
Children of Men's Ambient Apocalyptic Visions

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Abstract: Alfonso Cuarón's Children of Men (2006) is part of the long stream of films that respond vividly to social crisis and the hovering threat of human annihilation and that have sought to reimagine the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic myth. But I will argue that it represents a unique take on this popular genre that I call the ambient apocalyptic. The film's sense of pervasive crisis is not linked to a singular apocalyptic event and it redraws the tropes of many popular post-apocalyptic films. Cuarón intricately builds into nearly every scene referential signals to specific current political realities. He does this, however, without overburdening his film with either apocalyptic literalness or undisturbed certainty. He uses a layered referential style that seeks to create a kind of visionary realism.

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The catastrophic events of September 11, 2001 continue to inflect popular and political cultures, and a number of scholars (Prince 2009; Alford 2010; Kellner 2010) have surveyed American film in the post-9/11 era and tried to trace the resonance of this event and the ensuing war on terror in film productions. As Douglas Kellner (2010) writes:

Films are an especially illuminating social indicator of the realities of a historical era, as a tremendous amount of capital is invested in researching producing, and marketing the product. Film creators tap into the events, fears, fantasies, and hopes of an era and give cinematic expression to social experiences and realities. (4)

But as Matthew Alford (2010) reminds us, medium to big-budget mainstream films are not usually neutral reflections of social reality. They are the product of a particular nexus of power, which more often than not in American film history has highlighted the role and right of American supremacy and only challenged this position from within very narrow constraints. Some of the factors Alford examines that effect this constraint on critique include: the concentrated ownership of large-scale film production; the increasing commercialization and integration of product placement within large-budget films; the co-operation of government agencies in film productions; and the existence of attack media who threaten to punish filmmakers who step outside acceptable constraints.

However, in spite of such constraints, both Alford (2010) and Kellner (2010) agree that some level of critique does emerge, even within the mainstream Hollywood film industry. Kellner argues that film "transcodes"—translates and encodes—specific political discourses. In the context of post-9/11 film he writes: "many conservative films transcode Bush-Cheney discourses on foreign policy and militarism, while films like *Lions for Lambs* and *Rendition* transcode liberal discourses critical of Bush-Cheney administration politics" (Kellner 2010, 2).

Stephen Prince (2009) argues that films are more than just representations of particular discourses or purely affective experiences; they are also “sources of social knowledge.” Particularly, they are sources of social knowledge about traumatic events such as 9/11.

They may even provide a kind of social memory about these events; by framing the events according to various narrative and emotional templates, films offer a means of explaining and understanding them and a form of closure on them. (Prince 2009, 13)

The apocalyptic myth is one of these “narrative and emotional templates” that filmmakers have used to respond to narratives of social crisis including those arising in the post-9/11 war on terror environment (O'Donnell 2004, 2012, 2014; Walliss and Aston 2011; Quinby 2010).

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) is part of this stream of apocalyptic films that respond vividly to social crisis and the hovering threat of human annihilation. But I will argue that it represents a unique take on this popular genre that I call the *ambient apocalyptic*. The film's sense of pervasive crisis is not linked to a singular apocalyptic event and it redraws the tropes of many popular post-apocalyptic films. It is not a hero survivor film, for example, but it does present a complex hero narrative. It is not an apocalyptic road film but it does present a unique take on the apocalyptic journey. Cuarón intricately builds into nearly every scene of his film referential signals to specific current political realities. He does this, however, without overburdening the film with either apocalyptic literalness or undisturbed certainty. He uses a layered referential style that seeks to create a kind of visionary realism.

The film's opening scene introduces its hero, Theo Faron, and his post-apocalyptic world in a detailed, complex, long tracking-shot. We see quickly that the film is set in a recognizably different, but clearly contiguous world to our own. We fade in from black, first with only the audio of news headlines, then to a shot of a TV newscast on a monitor. Then the camera pulls back into a coffee shop, where the crowd of workers watches the news and waits for orders. The news broadcast performs a simultaneous diegetic and mimetic function. It *tells* the story of the death of “baby Diego” (a celebrity as the world's youngest person, born eighteen years previously), but we watch the audience watching this news and are thus *shown* its emotional impact. News is the carrier of specific apocalyptic information but, even more important, it is also a carrier of the non-specific apocalyptic tone of the film. As Theo takes his coffee and goes outside, the camera pulls back further and we see a familiar but different cityscape: English double-decker buses but with Asian tuk-tuks. Suddenly an explosion rips apart the coffee shop. The landscape of the film is both generic post-apocalypse and a specific hybrid mix—it could be London, it could be Bangkok, it could be Sarajevo—we are at once in all catastrophes.

In her review of the film, the *New York Times's* Manohla Dargis (2006) sums up this pervasive, all-embracing sense of the catastrophic become ordinary:

“Children of Men” pictures a world that looks a lot like our own, but darker, grimmer and more frighteningly, violently precarious. It imagines a world drained of hope and defined by terror in which bombs regularly explode in cafes crowded with men and women on their way to work. It imagines the unthinkable: What if instead of containing Iraq, the world has become Iraq, a universal battleground of military control, security zones, refugee camps and warring tribal identities? (para. 2)

This is clearly a “post-apocalyptic” film in the popular sense of being set in a post-crisis landscape, but it is also “post-apocalyptic” in the sense that it moves beyond easy singular notions of what constitutes such an apocalyptic crisis. P.H. Liotta (2005) argues we now live

in an environment where security—national, homeland, personal—must be reconfigured in response to what he calls “creeping vulnerabilities” as well as specific “threats.” As Michael Barkun (2002) notes, it is also an environment in which “war” and “disaster” are conflated with very real policy consequences:

It implies that all forms of emergency response must be linked, whether civilian or military, national or local. This potential breaching of boundaries between types of response mirrors the breaching of conventional boundaries among types of threats. Thus there are no longer clear distinctions between war and peace, war and crime, war and disaster. Rather myriad forms of “low intensity” conflict inhabit a transnational zone of ambiguous events. (31)

This sense of pervasive foreboding, or the sense of the apocalyptic in the present rather than as a purely future condition, has been written about by other authors (Doel and Clarke 1997; Pain 2009, 2010; Ironstone-Catterall 2011) including Brian Massumi and his collaborators in the influential *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (1993). Massumi writes:

Society’s prospectivity has shifted modes. What society looks toward is no longer a return to the promised land but a general disaster that is already upon us, woven into the fabric of day-to-day life. The concept of the disaster is unimportant. Its particulars are annulled by its plurality of possible agents and times: here and to come. What registers is its magnitude. In its most compelling and characteristic incarnations, the now unspecified enemy is infinite. Infinitely small or infinitely large: viral or environmental. The communist as the quintessential enemy has been superseded by the double figure of AIDS and global warming. (Massumi 1993, 11)

In a later interview, reflecting on the post-9/11 security environment and particularly the Bush administration’s policy of pre-emption, Massumi makes a critical point about “ambient” fear and its evocation in urban spaces:

It is important to keep in mind that the “ambience,” the affect of pre-emption, is not subjective in the sense of being limited to an internal state of an individual. Affect is an action word. It has as much to do with action-potential as feeling tone, and the felt field of potential action is environmental, which is to say immediately collective. Bodies react differently together, and that redefines what the environment is for each, and what each is for the environment. The operative space they cohabit is a space of collective re-individuation. (Rice 2010, 37)

This intersection between ambient fear, space, and political structure is, I will argue, at the heart of the way Cuarón uses a particular spatial aesthetic to convey the essential concerns of his film.

Children of Men takes its title and some of its essential plot points from the 1992 P.D. James novel, but Cuarón and his screenwriter Tim Sexton have freely adapted it to suit their contemporary political and filmic context.¹ It is set in a post-apocalyptic England in 2027. Although the precise nature of the apocalyptic trajectory is not revealed, one of its main markers is an infertility crisis that has led to a complete absence of human births for the previous eighteen years. England is one of the only countries left where a relatively safe, normal life is still possible for some, and it is besieged by a refugee crisis as people from all over Europe seek refuge. A young refugee, Kee, is suddenly found to be pregnant and the film centres around Theo (Clive Owen), who, through his ex-lover, resistance leader Julian (Julianne Moore), is suddenly embroiled in a journey to shepherd Kee and her child to safety.

A mysterious group, called The Human Project, will protect her from both the security state and the nefarious plans of the so-called resistance.

Although *Children of Men* pivots on major dramatic moments, like the opening coffee shop explosion, the sense of ongoing, low-intensity conflict and creeping vulnerabilities is key to understanding the film. The conversations of the characters give hints of the way this world has evolved, but the nature of the contemporary apocalyptic reality is revealed not so much in their dialogue but in the images, motifs, and locations of the film: its ambient information, its background aesthetic. Apart from the big-bang, thriller moments, the film is awash with a disturbing set of images: from refugees in cages, to protesting cultist “repenters.” It also shows life continuing well in the sectioned-off government “green zone” and in pockets of private resistance such as the country idyll one key character has carved out for himself. The diversity of problems is also mapped by the range of resistant belief systems: from the Fishes—an IRA-style terrorist group concerned with the plight of refugees—to the Repenters—a more traditional, sackcloth-and-ashes, apocalyptic cult.

Apocalypse and Post-apocalypse

Apocalyptic is used colloquially to refer to a major catastrophic event and the representation in film and literature of landscapes and societies after such an event is often referred to as *post-apocalyptic* (Berger 1999). But the apocalyptic is a much richer tradition which has a distinct set of theological meanings in Judeo-Christian theology. The Christian Bible’s book of Revelation presents the fullest enunciation of this tradition. It includes a cosmic war between forces of good and evil and a set of fated histories, which result not only in catastrophic plagues of destruction, fire, and disease, but ultimately in the birth of a new reality and a 1,000-year millennial reign of peace. The apocalyptic in its fullest sense always includes this tension between catastrophe and renewal, and as such it has come to influence a rich tradition of both religious and secular storytelling.

I have argued in previous work (O’Donnell 2012, 2014), following Quinby (1994), that easy or clear-cut distinctions between an ancient religious apocalyptic tradition or genre and contemporary secularized “spin-offs” are ultimately inaccurate and unhelpful. Rather the apocalyptic should be regarded as a “proliferative and persistent network of discursive and nondiscursive practices . . . that has appeared over a long period of time and a wide variety of statements” (Quinby 1994, xv). However, unpacking particular shifts between the biblical idea and current discursive practices can be helpful in highlighting particular ways the apocalyptic acts as a contemporary “regime of truth” (Foucault in Quinby 1994, xv). As Neil Gerlach (2012) has recently written:

Apocalypticism has been a dominant regime of truth in both theological and secular discourse, but the elasticity of the term “apocalypse” facilitates the convergence of theological and secular representations into a central discursive formation in American culture. The apocalypse works as a nexus point for the intermixing of religious and secular popular culture, highlighting the fluidity and mutuality of influence between the two. (217)

The most significant shift between the biblical idea of apocalypse and contemporary popular culture iterations is the shift from divine agency to human agency. In the traditional apocalyptic story the secrets of history and its ends are revealed and enacted by God. In contemporary versions engagement with the apocalyptic entails active searching and the end-time battle is structured around a human hero who seeks to avert the end rather than initiate the end of time. This move to a focus on human agency has been pointed out by a

range of authors (see Ostwalt 2009) and is one of the key ways the apocalyptic myth has been reimaged. In order to adapt apocalyptic trajectories to account for contemporary conditions, secular thinkers have also engaged with new ways of narrating the apocalypse and one of the significant interventions has been the narrative of “post-apocalypse” (Berger 1999; Heffernan 2008; Curtis 2010). Writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, James Berger (1999, xiii) analyzes what he calls “a pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture.” He argues that what Frank Kermode analyzed at mid-century as a “sense of an ending” has given way to “visions of after the end.” This is because of our now compelling awareness of actual historic catastrophe on a scale never before experienced:

We have had the opportunity previously only enjoyed by means of theology and fiction, to see after the end of our civilization – to see in a strange prospective retrospect what the end would actually look like: it would look like a Nazi death camp or an atomic explosion, or an ecological or urban wasteland. We have been able to see these things because they actually occurred. The most dystopic visions of science fiction can do no more than replicate the actual historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. (xiii)

Berger (1999) centres his enunciation of the post-apocalyptic form as an understanding of apocalypse as the site of “revelatory trauma” (143). In this sense apocalypse is both cataclysmic and hopeful because the notion of the revelation, the gift, inherent in traumatic history contains a millennial aspect. The apocalypse in this sense is also always post-apocalyptic in that it is a process that is always in a process of moving forward from the traumatic moment toward the millennial new creation. In this sense it is not just post-cataclysmic, but in the sense that the revelation always contains the seeds of its reality it is also post-millennial: the new age has begun. Berger shows this to be a complex political process.

For Berger the “language of the post-apocalypse demands a ‘saying the unsayable,’ providing an account of an unimaginable aftermath. And yet, these aftermaths, however unimaginable, have actually happened and languages for them exist.” The task, therefore, of the post-apocalyptic critique is to bring these representations to light and to analyze their history and context:

Not only to describe the overwhelming, often denied traumatic presences of the past that characterise our post-apocalyptic/postmodern present but also to suggest ways for “coming to terms” with the past, for moving toward a future with moderate hopefulness yet without amnesia. (Berger 1999, xx)

The language of post-apocalypse is a rhetoric of looking back as well as one that is looking forward. Berger warns of the “mechanisms of amnesia” by which such post-apocalyptic gestures can both construct and disavow important historical contexts for current geopolitical apocalyptic systems. Ronald Reagan’s post-apocalyptic rhetoric, for example, extolled an “achieved utopia” in his celebratory narration of the “city on the hill,” but in the shining light of its post-apocalyptic, utopic achievement the realities of past struggles (over racism and human rights, for example) are disavowed as in some sense not having happened. Reagan’s (1999) rhetoric sets up “gorgeous mechanisms of amnesia” (xiv); reality is softened: sandwiched between nostalgia for a non-existent golden age and this vision of the achieved future already here.

Cuarón’s exposition of the Bush-era post-apocalyptic is very different. I will argue that his layered, ambient apocalyptic manages to narrate past, present, and future in a uniquely compelling and revealing way.

The Ambient Apocalyptic Aesthetic

As Samuel Amago (2010) notes, Cuarón's constant referential signalling of current political realities within the frame of the film is one of his main artistic strategies. But this strategy is not based in a mathematical symbolism that mechanically equates image with reference; instead, the film builds a burgeoning set of evocative referential tableaux:

Cuaron ... and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki began with the idea that "not a single frame of this film can go by [without] making a comment about the state of things. So everything became about reference ... how this has relevance in the context of the state of things, of the reality that we are living today." He continues, saying that "the exercise was to transcend not only reality, but also to cross-reference within the film to the spiritual themes of the film." (Amago 2010, 217)

Amago (2010), like a number of critics (Parent 2008; Chaudhary 2009), follows philosopher Slavoj Žižek's² lead in pointing out that this referential strategy occurs through building detail in the background of the film. In discussing the film in a DVD commentary feature, Žižek says that the key to *Children of Men* is in this background aesthetic. He maintains that the film's rich, background detail allows the representation of complex new apocalyptic realities that full frontal analysis would not reveal as forcefully. Žižek refers to this as "the paradox of ... anamorphosis." He goes on: "If you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you don't see it; you can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background."

The strategy of "anamorphosis" that Žižek refers to is the classic trick of many famous Baroque ceiling murals. These Baroque illusions demand to be looked at from a certain point of view; it is only from a particular place that the illusions reveal themselves, otherwise they appear as distortions. Topper (2000) defines it this way:

When the viewer is placed near the projection point of the anamorph ... the undistorted image or form appears (it often helps to close one eye in order to see only the projected image). In so doing the viewer, so to speak, "re-forms" the object; thus the term "anamorphosis" was coined, combining the Greek words *ana* (again) and *morphoun* (to form). (115)

Throughout *Children of Men* the viewer is drawn into this anamorphic process of both watching and reforming the images on the screen: reforming apocalypse as there *and* here as then *and* now. It is a strategy both of oblique revelation and of immersion. It is thus both spatial and time based: immersion produces the illusion of sinking into the immensity of both space and time. The anamorphic spaces of the great Baroque ceiling murals took the viewer not only inside the perspective of the painting, but also transported them into the heavenly realm. As Collins points out, part of the essential conceptual framework of the apocalyptic imagination was a belief that this world was "bounded by the heavenly world of the angels and the prospect of heavenly judgement" (Collins 1998, 280). The anamorphic religious art of the Baroque visualized this relationship dissolving these boundaries between worlds.

Children of Men, as a contemporary post-apocalyptic tale, seeks to establish an analogous simultaneity between the apocalyptic world of the film and the current reality of this world. Cuarón describes this deliberate aesthetic strategy:

The visual references are mostly from media, of stuff that's been happening the past few years. What we were trying to do, as much as possible, was not alienate that sense of the present. Emotionally, you're watching something that's happening in the moment, that's happening today. (Ridley 2007)

Cuarón describes his initial clash with the film's art department, which wanted to produce a film with a *Blade-Runner* futuristic aesthetic:

I was excited to see all of that stuff, but then I said, "OK, guys, thank you, but that's not the film, the film I'm going to do is this." And I'd bring my own file of photographs I'd been putting together through all the years I'd been developing the project. There were photographs from Palestine, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, the Balkans, Chernobyl. I said, "No, this is the movie we're making." The constant mantra was, "We're not creating; we're referencing here." Everything has to have a reference to the state of our times. (Ridley 2007)

Like a true apocalyptic visionary Cuarón assembled his cinematic vision from the signs of the time (Matt. 16:2–3). This is produced through matching this carefully crafted visual *ambient apocalyptic aesthetic* with a use of ambient *news tone* as a soundtrack to the film's events: snippets of news broadcast are used as a constant revelation of terror and the brewing background crisis. The apocalyptic is subtly but consistently present, woven into the texture of the film as a background set of tones and images.

The film's mythic narrative strategy carefully integrates the resonance of symbol and image with the propulsion of sequenced plot. The build up of visual background detail allows contrasting parallel realities to be revealed in a single shot or carefully orchestrated series of shots. Cuarón gives a specific example of how this visual mythic strategy works. In one of the film's key moments of transition, Theo and Kee are trying to negotiate their way through the ghetto world of a militarized refugee settlement zone toward their rendezvous with The Human Project's boat on the coast. The boarded-up buildings, the wreckage strewn throughout the street, the soundtrack of guns and violence all signal the post-apocalyptic environment, but Cuarón also stitches in other levels of meaning and allusion. He explains in an interview:

They exit the Russian apartments, and the next shot you see is this woman wailing, holding the body of her son in her arms. This was a reference to a real photograph of a woman holding the body of her son in the Balkans, crying with the corpse of her son. It's very obvious that when the photographer captured that photograph, he was referencing La Pieta, the Michelangelo sculpture of Mary holding the corpse of Jesus. So: We have a reference to something that really happened, in the Balkans, which is itself a reference to the Michelangelo sculpture. At the same time, we use the sculpture of David early on, which is also by Michelangelo, and we have of course the whole reference to the Nativity.³ And so everything was referencing and cross-referencing, as much as we could. (Voynar 2006, para. 37)

One of the most striking examples of this referential ambient background in the film is the clear evocation of Abu Ghraib. Throughout the first half of the film there are constant background scenes of caged refugees; these cages set up a number of echoes: they recall the caged prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, but also evoke other crises. At one point, for example, an old woman gesticulates in German, setting up an echo of the Holocaust ghetto. These background scenes carry the weight of the film's "refugee crisis" narrative. But the reference to Abu Ghraib is quite specific. As Theo, Kee, and Miriam are taken toward the Bexhill Refugee Camp, through their bus window a number of cages are seen and they contain a series of tableaux, including naked prisoners and dogs that recall the Abu Ghraib images; most notable is a specific figure that recreates the now notoriously well-known image of the hooded man in a shroud standing on a box. The overall scene is chaotic and crowded and this image is seen very briefly through the bus window. If the viewer does not note the specific image, the tenor of the cluster will undoubtedly register, so in this sense it signals

that this scene *is* and *is like* its multiple references. This is the same apocalyptic terror system at play, or rather, the nature of the apocalyptic terror system is that it always draws on the resonance of past terrors and projects future threats.

The Reluctant Hero

In spite of this psychologically unsettling reality, and in spite of the fact that, as the opening scene shows, “normal” life now also means negotiating near misses with terrorist explosions, Theo, the film’s unlikely hero, seems determined to live as close to a normal life as he can. The opening scene sets up a complex interplay between Theo’s desire to approximate a “normal” life (even if this means blocking out “creeping vulnerabilities” through dosing his coffee from a hip flask) and the apocalyptic events that propel him toward reluctant resistance. As the film progresses he gets dragged into a stranger, darker, and more carnivalesque world where he can no longer pretend that a “normal” or non-resistant life is possible in this post-apocalyptic world.

The film alternates between urban and country settings which at first appear to set up an easy hell/paradise dichotomy as Theo escapes the urban chaos of the city to visit the hidden country idyll of his friend Jasper. This secluded world can only be entered through a carefully camouflaged gateway at the side of the road. But as the film progresses any easy identification of safe and unsafe places is quickly dispelled. Jasper’s retreat becomes, later on in the film, a place to *flee from* as a horrified Theo watches from a distance as his friend gets murdered.

At one level *Children of Men* could be conceptualized as a typical hero’s journey film where the hero confronts a series of tests and travels literally and metaphorically to a new place (Vogler 1992). There are also plenty of pointers—not least of which is his name—that Theo is to be understood as some kind of messianic Christ figure. But Theo and his journey cannot be easily pigeonholed into these simple categories. Certainly *Children of Men* is not typical of the common male action-hero/journey-myth film. Theo is as much midwife as he is protector. He plays midwife to Kee’s baby (after Miriam the resistance midwife is captured) and metaphorically his death is midwife to Kee’s putative new reality on the ship *Tomorrow*. This reinforces his presentation as a Christ figure: the harbinger of new life through suffering and death. But Sarah Schwartzman (2009) suggests that the film presents a new twist on this messianic Christ figure.

The most conspicuous alteration in this film is the shift to the plural, *Children of Men*, signifying that which is salvific as plural and collective. The messianic implication of the title is that humans, as a plurality of individuals, will save humanity from our own devastating end. (para. 4)

Schwartzman suggests that this “plurality” of the messianic can also be seen in the multiple Christ figures of the film. Theo ends up a sacrificial hero; Julian—the resistance leader of the Fishes—also in a sense dies to save Kee’s child. This child—sudden new hope for humanity after eighteen years of infertility—is also of course a Jesus figure. In this sense the metaphor of the journey in the film might also be seen as a *relay* where the beacon of hope is passed from Julian to Theo to Kee’s child.

But Theo’s heroics are by no means purely messianic. He is an unusually passive hero: Theo is not presented as driven and active even though he gets to make decisive moves at critical junctures. His journey begins when he is kidnapped by the Fishes and Theo does not

so much journey through the different worlds of the film; it often seems as if he is being shunted through worlds. He is an accidental guide through these multiple apocalyptic worlds: worlds of hope, resistance, and agency coexist with worlds of passivity, anomie, and powerlessness.

The film also sets up a very particular set of relationships between the personal and the political and between the individual characters' past and present realities. Although the background aesthetic of the film is key, this is not necessarily the case in the usual sense of establishing the characters through their milieu. Home and work locations, often used in film as a location of a character's identity, are used sparingly. Theo is not grounded in any one location: there is one very brief scene in his bedroom and one very brief scene at his workstation. The only place that he returns to is Jasper's home, and this is in some sense a refuge and a return to the past. The central political cause negotiated in the film is that of displaced people, of refugees, but it is also the story of a displaced hero; he is psychologically and, later, physically on the run. It is through the acute and contrasting images of place that the disjuncture at the heart of this central metaphor garners its power.

Technically, part of the delivery of Cuarón's ambient background aesthetic is through the consistent use of "one-shots" or single, unedited, long, tracking shots. In an interview he notes this and comments:

The reason for that is, we 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 have tension between background environment and your character. (Voynar 2006, para. 18)

Žižek notes this creation of tension between character and background and relates it specifically to *Children of Men's* reimagining of the heroic: "It's not really that all this infertility is just a pretext for the hero's inner journey from apathetic anti-hero mode to more active engagement. No; the fate of the individual hero becomes a prism through which you see the background more sharply."

The choices each character makes throughout the film are, of course, significant; the key ones are end-oriented choices. Jasper makes a critical decision to ward off the Fishes so that Theo and Kee can escape; he knows what the consequences of this are, and, although he has been portrayed as a happy-go-lucky figure throughout the film, he makes a sturdy choice here. Theo's choices do not seem as clear-cut. His choice to run with Kee from the Fishes' safe house, after he discovers some in the resistance are responsible for Julian's death, is partly because he knows that he is next, but his decision to take Kee and Miriam is spontaneous and unhesitatingly heroic. His initial decision to become involved seems more complex and more ambiguous.

Julian and he had been lovers and political activists in their youth, but they had drifted apart after the death of their young son. At the beginning of the film it is clear that he is a loner/alcoholic/bureaucrat who is muddling through life. He resists Julian's initial entreaty to become involved and it is unclear why he changes his mind, but the change seems to emerge from a reawakening of his connection to Julian ("What happens to us?" he asks her at one point, implying there may be a future for them) and with this connection to Julian comes a reawakening of his old sense of identity.

The apocalyptic crisis has the potential to both create and upset the dulled equilibrium of entrenched anomie and to initiate new choices of surrender or resistance. Apocalyptic

time limits these choices and orients them to a particular set of ends—either in synch with the state/crisis or as resistance. The “noise” of the apocalypse, the subtle ambiguous background crisis, obscures this choice for many until they are woken up by a particular apocalyptic or revelatory encounter. The encounter in the traditional apocalyptic story would come through a vision of an angel or dream, but in the new apocalyptic story modelled by films like *Children of Men* this reawakening comes in the form of a human encounter. It nevertheless takes on the fantastic and strange tone of the typical apocalypse. It is a revelation which suddenly breaks into Theo’s everyday: he is abruptly kidnapped from the street and taken to Julian by her Fishes henchmen; this is his initiation into the disorienting world of the apocalyptic. However, Theo’s response to this initial encounter is not the simple, awed response—to attend, write down, and proclaim—of the traditional apocalypticist.

Theo’s initial moment of revelation begins a complex process. It is an encounter with memory: an apocalyptic text that demands a negotiation with the past as well as the present and the future. It unearths the pain he feels over the child whom Julian and he had lost and brings him back into contact with his past values when both he and Julian were political activists. Even though Theo and Julian do not reawaken their sexual relationship, it is in part the eros of the encounter, as well as the entreaty, that brings Theo back into his embroilment with Julian, with his son, and with their shared past. There are intimate hints that their encounter is still visceral, such as the mouth-to-mouth Ping-Pong ball trick that occurs just before the attack in which Julian is killed. In a traditional Hollywood filmic structure these hints would mark the gradual movement from reconnection to resexualization of the relationship. Cuarón plays with such expectations and thus increases the power and poignancy of Julian’s sudden death.

This sudden rupture in the plot and in Theo’s life, which occurs relatively early in the film, would also usually evoke a typical Hollywood response: the reluctant hero would suddenly be transformed through the certainty required of vengeance. Everything that follows is done in response to Julian’s death, but Theo does not act out of vengeance; he acts to honour her memory. Kee says that Julian told her to trust him if anything happened to her. Theo finds, just barely, the strength to honour Julian’s recognition of him as trustworthy. In this he honours the fragile web of connection that has endured between them in spite of the apocalyptic times and even in spite of death. In this process he is reconstituted and regains a sense of agency that the overwhelming apocalyptic crisis had taken from him.

Counter-apocalyptic Exegesis

What Žižek calls Cuarón’s anamorphic strategy—to layer the film’s background with richly detailed, oblique-angled signs—and what I am calling an *ambient apocalyptic aesthetic* attests to the polyphonic nature of all reality, even apocalyptic reality, which is usually cast in strict binary terms. Cuarón’s layering of referential detail asks the audience to engage in *active exegetical work*, which is the posture of the apocalypticist who is always searching for “signs of the times” (Matt. 16:2–3).

Although all myth trades on the allusive power of the symbolic, traditional mythic stories such as the hero myth, or its Christ story variant, are recognizable primarily in the well-worn path of their plot-driven chronology. Contemporary myths are narrative structures which map the trajectory of the protagonist against the pattern of other similarly plotted heroic/messianic stories from cultural tradition. However, in the ambient detail of mythic films like *Children of Men* much more is taking place than the simple trajectory of the chronological

story. This type of film allows for a multilayered, multimodal form of contemporary mythic storytelling. As I have already noted, the multiple layers and motifs that occur in the background of the film are critical to the evocative power of this type of filmic mythmaking. The *active exegetical work* that reading a film like *Children of Men* requires is akin to the associative interpretation of a dream or prophetic interpretation of an apocalyptic vision.

Schwartzman (2009) demonstrates this type of analysis in her investigation of the film's layered background motifs. She notes Theo's association with free animals in certain key scenes and contrasts this with the caged refugees. Even more intriguingly she notes two repeated motifs in the film's soundtrack: "a high-pitched ringing noise," the "swan song" of dying ear cells," and a soprano singing "lofty church music," John Tavenar's "Fragments of a Prayer"(para. 12).

When Theo breaks down in tears over Julian's death, the sound of the high-pitched beep and the soprano voice merge together in a way that suggests a new kind of life-affirming possibility: one of restoring feeling-through-pain, of finding life-through-death, and of redemptive fertility-in-an-infertile-world.

The strategic deployment of certain visual motifs or locations brings different strands of mythic storytelling into connection with one another. As Schwartzman reminds us, the very fact that Kee first reveals her pregnancy to Theo in a barn recalls the nativity myth of the Christian gospels and builds the messianic story of the film. However, as she also points out, it brings the film's apocalyptic narrative into discussion with another contemporary dystopian myth, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which portrays "fertile women being rounded up, 'caged' in factory-farm sleeping halls, medicated and prodded, and completely disoriented to their own bodies or their offspring" (Schwartzman 2009, para. 14). Kee's reference in this scene to the mechanical milking technologies surrounding her in the barn further develop such parallels:

Kee's commentary ... provokes the viewer to think through this problem, about the ways in which bodies and reproduction are objectified and commodified in a society that strictly controls the movements, access, and vulnerability of differently marked bodies. (Schwartzman 2009, para. 14)

Thus a film like *Children of Men* is deploying a range of mythic and intertextual stories through a range of narrative, auditory, and visual means to build up a richly layered multimodal mythic cluster that speaks to both past traditions and contemporary realities. Simple scenes such as the barn scene which convey critical plot point information—here Theo first learns of the significance of Kee's journey—also function to raise much broader mythic and contemporary political associations. At other points the complex layering is done quickly, ambiently, in a set of passing shots or comparative motifs as Cuarón's explication of his use of the Pieta motif demonstrated.

Children of Men is not so much about the *imminence* of the apocalypse—although the looming sense of threat is acute—it is about the *immanence* of apocalypse, the felt texture of apocalypse all around. This is the essential message of what Žižek calls Cuarón's backgrounding strategy. The world is full of apocalyptic signs; it has become a living apocalyptic vision, a place where the reach of the apocalyptic system is not just through surreptitious surveillance but through the constant physical presence of apocalyptic structures such as caged refugees who line the sides of railway stations and streets.

Žižek makes another point about this overwhelming sense of the apocalyptic world. He says that in *Children of Men* the sense of "our world" has been dissolved. The characters no

longer feel that they have a world, a sense of community. The counter-apocalyptic hope that the film holds out is a story of fragile connections in this world without community. The Fishes resistance group is one portrait of a group seeking community, seeking to reconstitute connection as an ethic for living; they work together toward a time when refugees can be integrated into the community instead of exorcised. But their community is revealed as illusory and riven by factional conflict and conspiracy. The signs of genuine connectedness in the film are fragile.

Theo and Jasper have maintained a genuine sustained and sustaining friendship over time and they help reconstitute one another's identity. At one point after Miriam, Kee, and Theo have taken refuge at Jasper's, Theo returns to the group after being outside. Jasper is telling Miriam and Kee about Theo and Julian's relationship and the death of their child, Dylan. Theo hears this as he approaches and pauses, listening unobserved from around the corner. He listens to his own story being narrated by his friend as a story of cosmic chance; he is moved and in a sense he is reconstituted by this memory and its loving narration by his friend. This is an example of what Nelson Goodman (1978) calls "worldmaking": we make and remake the world by telling stories of and to one another.

The sense of counter-apocalyptic community is also signalled by the fabled existence of The Human Project. The Human Project has a community in the Azores, Jasper excitedly says at one point. The Human Project is the millennial myth of the film. We see graffiti at one point which says, "the human project is real"; it is a myth being formed as a point of resistance. In one of their earlier conversations Theo is sceptical about the existence of The Human Project and Jasper seems happy enough to weave it into his personal tapestry of "improvisational millennialism" (Barkun 2003) as just one more element alongside a variety of "hippie" convictions such as belief in UFOs. But the film ultimately reveals that The Human Project *is* real. It is floating in a ship off the coast that only comes into clear view in the final scene of the film. This final scene is more than a mere sentimental happy (millennial) ending. It signifies not just the possibility of hope but its shape: a ship that size requires a skilled and united crew; it requires a community, a group of people who still have a sense of "our world" as a productive place where hopeful worldmaking remains possible.

The Possibility of Hope

Cuarón named an accompanying documentary that he released with the film on DVD *The Possibility of Hope*. In it he interviews a range of philosophers and social scientists about migration, climate change, geographies of urban division and globalization, and the question of hope. Clearly the question of hope is a key one in the film, but just as he builds his analysis of apocalypse's force through his complex layered background aesthetic, his analysis of hope is equally complex.

In a sense the film does have a happy ending. Although Theo dies, he dies a sacrificial hero just as The Human Project ship, *Tomorrow*, sails into view. He knows his project to honour Julian's trust in him has been venerated and Kee seals this by saying she will name her child Dylan, after Julian and Theo's dead child. The circle is complete. The baton has been passed. But Theo arrives at this strangely hopeful moment through what the mystics would call the *via negativa*. He has been stripped of everything. One by one, everyone he trusted or let himself love was taken from him—Dylan, his child; Julian; Jasper. He is left totally alone.

The final scene of the film, as the fatally wounded Theo rows a fragile little boat out into the bay toward the buoy where *Tomorrow* is scheduled to stop, is misty and grey. Unlike the layered backgrounds of the rest of the film—apart from a brief fighter jet flyover and a very distant explosion—the focus is only on Theo, Kee, and her baby floating in their flimsy boat. The hazy background is mist, the unknown.

The traditional apocalyptic action film that operates on a thriller structure sees the world taken to the brink of destruction and then brought back to stasis through the intervention of the hero. *Children of Men* undercuts all these conventions. The hero is reluctant, not driven by his own apocalyptic certainties; instead, he allows himself to be moved by a set of relationships and the embrace of memory. The end is hopeful but far from a resolution of the apocalyptic crisis. It shows a point or possibility of resistance, the seeding of a new world, not the sudden apocalyptic descent of a fully made new world. It therefore problematizes both catastrophe and survival, letting neither of these paradigms hold complete sway in the production of this imaginative world.

Children of Men makes clear the intimate connection between the cataclysmic and the millennial modes of apocalypse, or as Žižek comments on this scene:

Hope is only possible where despair is. Something truly new begins when you are in such a shit that with the existing coordinates you can find no way out and then in order to survive you have to invent something. Magic is to turn a desperate situation into a new beginning.

The invention in order to survive is not a sudden surge of heroic millennial warrior energy. The counter-apocalyptic vision of this film is to row, then to float. For Žižek the metaphor of the boat floating in a grey sea is a strangely apt solution:

The boat is the solution, in that you accept rootless, free, floating, you cannot rely on anything. It is not a return to land. Renewal means you cut your roots.

The film began with a black screen and the ambient terror of a news broadcast. It ends with the laughter and chatter of children at play as the credits roll on the final black screen. As viewers, we don't see these children; we only catch a glimpse of the approaching rescue ship and the film asks us to accept the glimpse, the echo, the possibility of hope.

Notes

1. Cuarón admits (Voynar 2006) that he didn't even read the James book (although co-writer Sexton did) because his interest was only in taking the key idea of the apocalyptic future marked by infertility and adapting it to his own cinematic project.
2. All quotes from Žižek in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, are from a series of commentary features on the 2007 Universal DVD of *Children of Men*.
3. Kee first reveals her pregnancy to Theo in a barn.

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