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Children of Men: The Power of Cinematography

Children of Men, directed by Alfonso Cuarón and with cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki, portrayed a dystopian future full of worldwide infertility and an overwhelming (and gravely devastating) issue with immigration. From a cold color palette to jarring explosive sounds, the movie stands to highlight the loss of hope. It forces the viewer to acknowledge the sadness of the situation and continues to lead them into a world of hurt and raw survival. Nonetheless, it provides the element of surprise—noticing when our guard is officially down, only to award us with the beauty of hope and faith in the future. Hence, *Children of Men* robs the viewer of tranquility while consciously instilling the concept of true humanity through brilliant camera work, recognizing the power of cinematography.

When it comes to filmmaking, there are many ways to convey not only the subject but the subtext. Alfonso Cuarón and Emmanuel Lubezki did not shy away from utilizing film techniques to express the almost never-ending bleakness in *Children of Men*. It combines a plethora of tools, including tracking shots, hand-held camera work, and long takes, to emulate “[...] a documentary-style social realist take on a sci-fi premise, as well as tropes taken from action-adventure films and the chase movie” (Shaw 206). The long tracking shot of Theo, Kee, Julian, Luke, and Miriam in the car chase is a great example of demonstrating subtext. The group was traveling in a direction they thought was safe; especially considering the state of Kee’s pregnancy, everything (including the condition of the world) was at stake. Once they encounter

the dangers of others trying to murder them and as Julian dies, that sense of prosperity is quickly erased. The scene transitions from a typical static tracking shot to a hand-held shot, translating the intensity of the chase. It brings the viewer into the forefront of the action and forces them into survival mode alongside the characters. The shakiness of the camera movement also emphasizes the quickened pace of the scene. Cuarón and Lubezki were able to translate the tone of fear and terror as the characters do their absolute best to escape with their lives unscathed. There is also the inclusion of swift panning between Theo's group and the motorcycle group; it created the illusion of documenting reality, similar to journalists capturing moments of war and civil unrest. At this moment, the viewer comprehends the concept of lost hope since the normalcy and predictability of their driving before was soon over. This scene can also be compared to when Theo and Jasper are talking in Jasper's home. It is a typical scene of two characters communicating with each other, cutting between their perspectives and encompassing both characters in the same viewpoint. Although their conversation may be sorrowful, it provides the viewer with a prime example of security and protection against the outside world. Not to mention, the various wide-angle shots of Jasper's house and the land around it produce an understanding of their isolation and how it is used as a source of refuge.

On another note, the technique of long-take shots in other scenes creates an additional layer of intimacy with the characters. The absence of cuts (or at least the appearance of close edits) suggests that Cuarón and Lubezki are simply recording what is in front of them, presenting long-take scenes as raw and full of emotion. "In both cases, a filmmaker's refusal to interpret physical reality with the help of ever-changing camera angles and montage interventions allowed cinema to live up to its original promise, namely not simply to capture the visible without overdetermining the visual activity of their eyes but also to offer an indexical record of the

passing of time itself and hence reduce the difference between the various dimensions of cinematic temporality" (Koepnick 42). For instance, when Kee gives birth with the help of Theo in the refugee camp, the camera does not pull away from what occurs. It rejects the usual structure of cutaways and urges the viewer to comprehend the grueling process of Kee giving birth in a world of infertility, finding it essential to keep her child a secret and hidden from the harsh reality around them. The scene also demonstrates the bridge between having no hope in the future to finally seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Although the birth, itself is very frightening for Kee and Theo, it brings on a new chapter in their lives as they strive to highlight newfound prosperity. Moreover, the longest scene of *Children of Men*—Theo racing toward Kee as an array of gunshots and explosives threaten his life—is a true representation of the “documentary-style” that Cuarón and Lubezki wanted (Shaw 206). The viewer becomes a part of the scene and is immersed in Theo’s struggle for safety. The sounds of the explosives and excessive gunshots also produce a sense of urgency when in search of Kee in the camp. By the time Theo finds her and they leave somewhat peacefully, the camera continues to track them while also severely slowing down its movement. It is no longer about survival but about the physical presentation of faith in a better future (especially considering the sound of Kee’s baby crying alongside the promising score).

In conclusion, Alfonso Cuarón and Emmanuel Lubezki beautifully characterize the concept of pessimism, optimism, and everything in between throughout *Children of Men*. They break the rules of sticking to the dystopian genre and apply the effective methods of hand-held camera, tracking, and long-take shots to provide a voyeuristic perspective into one’s reality. The movie shows that Theo and Kee are more than the main characters—they are an insight into how humans behave in a time of desperation, longing for something to believe in.

Bibliography

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