

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Eleven, Number Two

On Anamorphic Adaptations and the Children of Men

Gregory Wolmart, Drexel University, United States

Abstract

In this article, I expand upon Slavoj Žižek's "anamorphic" reading of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006). In this reading, Žižek distinguishes between the film's ostensible narrative structure, the "foreground," as he calls it, and the "background," wherein the social and spiritual dissolution endemic to Cuarón's dystopian England draws the viewer into a recognition of the dire conditions plaguing the post-9/11, post-Iraq invasion, neoliberal world. The foreground plots the conventional trajectory of the main character Theo from ordinary, disaffected man to self-sacrificing hero, one whose martyrdom might pave the way for a new era of regeneration. According to Žižek, in this context the foreground merely entertains, while propagating some well-worn clichés about heroic individualism as demonstrated through Hollywood's generic conventions of an action-adventure/political thriller/science-fiction film. Žižek contends that these conventions are essential to the revelation of the film's progressive politics, as "the fate of the individual hero is the prism through which ... [one] see[s] the background even more sharply." Žižek's framing of Theo merely as a "prism" limits our understanding of the film by not taking into account its status as an adaptation of P.D. James' *The Children of Men* (1992). This article offers such an account by interpreting the differences between the film and its literary source as one informed by the transition from Cold War to post-9/11 neoliberal conceptions of identity and politics. To articulate the terms of this argument and its implications, I turn to another narrative depicting the identity and politics at the end of history, Francis Fukuyama's infamous *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), published the same year as James' novel, both offering meditations on the Cold War and speculations (albeit on different registers) on its aftermath. Incorporating these two texts into Žižek's anamorphic paradigm contributes to our understanding of the film's message regarding the "state of things" during the post-9/11 era, as well as the Cold War era that preceded it, as perceived through the eyes of Theo adapted to suit the respective dystopian conditions of the novel and film.

In a short supplement filmed for the DVD release of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), Slavoj Žižek¹ briefly offers what he calls an "anamorphic" reading of the film. In it Žižek distinguishes between the film's ostensible narrative structure, the "foreground," as he calls it, and the "background," wherein the social and spiritual dissolution endemic to Cuarón's dystopian England draws the viewer into a recognition of the dire conditions plaguing the post-9/11, post-Iraq invasion, neoliberal world. The foreground plots the conventional trajectory of the main character Theo (Clive Owen) from ordinary, disaffected man to self-sacrificing hero, one whose martyrdom might pave the way for a new era of regeneration. According to Žižek, in this context the foreground merely entertains, while propagating some well-worn clichés about heroic individualism as demonstrated through Hollywood's generic conventions of an action-adventure/political thriller/science-fiction film. Žižek contends that these conventions are essential to the revelation of the film's progressive politics, as "the fate of the individual hero is the prism through which ... [one] see[s] the background even more sharply."

So much is clear in Emmanuel Lubeszki's remarkable cinematography, as Theo's point of view conducts the spectator's gaze but does not substitute it; he is a "prism" not a camera. Theo refracts the viewer's gaze anamorphically, in other words, toward the conditions that surround him, to which he is either oblivious, indifferent or restricted from observing for too long. It is not just in the movement of the camera but also in the dimensions of the lens itself that the term "anamorphic" acquires a valence consistent with Žižek's reading and Lubeszki's craft. To wit, an anamorphic lens broadens the horizontal axis to accommodate twice the information captured by a spherical lens, hence its popularity with cinematographers in the industry. By declaring an anamorphic reading Žižek is drawing from an artistic and critical tradition long preceding *Children of Men*, one to which he has contributed extensively and with far greater nuance than his anamorphic reading of the film suggests.

To encapsulate the provenance and substance of the anamorphic reading, we may turn first to the anamorphic image, most famously represented in Hans Holbein's

painting *The Ambassadors* (1533). The ostensible subject of Holbein's work are the eponymous ambassadors, at the foreground and posing side-by-side with an array of scientific and cultural objects between them, mounted on the two-tiered shelves at the top of which each man rests an arm. The calm symmetry and realism of the picture is disrupted by a skull that lays between them, painted from an elongated and distorted perspective. The skull haunts the painting; it is a seemingly extraneous supplement that is in truth essential to our appreciation and proper critical interpretation of *The Ambassadors* in its entirety. On the one hand, the painting cannot be apprehended as a whole without altering one of these parts, that is, the ambassadors posing in composed symmetry and the distorted skull. On the other, neither part can be read in isolation from the other.

Jacques Lacan seized upon this painting in his "Seminar XI" (Lacan 1978). Drawing from Lacan, Žižek applies the anamorphic to his interpretation of ideology, saying specifically that "The procedure which enables us to discern the structural inconsistency of an ideological edifice is that of the anamorphic reading" (Žižek 1997: 97). Žižek's is not a critical orientation directed to discern a truth beneath or above the surfaces of the symbolic, such as the Lacanian Real, a transcendental signifier that motivates desire precisely to the degree that it is unattainable. Rather, for Žižek the anamorphic perspective requires re-orientation, a "looking awry" as opposed to beneath an ideological edifice in order to discern inconsistencies that are sutured in dominant forms of discourse. An anamorphic reading attempts to suture, as opposed to synthesize, these polarities of representation into a Lacanian "symptomatology" that reads through an ideological edifice to its supplemental remainder, which is constitutive precisely, paradoxically, in its inconsistency with the whole –like the skull in *The Ambassadors* in relation to the painting as a whole. Žižek has demonstrated a clear instance of this anamorphic reading to the anti-semitic representation of the Jews in Nazi Germany, whose figuration as a "mongrel race" in excess to the Aryan ideal of racial purity makes them essential to the ideological edifice of National Socialism. (One may find a similar formulation in René Girard's concept of "violence and the sacred," as embodied in the figure of the scapegoat, e.g., the Jew of Nazi Germany.)

How, then, do we reconcile the artistic and critical tradition of the anamorphic reading to the one Žižek provides of *Children of Men*? The short answer is that we cannot, if only because the foreground has borne more critical weight than his ethereal reading of Theo as prism indicates. The long answer, the one I wish to provide in this essay, is that we can. We can indeed, but only by providing an anamorphic reading to Žižek's, that is, by foregrounding the "foreground," if you will, through an investigation not of Theo's typicality but rather of his literary antecedent in P.D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992), and how he, along with his cousin Xan, the dictatorial Warden of England, were adapted by Cuarón. While Žižek relativizes Theo's importance for the film as a whole and its message, it is my argument that Theo *is* indeed important to *Children of Men*'s political relevance in relation to the dire state of contemporary affairs, in particular neo-liberalism, globalization, and climate change, the coalescence of which causes the ecological catastrophes, civil unrest, and epidemic of infertility that led to the world depicted in the film, set in the year 2027.

Cuarón may object to this reading. Explaining his mythical rather than historical fascination with the promise of biological and spiritual infertility in P.D. James' Cold War dystopian novel, Cuarón states:

I respect, I love P.D. James. I enjoy the book, but I couldn't see myself making that movie. And, nevertheless, the premise of infertility kept on haunting me for weeks and weeks and weeks. Maybe three weeks I was in Santa Barbara, on one beach in Santa Barbara, when I questioned myself, 'Why [does] this premise haunt me so much?' It's when I realized that the premise could serve as a metaphor for the fading sense of hope that humanity has today, that's when I said, 'Okay, this can be the point of departure for talking about the state of things today.' (Voynar 2006: unpaginated)

Most if not all of the scholarship devoted to the politics of *Children of Men* (2006) has explored its representation of the "state of things today," an expression Cuarón invokes over and over again in his explanations of the film's composition as well as its meaning. This criticism has emphasized the film's critique of the Iraq War, Homeland Security and terror alerts, Guantanamo Bay, and the all-pervasive media that stokes public fear with their incessant invocation of domestic and global crisis. Such again is

the basis of Cuarón's adaptation: to modify the forms and trajectory of the literary source material, published in the wake of the Cold War, to conform not just to the medium of film but also to the state of things surrounding his film's production.

The "state of things today" also marks the difference between the novel and film as one of intertextual anachronism, which is based, I argue, on the discontinuity between the historical contexts in which they are respectively embedded, namely the Cold War era and the post-9/11 era of the early 2000's. We may read this discontinuity into the inspiration behind Cuarón's adaptation: infertility. Infertility paradoxically fertilizes the book's adaptive evolution from fiction to film. It is the premise that "haunted" Cuarón, driving him to adapt the novel, irrespective of its literary context.²

In *Children of Men* there are several points of historical reference that determined the design of the film, points that roughly correspond to C.S. Pierce's three levels of signification: the iconic, the indexical, and the symbolic. Along with direct "iconic" references, such as newspaper clippings meant to be recognized by the viewer, we see explicit allusions to the imagery and language associated with the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq War, such as color-coded terror alerts, as well as simulations of the abuses of Abu Ghraib reproducing the infamous images of stripped men threatened by German shepherds, and a hooded man holding battery wire. The indexical marks the information forecasted through the production design, including also newspaper clippings of events invented for the film, such as a mushroom cloud over NYC and heaping piles of garbage strewn about the streets, along with a generally decaying infrastructure caused by government neglect and popular indifference. These conditions represented through the indexical imagery have two points of causation: the state of things today, that is, the state of things in 2006, and the spiritual conditions, the "fading sense of hope" (Voynar 2006: unpaginated) that the state of things has engendered, as rendered symbolically in the premise of infertility that so inspired Cuarón.

Taken together, these referential images comprise a historical narrative that contextualizes Cuarón's England as it was defined by popular media and which effectively bridge Cuarón's world during the film's production to the diegetic one that he designed for the screen. Hence, we may understand the expression "the state of things today" as containing within it a dialectical tension between the metaphysical and the

material, one that Žižek recognizes in the anamorphic cinematography. The camera oscillates between two planes, one historically situated—“things today,” the matters of the present—, the other a transhistorical “state” that charges things with meaning promising something of a gestalt that the spectators will access perceptually and psychologically in their experiences of the film. This gestalt is transmitted through icons of a recognizable present and ones of a more universal or transcendent nature. The instrument with which the viewer “reads” this state, reads these historical reference both real and envisioned, is the camera, as helmed by Lubezki. The acclaimed virtuosity of *Children of Men*’s cinematography does not just draw the viewer into the film, but also inscribes history for us. The camera frames and tracks the aforementioned images, foregrounding a Piercean semantic relay spanning the mid-2000s to 2027. In this respect, Cuarón specifies the aesthetics behind the realities depicted on the screen:

So —the cinematographer [Emmanuel Lubezki], he said 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 —and not reference about what is around, like, oh, I’m walking around, and this is what I saw on the street, but about how this has relevance in the context of the state of things, of the reality that we are living today. And most of those things we tried to make references coming from the media, referencing that they had become a part of human consciousness, and that maybe we don’t fully remember, but when you see it you recognize something that rings true because you have seen it in reality —even if you don’t really remember it consciously. And so the exercise was to transcend not only reality, but also to cross-reference within the film to the spiritual themes of the film. (Voynar 2006: unpaginated)

The camera does not merely record but also exercises a certain agency, driven by motives correspondent to, yet different from its presumed host Theo. One might say that the camera’s tracking of Theo has a critical, perhaps even conscientious motivation; it does not record phenomena objectively, but rather reveals a position toward them by selecting them as subjects of contemplation and compassion. While the camera and Theo are bound together, both instruments of historical discovery, they do not always share the same point of view. Rather, one might say that Theo is

metonymically tethered to the camera, like the two astronauts floating in space in Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013), bound to one another but floating in different directions, seeing different things. Theo's movements do lead the camera, but they do not always determine its trajectory. The camera tracks Theo discontinuously, as if motivated by its own instincts and concerns and, in so doing, achieves the double-speared goal of reference sought by Cuarón and Lubezki: it broadens the panorama of material and spiritual destitution while remaining firmly anchored in the struggles of individual lives as a collective, albeit tenuously differentiated mass.

The significance of the tethered camera returns us to Žižek's anamorphic reading as one which effectively foregrounds the camera's discursive instrumentality as distinct from Theo's principally diegetic function to motivate the plot progression. Such a reading is accomplished within the camera's phenomenological framing of the "state of things today" through its navigation of Cuarón's referentially multi-layered *mise-en-scène*. Yet, it also allows for more complex forms of intertextuality that radiate beyond the frame, a "cross referencing" that incorporates, for instance, the "spiritual themes" of the film—what we might call, to recall Žižek, the background to the background, but also the interstices between the foreground and background, and the ways in which each can be different to itself. Indeed, the particular situation of Žižek's anamorphic reading reflects Cuarón's desire to expand the referential potentialities of the film.

If reference to the state of things today was paramount, then of what value is James' original novel, published fourteen years and a substantial geopolitical shift before the release of its film adaptation? In order to answer this question, we should go back to the animating idea for the adaptation, namely, infertility. To recall the film's inspiration, Cuarón seized upon the subject of infertility as a metaphor for humanity's "fading sense of hope," an idea that could well have been inspired by any number of writings from any era. Moreover, the archetypicality of the theme threatens to undermine the director's desired clarity of historical reference in favor of more universal and a-historical treatments. It would seem then that infertility is, as it were, an infertile basis for adaptation as such. Indeed, in adapting the James novel, Cuarón bases the lineage of the film on a premise that implies the cessation of lineage, thus achieving what Žižek calls, echoing Kant, "the positivation of a void" (1989, xiv).

In both the film and novel the cause of the pandemic is unknown; we only know its symptoms, which, for all intents and purposes, are registered as psychological or spiritual rather than material facts —as states of mind, not of things. For Cuarón, this is a metaphor for a fading sense of hope. If the state of things today is infertility, a cessation of social evolution, a severance of lineal ties and a fading sense of hope for the future, then the end of history, to recall Francis Fukuyama's (in)famous declaration on "the state of things" at the end of the Cold War, is its proper ideological correlative. It is in this concept that we might recognize the meaningful associations and intertextual mediations between the novel and film.

Infertility contains the positive conditions for a historiographical conceit. Cuarón points us in this direction when discussing one of the more outstanding and oft-noted differences between the novel and film, which is the displacement of Xan Lyppiat, James' dictator figure, from the Warden of England to the relatively peripheral role he plays in the film. Bearing in mind the popular consensus behind the Patriot Act and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the figure of a single dictator did not square with the political realities of the 21st century, according to Cuarón, for it presumed a dichotomy between the democratic wisdom of the people and the monomania of a single individual.³ The events of the 21st century have already proven that democracy can function as an instrument of tyranny just as easily as provide a bulwark against it. "Being a democracy doesn't mean people are choosing the right things or what is just," Cuarón once contended (Voynar 2006: unpaginated). Belief in the justice of democracy is rather more a matter of "blind faith" and inconsistent with the realities of a world in which the ideals of egalitarianism and universal justice have given way to the injustices of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and the NSA. Removing the dictator figure altogether in the adaptation was therefore consistent with the desire to represent the state of things today. In the 21st century adaptation, a dictatorial Warden would have functioned as something akin to a vestigial organ: it would have been superfluous in a historical situation so fundamentally different from the one in which it was conceived. Xan Lyppiat survives the adaptation, however, as Theo's cousin Nigel (Danny Huston), the Minister of Culture. As in the novel, Theo is called upon to contact his cousin in order for the

resistance group, The Fishes, to secure the passage of Klee (Clare-Hope Ashitey), whose pregnancy bears the possibility of humanity's re-birth.

The adaptation of Xan from dictator to Minister of Culture is so distorted as to make it seemingly arbitrary. More plot device than protagonist, let alone a tyrant, Nigel's presence in the film as Theo's cousin, as opposed to, say, an old college pal who happens to be the minister of Culture, perplexed reviewers familiar with the novel. Writing for *The New York Times*, Caryn James feels that the episode of Theo meeting his cousin was "shoehorned into the movie," adding that Cuarón "lost the opportunity to explore how and why a tyrant comes to exist and what motivates them to act as such" (2006: unpaginated). Certainly the novel offers ample answers to these questions, though Cuarón rather challenges the relevance of the questions themselves. He would change the questions to fit a 21st-century context, and ask instead, what are the forms of tyranny that exist today and who are its agents? This question, and the ensuing answer Cuarón provides, explains why the tyrant was turned into Minister of Culture and Theo's cousin.

In the novel, Theo is approached by Julian, leader of the Fishes, a rebel group demanding that the state end the Quietus (a ritual of state enforced suicide of the elderly), that it discontinue the compulsory fertility tests, recognize the rights of the immigrant workers (called Sojourners) and close the penal colony on the Isle of Man, to which prisoners are sent even for minor offenses and in which they are subject to torture and deprived of their basic necessities for survival. They approach Theo because he is the warden's cousin, with whom he once had a close relationship and served as member of Parliament, but from whom he has since been estranged. When he decides to commit himself to the cause, Theo reflects on how "There was some dignity and much safety in the self-selected role of spectator but, faced with some abominations, a man had no option but to step onto the stage" (James, 2012: 69). In the film, The Fishes kidnap Theo and take him to see their leader, Theo's ex-wife Julian (Julianne Moore), whom he had not seen in 20 years, soon after the death of their child Dylan. They offer Theo five thousand pounds to procure strictly regulated transit papers from his cousin, the book's warden, to ensure the passage of a refugee across the British border. And so Theo sets out to visit his cousin in his luxurious adobe.

The mise-en-scène of Nigel's high-rise includes Michelangelo's *David* and Picasso's *Guernica*. These iconic Western works of art sit in his apartment like so many home ornaments, severed from their cultural roots as vestiges of an extinguished epoch. Awash in white and light, Nigel's apartment has an antiseptic quality that contrasts with the drab colorations of squalor and detritus stirring in the streets below it. Much like the displaced works by Michelangelo and Picasso present in his home, Nigel is an adapted character and, as such, he is detached from its historical moorings, in the same way as his apartment is separated from and elevated above the world outside.

Adaptation disperses the significance of his character in much the same way that Michelangelo's *David* is divested of its cultural value while sitting in Nigel's domicile. Like Theo when he first walks into the apartment, we pause at the statue's uncanny revelation; unlike Theo, we contemplate the significance of its context in reaction to its jarring displacement. If we did not recognize the statue (as many of my students have not), then we would likely see *David* as merely an emblem of Nigel's excess irrespective of the official pretext, an oversized prop deposited at the far end of the entrance hall to signal the owner's wealth, and perhaps his gaudy taste in interior design. It would serve a diegetic purpose, in other words, but not a discursive one. The spectator's presumed foreknowledge of the statue's relevance—as a masterpiece of Western civilization, as the magnificent embodiment of humanist ideals, as the exaltation of the human form, as a remarkable exemplar of Renaissance classicism, etc.—makes its presence provocative, demanding some point of recognition to activate its meaning.

Here is one of the points of the spectator's identification with Theo. As he walks into the apartment, we see just a reaction shot of Theo, whose eyes widen at what he sees, his lips bending to a smirk. As the camera is affixed to Theo's profile, we assume he is looking at Nigel, until we realize that he is rather gazing upon Michelangelo's *David* at the far end of the entrance hall. Nigel appears a long couple of seconds later, quite dramatically placing himself at the forefront of the statue that towers above him. What was Theo smiling about? Was it at the obscenity of the image in context? Or is it demonstrating the reification of ideals? If we apply the humanist credo "Man is the measure of all things," Nigel, diminished before *David*, is the measure of Man, alas, writ small.

The *David* in Nigel's apartment signifies that everything is for sale at the end of history because nothing is sacred. As Žižek states in his commentary on the film, the iconographic value of *David* only works "if it signals a certain world ... And when this world is lacking, then it's nothing." I would only add that it is precisely this nothing, this absence or hollowing out of substantive meaning in the presence of *David* that paradoxically makes its presence meaningful as critique. It cannot, in other words, fulfill its discursive function and at the same time merely refer to the state of things today. This is not to say that the statue reveals a flaw or inconsistency in Cuarón's artistic objectives but, rather, that it expands the field of reference to illuminate the historical subtext linking the film with the novel.

The episode of Theo visiting Nigel's abode brings into focus the connection between Cuarón's film and Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992). As Amago notes, Fukuyama's text is interestingly itself "a kind of apocalyptic sci-fi that, in its merger of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, continues to provide ideological justification for the sociopolitical disasters that *Children of Men* addresses" (2010, 224).⁴ For Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War marked a telos in Western history in which its social, political and cultural evolution had come to an end and Western liberal democracy established itself as the final form of government. "What we may be witnessing," Fukuyama declares, "is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of post-war history but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." The end of history is not the secession of historical events, or of conflict, or of opposing ideologies such as fundamentalism or permutations of fascism and communism. Fukuyama posits the end of History as a process that refined and synthesized the forms of government that would crystallize the ideal, "final" form of government in liberal democracy. Liberal democracies—most notably, the US—completed the historical trajectory of reason, desire, and *thymos*. Essential to Fukuyama's thesis, he defines the latter as the desire for recognition, the value that would compel one to transcend their reason and desire in the name of an abstract principle, such as the soldier's decision to sacrifice himself for the nation, God, Freedom, etc.

Underlying it is a fundamental conception of one's human dignity, the necessity of being recognized as human, even at the expense of one's life. A liberal democracy satisfies this requirement by recognizing the equality of everyone, in principle if not always in fact. So long as the liberal democracy functions as such, that is, in keeping with its egalitarian principles, then the problems of inequality will sooner or later find their institutional remedies. Thus, the "Last Man" of the full title, unlike the First Man, no longer needs to struggle for recognition as, in the "post-historical" world of the liberal democratic nations, recognition is provided by birthright. Fukuyama cites Nietzsche's fear that living in a liberal democracy would reduce man, the Last Man, to a life of moral and spiritual indolence, with nothing to call upon his courage to assert or even sacrifice himself in order to be recognized. There are no masters in the liberal democracy because the dialectic has evolved into the universal free and equal human subject, conceived in "The Declaration of the Rights of Man" and in the United States' "Declaration of Independence" and realized for all time in liberalism's ideological conquest of its fascist and communist adversaries. Liberalism has finally found its proper form of governance in liberal democracy, and its proper place, its topos, not in the US but rather around the globe. As the telos of a world historical movement that evolved through the dialectical clash of ideologies, the post-Cold War world is the new Israel, and neoliberalism its new covenant.

Whatever noted and plentiful flaws in Fukuyama's book, it nonetheless heralded the post-Cold War neoliberal economic policy of international market expansion, and, if by inference more than exposition, the neoconservative foreign policies that would culminate in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Indeed, *The End of History* affected something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it generated a specific terminology and grand narrative vision that was frequently co-opted by the neoconservative rhetoric and policy that influenced both Bush presidencies. Fukuyama himself would join the ranks of neoconservative ideologues on the strength of his justification of the Persian Gulf War in his book, in which he argues that military intervention was the necessary and just response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Fukuyama's objection to the invasion was not in its immorality, however, but rather in its economic inefficiency. "The consequences of this invasion," Fukuyama writes, "are not likely to make this method of

securing resources attractive in the future. Given the fact that access to those resources can be obtained peacefully through a global system of free trade, war makes much less economic sense than it did two or three hundred years ago” (262).

P. D. James’ Theo is an Oxford professor of history, and as such, is particularly attuned to the dynamics of history and the consequences of its imminent closure. His profession rendered obsolete by the novel’s premise, he turns to record a personal history of his experiences on the occasion of his 50th birthday on New Year’s Day 2021, and the death of Joseph Ricardo, the last human being to be born. The novel begins with this first entry to a journal, which he creates merely as “one small additional defense against personal accidie” (James 2012: 4). Keeping a journal sustains the illusion of significance, the absence of which threatens to launch him into an unbearable ennui. Yet, he is not under any illusion that his experiences will be meaningful or have any historical value beyond the act of recording them in the present, for himself. “If there is nothing to record, I shall record the nothingness and then if, and when, I reach old age—as most of us can expect to, we have become experts at prolonging life—I shall open one of my tins of hoarded matches and light my small personal bonfire of vanities” (James 2012: 4).

In some ways, Cuarón’s Theo is no great departure from James’. They are both solitary figures haunted by the past and, perhaps as a result, are indifferent to the present. They are indifferent, that is, until circumstances thrust them into history so that their actions are meaningful, indeed, the most meaningful actions that can be performed in securing the birth of the new child, and thus the continuation of the species. Their perspectives determine and dominate their respective narratives, but not necessarily their points of view. In the novel, even in the occasional shifts from first- to third-person, it is merely a shift from Theo’s point of view, as demonstrated in his journal entries early in the novel to Theo’s perspective as encompassing the conditions surrounding him, on which he increasingly asserts his control. In so doing, James constructs for her protagonist a tightly controlled regime of perception and cognition that grounds the hermeneutical conditions with which the reader may interpret the trajectory of his arc. On the occasions when the narrative veers toward third-person, that is when we are not reading what he wrote in his diaries, we are nonetheless always with him; we always

see what he sees, we are always privy to his thoughts about what is meaningful about what he sees. Since he is someone who has lived a cloistered life, even as it draws closer to death, someone who has failed to create many meaningful social relations, what we see is therefore accordingly limited. What we read is the relatively sterile, white, aristocratic *mise-en-scène* of an Oxford professor, or at least the stereotype of it. Our understanding of the social and political currents around him is mediated by his academic processing of them, in the explanatory frameworks he devises that are proper to the historical situation in which he has come of age, which we read in a journal he starts on New Year's Day, 2021, his 50th birthday:

The year 1995 became known as Year Omega and the term is now universal. The great public debate in the late 1990s was whether the country which discovered a cure for the universal infertility would share this with the world and on what terms. It was accepted that this was a global disaster and that it must be met by the response of a united world... As the years passed and the united efforts under the aegis of the United Nations came to nothing, this resolve of complete openness fell apart. Research became secret, nations' efforts a cause of fascinated, suspicious attention ... But there was no inter-race co-operation; the prize was too great. The terms on which the secret might be shared were a cause of passionate speculation and debate. It was accepted that the cure, once found, would have to be shared; this was scientific knowledge which no race ought to, or could, keep to itself indefinitely. But across continents, national and racial boundaries, we watched each other suspiciously, obsessively, feeding on rumour and speculation. The old craft of spying returned. Old agents crawled out of comfortable retirement in Weybridge and Cheltenham and passed on their trade craft. Spying had, of course, never stopped, even after the official end of the Cold War in 1991. Man is too addicted to this intoxicating mixture of adolescent buccaneering and adult perfidy to relinquish it entirely. In the late 1990s the bureaucracy of espionage flourished as it hadn't since the end of the Cold War, producing new heroes, new villains, new mythologies. (James, 2012: 3)

We might look upon Theo in the novel as one among the “new heroes,” or at least as a hero turned villain, and *The Children of Men* as a new mythology, a story of origins of the new world order with which the book concludes. In narrating the developments that he witnessed in the race to cure infertility, a race explicitly rendered akin to the Cold War, Theo is also foretelling his imminent turn as a spy, an arc beginning in his “adolescent buccaneering” as a suitor to his love interest Julian, and resulting in the “adult perfidy” that would lead to his political ascent by killing his cousin Xan and taking his place as the tyrannical Warden of England. He becomes a spy when he is approached by his former student Julian and finds himself falling in love for the first time in his 50 years of life.

Julian approaches Theo because he was a former member of the British parliament and the warden’s cousin. When he decides to take on the cause, Theo switches from passive observer to agent of change. By stepping onto the stage he has become a different kind of spectator, an active one, a spy who infiltrates and ultimately ascends to the highest status of power, a spy who sees and then oversees. The terms spectator, spy, and espionage share the same root in the Latin *spectare*, to view or watch. In the novel, Theo evolves from the passive observer and recorder of history, to an active role as spy, to an agent of history who sets its wheels back in motion. He resolves to assert his individual agency when he discovers his purpose, first as protector of the secret of Julian’s pregnancy by Luke, her deceased comrade, and by becoming Warden of England at the novel’s conclusion.⁵ With the birth of Julian’s son he also attains a heir, as the infant will be called by the names of his biological and symbolic fathers, Luke and Theo. After a generational hiatus, history resumes its cycle, as the rebel becomes the tyrant intoxicated by the prospect of power. The novel ends with Theo baptizing the baby, at Julian’s behest, thus completing the apotheosis of Theo Faron and the christening of his legacy.

In the film, Theo, a mid-level employee of the Energy Department rather than an Oxford professor of history, also experiences something of an apotheosis, not through political ascension, but rather through his martyrdom. He too is midwife to the baby, but throughout the film he is less an agent of history than its pawn. He never had pretensions to power, though he was once its antagonist. While the film is told from his

perspective, it is not always from his point of view. Indeed, if the point of view were as predominant in the film as it is in the book, then we would not be exposed to the ideological dimension that Cuarón conveys through his meticulously crafted designs of England in the near future.

Mikel Parent cannily describes Lubezki's camerawork as a "Godardesque pedagogical tool through which one can essentially 'read' the ideological makeup of the political present through the distorted lens of the film's vision of the future" (2008, p.33). Parent's definition of Lubezki's camera as a "pedagogical tool" is particularly appropriate with our recognition of its function as a device that instructs and guides the viewer through its perambulations with them. The steadicam dilates our point of view, encompassing the surroundings to which Theo is seemingly oblivious and indifferent, scanning Theo's environment when Theo does not. As such, the camera exhibits a conscientious drive, in the way they compel us to see what Theo refuses to see, if only because his apathy refuses to allow for such recognition and the sympathy it might engender. Theo cynically excuses himself from work to grieve for Baby Diego, the last human born, only to dismiss him later as a "wanker" to his aging hippie pal, Jasper. The camera therefore compensates for Theo's limitations, opening up a point of view that would otherwise be lacking. Throughout the first half of the film the camera walks with Theo, usually behind him, and always in front of us. While Theo's movements lead the camera, they do not always determine its trajectory; rather, the camera tracks Theo discontinuously, as if motivated by its own instincts and concerns. The camera walks, sometimes runs, with Theo, but, in a departure from the classical Hollywood style, it is *not* Theo. The camera has its own agenda, its own disembodied consciousness, not restricted to Theo's movements but also not at all objective. While it is Theo's life that we track from beginning to end, the camera nonetheless pays its respects to the victims who surround him, who enter in and out of his purview.

The pattern of Theo's discontinuous tracking, however, ceases when Kee reveals her pregnancy to him. Circumstances have chosen him to midwife the new human, thus consecrating his moral purpose and ultimate martyrdom. Sight and conscience are thereby aligned. While Cuarón asserts that his principal objective was reference rather than invention (Voynar 2006: unpaginated), his stated drive to reference the events and

iconography that have become "part of the human consciousness" suggests as well a vision abstracted from the particular material circumstances endemic to our current geopolitical situation. Cuarón suggests as much when he expands his notion of reference to the state of things from the camera's attention to Theo's material environment to encompass as well the "spiritual themes" of the film, as mentioned above, immaterial "parts of the human consciousness" of ambiguous meaning and indeterminate reference (Voynar 2006: unpaginated). He does not articulate these themes beyond his aforementioned remarks on infertility and humanity's "fading sense of hope" . The visual references to Christian iconography we see throughout suggest a theological dimension to the otherwise political film, with the model of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection as the antidote to the "fading sense of hope" characteristic of the state of things today. Kee's impossible pregnancy, which she reveals in a manger, along with Theo's martyrdom at the end (not to mention Theo's name) inaugurating humanity's impending salvation, would support such a reading of the film's spiritual themes. Yet, these allusions are false leads, to which Kee attests when she tells Theo that hers is a virgin birth, only to laugh it off and confess that she does not know who the father is.

We are rather left to contemplate the metaphysical valence of the "*state* of things today" and its mediations with the "human consciousness" of the audience, namely, through the introduction of Kee's child, whom she names Dylan after Theo and Julian's deceased son. Whatever redemption Dylan might provide for humanity and the revival of its consciousness occurs in the mysterious indecipherability of her affects on those surrounding her. Such is evident in the gripping scene in which a battle between state and rebel forces momentarily ceases at Dylan's revelation, a *deus ex machina* that ensures Theo and Kee's otherwise impossible passage to rendezvous with the Human Project. Many soldiers genuflect and cross themselves before her, while the rest are simply dumbstruck, all effectively provide safe passage for in their temporary suspension of hostilities. With the swelling of quasi-ecclesiastical music scoring this sequence, along with the genuflections, crossings, the persistent declarations of "Jesus Christ" and the like, the bare fact of her existence proves to be, in a word, miraculous. Žižek uses this word when writing of the 2011 uprising in Tahrir Square, defining it as

the “intervention of a mysterious agency” that allowed for a universal identification with the uprising without having to understand it through conventional sociological measures (2011: unpaginated). The miracle of Dylan, in other words, is the appearance of the Real in the midst of reality, an “anamorphic stain” for the dumbstruck soldiers. “At its most elementary,” Žižek writes, “the Real is an anamorphic stain that pops up all of a sudden in the midst of reality; such a stain...does not function merely as part of reality; it is not a mere stain *in* reality –rather, it indicates a process of the ontological disintegration of reality itself” (2008: lxxxix) The soldiers’ veneration of the baby arises from their inability to situate her in the infertile symbolic order with which they have become accustomed in the eighteen years between Baby Diego’s birth and Dylan’s. Throughout the second half the film Theo and Kee have been evading the Fishes, who anticipate harnessing the baby’s symbolic power for themselves once she is born as a figurehead for their struggle.

In the novel, this objective of appropriating the baby’s symbolic power to serve a political end is fulfilled not by the Fishes but rather by Theo, whose paternal claims to the newborn sanctify his impending rein as Warden of England. Intoxicated with power, Theo now senses that the world can now be “fashioned according to his will.” History thereby resumes in the form of a cycle, as Theo takes Xan place as dictator and has secured his patrilineage in his baptism of the baby boy as his own. Dylan’s appearance in the film, by contrast, precludes, indeed repulses, any claims to her existence. No one stands in their way as they pass the awed soldiers; no one pursues them in their rush to rendezvous with the Human Project’s frigate, aptly named *Tomorrow*. Theo death from an errant bullet while rowing Kee to *Tomorrow* cinches his from a spiritually indolent Last Man to a First Man who sacrificed himself for the Human Project. *Tomorrow* appears to secure Kee and Dylan’s safe harbor and the promise of humanity’s resurrection, which is followed by an abrupt fade to black that concludes the film. While allegorically ripe, it is not clear what will happen tomorrow, as it were; as opposed to the novel’s conclusion, we cannot coordinate this ending with a model of history that allows us to anticipate the nature of its post-diegetic resumption, as we are left without the point of view of its protagonist at the foreground.

The novel and film present two distinct images bound by a common frame of reference in the figure of Theo. It is through his eyes that we perceive the historical backgrounds of each, as afforded by his point of view. Cuarón's is therefore an anamorphic adaptation insofar as we reflect on our spectatorial position with respect to both, that is, as an intentional orientation toward each individually and in relation to the other. One may accordingly read each as an adaptation of Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, with our gaze onto each distorting Fukuyama's pretty portrait of the post-Cold War resolution of ideological conflict, itself a distortion of what was rather the ascendancy of the neoliberal ideology thriving today. Ironically, Fukuyama himself provides an anamorphic point of view on his rosy portrait the implications of the reflects on competition over natural resources and the mass migrations of peoples who are disenfranchised by the inequities of material wealth between the "post-historical" liberal democracies and the nations still mired in history, mainly in the Third World. "It is probably healthy for liberal democracies that the Third World exists to absorb the energies and ambitions of such people. Whether it is good for the Third World is a different matter" (2006: 318). It is this "different matter" that makes both Fukuyama's thesis, and Cuarón's film, relevant today, ten years since the film's release and twenty-four since the book was published. They are relevant to our understanding of the insidious developments in the liberal democracies of the "First World." Indeed, with the Brexit and Trump debacles having come to pass, both strongly animated by anti-immigrant sentiment, along with the Syrian refugee crisis unresolved and growing more calamitous, and the crises to come with the rising sea levels and the mass exoduses that will ensue, we may sadly still see *Children of Men* as a reflection of the "state of things today."

Notes.

¹ Cuarón approached Žižek to comment on the themes explored in the film for a documentary he was producing for the DVD release, titled *The Possibility of Hope* (2007), which Cuarón intended as a "documentary approach to what the film is about." Featuring contributions from such heavyweights as Slavoj Žižek, Tzetzan Todorov, Fabrizio Eva, and Naomi Klein, one might think the title ironic considering the scholars' assessments of the contemporary global situation, and their grim prognoses for the future, as they expatiate on the consequences of an increasingly unfettered regime of neoliberalism and globalization, and its outcomes in climate change, mass migrations, and the concomitant militarization of national borders. While their pronouncements about the present and enduring global crises situate the

politics of the film, they do not comment directly about *Children of Men*. Nevertheless, shots from the film appear alongside the documentary and stock footage to illustrate the arguments presented throughout. The documentary has helped plant a healthy discursive firmament from which some of the more sophisticated criticism on the film has been drawn.

² Infertility is hardly a P.D. James invention; Cuaron might have just as well adapted T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) to comment on the "state of things today." Indeed, the film alludes to the end of Eliot's poem when Theo's friend, Jasper (Michael Caine), shouts somewhat randomly, "shantih, shantih, shantih." We may read the declaration as implying the hope for what is identified in *The Wasteland* as a "peace which passeth understanding." But, ultimately, Eliot's poem is not the literary source of the film. P.D. James's novel is. It is not only the source of the infertility premise that haunted Cuaron, but also the characters and a significant part of the plot. There are differences and variations, though, ones that are determined and defined by history, by the "state of things today," as opposed to the state of things when James published her novel.

³ Such a dichotomy is more characteristic of the 20th century, as archetypally portrayed in Orwell's "Big Brother" and historically embodied in Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin.

⁴ Fukuyama's text, his "apocalyptic sci-fi," has effectively written the script for the post Cold-War world and, as such, P.D. James novel is also in dialogue with it. Both are written in the immediate shadow of the Cold War and both are informed by the idea that History has come to an end, for better and for worse.

⁵ "For a time at least he must take Xan's place. There were evils to be remedied; but they must take their turn. He couldn't do everything at once, there had to be priorities. Was that what Xan had found? And was this sudden intoxication of power what Xan had known every day of his life? The sense that everything was possible to him, that what he wanted would be done, that what he hated would be abolished, that the world could be fashioned according to his will. He drew the ring from his finger, then paused and pushed it back. There would be time later to decide whether, and for how long, he needed it" (James, 2012).

References.

- Amago, S. (2010) "Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future in Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men*," *Discourse* 32.2: 212-35.
- Caryn, J. (Dec. 28, 2006) "Children of Differing Visions: Contrasting a P. D. James Novel and the Movie It Inspired," *The New York Times*. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/28/movies/28men.html>. Accessed October 4th 2016.
- Eliot, T. S. (1987) *The Wasteland and Other Poems*, New York: Faber and Faber.
- Fukuyama, F (2006) *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Girard, R. (1977) *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- James, P. D. (2012) *The Children of Men*, Toronto: Vintage.
- Lacan, J. (1978) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Book XI*, trans. by A. Sheridan, New York: Norton and Company.

Parent, M. (July 2008) “*Children of Men* or a Brief Guide to ‘Embedded’ Cinema and the Remapping of Global Depression,” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society* 20.3: 500-07.

Pierce, C. S. (1982-) *The Writings of Charles S. Pierce: A Chronological Edition*, ed. by Pierce Edition Project, Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Voynar, K (2006) Interview: *Children of Men* director Alfonso Cuarón.

Available at: <https://www.moviefone.com/2006/12/25/interview-children-ofmen-director-alfonso-cuaron/>. Accessed October 4th 2016.

Zižek, S. (2007). *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor*. United Kingdom: Verso Books.

Zižek, S. (2011) Miracle at Tahrir Square –No Room for Compromise, Mubarak Must Go. Available at:

http://www.alternet.org/story/149880/zizek%3A_miracle_of_tahrir_square_-_no_room_for_compromise_mubarak_must_go. Accessed October 4th 2016.

Zižek, S. (1997) *The Plague of Fantasies*, New York: Verso.

Zižek, S (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso.