somewhere on the south coast of England.

The racism that is on display here, and the violent enactment of said racism, is quintessential dystopia. The loss of hope and death of joy in-universe allows a totalitarian state to take ultimate control of the nation, removes checks and balances, and makes use of an entire state apparatus to enforce its xenophobic, isolationist will.

It is hope, or the lack thereof, however, that truly drives the story. In fiction, as in many ways with reality, children represent hope, a brighter future, a reason for existing and soldiering on, as it were. To have this hope extinguished is to plunge into a deep nihilism, from which the totalitarianism and, ironically enough, anarchy arises.

On this topic, the original author, P.D. James, writes:

“It was reasonable to struggle, to suffer, perhaps even to die, for a more just, a more compassionate society, but not in a world with no future where, all too soon, the very words ‘justice,’ ‘compassion,’ ‘society,’ ‘struggle,’ ‘evil,’ would be unheard echoes on an empty air.” (Bowman, 2007)

Cuarón himself saw the source material, and therefore the film itself, as a metaphor for the “fading sense of hope that [he] feel[s] humanity has [today]” (Cuarón, 2006). In the film, in this case, the Human Project represent an object of faith, an organisation that none of the main characters are fully convinced exists, and yet are willing to entrust the first new person in eighteen years to.

In conclusion, Children of Men is a film of contrasts, hope and faith surviving and even thriving in a totalitarian dystopia. It subverts the narrative expectation of dystopia towards the end, offering a shining ray of hope in the form of the Human Project coming to redeem humanity. In this way the film serves as a form of therapeutic dystopia, reassuring the viewer that although there is pain and anguish and injustice etc., there may also be hope.

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