REWIND & RECLAIM

CHILDREN OF MEN

The Film That Didn't Predict the Future. It Filmed the Present.

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Introduction: Christmas Day, 2006

There is something fitting about the fact that Children of Men opened in the United States on Christmas Day, 2006. Cuarón noted the relationship between the date and the film's themes. A film about the birth of a child who might save a dying world, arriving on the day the culture had reserved for exactly that story. The irony was precise, and so was the indifference.

The film had already opened in the United Kingdom in September to strong reviews and modest attendance. In the US the holiday market was crowded, the premise was bleak, and the film's marketing had communicated correctly but unhelpfully that it was not going to be a comfortable experience. Audiences who wanted comfort on Christmas Day found it elsewhere. Charlotte's Web and Dreamgirls were also opening that weekend. The distributor's bet that serious-minded adults would want Alfonso Cuarón's vision of a collapsing civilization on December 25 was, empirically, a losing one.

The film grossed $70.5 million worldwide against a $76 million budget. By the strict arithmetic of production cost versus theatrical return it was a loss, a modest one, but a loss. It received three Academy Award nominations, for cinematography, editing, and adapted screenplay, winning none. It did not win the Oscar for cinematography despite containing some of the most technically extraordinary camera work in the history of the medium. Critics who had seen it praised it. The year-end consensus was that it was a significant film. It did not find the audience that significance requires to translate into commercial success.

Then the world that Cuarón had filmed inside a studio and on location in the English countryside started arriving outside the

window.

Chapter 1: The Source

P.D. James published The Children of Men in 1992, a departure from the detective fiction that had made her famous. James was one of the most successful crime writers of the century, the creator of Adam Dalgliesh, a detective of considerable intelligence and melancholy, and she had spent her career building carefully plotted murder investigations in the tradition of the classic British novel. The Children of Men was something else: a Christian fable about the end of human reproduction, set in an Oxford rendered cold and strange by the approaching extinction of the species, and concerned less with plot mechanics than with questions of faith, governance, and what it means to choose hope in the face of annihilation.

In James's novel, Theo Faron is a cousin of the Warden of England, the benevolent authoritarian who governs the country in the final years. The story is intimate and almost entirely interior, driven by Theo's relationship with a small group of rebels and with Julian, the young woman who carries humanity's last pregnancy. The ending is more explicitly Christian than anything the film retained, Theo baptizing the newborn child in the final pages, the imagery of new life and new faith inseparable.

By the time Cuarón came to direct it, the project had been in development since 1997, passing through Beacon Pictures and accumulating screenwriters across nearly a decade. Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby wrote early drafts that built out the world, establishing the visual density of a near-future Britain covered in government propaganda and refugee cages. David Arata did a

rewrite that brought the project to Cuarón. Timothy J. Sexton worked closely with the director through production. Clive Owen contributed uncredited revisions to his own character. What emerged bore James's central premise but had been substantially remade: the setting was no longer intimate or interior but documentary, a film that would show the world rather than analyze it, that would trust the audience to understand what they were seeing without explanation.

Cuarón has said he deliberately avoided reading James's novel in full, asking co-writer Sexton to immerse himself in the source while Cuarón worked from an abridged summary. He worried that deep familiarity with the novel would cause him to second-guess his adaptation instincts. The result is a film that draws from the novel's premise and its emotional conclusion while building an entirely different visual and political world around them. James reportedly disliked the film. Whether she was wrong to dislike it is a different question from whether Cuarón made the right film for his purposes, and the answer to that question is yes.

Chapter 2: The Making

Cuarón had come to Children of Men from Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban in 2004, his third film with Warner Bros. following Y Tu Mamá También in 2001. The Potter film had demonstrated that he could navigate a studio production of enormous scale and complexity, had given him a commercial track record with Universal that greenlighted the dystopia, and had, by his own account, clarified for him everything he did not want to do next. He did not want to make a film that was safe or comfortable or that resolved into reassurance.

The decision that defined the film was made before a word of the final script was locked: the camera would behave like a witness rather than a narrator. This was a philosophical choice before it was a technical one. Cuarón and his cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki had been friends since film school in Mexico City in the early 1980s and had worked together on every film Cuarón had made since A Little Princess in 1995. Their creative vocabulary was built on decades of shared filmmaking, and for Children of Men they arrived at an aesthetic principle together: no single frame could go without a comment on the state of things.

This meant natural light wherever possible. It meant handheld throughout, the camera moving through spaces the way a person moves through them, unsteadily, reactively, unable to take in everything at once. It meant the background was as important as the foreground, loaded with information, the graffiti and the cages and the burning refugees and the anti-immigrant posters layered through every exterior shot, so that the world could be understood without explanation. And it meant the long take: extended unbroken sequences in which the camera refused to cut

away from what was happening, refused the conventional grammar of edited coverage that allows the audience to breathe, that enforces the sense that the action is being managed rather than simply witnessed.

The car

The first of the film's two most discussed sequences is the car ambush, approximately four minutes inside a moving vehicle. The scene required custom technology that did not exist before the film needed it. Gary Thieltges of Doggicam Systems designed a wirelessly controlled camera dolly called the PowerSlide that could rotate freely inside the car cabin while the car was in motion, with the seats modified to lower and lift to clear the camera's path. The windshield was designed to tilt out of the way. The car's roof was removed and replaced with a rig that allowed Lubezki and his operators to work from above the passengers.

Two weeks of rehearsal preceded two days of filming. The sequence that resulted is, in its construction, a compressed narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end: the playful camaraderie of the characters in the opening moments, the sudden violence of the ambush, the death of Julian, the arrival of the police, and the first clear signal that someone Theo trusted has betrayed him. All of this plays in a single unbroken take, with Lubezki's camera moving fluidly between positions that should be physically impossible, in a car that is in motion on a public road, with the specific quality of handheld uncertainty that communicates an observer rather than a narrator.

The battle

The second sequence is the Bexhill battle, approximately six minutes through a collapsing urban war zone. Bexhill-on-Sea, a quiet retirement town in East Sussex, was refashioned with rubble, cages, and burned vehicles, its derelict seafront a ready-made skeleton for the set dressing of a refugee detention camp in full revolt. The De La Warr Pavilion, the town's Art Deco landmark, is briefly visible in the background of the boat scenes. Camera operator George Richmond shot the entire sequence handheld for sixteen weeks of production, and the sequence was planned and choreographed with an exactitude that made it feel entirely unchoreographed: every explosion, every soldier, every running figure placed precisely so that the camera could find them at the moment of maximum emotional force.

The blood that appears on the lens partway through the Bexhill battle is real blood, the practical effect of an explosion too close to the camera, and Cuarón kept it in. A cleaned lens would have announced: this is a film that is being managed. The smeared lens announced: you are present.

The film was shot primarily on Kodak 5229 stock, Lubezki's choice for its ability to hold exposure in both the dark interiors and the bright exteriors within the same frame, which the documentary approach required. The Battersea Power Station served as the location for the Ark of the Arts sequence, its vast turbine hall retrofitted with Michelangelo's David, Picasso's Guernica, and Pink Floyd's pig floating in the industrial darkness, a collection of human culture preserved for an audience of one billionaire while refugees burned outside.

Chapter 3: The Cast

Clive Owen carried the film as Theo Faron with the specific quality of a man who has organized himself, after the loss of his child and his marriage and his political faith, around the project of feeling as little as possible. The first time we see Theo he is buying coffee in a Starbucks that has just survived a bomb blast, and he walks outside through the shattered glass and the screaming crowd and stands on the pavement and adds whiskey from a flask to his coffee and drinks it. This is the whole character in a single piece of blocking: a man who has learned to insulate himself from what is happening around him because the only alternative is being destroyed by it.

Owen had contributed to the screenplay as well as the performance, working with the writers on his character's emotional arc, and the result is a Theo who is more specific and more damaged than the novel's protagonist. His journey across the film is not from cynicism to belief but from numbness to presence, from a man who has learned not to be there to a man who cannot help being there, who is pulled back into the world by a pregnant woman who needs him and who will not survive if he retreats into his whiskey.

Julianne Moore played Julian, the leader of the Fishes, Theo's former partner and the person most responsible for his re-entry into the world of action, and the film kills her in its second act, earlier than almost any viewer expects. The death is startling not because it is violent but because it is sudden, a bullet through a car window, and then she is gone, and Theo cannot process it because the car is moving and people are shooting. Moore gives Julian a quality of warm conviction that makes her absence in the

film's second half a genuine emotional fact rather than simply a narrative choice.

Michael Caine played Jasper Palmer, the former political cartoonist who lives in a forest cottage with his catatonic wife, growing marijuana and playing with his dog and telling Theo jokes with punch lines that are as old as he is. The character is, in the film's emotional architecture, the thing the world was before it became what it is, the last site of human warmth and gentle humor, and his death is the film's cruelest act precisely because he is the last person who remembers how to be happy. Caine based the character partly on the satirical cartoonist John Lennon and partly on his own memories of the 1960s, and the performance has a quality of genuine ease that nothing else in the film permits itself.

Clare-Hope Ashitey played Kee, the film's central mystery and its central hope, with a directness that was the right choice for a character whose function was to be the future rather than to analyze it. Kee does not understand what her pregnancy means in global terms. She knows what it means to her: she is young and frightened and pregnant in a world that has spent twenty years forgetting how to help anyone be born. Ashitey gave her a resilience built from necessity rather than heroism, and the scene in which she reveals her pregnancy to Theo, in a barn surrounded by cows, standing in the golden light of the late afternoon and opening her coat to show him her stomach, is the film's fulcrum, the moment that transforms a story about running away from something into a story about running toward something.

Chiwetel Ejiofor played Luke, the Fishes' military commander, as the film's most morally complicated figure: a man who believes in the cause he is fighting for and who has concluded that the

cause requires him to do things the cause also condemns. His betrayal of Theo, the decision to sacrifice the pregnant woman's safety to the political needs of the revolution, is the film's darkest argument about the relationship between idealism and violence, and Ejiofor played it without making Luke simply a villain, maintaining the quality of genuine conviction that made the betrayal feel like a tragedy rather than a surprise.

Chapter 4: The Visual Language

The formal argument of Children of Men is that the way a film is photographed is an ethical position, not merely an aesthetic one.

To cut coverage, to maintain clean image quality, to ensure that every shot is purposefully composed and every camera position is chosen for its pictorial clarity, is to establish a relationship between the camera and the event in which the camera is superior to the event, in control of it, able to organize it into legible pieces and present them in a sequence that the audience can manage. This is the grammar of most films, including most serious films about serious things, and it is a grammar that produces a specific relationship between the viewer and what they are watching: they are watching something that has been arranged for their understanding.

Cuarón and Lubezki refused this grammar. The handheld camera is at the same level as the event. It cannot organize what it sees. It can only follow, and trying to follow is frequently insufficient: things happen faster than the camera can move to them, important things happen off to the side while the camera is pointed somewhere else, and the audience finds themselves in the position of someone who is actually there, unable to see everything, unable to stop anything, simply present.

This had specific political implications that Cuarón understood and intended. The film's world, a Britain of anti-immigration hysteria and cattle-cage detention centers and state violence against the already vulnerable, was a world Cuarón and Lubezki insisted on showing in full and without management. Every exterior location was dressed with the specific visual language of the political moment the film was inhabiting, the

dehumanizing bureaucracy and the nationalist sloganeering and the camps, and the camera was required to find all of it, never to look away, never to clean the frame of anything uncomfortable.

The film's influence on subsequent cinema has been enormous and is usually acknowledged imprecisely. The phrase "long take" is used to describe what Children of Men did, but the phrase undersells it. Many films use extended unbroken sequences as set pieces, as demonstrations of technical virtuosity, as moments of formal distinction within an otherwise conventional grammar. What Children of Men did was different: the long take was not a set piece but a commitment, an ethical decision that the camera would not impose a grammar of management on events that deserved to be seen unmanaged. The difference between Children of Men's long takes and the long takes of subsequent films that were clearly influenced by it is the difference between a formal argument and a formal effect.

Chapter 5: The World

The world of Children of Men is 2027, which at the time of the film's production was twenty-one years away and at the time of writing this is one year away. The specific social conditions Cuarón and Lubezki loaded into the background of every frame, the conditions they refused to explain through dialogue because they insisted the audience could read a visual environment, are conditions that have materialized with a specificity that no science fiction film in recent memory has matched.

The refugee crisis. The cage detention centers at ports and borders. The anti-immigrant political movements that trade in the language of national purity and species survival. The surveillance infrastructure and the government propaganda and the specific quality of an administration that has decided that some people are not people for the purpose of law. These were not predictions. They were observations, made in 2005 and 2006 from the trajectories that were already visible in the world, and filmed with a commitment to documentary specificity that was designed to communicate their reality rather than their possibility.

This is the quality that screenwriter Mark Fergus identified when he said it has taken a couple of decades for the film to be fully understood. The film was received in 2006 as a dark but speculative vision of a possible future, a warning about tendencies that might, if unchecked, produce something like what was on screen. By 2016, by 2020, by 2024, the speculative distance had collapsed. The film was not being watched as a warning about the future. It was being watched as a document of the present, and the documentary approach Cuarón had chosen, the insistence on the camera as witness rather than narrator, was the formal feature

that made the collapse of that distance so disorienting.

The film asked, from the beginning, to be treated as a record rather than a fiction. The audience eventually agreed.

Chapter 6: The Reclamation

The rehabilitation of Children of Men happened in stages, each one tied to a specific development in the world outside cinema.

The first stage was the home video release and the Blu-ray era that followed it, which allowed the film's cinematography to be studied rather than simply experienced. The technical achievement of the long takes, understood intellectually in the theatrical reception but received as overwhelming rather than analyzable, became, on a screen that could be paused and rewound, the subject of the most sustained and passionate critical discussion any film of the decade generated. Film students and filmmakers and cinematography critics watched the car sequence frame by frame, documented the positions of the camera, noted the moments where the continuous take concealed what Lubezki himself confirmed were a small number of seamlessly hidden cuts, and produced an enormous body of technical analysis that made the film's methodology a curriculum.

The second stage was political. The years between the film's release and 2016 were years in which the trajectories Cuarón had filmed accelerated to the point where the distance between the film's world and the actual world became difficult to maintain. The Bexhill detention camp, in which refugees are caged behind wire in a seaside town while soldiers move through them with weapons, was watched by audiences who had also watched the news from Calais and from the Greek islands and from the US-Mexico border. The film's anti-immigration posters and the government loudspeakers ordering illegal immigrants to surrender themselves, which had seemed like extrapolation in 2006, seemed like footage by 2016.

Writers and critics who returned to the film in this period were not revising their assessment of a film they had undervalued. They were recognizing a film they had valued correctly but had not yet fully understood, a film that had been right about things that had not yet fully happened when they first saw it. This is the most specific version of the "ahead of its time" argument: not that the film was formally innovative in ways the culture had not yet received, but that its political vision was accurate in ways the world had not yet confirmed.

The third stage was the acknowledgment by practitioners. Director after director, in interviews and retrospectives across the decade after the film's release, cited Children of Men as the work that had changed how they thought about the camera's relationship to the event, the work that had demonstrated what documentary grammar could do inside a narrative fiction, the work that had redefined what the long take was for. 1917, Sam Mendes and Roger Deakins's 2019 film, is the most explicit formal descendant, an entire feature constructed as the illusion of a single take, and Deakins has discussed Lubezki's work on Children of Men as a benchmark he was trying to meet. The influence lines through Birdman, through The Revenant, through action sequences in superhero films and war films and thrillers that have all absorbed, in varying degrees of fidelity, the lesson that the camera can be a witness rather than a narrator.

Chapter 7: What It Says

The argument of Children of Men is contained in a single visual choice: the film does not show us what the world would look like if fertility stopped. It shows us what the world looks like now, with a thin fictional frame placed over the parts that have not quite arrived yet.

This is why the film does not explain the infertility. In a conventional science fiction narrative, the mystery of the cause would be the engine of the plot, the thing the characters are working to solve. Cuarón is not interested in the cause because the cause is not the point. The point is what human beings do to each other when resources become scarce and fear takes over, and human beings have been doing that without waiting for global infertility to provide the occasion. The film's political world is the world of 2006 with the amplification dial turned slightly past its current position, and the question the film is asking is not what would happen if fertility stopped but what is already happening now, and why are we looking the other way.

Kee's pregnancy is not, in this reading, a literal plot device. It is a formal one: the introduction of the thing that the world has organized itself to extinguish, and the test of whether the people in the film have enough left of their humanity to protect it. Theo passes the test, narrowly, at enormous cost, in a way that may not change anything beyond this specific child's survival. The film ends in the fog, the boat called Tomorrow approaching through water that is nothing but grey, and the sound of children playing arriving from somewhere beyond what the camera can reach. Whether that sound means anything is not resolved. The film does not resolve it, because the film is honest about what hope actually

consists of in the world it has been describing: the sound of something good in the distance, heard through the fog, with no guarantee it is real.

Chapter 8: The Enduring Witness

The question asked most frequently about Children of Men in the years since its rehabilitation is the one that screenwriter Mark Fergus's comment implies: why didn't the audience find it in 2006?

The partial answer is commercial and marketing-related: the film was bleak, it arrived on a holiday, the audience wanted comfort, and the distributor's bet on serious adults was lost to Dreamgirls and Charlotte's Web. This is true as far as it goes.

The deeper answer is the one the film's political journey implies. In 2006, the film's world was recognizable but not yet arrived. The specific horror of a government cage-detaining refugees at the border, of a society that had decided some people were not people, of the surveillance and the propaganda and the institutional violence against the already vulnerable, was present in the world in 2006 in the form of tendencies and trajectories and emerging policies. It was not yet present in the form of images that matched, frame for frame, what Cuarón had put on screen.

By the time those images existed in the daily news feed, the film had been waiting for twenty years in the catalogue of universal memory, and the audience that had been too young or too distracted or too hopeful in 2006 found it in the streaming era and found it had been waiting for them specifically.

Lubezki's camera had been standing on the pavement, recording, patient, while the world assembled the evidence it needed to understand what was being shown. The blood on the lens was still there. The world had finally caught up to the smear.

Appendices: The Numbers, the Sequences, and the Record

Appendix A: The Box Office Record

Children of Men's financial performance was a genuine loss by the strict arithmetic of production budget versus theatrical gross, and the loss was compounded by an international performance that was weak in almost every territory.

The film failed to break even on its production budget in theatrical release, with the studio receiving approximately half the $76 million cost from its share of the worldwide gross. Marketing and distribution added further to the shortfall.

Opening weekend context (US, December 25-31, 2006):

The Christmas Day placement was a calculated bet that failed: the audience that was predisposed to the film did not turn out in numbers sufficient to overcome the holiday crowd's preference for comfort.

Awards:

The Academy's failure to nominate Lubezki for a win that most cinematography professionals considered the clearest winner in the category that year became one of the more frequently cited examples of the Academy's consistent undervaluation of genre work. Lubezki subsequently won three consecutive Academy Awards for Gravity (2013), Birdman (2014), and The Revenant (2015).

Appendix B: The Technical Record

The two most discussed sequences in the film generated documentation that constitutes a significant body of record for the cinematography of extended unbroken takes.

The car ambush (approximately 247 seconds):

The sequence was shot inside a moving Chevrolet Suburban whose roof had been removed and replaced with the Doggicam PowerSlide rig, a wirelessly controlled dolly designed and built specifically for this sequence by Gary Thieltges of Doggicam Systems. The rig allowed the camera to rotate 360 degrees inside the vehicle while it was in motion, with the seats modified to lower and raise to clear the camera's path. Two weeks of rehearsal with the full cast, crew, and moving vehicle preceded two days of principal photography. Lubezki has confirmed that the continuous appearance of the sequence conceals a small number of hidden cuts, most notably at the moment of the bullet impact.

The Bexhill battle (approximately 379 seconds):

Shot on location in Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, which was dressed over several weeks of preparation as a collapsing refugee detention camp. The De La Warr Pavilion is visible in the background of the boat sequences. Camera operator George Richmond shot handheld for sixteen weeks of the production, with the physical choreography of explosions, gunfire, and hundreds of extras planned to allow the moving camera to find the emotionally significant moments at their moment of maximum force. The blood that appears on the lens is the result of an explosion detonating closer to the camera than planned, and Cuarón chose to keep it in the final cut.

Lubezki's lens choice:

Arricam LT, Kodak 5229 stock, chosen for its ability to hold exposure across the contrast range of interior and exterior within the same frame. The entire film was shot without traditional film lighting wherever possible, using available light and practical sources.

Appendix C: The Cast

Cuarón worked with Clive Owen on a specific directorial decision that shaped the entire performance: Theo should be late to every emotional response, should feel things slightly after he should feel them, a man whose insulation from grief had made his affect genuinely slow. This late emotional processing, visible in Owen's performance throughout, gives the film's final sequence its specific quality: Theo's grief and fear and exhaustion and love arriving at his face in a sequence that the actor controls but that feels finally involuntary.

Appendix D: The Growing Relevance

The documented instances of the film's political vision being confirmed by subsequent events constitute an unusual body of evidence for any film's reclamation story.

The film depicts a Britain that has withdrawn from the world and turned inward, in which the United Kingdom is described as the only functioning government left in a world that has otherwise collapsed. The specificity with which the film's 2027 Britain resembles the political rhetoric of 2016-2024 Britain has been noted by critics, by politicians, and by Cuarón himself in retrospective interviews.

The refugee detention camps have been photographed in the news from multiple continents in the years since the film's release, and the specific visual grammar of those photographs, cages behind wire, uniformed guards, the specific geometry of containment applied to human beings, maps onto the Bexhill camp with a precision that is not coincidence but was, in 2005 and 2006, extrapolation from trajectories that Cuarón and Lubezki were determined to make visible.

Screenwriter Mark Fergus's statement that it has taken a couple of decades for the movie to be fully understood is the most direct available summary of the film's reclamation arc. In 2006 it was a film about a possible future. By 2016 it was a film about an arriving present. By 2024 it is a film about the recent past and the continuing present simultaneously, and the audience that has found it in the streaming era has found it not as prophecy but as testimony.

THE END