

FILM THEMES IN CONTEXT

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Research In Context

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Hope is a powerful theme that has been displayed countless times throughout cinema. As a concept, hope is a “distinctive way of exercising one’s rational agency. It is a way of making an attractive outcome a part of one’s mental, emotional, and planning activities.” (Martin, 2014, p. 69). As an extension of this, our hopes “may sustain us through trials that would otherwise cause us to collapse or self-destruct; They may help us find means to elusive ends.” (Martin, 2014, p.142). Hope can therefore be used as a central theme within a narrative in order to provide agency to its characters and their motivations.

At the opposing end of the spectrum is the theme of hopelessness, which is the antithesis to hope and its values. Within an unjust and oppressive society, “when people lose hope that their anger will receive uptake and that injustices will be addressed, they resign themselves to the unjust conditions in which they live.” (Stockdale, 2021, p.142).

Hopelessness can therefore be seen as the loss of agency that embodies hope, effectively destroying a person's connection with the world around them.

Both hope and hopelessness are commonly present in dystopian narratives that deal with a collapsed society. It is common for dystopian narratives to utilise strong themes of hope and survival in an oppressive world. “When dystopian fictions tell us: you will submit, we can answer: we will not. This is a bet. One bets on the future. As long as there is one single good person on earth, there will always be someone who does not submit.” (Heller and Mazzeo, 2019, p.55).

Although the two are contrasted, both hope and hopelessness can be interwoven in a dystopian narrative to create a strong sense of depth within the emotional context of the story. One such narrative that strongly utilises these two contrasting themes is the dystopian thriller *Children of Men* by director Alfonso Cuarón, which alternates between both at various points. Although the theme of hope is strongly present in the movie, Alfonso did not intend to force a certain conclusion within the minds of the viewers. In an interview discussing the movie, Alfonso states that he “tried to make an observation rather than to give a statement”, and that “the sense of hope is something you cannot impose, it is something so personal.” (Brevet, 2006). With this in mind, how does Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* utilise the

contrasting themes of hope and hopelessness to represent both the destruction and preservation of humanity?

The events leading up to the beginning of the movie help to contextualise the theme of hopelessness that permeates much of its runtime. In the dystopian future of 2027, a global infertility crisis has led to the downfall of humanity. By the time the movie begins, it has been 18 years since the last birth of a human, which has sent humanity into a frenzy of violence and conflict as they lose all hope for the future of the human race.

Most of the major global cities have been destroyed by war and nuclear devastation, which has left the world in an apocalyptic state without any proper authority. One of the only nations to avoid complete devastation is the United Kingdom. As a result of this, the UK government has become an authoritarian police state that exerts tight control through security forces. The British elites and government officials continue to live lavish lifestyles while the remainder of the population lives in poverty and chaos. Food supplies have begun to dwindle, leading to severe rationing. Amongst the rations are antidepressants and suicide pills, a sign that humanity is losing its will to live.

Large amounts of refugees and illegal immigrants have fled to Britain due to it being the only remaining society that hasn't completely collapsed. This has led to an immigration crisis that has sparked severe xenophobia. The UK government has passed a law that makes it a crime to aid or house illegal immigrants. They have sealed the UK borders and have begun hunting down refugees and sending them to cities that have been walled off and turned into refugee camps. The refugees within these camps are treated like animals and are subjugated to both mental and physical torture as they await deportation. As a result of this, several refugee groups have begun an uprising against the UK government, leading to a variety of terrorist attacks, some of which are staged by the government to incite further hatred against the refugees.

The UK government within the movie can be compared to Nazism, with their extreme xenophobia and hatred towards an entire group of people, most of which are detained within

concentration camps. Some of the refugees are even unjustly executed, a symbol of a fascist regime that has lost its humanity.

The movie begins with a news broadcast of the death of 18 year old Diego Ricardo, the world's youngest person, who was born just before the infertility crisis. His life brought hope to humanity, but with him now dead, they are left feeling hopeless once more as they are reminded that humanity is doomed to go extinct once the last remaining humans die.

This hopelessness extends to the central protagonist of the movie, a former activist named Theo Faron, who begins the movie jaded and nihilistic. It is made clear that Theo feels hopeless in the dying world. He lost his son Dylan during a flu pandemic shortly before the apocalypse, which has led him down a spiral of depression and has left him apathetic to the world around him. We can see this apathy spread across the entire country. When Theo is kidnapped by a group of rebels, the people around him ignore it and continue as if nothing happened, a sign that they are uncaring and are just living out their lives waiting for their inevitable death.

The movie shows that many people have turned to drugs in order to cope with their deteriorating state of mind. Theo has become an alcoholic since his son's death, which has further destroyed his well being. Theo's friend Jasper uses drugs as a distraction from his wife's catatonic condition, which helps him escape from reality. During Theo's visit to his home, Jasper recites "Shantih Shantih Shantih", which is a reference to *The Waste Land* by T.S Eliot, a poem about a world that has been ravaged by war and has lost all hope as a result. Within the poem, the post-war world has destroyed all of the joy and beauty that once permeated people's lives, just as it has in the movie (Eliot, 1922).

The UK government is preserving art that has been taken from several museums across the world. The art is stored in the Battersea power station, which has been repurposed into an art gallery and museum. The museum is owned by Theo's cousin Nigel, who chooses to preserve art as a means of clinging to the past rather than thinking about the future, which he feels is the only way he can remain positive about his life. It is therefore implied that art is his own personal drug, a means of distracting himself from the

hopelessness of the future. During a conversation between Theo and Nigel, a pig shaped balloon can be seen hovering over the former power station. This references the album cover for Pink Floyd's *Animals*, which is itself based on the novella *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, a story that similarly centres on a rebellion against a fascist regime and the hope of a future without it (Orwell, 1945).

The main focal point of the scene within the art museum is the painting *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, an anti-war piece that laments the many horrific acts that are committed during times of war at the cost of innocent lives (Picasso, 1937). It is ironic that this piece is being held in a museum by the UK government, who are currently committing atrocities across the country against innocent refugees.

Theo's hopelessness and nihilism begins to change after he is tasked with aiding the transportation of a refugee named Kee. Upon discovering that Kee is the first pregnant woman in 18 years, Theo becomes more hopeful as he feels that it's his duty to protect this woman in order to preserve humanity, thus bringing purpose and meaning back to his life after years of depressive repetition. Kee's name is therefore a reference to the fact that she is the "key" to the future of humanity, the last hope for its salvation. Her introduction displays her in a pose reminiscent of Venus in the *Birth of Venus* painting by Sandro Botticelli. Within the painting, Venus is seen as the rebirth of civilization and a new hope for humanity, a role that Kee plays in the movie (Takac, 2018). It's at this point that the movie begins its transition towards themes of hope, something that was previously completely absent.

During the final moments of the movie, a conflict between the government and the rebels is brought to a halt by the sounds of Kee's newborn baby. Both sides of the conflict are brought to a standstill in order to marvel at the life that has been brought back to the world. It's as if peace is restored to the world, if only for a moment. This greatly embodies the power of hope, with children being at its core.

The title cards at the beginning and end of the movie represent the change from hopelessness to hope. The beginning title card is displayed after a terrorist attack, with a ringing sound in the background that represents the deafening explosions that have

devastated humanity. The end title card is displayed after Kee is brought to safety, with sounds of children playing and laughing in the background, signifying that there is now hope for future generations.

The cinematography and the visual imagery is also used to strengthen the themes of the movie. The camera is mostly handheld with long takes that follow Theo, sometimes deviating to focus on background elements that serve to heighten the world building. The long takes help to increase the tension through a constant stream of action that alternates between moments of serenity and moments of chaos. The movie is shot like a documentary that follows the action at every point, displaying all aspects of life within dystopian Britain, including the many societal and economical shortcomings that have ravaged the nation. The handheld shakiness is used to create a gritty and down to earth perspective that places us in the world as a spectator, providing us with a firsthand account of the suffering that exudes from each and every person that is shown on screen (Dinello, 2019, p.47).

The movie uses bleak and muted colours to represent the hope and vibrance that has been sapped from the world and its people. The bleak colour scheme is sometimes contrasted by moments of vibrance, particularly during scenes involving Kee. During the scene within the abandoned school, in which Kee is sat on a swing, she is bathed in light, while Theo and the midwife Miriam are both shrouded in darkness, showing that the hope of the future outshines the hopelessness of the past. The time of Theo's generation has passed, but it does not matter to him as the future of humanity is more important, a future that is only viable through the light of Kee and her child.

Near the end of the movie, a refugee woman can be seen wailing as she holds her dead son in her arms. This imagery is similar to the sculpture *La Pietà* by Michelangelo, which depicts the Virgin Mary holding the deceased Jesus in her arms. Within the movie it's explained that this sculpture was destroyed before it could be preserved within the art museum, perhaps an allegory that humanity has lost its connection with faith and the hope that comes with it. It can also be interpreted that humanity has strayed too far down a path of sin and have thus lost the purpose and meaning of Jesus' sacrifice.

There are several references to the bible and certain biblical figures. Kee is introduced in a barn alongside several animals, a reference to the birthplace of Jesus. Upon seeing her for the first time, Theo exclaims "Jesus Christ!". Kee jokes that she is a virgin and that she has no idea who the father is, which is allegorical to the Virgin Mary (Dinello, 2019, p.106). The father can therefore be interpreted as God himself. Theo can be seen as an allegory to Noah. He has a strong connection to all animals, who seem to be more affectionate towards him than anyone else. At the end of the movie, Theo finally transports Kee to a ship that can be interpreted as the ark of Noah, which in both cases is used as a preservation of life.

The sound design is also incredibly visceral and dynamic, with a variety of ambient sounds that can be heard in the background as the camera moves through the crumbling landscape. The movie uses audio to direct the viewer's attention to certain elements within the scene, which includes human chatter and various diegetic music pieces. Each explosion is accompanied by a deafening ringing sound, which encapsulates the loss that accompanies violence and the hopelessness that results as a consequence.

The soundtrack is also used to heighten the themes of the movie, which includes both a collection of music from a variety of artists and an official score composed by John Tavener. The film score is very melancholic, using strings and a soft choir to invoke a sense of sadness and despair. The main theme 'Fragments of a Prayer' is a powerful piece that is used in fragments throughout the movie during moments of tragedy and loss. It is serenely beautiful yet also somewhat harrowing, which reflects the two contrasting themes that interconnect throughout the movie. The track 'Mother and Child' is reminiscent of a church choir with a piercing organ that develops beyond the halfway point. It's as if the track is a memorial and tribute to all the lives that have been lost and all the parents who have lost their children. The score is used sparingly as the movie favours moments of silence, which helps to provide a sense of loneliness in a desolate and hopeless world.

In conclusion, the movie *Children of Men* utilises the contrasting themes of hope and hopelessness to represent both the destruction and preservation of humanity. It does this

through the interconnection of visual imagery, sound design, dialogue, and narrative subtext. In the context of a dystopian thriller, the themes develop as an inherent consequence of the sins of humanity and their attempt to reconcile. Alfonso Cuarón and his team have curated a movie that displays the potential of humanity's downfall and how it would act in such a circumstance. Humanity's triumph beyond the end of the movie is uncertain, but it is certainly possible now that they have hope.

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