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Children of Men and a Plural Messianism

Abstract

Children of Men (2006) presents an apocalyptic narrative in which the hope for redemption relies on the formation and expansion of new communities. Director Alfonso Cuarón invents a realistic, modern Armageddon by playing on contemporary fears about environmental destruction, nuclear warfare, terrorist attack, and the sense of cultural loss that accompanies rapid globalization. The film relies on Christian theological symbols to propose a new kind of messianism – one in which many messiahs will collectively restore human sacrality and fertility by dismantling rigid systems of social control. By envisioning the apocalyptic world as one that dehumanizes outsiders, *Children of Men* is able to merge religious messianic motifs with a cultural critique of political borders and ideologies of exclusion.

The opening scene of *Children of Men* introduces the viewer to the despair, danger, and unpredictability of Cuarón's apocalyptic world, set in London in 2027. A television commercial informs, "The world has collapsed, and only Britain soldiers on," immediately immersing the viewer in the militaristic and mechanistic new order of life. The film's plot is based on the premise that human beings have been infertile for eighteen years. The reason why humans can no longer have babies is never given, so the viewer is disposed to associate the condition of infertility with the desperate quality of life in the apocalyptic world.

Synopsis of the storyline

Theo, our trustworthy anti-hero, begins by visiting Jasper, an aging hippie friend who is able to bring Theo out of his vacillating apathy and depression. Returning to London, Theo is kidnapped by the Fishes (a political group that uses terrorist methods to fight for the rights of refugees.) Julian, the mother of Theo's late son, orchestrated the kidnapping and convinces Theo to help her obtain a travel permit for a refugee girl named Kee. Theo, Julian, Kee, Lou (another member of the Fishes), and Miriam (an eclectic midwife) travel together until a violent ambush results in Julian's death. Soon after, Theo learns the importance of their mission: Kee is pregnant. Aware of the Fishes' plot to use Kee's baby for political ends, Theo is determined to deliver Kee and Miriam to safety with the Human Project, a

secretive and legendary group associated with restoring fertility and saving humanity.

After fleeing from the Fishes, Theo takes Kee and Miriam to safety at Jasper's home. Since they need to reach a designated meeting point with the Human Project, Jasper arranges with a guard named Sid for them to sneak into Bexhill Refugee Camp to be closer to their destination. Sid sneaks in Theo, Kee and Miriam as refugees, until Miriam is swept away by the brutal authorities. Kee goes into labor, and Theo helps to deliver the baby in the middle of the night. The next day, a massive uprising breaks out in Bexhill, and Theo, Kee, and a new accomplice, Marichka, struggle their way through the mob violence and away from the predatory Fishes. Marichka helps them to find a rowboat, and Theo rows Kee and the baby out to the designated buoy to meet the Human Project. After realizing that there is blood all over the bottom of the boat coming from Theo's wounds, Kee decides to name her baby Dylan, in honor of Theo's own late son. Theo dies, and soon after, a triumphant ship called the "Tomorrow" comes to rescue Kee and her baby. The film ends to the sounds of children playing and to credit music that serenades, "We don't care what flag you're waving."

Theology of hope: We can be our own messiahs

The characters and scenes in this movie provide clearly religious elements for discussion. This film suggests a transformation of Christian messianic theology about the Son of Man who is destined to save humanity from a cosmic apocalypse. 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.

The notion of an apocalypse focused on humans rather than the divine is a common trend in contemporary apocalyptic films. Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. has written about the “secularization of the apocalyptic tradition,” explaining how contemporary films focus less on divine destruction and redemption, and instead focus on the human power to destroy and renew the world. Ostwalt writes, “The modern apocalypse has replaced a sovereign God with a sovereign humanity, and instead of providing hope for an eschatological kingdom, the cinematic apocalypse attempts to provide hope for this world.”¹ He suggests that as humans have become increasingly aware of our technological ability to bring about the destruction of the world, apocalyptic film narratives have been rewritten to give humans the parallel ability to prevent that end.

Perhaps the clearest place to begin analyzing this shift from sovereign God to sovereign humanity is with the character of Theo. Theo’s name is etymologically

linked to the Greek word for God. Theo's association with the divine in this film is reflective of the secularization of modern apocalyptic films, because although Theo is fully human, he joins the movements to save and restore humanity, becoming one of the many "Children of Men" to sacrifice themselves for both a literal and figurative human rebirth.

Theo's similarities to Jesus as messiah are evident in several ways. His character is non-violent, despite being surrounded by guns and bombs. While defending and protecting Kee, he never uses or carries weapons. Theo is also consistently surrounded by animals, which are used throughout the film as indicators of goodness and trustworthiness. The recurrent focus on free animals loving and surrounding Theo is set in contrast to the repeated caging of humans on streets and in camps. The caged humans become living symbols of the unfeeling, institutional systems that have led to apocalyptic conditions.

Animals are also used in the film to connote specifically Christian symbolism. When Theo and Kee leave an armored building in Bexhill Refugee camp, an unexplained herd of sheep pass in front of Theo, associating Theo with the symbol of Jesus as lamb and shepherd. Also the Fishes, the group that want to use Kee's baby as a symbol of refugee rights, might be understood as a play on the Christian fish icon. Fishes have historically been a symbol used to identify Christian followers; perhaps in this film, the Fishes can be interpreted as making a point about

the historic, distorted uses of violence that have come out of a rigidification of the Christly or messianic message. The Fishes are a political group that began ideologically with very good intentions to protect the rights of refugees and save humanity, but who have gradually misapprehended their redemptive mission and now dogmatically force their ideology through violence and terrorism.

Finally, perhaps one of the strongest allusions of Theo to Christ figure is at the end of the film, as Theo bleeds from his side. When Kee notices blood all over the floor of the boat, she thinks that she is bleeding. Theo clarifies that it is his blood and soon after passes away, having sacrificed himself for Kee and the baby, and for what they represent: the future and hope of humanity. Another possible theological reading of this scene is possible. After Theo acknowledges that it is his own blood, Kee says that she will name her daughter Dylan after Theo's deceased son. If we rely on the name symbolism of "Theo" as God the father, then we can read the new baby, who marks the potential survival and 'salvation' of humanity, as named for the son of Theo or "God."

Steve Vineberg has interpreted Kee's character as "an earthbound version of the Virgin Mary, carrying the miracle child of an unseen father."² Theo becomes aware of Kee's pregnancy in a barn, a clear adaptation of the nativity scene. When Kee disrobes to show Theo her pregnant stomach, his immediate response is "Jesus Christ." Vineberg also comments that Cuarón keeps the viewers focused on "the

ineffable sadness of a world without children” until the climatic scene in which Theo and Kee carry the baby through a bombed, crowded apartment building.³ In one of the most moving scenes of the film, Theo, Kee and the newborn pass through the building as bystanders cry or stand back in awe. Some reach out gently to the baby and mother, some kneel and cross themselves, and all of the combatants stop firing in protective reverence. The “ineffable sadness” is interrupted by the renewal of faith and hope that people experience in witnessing Kee’s miracle baby.

Since the movie focuses on the idea of messiahs as plural, it is important to see how other characters in the film also play messianic roles. Julian can be viewed as one of these messianic figures. She is said to be a “mirror,” someone who anonymously goes between people to help the Human Project relay messages. In keeping with common symbolic uses of mirrors in film to represent reflectiveness, introspection and enlightenment, we can see her role – that she is a mirror – as signifying both her heightened position in the cause for restoring humanity, and perhaps also signifying her ability to reflect or illuminate others’ abilities to be part of the movement. Julian is the first character in the film to die for the Human Project. In the viewer’s first encounter with Julian, she is in hazy silhouette, surrounded by the blinding interrogation light directed at Theo. One reading of this scene is that Theo is reborn in that moment, into the small womblike shed, his eyes adjusting to bright light as he is first brought into the Project. If we read this scene

in the context of traditional Christological films – as one of Theo’s rebirth or reawakening – Julian is presented in much the traditional way that the messiah figure is presented. She is obfuscated by the bright light emanating around her before we are able to see her clearly. This scene can perhaps be viewed as one of Julian indoctrinating Theo into his own capacity for messiahship. This ability to convert or awaken Theo is reiterated in her ability to make him feel alive again, to revive him from his numb depression and to renew in him a sense of meaning.

Julian’s death also leads to a new depth of “humanness” attained by Theo. This scene of his reclaimed humanity is magnified by the film’s use of sound. From the beginning, we are introduced to a high-pitched ringing noise, the “swan song” of dying ear cells, which comes to represent the horror of a world of bombs, borders, and death. In contrast, a soprano voice singing an original piece, “Fragments of a Prayer,” is reminiscent of lofty church music, and is played in scenes that represent life, intimacy, and hope. Throughout the film, the high-pitched ringing noise is set in opposition to “Fragments of a Prayer.” 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.

An infertile worldview and systems of abjection

Throughout the film, Cuarón sets intimacy and personal closeness in opposition to dehumanizing and punitive systems of social control. The character Sid is an armed guard who sneaks Theo and Kee into Bexhill Refugee Camp, and who can be read as a human representative of fascist systems. Sid is unable to empathize with Theo, Kee, or Miriam, and laughs at their vulnerable situation. In order to verify Sid's identity, Theo had to tell him the password – "You're a fascist pig." Sid's inhumanity is underscored by speaking in the third person. "Sid doesn't know why you want to get in. Sid doesn't want to know." His inability to speak in personal pronouns – in ways that relate I and you in relation to one another – is further indicative of how fascist systems dehumanize people and disable personal recognition.

The dehumanizing infertility is also discussed in the barn scene, when Kee reveals her pregnant belly to Theo. She comments about the absurdity of the milking machinery, that farmers cut off two of each cow's teats because the milking machine only works with four. The absurdity is that the animal's body is destroyed to fit the machine, rather than making a machine to fit the animal's body. This comment exemplifies the cultural critiques that the film is trying to make – that the systems of controlling and regulating people have become more concerned with protecting the system itself than with protecting the humans for whom the systems were designed. This scene about livestock and reproduction also draws parallels to

other dystopian films, like Volker Schlöndorff's 1990 adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. A recurring theme in dystopian narratives is that reproduction is commodified and fertile bodies are subjected to a kind of industrialized debasement. *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts fertile women being rounded up, 'caged' in factory-farm sleeping halls, medicated and prodded, and completely disoriented to their own bodies or their offspring. Kee's commentary in the barn also 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.

Children of Men offers a critique of rigid social systems, instigating complicated questions like, "Who gets included?" and "Who matters?" in the context of national politics and citizenship. Through a cinematic emphasis on the background, the film forces the viewers to see how people are dehumanized: the other, the foreigner, and the beggar. As an overarching message, the film suggests that by breaking into imprisoning, delimiting, and impersonal systems of social control, humanity can form a new and improved, perhaps redeemed world. Messianic salvation in this film is conceptualized as fertility, as the creative potential that enables human flourishing as opposed to those structures that regulate, rigidify, and delimit it.

Slavoj Zizek has commented that *Children of Men*'s discussion of infertility signifies a "lack of meaningful historical experience" in the face of new globalization.⁴ For Zizek, infertility develops out of the loss of a cohesive worldview, a loss that forms when individuals are disconnected from larger collective or communal experiences. As an example, Zizek notes a scene in which Theo sees classic works of art in the foyer of a residence, completely stripped of their cultural and historical significance. Zizek interprets this scene as demonstrative of how life, like art, is no longer meaningful when it is stripped of its context, and when it no longer signals a viable, or fertile, worldview.

Zizek also draws attention to the film's continuous tension between foreground and background. Zizek comments that Theo's story is not the primary focus of the film, but that Theo's transformation of faith functions as a "kind of prism through which to see the background more sharply."⁵ The background highlights various disruptions of cultural experiences, emphasizing the displacement of individual experiences from communities, and the many ways that people are struggling with the sense of meaninglessness, isolation, and the loss of a cohesive worldview.

The film's emphasis on fragmented and dystopian background provokes the reader to question how concepts like 'abjection' come to be produced in social and political terms. The focus on background enables the viewer to see those people

who are considered not to ‘count’ in political terms, whose stories do not to ‘matter’ enough to be the basis of their own film narratives. Judith Butler describes this abject figure as one who “lives within discourse as the radically uninterrogated and as the shadowy contentless figure for something that is not yet made real.” She suggests that this abjection can be discussed in instances when a nation values the lives of its own citizens more than the lives of outsiders.⁶ *Children of Men* focuses in on those ‘abject’ figures in the background, forcing the viewer to recognize how underlying and uninterrogated social structures result in such systematic dehumanization.

Cuarón also deliberately uses haunting, iconic images to tap into the viewers’ collective memory, in order to make ‘real’ this apocalyptic dystopia. For example, the scenes of torture and humiliation when the bus lands in Bexhill deliberately evoke images from Abu Grahیب. The scene shows faceless victims who are bound uncomfortably, heads covered in bags, stripped to underwear, with their bodies on display in positions of utmost vulnerability. Another explicit recreation of a memorialized image is when Theo and Kee pass a pile of luggage at the entrance to Bexhill. This moment deliberately recalls images of piled suitcases and shoes commonly found in Holocaust memorials. By recreating several well-known images of historic suffering, Cuarón allows us to link ‘our own’ historic or memorialized suffering with the apocalyptic suffering in the film, in the hope that

it will prod us toward a common recognition of real, structural evils. Despite the radicalism of the film's setting, the atrocities witnessed in the film are made believable through association with these images of tragic-but-real horrors from recent Western memory. This use of collective memory in setting the scenes is a poignant way for Cuarón to use the "meaningful historical experience" that Žižek addresses, in order to draw the viewers out of their individual viewership and into a collective, historical recognition of structural injustices. By making visible the abject figures that have been dehumanized, *Children of Men* provides hope for a rethinking of social and political systems to be able to accommodate disruption and plurality. The hope is for a renewal of human flourishing through a sense of shared recognition rather than systematic exclusion.

How to live in a fertile world

The film promises a kind of mobile solution through new ways of thinking about frontiers and boundaries. Žižek suggests that the boat at the end of the film (aptly named the "Tomorrow") represents future cultures as floating and rootless. The boat suggests a discontinuation of our reliance on national or territorial boundaries.⁷ Human Geographer Fabrezio Eva supplements this interpretation by rethinking traditional and territorial conceptions of citizenship. Eva proposes multiple and overlapping borderlines that would work in such a way that every state would guarantee the rights of every human being, not only the rights of its own citizens.⁸⁸

In this way, the “rootlessness” that Žižek describes could be understood also as a kind of floating mobility, suggesting that one is not territorially (or otherwise) bound in finite and exclusionary ways. This sense of floating, of not being determinedly ‘grounded,’ can be connected to the film’s multiple close-up shots on Theo’s inadequately clad feet (flip-flop sandals, socks, ragged sneakers with an injured leg) – a signal of his inability to stand firmly rooted anywhere.

The film shows how territorial boundaries and national membership are enforced through debasing practices of exclusion and dehumanization. It seems, then, that one possible solution might be found through rethinking the current terms of national membership and borders. If we read these borders as kinds of enclosures that keep some people in while keeping others out, then the scene in which Theo and Kee break into Bexhill can be read in a more meaningful way: they needed to break into the institutions that were created to limit and regulate. By disrupting (or ‘breaking into’) the social and institutional barriers (economic, territorial, political, and ethnic) that give membership to some while deliberately failing to recognize others, perhaps the film suggests that there may exist fertile hope for a new experience of humanity.

Children of Men ends somewhat ambiguously. After Theo’s passing, there is a brief moment of desolation and fear while Kee and her baby float alone in their boat. Soon Kee sees the ship in the distance and reassures her baby, “It’s okay.

We're safe now. We're safe." The frame sets up a final image of the distant ship between Kee's boat and the blinking buoy light; although the ship's imposing size ought to overwhelm and diminish Kee's small boat, the framing of this moment reassures the viewer that the ship will not overtake her. Despite her claim to safety and the relief of seeing the rescuing ship, there remains a clear sense of uncertainty at the end of the film. There is an indiscernible horizon between sky and ocean in the background, and the boats are surrounded by cloudy fog. As in the conclusion of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the 'freed' character is still resigned to live a marginalized life, along uncertain borders and without the ability to root themselves to stable ground. The viewer's sense of hope is checked by the disoriented transience implied at the end of each of these films. Metaphorically and visually, the films remind us that there is no clear horizon in a dystopian world. Our primary characters may have escaped their immanently dangerous situations, but the reality of escape in these dystopian worlds is precarious at best, and perhaps inconceivable at worst.

In concluding, *Children of Men* suggests that humanity might be able to prevent an apocalyptic end in two ways: by recovering fertile 'humanizing' ways of life, and by breaking down tyrannical systems of abjection. As cultural critique of globalization and of unchecked capitalism, the film presents the end of the world as coming through the human propensity not to recognize or treat 'others' as fully human. Cuarón addresses these issues by suggesting that we will learn from our

collective past, breaking down borders in ways that enable a redemptive flourishing of humanity. However, this deconstruction of borders seems likely to lead to an uncertain and unpredictable future. Despite this enveloping uncertainty, the film suggests that humans will be our own messiahs. In other words, mobile communities of interconnected individuals will save humanity from an Armageddon of our own tragic, systematic making.

¹ Ostwalt, Jr., Conrad E. 2005. Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic themes in recent cinematic presentation. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, myth, and ideology in popular American Film*, ed. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. Boulder: Westview Press, 62.

² Vineberg, Steve. 2007. Rumors of a birth. ("Children of Men" Movie review). *The Christian Century* 124, no. 3: 44.

³ Vineberg, Steve. 2007. Rumors of a birth. ("Children of Men" Movie review). *The Christian Century* 124, no. 3: 44.

⁴ Commentary by Slavoj Zizek. " 'Children of Men' Comments by Slavoj Zizek" Bonus features. *Children of Men*, DVD. Universal Studios, 2006.

⁵ Commentary by Slavoj Zizek. " 'Children of Men' Comments by Slavoj Zizek" Bonus features. *Children of Men*, DVD. Universal Studios, 2006.

⁶ Prins, Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje. 1998. How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler. *Signs* 23, no. 2: 281.

⁷ Commentaries by Slavoj Zizek, Tzvetan Todorov, Naomi Klein, Saskia Sassen, and Fabrizio Eva. "The Possibility of Hope" Bonus features. *Children of Men*, DVD. Produced by Alfonso Cuarón et al., Interviews by Riccardo Romani. Universal Studios, 2006.

⁸ Commentaries by Slavoj Zizek, Tzvetan Todorov, Naomi Klein, Saskia Sassen, and Fabrizio Eva. "The Possibility of Hope" Bonus features. *Children of Men*, DVD. Produced by Alfonso Cuarón et al., Interviews by Riccardo Romani. Universal Studios, 2006.