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**The Politics of Film Adaptation:**

**A Case Study of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men***

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**The Politics of Film Adaptation:**  
**A Case Study of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men***

by

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**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2010

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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This thesis investigates the political and social contexts of the adaptation of the 1992 novel *The Children of Men*, written by prolific British mystery writer P.D. James, to a 2006 US film of the same title, directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Both novel and film share the same premise, imagining a future world where human reproduction is no longer possible; however, each deals with drastically different ideological and political concerns. As a case study of the politics of adaptation, this project considers adaptation as both a product and a process, analyzing representation, medium specificity, genre and political contexts as well as issues of production and reception.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: Contexts of Adaptation.....	1
Chapter One: Textual Translations and Transformations.....	23
Chapter Two: Production Contexts and the Discursive Construction of Authorship.....	57
Chapter Three: Value and Meaning in Reception of Adaptation.....	76
Conclusion.....	102
Bibliography.....	106
Vita.....	117

## Introduction: Contexts of Adaptation

At the time of the release of Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 post-apocalyptic thriller *Children of Men*, adapted from British mystery writer P.D. James' 1992 dystopian novel of the same name, mainstream reviews widely lauded the film as a thoughtful and artful meditation on the moral state of contemporary politics. Terming *Children of Men* "the kind of glorious bummer that lifts you to the rafters, transporting you with the greatness of its filmmaking," Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* lauded the film not only for the "beauty of its form" but for its ability to "hold up a mirror to these times" (Dargis 2006). In a later review, Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun Times* similarly praised the film for creating, through its set and art design, an affecting vision of "how the world is slipping away from civility and co-existence" (Ebert 2007). These and other reviews praised the film both for its technical mastery and its political relevance.

In addition to critical acclaim—the film garnered a rating of 92% "fresh" on the review aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes—*Children of Men* received some success on the 2007 awards circuit, primarily for its cinematography. Cuarón, already known in the United States as the director of the Oscar-nominated Mexican independent film *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001) and the film adaptation of the third *Harry Potter* novel (2004), also received attention for his work on the film as director, co-editor, and first-credited screenwriter. Nominated for three Academy Awards, the film won none, losing out to *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006, dir. Guillermo del Toro) for best cinematography and *The Departed* (2006, dir. Martin Scorsese) for best editing and best adapted screenplay.

Set in Britain in the year 2027, *Children of Men* depicts a future in which human procreation has inexplicably ceased. Making no attempt to explain this biological catastrophe, the film employs this plot conceit to paint a bleak picture of the consequences of a world without hope for the future. Starring Clive Owen, who had at this time only recently come to prominence as the Oscar-nominated star of *Closer* (2004, dir. Mike Nichols), as the bloody and beleaguered reluctant hero, the film was marketed as an intellectual action thriller. US promotional posters, imitating black graffiti on a plain white background, offering cryptic taglines such as “The last one to die please turn out the light,” and featuring images of fetuses, centralized the horror of the film’s unique premise rather than its stars or director.

Yet in both critical reviews and promotional materials for *Children of Men*, references to the film as an adaptation of James’ novel proved conspicuously absent. Best known as an author of detective fiction, James published her first novel, *Cover Her Face*, a murder mystery featuring iconic detective Adam Dalgliesh, in 1962. Many of her eighteen published novels, the majority of which feature Dalgliesh as protagonist, have been adapted for British television, first by ITV and, since 2003, by the BBC; in the United States, these adaptations have been broadcast on PBS. As a mystery author, James has been acclaimed as a master of the genre. A 1986 *New York Times Magazine* interview lauds her ability to blend “a whodunit and a fully realized modern novel” and notes that her novels received “long, in-depth reviews usually accorded only to a major novelist” (Symons 1986). James’ 2005 Dalgliesh novel, *The Lighthouse*, attained bestseller status, selling over 200,000 copies in the United States (Maryles 2006).

All this is to say that at the time of the film release of *Children of Men*, James had been publishing successfully for over forty years and remained a bestselling and widely praised author in both the United States and Britain. And *The Children of Men*, the source text for Cuarón's film, while a departure from James' usual work, was, like the film, at the time of its release widely praised both for its premise and its skillfully crafted prose (Wangerin 1993, Goodrich 1993, Sallis 1993). Given James' status as a critically respected and commercially successful author, it seems bizarre that association with her novel was largely ignored or diminished in dominant discussions of the film adaptation, especially in light of the centrality of association with bestselling source texts and their authors to marketing campaigns for film adaptations of thriller novels by other popular genre authors such as James Patterson and John Grisham.

Indeed, the tendency to read the film version of *Children of Men* in isolation from its literary source text has been replicated in the few extant scholarly examinations of the film. Little existing scholarship undertakes in-depth analysis of either the novel or film versions of *Children of Men*. Those articles that reference *Children of Men* tend to fall within two categories, either mentioning the premise of the novel and/or film in order to craft arguments about futurity, time, and memory (Edelman 2004, Ramirez 2008, Bell 2009) or considering the film within genre trends of the 2000s, either as an apocalyptic disaster movie (Clover 2008, Moe 2008) or a conspiracy thriller (Kapur 2009), in order to make claims about structures of feeling in contemporary US culture. In a feminist vein, Susan Squier (1999) traces parallels between the novel and scientific discourses of infertility, and Ron Becker (2008) considers the film's representation of reproduction.

Yet all of these articles choose either to engage with the novel or the film as an independent text or, concerned primarily with the basic premise, conflate novel and film without distinguishing between the two. No authors have undertaken an adaptation study interested in the translations between the two texts.

In light of this omission, my project considers Cuarón's *Children of Men* explicitly as an adaptation, paying particular attention to reading the spaces in which the film and the novel are and are not in dialogue with each other as well as the discourses surrounding that conversation. In particular, given the function of both novel and film as enacting critique of contemporary society through the depiction of a dystopian future, I focus on political and social contexts of the adaptation in an attempt to unravel the motivations for and implications of the changes in themes, content, and representations between the two mediums.

### **Adaptation Studies: Beyond Identifying Differences**

Any exposure to both the novel and film versions of *Children of Men* immediately reveals considerable and obvious changes in plot, characterization, and thematic concerns. While James' novel suggests the futility and cyclicity of human existence, engaging themes of Christianity, reproductive rights, political corruption and totalitarian regimes, and the apparent futility of political activism, Cuarón shifts the focus to immigration and environmentalism and inscribes in his film a hope for the future, activated by the promise of children, that remains notably absent in the novel version. Representation of pregnancy and childbirth differs greatly in the film and the novel—the race of the only pregnant woman is shifted from white to black; the film locates infertility



in men rather than women; and the novel's sacred childbirth scene takes on a sense of the abject in the film. Significant changes are also made to individual characters' races, gender performances, and class positions. Ultimately, these two texts seemed to share a title, a premise, and some action, but little else.

Early approaches to adaptation studies dwelt primarily on identifying these types of differences. Although scholars have studied the adaptation of literature to film for decades, this sub-field of film studies had fallen out of favor in the academy before undergoing a significant rejuvenation in the last ten years.<sup>1</sup> Early foundational works of literary adaptation studies, such as George Bluestone's *Novels into Films* (1957), focused primarily on exploring the fidelity of specific films to their source texts. Locating differences in novel and film in the properties of each medium, Bluestone explicitly notes the inevitability of aesthetic changes "the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium" (Bluestone 1957, 5). However, although he goes on to state that constructing a hierarchy of quality proves counterproductive because "the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genre, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture" (Bluestone 1957, 5), his language throughout the text clearly constructs literature as superior, as with his use of the word "abandon" in the above quotation. Notably, subsequent glosses of Bluestone's contribution to the field have tended to omit that his primary objection was not to the film form itself, which he acknowledges possesses great potential for metaphor through editing, but rather to the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here only to the adaptation studies scholarship discussing literature to film adaptation. Some scholarship discussing theater to film, such as André Bazin's essays "In Defense of Mixed Cinema" (1967) and "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest" (1948), give a much more nuanced consideration of adaptation.

conventions of the Hollywood system and the constraints of industrial production. If, for Bluestone, film's "virtue" lies in the possibilities of the medium, its "vice" rests in its slavery to "businessmen and audience" or the demands of commercial production and mass consumption (Bluestone 1957, 42). In his estimation, these demands limit successful cinema to genres with "a broad and nervous kind of energy," such as slapstick, gangster film, romance adventure, and musical comedy (Bluestone 1957, 44).

Yet perhaps the repeated omission of this dimension of Bluestone's theorizing in historical accounts of the intellectual trajectory of adaptation studies makes sense, as despite this nod to reception and production in his introductory chapter, Bluestone's case studies in *Novels into Film* proceed to follow a schematic fidelity model. Indeed, he summarizes his method thus in his analysis of the adaptation of *The Informer* (1935, dir. John Ford): "If we can fix upon those elements in the film version that carried over from their source, and those which depart from it, we ought, in the process, to illuminate the essential limits and possibilities of film and novel both" (Bluestone 1957, 68). If subsequent scholars have perhaps oversimplified Bluestone's theory of adaptation, then, it may very well be because, in practice, his analytical approach ignores audiences and producers in favor of strictly textual considerations.

Following Bluestone, the majority of adaptation projects continued in this vein, investing in listing differences between adaptation and original. Furthermore these projects, often, even more explicitly than Bluestone, judged "good" adaptations as those that "accurately" replicated the novel on which they were based and "bad" adaptations as those that strayed too far from the source material, an approach that may have originated

in the novel's status as an older and more critically "respectable" form (MacFarlane 1997, 8). As late as 1997, for example, James Griffith's *Adaptations as Imitations* takes as its central question: "Is it true that some or all novels cannot be adapted to film faithfully, adequately preserving the novel's style, plot, and effects?" (Griffith 1997, 17). If Griffith's choice of the terms "faithfully" and "adequately"—let alone "imitation"—were not enough to clarify which form he sees as originary and superior, he proceeds to identify film adaptations as "great," "adequate," or "weak" based on their "successful" translation of the source novel. As Brian MacFarlane argues, this very notion of fidelity necessarily trails its own interpretational hazards; his critique of this type of analysis is worth quoting at length. He states,

Fidelity criticism depends on the notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct 'meaning' which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with. There will often be a distinction between being faithful to the 'letter'... and to the 'spirit' or 'essence' of the work. [This] involves not merely a parallelism between novel and film but between two or more readings of a novel, since any given film version is able only to aim at reproducing the film-maker's reading of the original and to hope it will coincide with that of many other readers/viewers. Since such coincidence is unlikely, the fidelity approach seems a doomed enterprise and fidelity criticism unilluminating. (MacFarlane 1997, 8-9)<sup>2</sup>

MacFarlane here evokes the notion that all texts are necessarily polysemous—that is, capable of producing multiple meanings. Efforts to elucidate the filmmaker's interpretation of a literary text as "wrong," then, tell us much less about the film text or the process of adaptation than they tell us about the critic's interpretation of the source

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<sup>2</sup> Although interestingly, MacFarlane himself then goes on to outline an approach to adaptation that in itself seems to focus on the "limitations" of the film medium by proposing a focus on the "cinematic potential" of various types of narrative as guiding a "new agenda" for adaptation studies.

text. Furthermore, as Thomas Leitch points out, the tendency of adaptation studies to organize itself around canonical authors imbues this scholarship with preemptive notions of quality based on the literary canon (Leitch 2007, 3).

As a result of this tendency toward fidelity criticism and the perpetual reinscription of the superiority of literature to film, by the 1980s, adaptation studies had been largely dismissed within film studies as a critical dead end (Leitch 2007, 3-13). However, the release of the 2000 anthology *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore, marked a shift in the aims and assumptions of adaptation studies as a field. In a thorough history of the state of the discipline, Robert B. Ray identifies the source of this analytic stagnation as the lack of a “presiding poetics” or a guiding theoretical framework structuring the field of adaptation studies (Ray 2000, 44). Instead, he maintains, adaptation scholarship through the 1980s consisted primarily of isolated case studies and lacked “any evidence of cumulative knowledge development or heuristic potential” (Ray 2000, 44). Ray calls for a return to the “repressed” study of adaptation but with a rejuvenated focus: a turn away from New Criticism in favor of a thorough explanation of the relationship between word and image.

Robert Stam’s “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,” an essay first published in the same volume and persistently credited by subsequent scholars with raising new questions and renewed possibilities for the study of adaptation (Hutcheon 2006, 4; Staiger 2008, 281), offered just such an intervention. In a sense moving back to Bluestone’s general concerns, if not his method, Stam provides a framework for understanding changes between literature and film as influenced by medium specificity,

affording neither text privilege as the “original” or “authentic” embodiment of a story. As an alternative, Stam suggests a poststructuralist model that foregrounds the need to engage with the adaptation of novels to films in terms of the shift from a single-track (written word) medium to a multi-track medium that incorporates image, sound, words, and performance. Stam conceptualizes adaptation through a series of tropes, including translation, transformation, and intertextual dialogism, the notion that “film adaptations are caught up in the ongoing whirl of... texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin” (Stam 2000a, 66). In dismantling established hierarchies that privileged literature over film, and in laying out a theory that conceptualized precisely why adaptation studies remained important, Stam’s article rejuvenated questions of adaptation as a provocative field of inquiry for film studies.

Following Stam, numerous scholars have written theories of adaptation. Work on film remakes (Horton and McDougal 1998) and on intertextuality among a wide-range of films that may or may not originate from related production contexts or source texts (Metz 2004) has expanded what “adaptation studies” might mean. The majority of proposed models centering specifically on literature to film adaptation, however, have continued to take the question of medium specificity as, if not a starting point, at least a significant component. These range from a focus on the screenwriter as author (Boozer 2008) to a centralization of genre and intertextual cues in shaping shifts in narrative and characterization (Geraghty 2008). A few of these theories incorporate either production or reception in their approaches to adaptation studies, as with Leitch’s (2007) model of

adaptation as a means to understand literacy in multiple mediums or Linda Costanzo Cahir's (2006) dual focus on both the formal properties of film and the influence of the structure and economic concerns of the film industry. Yet a textual analysis approach, concerned with formal or narrative elements of adaptation, widely predominates within the field, with very few scholars devoting significant study to contexts of production or reception. In foregrounding the formal qualities of medium as predominantly responsible for the translations that take place in adaptation, the majority of adaptation theories privilege the text itself as the source of meaning—or, in this case, two texts: the literary and the filmic.

Indeed, even those studies that do incorporate consideration of producer or audience reception do so largely on the basis of analysis of the text. Essays in the anthology *Authorship and Film Adaptation* (2008), for example, tend to turn primarily to the adaptation itself, rather than interviews or production accounts, as evidence of how a director or screenwriter interpreted the novel. Similarly, while Leitch's *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2007) purports to be concerned with viewer interpretations of adaptations, in all of his analyses except one (of *The Passion of the Christ* [2004, dir. Mel Gibson]), Leitch is primarily concerned with extrapolating, based on textual features, how viewers might interpret certain adaptations.

This type of approach seems particularly problematic within the field of adaptation studies, given that, as MacFarlane and others have asserted, interpretation necessarily rests at the very center of any adaptation project. A film adaptation represents the intersecting interpretative visions of director(s), screenwriters(s), and often

actor(s) or cinematographer(s)—indeed, anyone involved in the film’s production that read the source novel and allowed the material contained therein to influence their contribution to the film. Furthermore, in forwarding interpretations based on translations or intertextuality between novel and film, scholars assume viewer familiarity with both literary and filmic texts and foreclose the question of how reception might differ for viewers who are not aware of the work as an adaptation or who have either had little or long-past exposure to the source text.

Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), offers what seems the most comprehensive model, which advocates viewing adaptations through a three-pronged approach: as a formal product, as a process of creation, and a process of reception. Hutcheon’s approach proves appealing in part due to the synthesis of various approaches to adaptation, taking into account the issues of medium specificity that have permeated adaptation studies, but also considering producers and audiences. Furthermore, she insists upon placing all three of these elements (what she terms the “what,” “who/why,” and “how” of an adaptation) within a consideration of contexts of adaptation, which she states are always “material, public, and economic as much as they are cultural, political, and aesthetic” (Hutcheon 2006, 28). The breadth of this approach sets it apart from other theories of adaptation, and, indeed, Hutcheon attempts to argue that this framework can be equally applicable to analysis of adaptation to and from any medium. Accordingly, her examples are wide-ranging, including literature and film, but also video games, opera, and even amusement park rides.

In marked contrast to other book-length studies of adaptation, the absence of any extended case studies emerges as one of the drawbacks of this expansive account. Hutcheon organizes her monograph by approach—a chapter on analysis of medium specificity, one on producers, one on audiences, and finally, a chapter on studying adaptations as the products of cultural and historical contexts—and chooses multiple examples for each. The end result is that each approach to adaptation appears somewhat isolated. While Hutcheon informs us that a thorough analysis of adaptation demands a multi-faceted consideration of medium, producers, audiences, and contexts, in dividing each of these considerations so strictly, she suggests that for any given adaptation, one of these elements proves more relevant than others. Yet certainly, these approaches can—and must?—be understood intersectionally in order to develop a thorough understanding of any adaptation as *both* product and process. Furthermore, historical, cultural, and political context must be understood to influence all texts, producers, and audiences in meaningful ways, a point that Hutcheon’s choice to isolate contextual analysis as a separate approach effaces.

Loosely following Hutcheon’s approach to adaptation, then, my project attempts to apply her multi-faceted approach to a single case study: that of *Children of Men*. Adopting a three-part structure, I begin with a formal analysis, encompassing issues of medium specificity as well as genre shifts. Subsequent chapters discuss the film’s production as an interpretive process and the ways in which reception by specific niche audiences does or does not engage with the film as an adaptation. While Hutcheon provides a structuring framework, each of these sections also engages with other theorists



of adaptation; while her synthesis of several methods of analysis offered an important intervention, the very scope of her project means that her analysis of the specific applicability of each individual approach to the adaptation of literature to film merits a more cursory treatment than appears elsewhere in the literature. Furthermore, outside of adaptation studies, media theorists have been engaging in important discussions of production and reception. An attempt to situate my discussions of these processes within the wider literature on the production of culture and media reception studies allows me to engage more thoroughly with these methodological questions than does Hutcheon.

Finally, as I will discuss in depth later in this introduction, in a departure from Hutcheon's theoretical framework, this project will not afford "context" its own chapter. On the contrary, a historicized conceptualization of social and political context as always integral to production and reception of texts, and a commitment to discussing form and context in tandem provides a crucial underpinning to each of these chapters.

### **The Case for the Case Study**

Given the privileged—and somewhat contentious—position of the case study within the study of adaptation, a few words ought to be said on my choice to use this approach. As Ray bemoans, since the birth of the field of adaptation studies, scholars have frequently used the case study method to make claims about the adaptation of novels into films. Researchers have undertaken case studies of all types of adaptations—while a considerable amount has been and continues to be written about the adaptation of canonical literary texts by authors from William Shakespeare (Lan 2007) to Jane Austen (Lanier 2007), many other recent case studies investigate the adaptation of mainstream

popular texts (Lucia 2008, Cobb 2008). Methodologically, these case studies take a range of approaches, with some authors concerned with a primarily formal analysis, others interested largely in production, and a few undertaking projects considering the adaptations from several different angles.

Like any method, there are some limitations to the case study, the foremost of which is the inability to produce viable generalizations from a single case. In recent years, some scholars of adaptation have pointed to this problem. Hutcheon articulates two objections to the case study: first, that “such individual readings in either literature and film rarely offer...generalizable insights into theoretical issues,” and second, that, “in practice, [this method] has tended to privilege or at least give priority (and therefore, implicitly, value) to what is always called the ‘source’ text or the original” (Hutcheon 2006, xiii). Leitch also advocates moving away from the case study method in the form that it has historically been used in the field of adaptation studies: “paired readings of novels and films [using] close reading [to] compare each novel to its putative source” (Leitch 2007, 20). Insofar as my project strays from the traditional case studies that Leitch and Hutcheon criticize in its intention to focus less on a comparison of the texts than on the film adaptation itself as product and process, the pitfall of reifying some notion of fidelity, while a concern I intend to keep in mind, is not anticipated as a major problem of my case study. However, the issue of generalizability, as raised by Hutcheon, merits some consideration.

As feminist researcher Shulamit Reinharz argues, the case study method has different strengths, and different aims, than the articulation of a generalizable theory or

conclusion; she points to the case study as the method best able to address a phenomenon in its “specificity, exceptions, and completeness” (Reinharz 1992, 174). Applying Hutcheon’s broad three-pronged approach to adaptation to a single case, that of the adaptation of *Children of Men*, thus allows me to attempt to use her approach in a way that she does not: while she makes generalizations about adaptation in general, I intend to employ her framework to interrogate a single text through three different lenses. Furthermore, because the scope of this case study is much larger than the typical “endless series of twenty-page [isolated close readings]” that Ray claims have pervaded academic adaptation studies, I hopefully avoid replicating the major flaw in such studies: that they are “restricted in scope, demanding neither sustained research nor historical study about the two media... [a scholarly version of] that undergraduate staple, the compare and contrast paper” (Ray 2000, 47). On the contrary, analyzing a single instance of adaptation from three different angles proves a useful methodological exercise in that it illuminates what precisely can be gained from formal analysis, production of culture analysis, and reception studies—and what each approach effaces.

### **Towards a Feminist Adaptation Studies**

As a scholar deeply invested in the type of structural critique mobilized by feminist, queer, and critical race theories, a significant element of my interest in the study of culture lies in an understanding of all texts as products of a society that rests on intersecting power imbalances that privilege certain groups over others. Thus, an assumption of gender, race, class, and sexuality as systems of power structuring society’s processes of meaning-making will underpin my analysis at every level. As Lisbet van

Zoonen articulates in *Feminist Media Studies* (1994), feminist scholars have, since the 1970s, increasingly been concerned with the role of culture as “the conditions and the forms in which meaning and value are structured and articulated within a society” (van Zoonen 1994, 6). Feminist cultural studies scholarship, then, assumes that cultural critiques hold the potential to expose social relations of power and exclusion; my project accepts the presumption that culture affects lived experience in tangible ways and that cultural critique can thus function as a progressive political act.

Much of feminist cultural criticism, however, has fallen within what film scholar Janet Staiger has termed symptomatic or ideological criticism, in which the critic looks at textual content to discover hidden meanings about class, gender, sexuality, or race (Staiger 2005, 12). Contemporary scholars studying various identity formations use ideological textual analysis; indeed, as Staiger states, “Marxists examine messages for hidden statements about class; feminist, gay, lesbian, and queer theorists consider sex, gender, and sexuality; and scholars of racism read for race and ethnicity” (Staiger 2005, 12). In addition, scholars have applied this type of textual analysis to all types of media; relevant to this project, numerous prominent feminist critics have famously employed ideological textual analysis in studies of literature (Greer 1970, Morrison 1992, Adams 1994) and film (Straayer 1992, Kaplan 1992, Maher 2002). Yet the majority of this work has been primarily concerned with representation, or what Jacqueline Stewart terms “the politics of the image” (Stewart 2003, 650). Indeed, my interests in *Children of Men* originated in a fascination with its representation of race and reproduction. Yet as Stewart points out, this type of project can often devolve into identifying a representation

as “positive” or “negative” object, politically progressive or politically regressive, based on notions of perceived “realism”—an effort widely recognized in contemporary scholarship as a critical dead end (Shohat and Stam 1994, 178-82).

Adaptation studies, in contrast, have largely eschewed questions of race and gender representation—or limited themselves to focusing solely on such questions. Shelley Cobb’s (2008) textual analysis of the adaptation of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001, dir. Sharon Maguire), for example, looks at representations of gender and feminism; Elaine Roth (2008) considers racial representation in adaptations of Sherman Alexie’s short stories. Yet even these types of analyses of the representational politics of adaptation are in the minority in the field, in which the majority of scholars tends to produce formal analyses of medium that minimize or ignore contextual factors. A limited number of scholars have also looked at feminist adaptations of not explicitly feminist texts (Weckerle 1999, Vidal 2005, Friedman 2009).

What, then, would a feminist adaptation studies look like? In her discussion of the importance of context, Hutcheon notes that scholars of adaptation must remember that any adaptation “always happens in a particular time and space in a society” (Hutcheon 2006, 144). While this statement may initially seem almost painfully simple, Hutcheon here points to the importance of historical and geographic specificity, as well as the relevance of the specific structures and institutions of a society, to the analysis of any adaptation. While Hutcheon goes on in this section to concentrate primarily on texts that have been adapted over great geographic or temporal distances, her point remains equally relevant in analyzing texts such as *Children of Men* that have been adapted over

less “exotic” cultural contexts. The influences of location or of a specific cultural moment exist not only “over there” or “back then”; social structures and cultural contexts, inevitably bound with issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, matter here and now. The inevitably political nature of all cultural products is certainly not escaped by adaptations.

Centralizing a consideration of political and social contexts, then, may be another way of conceptualizing a feminist adaptation studies—one which departs from extant models of analyzing shifts in gender representation or limiting analysis to explicitly feminist adaptations. Considerations of race, gender, and sexuality should echo through any thorough study of adaptation because they are structural features of society; they organize cultural production and reception even as they echo throughout the texts themselves.

A final note on the choice to label my project a “feminist” adaptation study: historically, many feminist film scholars have persistently privileged gender analysis over consideration of other structural systems such as race, class, or sexuality. This single-issue approach to film studies was critiqued as early as 1986, when Jane Gaines criticized feminist film scholars for being “lock[ed] into modes of analysis which will continually misinterpret the position of many women [...and which] still place the categories of race and sexual preference in theoretical limbo” (Gaines 1986, 294); however, as recently as 2005, Leslie McCall has suggested that an intersectional approach has still not been effectively integrated into feminist research practices. In order to avoid this myopic focus on gender, my theoretical paradigm is heavily influenced by an intersectional

feminist approach that assumes that gender analysis cannot be separated from racial or class analysis. Formal analysis as well as studies of production and reception must thus also take into account the varying subject positions of producers and spectators.

### **Why *Children of Men*?: Imagining a World With No Future**

Several factors brought *Children of Men* to my attention as a case of adaptation that proves particularly relevant to an extensive, specifically feminist adaptation study. I first encountered the film as an undergraduate, discussing its theatrical previews in a Women's Studies class—turning over the implications of a world with no reproduction and no children, interrogating whether the premise of the film was sexist or racist. The sources of our feminist concerns are not difficult to identify. The tagline, “This fall, one man will fight for our future,” emblazoned in white letters on a black background, paired with the preview's voyeuristic panning shot of a black pregnant body, promised an action film with a male protagonist in which the world was falling apart because women could no longer have babies. My class agreed that the film seemed destined to hinge on a glorification of reproduction as women's most important role, even as we acknowledged the novelty of an action film about pregnancy and reproduction. Yet the treatment of reproduction in the film, and the novel upon which it was based, proved much more complex than this initial impression suggested.

The premise of both James' novel and Cuarón's film—imagining a world where reproduction is no longer possible—engages questions of nationhood, social “progress,” and futurity with which feminist, queer, and critical race scholars have repeatedly grappled. Indeed, the topic of reproduction itself is one that has met with significant

analysis and theorizing within these critical traditions. Feminist theorists have turned to psychoanalysis and anthropology to interrogate the psychic and social dimensions of pregnancy. Julia Kristeva argues that pregnancy falls within the category of the abject, that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules” and “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982, 4); women are specifically connection to the abject through menstruation. According to Kristeva, confrontations with the abject result in both a perverse pleasure and a desire to eject the contaminant. Film scholars including Barbara Creed (1993) and Mary Russo (1994) have applied Kristeva’s theory of the abject to the horror film, arguing that female monstrosity is persistently linked to reproduction and female sexuality.

Queer theorists Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant have read the fetus and the idea of “the Child” as projections of time and nation, which hold particular relevance for *Children of Men*’s imagining of a dystopian future. Both authors ask the question: Why does the unborn fetus and/or the Child matter so much to us? Berlant (1994) maintains that the American obsession with the pregnant body hinges on the construction of the fetus as an unmarked figure that, having no political associations, represents all people and embodies the “natural, complete” citizen as icon. Edelman takes the argument further in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) in which he argues that not only the fetus, but the iconic figure of the Child, functions as a projection of the norm into a never realized future. Indeed, Edelman specifically references James’ novel *The Children of Men* as reifying of the importance of the Child.



Finally, scholars of race have discussed the ways in which the United States' history of eugenic policies and political rhetoric clearly demonstrate a tradition of heightened anxiety surrounding the reproduction of non-white, immigrant, and impoverished women. Historian Linda Gordon (1976) asserts that the fundamental premise of eugenics in the nineteenth and early twentieth century hinged on a fear that biological reproduction of certain segments of the population would have a negative cultural impact on American society as a whole. The reproduction of these marginalized peoples was considered dangerous precisely because certain groups were seen as biologically, and thus culturally, inferior. Historian Paul Spickard (2007) and legal scholar Dorothy Roberts (1997) have discussed extensively the ways in which both immigrant populations and African Americans have been historically marked as undesirable but prolific reproducers; anthropologist Leo Chavez (2008) argues that these anxieties about uncontrollable immigrant sexuality and reproduction persist in the discourses surrounding Latino immigrants. These scholars and others emphasize that questions about what the future of America ought to look like, and associated anxieties about high rates of reproduction among marginalized groups, inevitably underscore discourses about who can or should reproduce.

All this to say that reproduction functions as an overdetermined signifier, inevitably trailing meanings that may not necessarily be intended—meanings that are inseparable from notions of gender, queerness, race, and nation. Although I do not subscribe to the notion that meaning lies solely, or even primarily, in the text, the centrality of reproduction, and associated concerns with hope and futurity, to the premise

of *Children of Men* raise provocative questions that intersect in complex ways with the issues of genre, medium, production, and reception that will structure my analysis of the adaptation as process and product.

Specifically, then, I intend to investigate how political and social themes are negotiated in the adaptation from novel to film at from three angles: first, formally; second, in production; and finally, in reception. The first chapter analyzes narrative shifts and representations of race, gender, and reproduction, forwarding three possible textual explanations for these changes: medium specificity, a shift in genre, and influences of differing political and social contexts of adaptation. The second chapter considers the impact of industrial contexts and issues of authorship on the process of adapting the novel and then argues that in publicity interviews, Cuarón attempts to disavow the film as an adaptation in order to construct himself as an auteur. Finally, I analyze the ways that reviews published in mainstream, Christian, and feminist publications discuss the film's meaning, value, and relationship to the novel, elucidating trends in interpretive strategies demonstrated by each cluster of reviews. Taken together, these three approaches to the case of *Children of Men* move beyond extant work on adaptation studies to provide a more thorough and complex image of adaptation as both process and product.

## **Chapter One: Textual Translations and Transformations**

As the field of adaptation studies has historically been largely rooted in a textual analysis approach, various types of blueprints exist for the first phase of my project: offering a critical analysis of the novel and film based on the texts themselves. The textual analysis method attempts to draw conclusions about possible interpretations of a given cultural artifact by looking at features of that text. Traditionally one of the main methods of literary and film studies, interpretative textual analysis reads a text for meaning and symbolism in order to make statements about how the text might be understood by readers. Interpretive textual analysis scrutinizes the stylistics, characters, narrative, and/or visual elements of a specific text in order to discuss its encoded meanings, positing an argument as to how a reader or viewer might understand the text as a whole. Beyond this basic objective, numerous scholars have advanced different approaches to textual analysis (see summary in: Staiger 2005, 8-13).

Within adaptation studies, attention to medium specificity, advocated by adaptation theorists from George Bluestone (1957) to Robert Stam (2000a) and focusing on formal features of the film and novel forms, has been one of the most frequently adopted angles. Yet numerous alternative approaches to textual analysis of adaptation exist. For example, looking at the fantasy film and the woman's film respectively, I.Q. Hunter (2007) and Imelda Whelehan (2007) have considered adaptation in terms of generic conventions. Alternatively, several scholars have turned to historical analysis, influenced by a cultural studies approach, as with Lindiwe Dovey's (2005) discussion of *Fools* (1997, dir. Ramadan Suleman) as a political post-colonial project or Brian Neve's

(2007) contextualizing of *The Quiet American* (1958, Joseph Mankiewicz) within Cold War rhetoric. Others have discussed adaptation soundtracks (Davison 2007) or film adaptations as modernist (Halliwell 2007) or postmodernist (Brooker 2007, Garcia 2005) re-imaginings. All of these case studies are primarily text-based, seeking “meaning” or “importance” of an adaptation in the film or novel itself, rather than production histories or reception accounts.

As numerous scholars have pointed out, unavoidable problems exist when academics undertake textual analysis. Of course, the major limitation of the textual analysis method is the inherently subjective nature of interpretation. As Janet Staiger states, “Each textual method has advantages and deficits, but these do not include objectivity” (Staiger 2005, 14). The scholar undertaking a project of textual analysis necessarily interprets a text through his or her own individual perspective, as David Bordwell affirms when, drawing on cognitive psychology, he states, “Comprehension and interpretation involve the *construction* of meaning out of textual clues.... The perceiver is not a passive receiver of data but an active mobilizer of structures and processes (either ‘hard-wired’ or learned) which enable her to search for information relevant to the task and data at hand” (Bordwell 1989, 3). Accordingly, two researchers looking at the same collection of texts will most likely not draw the same conclusions, and the decisive “meaning” of a given text can never be reached.

Furthermore, some have argued that a text itself can never be fully detached from the context in which it was produced and distributed or from its interactions with readers and viewers. Indeed, Tony Bennett goes so far as to state boldly that the “very notion of

the ‘text itself’ is inconceivable, an impossible object”; he continues, “there is *no* text behind or beyond the diverse forms in which it is materially produced, the social relations in which it is inscribed and the interpretive horizons in which it is embedded” (Bennett 1982, 7). I find Bennett’s critique of traditional modes of literary and media scholarship both compelling and productive; however, I would invoke here Staiger’s bracketing of textual analysis from other approaches, particularly reception studies. She states, “Reception studies is trying to explain an event (the interpretation of the film), while textual studies is working toward elucidating an object (the film). Both activities are useful in the process of knowledge, but they explore different aspects of the hermeneutics of cultural studies” (Staiger 1992, 9).

I proceed with the text-based portion of my analysis with the acknowledgement, then, that I myself am increasingly wary of the approach and with the caveat that issues of production and reception will receive due attention in later chapters. Yet textual analysis does have its advantages as a way to consider adaptation, insofar as it allows for researched, extended attention to the formal qualities that may be glossed over in other types of analysis. The temptation certainly exists simply to describe shifts in narrative, including plot, characters, and themes; however, this approach runs the risk of merely identifying differences.

On the contrary, synthesizing several different approaches to adaptation studies, I posit three theories that might explain translations of social and political themes, and specifically differing representations of race, gender, and reproduction, between two versions of *Children of Men*: James’ novel and Cuarón’s film. For the sake of clarity, I

begin this chapter with a summary of the changes on which my analysis hinges, but I attempt to devote as little space as possible to this sort of “find the differences” exercise, while still providing necessary background, before trying out three different explanations of what those transformations might tell us about how an adaptation comes to be so drastically different from its source text. First, following Stam, Linda Hutcheon, and others of the medium specificity contingent, I consider the possibility that the properties of the film and the novel form enable certain shifts in representation of reproduction, which result in accordant translations of political and social implications of novel and film. Second, drawing from Steve Neale’s *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), I undertake a generic analysis, suggesting that the shift from political dystopia with romance elements to post-apocalyptic action thriller demands an alteration in narrative. Finally, I consider how each text reflects the social and political contexts of its release, taking into account the ways in which the national and global political contexts of the early 1990s and mid-2000s appear to have influenced the thematic concerns of novel and film, respectively. While these last two explanations could suggest a move into production analysis, for the purposes of this chapter I discuss them as context for two different textual readings.

Of course, while I separate these three explanations in my analysis, it ultimately proves a strictly academic division. Yet, in considering them individually, I hope to show that medium, genre, and political context must each be recognized to impact the translations present in an adaptation. Like my larger project, this serves as an intervention of sorts in the tendency of extant adaptation case studies to, often for

purposes of space, oversimplify the myriad reasons that literary and filmic versions of the same story are necessarily *always* different.

### **The Background: Major Changes from Novel to Film**

As published first in the United Kingdom in 1992, P.D. James' *The Children of Men* featured on its cover the image of an overgrown forest. In the lower right-hand corner, a broken doll lies on a pavement street next to its detached, vacant blue eyes. The cover of the first US edition, published one year later, similarly features a glassy-eyed baby doll, here standing upright and intact against a black background. In both covers, the images allude to the absence of children that constitutes the premise of the novel: in James' dystopian future, lacking living children, women pretend that expensive baby dolls are alive. For the British edition, the centrality of the forest underscores one of the major themes that echoes throughout the novel: that without children to carry on humanity's legacy, all of the work of humans will soon return to nature.

Notably, neither cover features images of the protagonists or of the living fetus or child whose conception and birth drives the events of the narrative; this proves fitting, as the novel is primarily devoted to sketching social conditions and political maneuverings of a Britain certain of the impending death of humanity rather than the child who will "save" that humanity. The world that James imagines simply wants to die peacefully: on the orders of the ruling Council, led by Xan, the all-powerful Warden of Britain, the country has instituted policies restricting immigration, condemning criminals of all sorts to an isolated island prison, and pushing those of the elderly who cannot care for themselves out to sea to die in monthly public ceremonies. Violence has all but

disappeared in this world, replaced by what the narrator terms “universal negativism” (9)—a sort of “why bother?” attitude fueled by the awareness of living in the last generation. In this context, the first-person narrator asserts, the British populace cares only for hoarding whatever comfort they can find to ease them through the last years before the death of the human race, and even popular religion has turned to emphasizing “the pampering and gratification of this temporal body” (50).

Alternately narrated in third-person and in the diary entries of the university history professor protagonist, Theo, James’ novel takes pains to craft this dystopian future in great detail. Indeed, Theo’s discovery of a pregnant woman, the event that begins the novel’s primary plot, does not occur until over halfway through the novel, and the miraculous child’s birth occurs only in the last ten pages. James’ *The Children of Men* closes with Theo murdering his cousin, the autocratic and often unjust ruler of Britain, and, as symbolized by wearing his royal ring, taking his place. In the last pages of the novel, James lays out an image of a cyclical history that cannot escape personal ambition and the tyrannical state: “Theo thought: It begins again, with jealousy, with treachery, with violence, with murder, with this ring on my finger... Was this sudden intoxication of power what Xan had known every day of his life? The sense... that the world could be fashioned according to his will” (241). The novel closes with Theo christening the newborn boy with his bejeweled hand, wet with tears and blood (241), suggesting that the continuation of humanity promises a different kind of hopelessness, the replication of a despotic patriarchy.



Despite retaining the premise of the novel, Cuarón's film adaptation utilizes a significantly different narrative structure and imagines drastically different social and political consequences of the inability to reproduce. Here, a Britain without children descends into anarchy, extreme violence held only barely at bay by the force of an authoritarian police state. While the Oxford of the novel trudges on blithely, continuing to hold classes for adults in the absence of youth to serve as students, the film begins in a bleak and filthy London as the camera follows Theo (played by Clive Owen) out of a coffee shop past trash bags heaped unceremoniously on the sidewalk and scowling police officers in full gear.

In contrast to James' vision of a Britain that, in the face of hopelessness, makes every attempt to imagine that things are "normal," Cuarón's Britain responds to the absence of the future that children represent by deteriorating in a state of filth and violence. A newsreel flashes images of major cities across the world burning and concludes with the words "The world has collapsed. Only Britain soldiers on"—an ironic allusion, perhaps, to self-congratulatory propaganda lauding Britain's fortitude in the wake of World War II. Yet immediately after this newsreel the camera pans to show glimpses of shantytowns through barbed subway windows from which delinquent youth throw flaming projectiles at the subway on which Theo makes his daily commute. Armed policemen guard the subway platform where immigrants wait in cages to be deported and a scrolling sign on the platform reminds passengers to have their "identity cards and transit papers ready." Comfort is clearly not a priority or a possibility in this future, which seems to be just barely holding together, and unlike the novel's vision of a

corrupt Council responsible for injustices that the populace seems too apathetic to notice, in the film the population is incriminated as active perpetrators of violence.

The film also reveals the pregnancy far earlier, with Theo, in this incarnation a former political activist turned office drone rather than a university professor, discovering a half hour into the nearly two-hour film the secret of the existence of the pregnant woman. The escape that follows, as Theo, Miriam the midwife (played by Pam Ferris), and pregnant Kee (played by Clare-Hope Ashitey) flee from the “terrorist” organization that they thought would protect them, takes them across Britain and ultimately to Bex Hill, a prison island of filth and terror for deported immigrants and criminals. While an island penal colony is mentioned in the novel, the characters never visit there; in contrast, the last third of the film depicts Theo and Kee attempting to navigate the island with the girl baby, born soon after they arrive, in order to reach a promised salvation, a boat from the mysterious “Human Project.”

Unlike James’ novel, Cuarón’s *Children of Men* ends on a note of cautious hope. Having successfully stolen a rowboat, Theo, Kee, and the child wait on the ocean as bomber planes fly overhead and, through the cloud cover, in the distance, a series of explosions destroy Bex Hill, the final act of state-sponsored disregard for human life—and particularly non-British lives. Theo, shot earlier on the island, proves the consummate parent as he successfully instructs Kee as to the proper way to stop the baby from crying, and she informs him that she will name the baby after Theo’s dead son, validating him as the father of the child in spirit if not biologically. Theo then dies immediately before the boat, called “Tomorrow,” appears. Far from the despots of the

future that the novel concludes with Theo and the male child, the film allows Theo to die a martyr, sacrificed for the continuation of humanity, and, with the survival of the girl child and the arrival of the promised boat, would seem to offer some promise for a genuinely better tomorrow.

### **Representations of Gender, Race, and Reproduction: The Look of a “Better Tomorrow”**

In addition to shifts in narrative focus, plot details, and vision of a future without children, the novel and film versions of *Children of Men* differ significantly in their intersecting representations of race, gender, and reproduction. Queer theorist Lauren Berlant argues that cultural representations of reproduction hold particular significance for constructing notions of citizenship in the age of identity politics. Berlant suggests that the image of the pregnant woman serves “as a national stereotype and as a vehicle for the production of a national culture.... It condenses and camouflages many forms of utopian cultural investment and many critical relations of violence and displacement” (Berlant 1994, 148). In addition to re-inscribing the centrality of reproduction to woman’s function as productive citizen, she claims, a proliferation of reproductive imagery in the 1990s frames the unborn fetus as “personhood in its natural completeness, prior to the fractures of history and identity” (Berlant 1994, 156). Berlant understands the pregnant woman and the unborn child as increasingly central to conceptualizations of citizenship precisely because they are rhetorically and visually detached from qualities of race, gender, or sexuality; only the abstract future person of the fetus can truly represent

the ideal citizen, a rhetorical move that Berlant suggests underpins the anti-abortion rhetoric of fetal personhood.

Evelynn Hammonds's discussion of technological images of racially blended future humans similarly asks what bodies are imagined to constitute humanity's future, in this case by analyzing two 1990s news magazine articles that predicted a future in which mixed race individuals will predominate. While these articles pictured "post-racial" humans, Hammonds reveals underlying assumptions that even the racially blended future face of America must necessarily be primarily white. She states, "no woman of color has ever symbolized citizenship in United States history, only the denial of citizenship" (Hammonds 1997, 120). Yet in *Children of Men*, the singular future child is necessarily raced and gendered; furthermore, both the race of the mother and the gender of the child are shifted from novel to film, in both cases to more marginalized identities. These texts attach the continuation of the "human race" to specific bodies, making the issue of reproductive futurity necessarily entwined with the identity politics that, as Berlant claims, many Anglo-American representations of reproduction attempt to eschew.

Indeed, in light of Berlant's and Hammonds's exposure of racial politics as always already attached to the pregnant body, the choices made regarding the race of the pregnant woman in both novel and film cannot be read as innocent. While James' novel claims to envision a global return to fertility, her description of Julian, the anti-government organizer who will be revealed to be the last pregnant woman, suggests a

white, European identity;<sup>3</sup> implicitly, the face of the future that James presents is white. However, James marks Julian's otherness instead by visible disability, a severe deformation of her left hand. The text goes on to state that this was the reason that she had been exempt from mandatory yearly fertility testing. Thus, Julian's disability provides a convenient plot device, allowing her to escape the quietly pervasive government surveillance that James offers as a feature of her future Britain. Yet significantly, in marking Julian as "different," James gives her what is depicted as an only cosmetically important feature of difference.

The film divides the novel's character of Julian into two characters. Julian (played by the white actress Julianne Moore) in this incarnation becomes Theo's ex-wife and the leader of a major anti-government "terrorist" organization and the black immigrant Kee takes on the role of the pregnant woman. While racial politics do not seem to produce problems in the world of the film, the characters do explicitly address the significance of Kee's immigrant identity, as when one of the rebels states that they cannot make the pregnancy public because "The government will take the baby and parade a posh black English lady as the mother." In this way, Kee's marginalized nationality becomes central to the plot, indeed, the *reason* that the pregnancy must be hidden; she is visually and verbally marked as black, but it is her immigrant status that

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<sup>3</sup> Although Julian is never explicitly termed "white," James describes her as "light-skinned for someone so dark-haired, a honey-colored woman" with a "pre-Raphaelite face" (39). While the physical description may seem to leave some space for racial ambiguity, the association with the pre-Raphaelites, a group of English painters, poets, and critics, places Julian firmly in a European model of beauty. Furthermore, James explicitly marks those characters whom she intends to be recognized as black, as with her description of Miriam, the midwife: "She was black, probably Jamaican" (55). Julian's whiteness, then, while never explicitly stated, is strongly contextually suggested, in part due to its absence of explicit mention.

takes precedence within the diegesis. The child of an immigrant seems presumed a threat to the safety of the nation even (or especially?) when it is the only child in the world.

In both novel and film, Theo and the reader/viewer learn of the pregnancy concurrently. In James' novel, midwife and co-conspirator Miriam verbally informs Theo of Julian's pregnancy, earning his disbelieving derision. Their dialogue interweaves with historical commentary from the third-person narrator, who informs us chattily that false pregnancies "used, after all, to be a common delusion" among women (148). Interrupted by a flashback to Theo's youth, the reveal continues when he and Miriam enter the chapel where Julian waits, a building described as simple and sacred, with a stone floor and unpolished wooden pews, evoking Protestant valorizations of the unadorned place of worship. Julian allows Theo to reach under her tunic to touch her belly, in a moment of both romantic intimacy and religious fervor: it both "seem[s] to him that their flesh had become one" (152), phrasing usually used to connote sexual intercourse, and causes him to kneel because "he [knew] it was right for him to be on his knees" (153), a gesture of worshipful submission. This scene clearly evokes the Christian Gospels' depiction of the revelation of the Virgin Mary's pregnancy to Joseph. The pregnant Julian here is presented both as sexual object and as sacred mother, site of desire and of holiness. The moment serves as the turning point that begins the romance between Theo and Julian that develops throughout the rest of the novel—the miracle child brings them together, ultimately enabling the novel to close on the fully realized heterosexual family unit.

In contrast, the revelation of Kee's pregnancy occurs when Miriam leads Theo into a barn. The scene opens in a medium shot, as Miriam and Theo walk in the door; the camera tracks around Theo as he walks forward to reveal Kee in long shot, standing in a pen of cattle. At left and right edges of the frame, cows stand attached to milking machines, a visual demonstration of Kee's assertion that "they cut off their tits... to fit the machine." While the novel represents this moment as sacred, even before the reveal, the film associates the reproduction with inhumanity and degradation, a soulless production controlled by machine. A shot/reverse shot sequence captures a heated argument between Theo and Kee, which concludes when, shown in close-up, she removes her blouse, revealing her naked breasts at the bottom of the frame. A cut to a reverse shot shows her naked back to the waist, Theo's astonished expression, and between the two characters, the cows, as choral music begins on the soundtrack, offering a cue that the sacred yet exists in this space of animalization. There is a cut back to the cows, in the foreground of the frame, and the camera tilts up to show the pregnant belly and finally Kee, covering her breasts as she states, "I'm scared. Please help me." Rather than a moment of sexual and religious connection between Theo, mother, and child, as in the novel, in the film, the camera offers Kee for the viewer's voyeurism. The camera reveals her pregnant belly not through the spoken and the touched, but through the visual; the spectacle of her reproductive body, animalized in the context of the cattle and the barn, invites Theo and the film's spectator to gawk at the image that reveals meanings that do not need further explanation.

Finally, the birth of this miracle child holds almost no similarities between novel and film. In the literary text, the birth, like the revelation of Julian's pregnancy, becomes a moment of sacredness and intimacy. The child is born in a secluded woodshed in a forest, described as "a sanctuary, mysterious and beautiful" (222). Descriptions of the shed emphasize its isolation and its secrecy—although a manmade structure, it has, in a sense, gone back to nature. Indeed, the narrator suggests the superiority of this "natural" birth, supervised by Miriam the midwife, to the sterility and impersonal nature of a hospital birth. Birth here appears as a beautiful act of nature in which women are necessarily the agents, and Theo himself acknowledges his role in this "primitive act" (227) as negligible. Indeed, he thinks that "midwife and patient were one woman and that he, too, was part of the pain and the labouring, not really needed by graciously accepted, and yet excluded from the heart of the mystery" (228). Yet the scene culminates with a valorization of masculinity, as represented by the child's spectacular genitalia, when the narrator states that, "[The child's] sex, seeming so dominant, so disproportionate to the plump, small body, was like a proclamation" (228). This association of the newborn child with phallic power—the "proclamation"—foreshadows his christening as the future of patriarchal dominance.

On an uncovered mattress in a filthy tenement on Bex Hill, the anarchic prison and concentration camp for criminals and immigrants, Kee's childbirth suggests neither the beauty of nature nor the miracle of female reproduction—rather, the scene evokes terror and a sense of the abject. A small lantern illuminates the room's peeling wallpaper and broken windows as well as Kee and Theo's visible breath—by no means the idyllic



setting offered by the novel. In this version, Miriam was shot and killed upon their entrance to Bex Hill, so here Theo guides the birth, coaxing and encouraging Kee through breathing exercises as he sterilizes his hands with a bottle of bourbon. The repurposing of this liquor, which was initially seen in the film's first scene when Theo stops on the street to pour some into his coffee, nods to this moment as a crucial turning point in Theo's redemption over the course of the film.

Filmed in a single shot, the birth takes less than two minutes from when Theo washes his hands in a bucket of dirty water until the baby, a computer-generated floppy creature covered in blood and placenta, plops out into his hands and begins screaming. The child's first appearance is in close-up, shown emerging from Kee's vagina and into Theo's hands, but the camera lingers on Theo holding the child for a full thirty seconds before again showing Kee's face, thereby establishing the crucial relationship here to be between Theo and the newborn. Even after the birth, Theo retains an authoritative role, announcing the child's gender (female here) and informing a concerned Kee that the umbilical cord does not yet need to be cut. Although the dialogue pokes fun at Theo's sense of self-importance, as the scene closes with Theo telling the exhausted Kee, "See? It wasn't that bad"—to which she replies, laughing, "Not for you"—this ultimately fails to undercut the sense that the successful birth was most significantly Theo's victory.

What explanations might exist for these drastic shifts in representations of reproduction and shifts in race and gender of mother and child? How could motivations for these translations in representation be related to causes of shifts in narrative structure or drastically different images of Britain's dystopian future? The rest of this chapter

considers three possible explanations for shifts between instantiations of the story. Using various theories that frame adaptation as a function of medium specificity, I look first at the ways in which formal properties of each medium demand translations that are reflected in each of the two texts. I then turn to genre theory in order to read the changes between novel and film as embodying a shift from the literary genres of political dystopia and romance to the cinematic genre of the apocalyptic action thriller. Finally, I offer a context-activated textual analysis, reading novel and film through the political and social contexts of 1990s British immigration debates and America's global "War on Terror" of the 2000s. All three of these approaches are similar in that each turns to the textual features just described as the basis of analysis, tabling for now accounts of production and reception to be discussed in chapters two and three.

### **Medium Specificity: From "Telling" to Showing"**

Investigation of medium specificity, operating on the assumption that literature and film inherently function differently, has been central to much of foundational work on adaptation. Hutcheon argues that this project centers on the question: "What can one art form or medium do that another cannot?" (Hutcheon 2006, 23). In response, she divides all media into three foundational categories: telling (literature), showing (film, television, stage plays), and interacting (video games, amusement park rides). Although she discusses each possible transformation between these categories in detail, she states that,

The familiar move from telling to showing and, more specifically, from a long and complex novel to any form of performance, is usually seen as the most fraught transposition... the novel, in order to be dramatized, has to

be distilled, reduced in size, and thus, inevitably, complexity.... description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images. Conflicts and ideological differences between characters must be made visible. In the process of dramatization there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot. (Hutcheon 2006, 36, 40)<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, Hutcheon's model is thorough; however, the weakness of this aspect of her approach lies in its simplification of film to a "showing" medium. As Stam points out, film actually has "at least five tracks: moving photographic image, phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials" (Stam 2000a, 59), all of which must be considered in analyzing cinematic adaptations.

Given the pervasiveness of the influence of medium, this section of analysis alone could erupt into an entire thesis. Yet many of these shifts seem obvious: the film avoids the first-person sections that punctuate the novel, which could have been achieved only through voiceover, resulting in less historical information being provided; compression of time occurs, from almost a year to roughly a week; visual images replace extended descriptions of setting; character development is externalized. While all of these shifts are important, each also generally holds true for nearly every adaptation from literature to film, as evidenced by volumes worth of frequently repetitive case studies. More relevant ideologically for the unique case of *Children of Men* are the ways that medium influences depictions of reproduction, specifically in the move from a single-track to multiple-track medium.

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<sup>4</sup> Hutcheon carefully notes that none of these changes imply an inherent superiority of "telling" to "showing" and indeed explicitly states that in some cases these compressions or translations result in stronger texts.

Several literary scholars have discussed representations of pregnancy and childbirth in literature, although primarily in the American literary canon. Mary Ruth Marcotte (2008) charts images of pregnancy in American memoir and fiction from captivity narrative to contemporary memoir, arguing that depictions of pregnancy by women writers tend to describe the state in terms that evoke psychological captivity. In contrast, Michele Lise Tarter draws on French feminist theory to claim writing the pregnant body as an emancipatory act for women writers, “bring[ing] life forward from the text” (Tartar 2000, 19). Yet although James fits within this broad category of “woman writer,” her depiction of pregnancy and birth seems much more ambivalent than either of these theories. She does focus on the psychological, in keeping with the novel form, but it is Theo’s psychological state, his experience of pregnancy, with which the reader is led to identify. As even in the third-person sections, the narrator aligns with his character; the novel offers the reader a primary position of engagement with the text that parallels his perspectives of the pregnancy and of the birth, limited to what he sees, thinks, and feels.

Relatively little medium-specific work has been done on pregnancy and film, but several articles do provide useful critical frameworks for considering cinematic images of pregnancy in terms of the visual, the auditory, and editing. Offering a thorough discussion of the visual, Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler’s *Pregnant Pictures* (2000), a study of photographic images of the pregnant body, elucidates the ways in which images of the pregnant body disrupt traditional modes of looking, particularly the desire of an implicitly male spectator for a woman depicted onscreen. In regards to sound, in

“In Search of the Mother Tongue” (1992), Robin Blaetz argues that the sounds a woman makes during childbirth reveal a pre-discursive mother tongue and thus threaten the patriarchal order. She maintains that as a result of this revolutionary potential of childbirth to reveal a repressed gynocentric perspective, Hollywood films have generally approached childbirth either by the elision of pregnancy and childbirth, by the disavowal of maternal labor or by showing birth in terms of its effect upon a male listener, as in pregnancy films of the 1980s. Based on this work, attention to the presence of a spectator and the use of sound in *Children of Men* might initially suggest a reading of Cuarón’s representation of pregnancy as groundbreaking for the medium: by constructing Kee as a desirable body and actually allowing her cries during childbirth to be heard, Cuarón uses editing and sound differently from typical Hollywood films.

Yet Lori Shorr’s analysis of instructional childbirth videos offers another source of comparison for the birth scene, one that suggests that Cuarón’s techniques may not be so unique. Shorr interrogates the ways that editing in these videos constructs the pregnant body similarly to the construction of the female body in pornography. She identifies several recurring themes of these representations of birth: first, its framing as a female performance aimed at a male spectator and guided by a male expert; second, the simplification of birth from “long, messy, and confusing” to conformity to the neat and clean “expectations of a neat Aristotelian beginning (‘It’s time!’), middle (‘Push!’) and end (‘It’s a boy!’)” (Shorr 1992, 7); and third, the use of framing to cut the woman into pieces, ensuring that her face and vagina never appear in the frame at the same time. Although Shorr discusses nonfiction films in this article, all three of these features appear

in the birth scene of Cuarón's *Children of Men*. Indeed, the earlier death of Miriam in the film enables a representation of Theo as an inexplicably expert midwife; the camera takes on his point of view as he coaches Kee through a fairly quick delivery and the child first appears in close-up, emerging from Kee's vagina, rather than a long shot that could have also shown her face. As in the instructional childbirth videos that Shorr discusses, these narrative and cinematographic choices function to construct a male, rather than the pregnant woman, as the agent in childbirth. While the subsequent dialogue does nod to the inherent inadequacy of this trope (Theo: "See? It wasn't that bad"; Kee: "Not for you."), Cuarón still demonstrably draws from a long tradition in film constructing women visually and narratively as passive actors in childbirth.

### **Genre Conventions: Dystopian Romance and Thrills in Film and Literature**

In comparison to questions of medium specificity, issues of genre have merited considerably less attention in the field of adaptation studies. Hutcheon, for example, states that she intentionally deemphasizes questions of "form, genre, and mode" in favor of her distinction between telling, showing, and interacting (Hutcheon 2006, 52); however, at no point does she offer an explanation for the casual dismissal of the former. In "The Dialogics of Adaptation," Stam pays slightly more attention to this aspect of adaptation, highlighting generic conventions as one facet of the intertextual nature of adapted texts. He advocates asking the questions: "Precisely what generic intertexts are invoked by the source novel, and which by the filmic adaptation? Which generic signals in the novel are picked up, and which are ignored?" (Stam 2000a, 67). In keeping with

the essay's central argument, these questions highlight the need to look at the genre of each text independently, as well as the shifts between them.

Yet given the wealth of work on genre theory within the field of film studies, the relative de-emphasis on this aspect of adaptation proves surprising. In *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), Steve Neale argues that film genre studies met with a revival at roughly the same time as the rejuvenation of adaptation studies, the last few years of the 1990s (Neale 2000, 1). Surveying a range of definitions of "genre" as pertaining to film, Neale emphasizes the "multi-dimensional" nature of genre, suggesting that theoretical questions of genre hold significance across issues of reception and institutional production as well as the traditional definition of genre films as those linked by common characteristics (Neale 2000, 17). Indeed, Neale draws on several scholars, including literary critics E.D. Hirsch and Jacques Derrida, who suggest that a reader's or viewer's understanding of any text or utterance must be understood as fundamentally related to its identification as part of "one or many genres" (Neale 2000, 25), which construct a set of expectations for the text. In addition, he calls attention to economic motivations for genre choice, identifying mass culture in particular as relying upon "repetitive patterns, ingredients and formulae" in order to gain market share (Neale 2000, 23).

Relatively few case studies have successfully demonstrated the importance of this type of crossover. In her consideration of the British television show *The Way We Live Now* (2001), adapted from the 1875 Anthony Trollope novel of the same name, Sarah Cardwell offers a particularly convincing case as to why generic conventions hold special significance for considering adaptations. She states that genre "provides [the

adaptation's] framework, its ground rules, and a set of expectations for the audience. Most viewers will know this genre better than they will know the source book. They will have preconceptions about representations of the past, of gender and class in this genre" (Cardwell 2007, 56). Although Cardwell's construction of an imagined "typical" reader here is perhaps more than a little problematic, her suggestions that genre holds implications for issues of representation and also implies a certain set of "rules" for an adapted text point to the relevance of this mode of analysis. While Cardwell focuses solely on the genre of the adaptation, Imelda Whelehan's study of *Now, Voyager* (1942, dir. Irving Rapper) emphasizes the importance of looking at "the history of genre fiction in two media, and the place it is accorded in literary and film studies respectively" (Whelehan 2007, 138). Whelehan's dual focus comes closest to successfully approaching Stam's recommendation to consider the genre of each text, as well as the significance of the translation between them. Attempting to do precisely that, I situate James' novel within the genres of dystopian fiction and romance and Cuarón's film within the intersecting genres of the dystopian and the thriller. After discussing the ways in which the genre of the dystopian maps neatly onto the novel, I address the addition of a thriller element to the film as a possible explanation for the translations in narrative structure and characterizations.

Several literary scholars have attempted to schematize dystopian fiction. M. Keith Booker, in *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* (1994), identifies defamiliarization as the primary trope of dystopia; he defines this quality as "the use of a spatially or temporally distant setting [to] provide fresh perspectives on problematic



social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (Booker 1994, 19). Expanding upon this definition, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003), Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan suggest that literary dystopia, like literary utopia, engages in “social dreaming,” or the process of imagining the ways in which groups of people organize their lives in a radically different society. However, they identify four generic conventions unique to dystopia: (1) the text opens *in media res* in the alternate nightmarish society, confronting the reader with the “immediacy and normalcy of the location.” (2) The narrative consists of a conflict between the hegemonic order, powered by economic forces and the state apparatus, and a counter-narrative of resistance. (3) The counter-narrative centers upon a dystopian citizen who moves from apparent contentment to alienation and resistance. And (4) this narrative structure ultimately serves to produce social critique and the possibility of an alternate utopia (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 5-7). Baccolini and Moylan identify this literary genre as being at its height in the mid-1980s and 1990s, with the cyberpunk movement in science fiction and a rash of feminist dystopias by such authors as Octavia Butler and Suzy McKee Charnas. Peter Fitting makes a further distinction between dystopia and critical dystopia, maintaining that only the latter category offers an explanation of how the dystopian situation came to be (Fitting 2003, 156).

Thus defined, James’ *The Children of Men* seems to fit firmly within the dystopian genre—although, as James studiously avoids offering an explanation for the infertility, the novel could not be termed a critical dystopia. Instead, the inability to

procreate serves as a plot device to activate the possibility of a “different” Britain; because the story takes place only twenty-seven years after the publication of the novel, this setting functions as the familiar made unfamiliar. Narrated in first-person and limited third-person perspectives, the novel establishes Theo as the reader’s access point, a guide through the bleak world of a future with no children. An introspective character trained as a historian, Theo’s “diary entries” prove the perfect space for James to describe in detail the nuances of this dystopian future. Following Baccolini and Moylan’s generic outline, Theo’s political apathy at the beginning of the novel develops into a resistance to the hegemony of the unjust totalitarian government through his association with Julian and her rebel group, the Fishes. Theo’s involvement with the Fishes also provides a platform for very specific social and political critique, given that the organization explicitly advocates for immigrant rights, prison reform, democratic elections, and the abolishment of reproductive control by the government (James 111). In addition, Theo has unique access to this government as a result of familial kinship, allowing James plausibly to show the reader the minds behind this nightmare Britain. The conformity of James’ novel to generic conventions may be unsurprising, given her status as an author of genre fiction—the detective novel. Although a departure from her best-selling mystery novels, *The Children of Men* still fairly closely follows a recognizable schema and one that was gaining popular traction at the time of its publication.

In addition to the functioning of the novel as a dystopia, however, James includes a romantic subplot between Theo and Julian. As discussed by Jackie Stacey and Lynn Pierce, the continued success of the romance genre hinges upon, in part, the repetition of

predictable narratives, in which “a ‘first sighting’ ignites the necessary ‘chemistry’ between two protagonists [and a] series of obstacles usually function as a barrier to their union... Whatever the barrier to the romantic union, the narrative question is ‘will they or won’t they,’ or rather *how* will they?” (Stacey and Pierce 1995, 16). In other words, the ideal romance here implies a predictable narrative trajectory in which the primary concern focuses upon two main characters moving toward a climactic declaration of love. Although the mass-market romances that Stacey and Pierce discuss typically centralize a female character as the heroine, Theo is distinctly the protagonist of *The Children of Men*; however, like the male love interest in more typical examples of the genre, his character must undergo a redemptive change before the romantic pairing can be realized. Viewing the novel as a romance, both the reveal of the pregnancy and the birth scene serves as the climactic redemptive moment toward which the love story has been building; these scenes hold significance for the bond they establish and cement between the heterosexual couple.

Generically, then, James’ novel functions in the service of two main goals. First, as a dystopia, the novel aims to describe another world, recognizable as being “like” our own, that functions as a social critique. Theo’s diary entries, as well as several scenes in which description supplants narrative action, work in service of this function.

Narratively, the novel has two interlinked driving storylines: first, Theo’s awakening to the problems with this world, and his development of a consciousness of resistance, and secondly, the coming together of Theo and Julian as a romantic couple, and ultimately their formation of a family with Julian’s child. Internal changes in Theo as a character

primarily drive the plot, seen in his movement from failed masculinity to rebellion against the autocratic government and reincorporation into a family unit, which, in an embodiment of traditional masculinity, he successfully protects at the end of the novel.

The film version of *Children of Men* also displays many qualities of dystopia as the Baccolini and Moylan describe the genre. Indeed, attempts to classify *Children of Men* within contemporary generic trends compose some of the only scholarly work on the film. Joshua Clover (2008) associates *Children of Men* with *The Host* (2006, dir. Nick Tomnay), *28 Weeks Later* (2007, dir. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo), and *The Kingdom* (2007, dir. Peter Berg), arguing that all four films can be described as allegorical crisis films, employing a science fiction or horror premise to critique contemporary geopolitics. Kiel Moe similarly compares the film to *28 Days Later* (2002, dir. Danny Boyle), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004, dir. Roland Emmerich), and *I Am Legend* (2007, dir. Francis Lawrence), labeling these “post-Risk films”—in other words, films that depict a deteriorated future world. For Moe, this genre includes films in which “individuals attempt to survive barely habitable, eschatological ecologies where all systems of life have either radically mutated or disappeared altogether. Familiar systems and infrastructures are chronically ruptured.... Characters are transformed from survivors of cataclysmic events to mere survivors of place” (Moe 2008, 18). While I agree with both Clover and Moe’s readings of the film as crisis driven and post-Risk, respectively, I believe that generically, these elements can be classified as facets of the dystopian nature of the film carried over from the novel.

On the contrary, the classification of the film as a thriller proves more illuminating in terms of shifts occurring in the adaptation. Jyotsna Kapur (2009) links *Children of Men* to *Syriana* (2005, dir. Stephen Gaghan), *Babel* (2006, dir. Alejandro González Inárritu), *Crash* (2004, dir. Paul Haggis), and *Flightplan* (2005, dir. Robert Schwentke) in order to argue that recent American conspiracy thrillers have tended to centralize risks to children's lives. Although Kapur uses this generic classification to offer a "structures of feeling" argument, I am more interested in what the addition of a thriller element means for translations in narrative between novel and film. Charles Derry defines the suspense thriller as "a crime work which presents a generally murderous antagonism in which the protagonist becomes either an innocent victim or a nonprofessional criminal within a structure that is significantly unmediated by a traditional figure of detection" (qtd. in Neale 2000, 82). Of the six sub-types into which Derry further subdivides the genre, *Children of Men* falls within the category of the "innocent-on-the-run" thriller... organized around an innocent victim's coincidental entry into the midst of global intrigue and in which the victim often finds himself running from both the villains [and] the police" (Neale 2000, 83). In this case, of course, the innocents are both Theo and Kee, forced to run from both the extra-governmental "terrorist" organization, the Fishes and, eventually, on Bex Hill, from government agents as well. In making and marketing *Children of Men* as a thriller, the film significantly expands the chase plotline of the novel. Indeed, while Theo, Miriam, and Julian are only "on the run" for the last thirty-five pages of the novel, attempts by the characters to both

escape multiple pursuers and reach the rendezvous point with the Human Project drive the film.

According to Neale, the thriller enthralls the reader through two techniques: thrills and suspense. Thrills arise when protagonist becomes faced with deadly, unfamiliar, and threatening situations, while suspense in this genre emerges from the basic question, “What is going to happen?” (Neale 2000, 83-4). In adapting the relatively slow-moving novel into a thriller, then, Cuarón first adds spectacular “thrills”—an explosion in the initial scene, a kidnapping of Theo by the Fishes, the inclusion of the scenes in Bex Hill, including an elaborate single-shot chase scene, and the onscreen murder of characters including Julian and Theo’s mentor Jasper (played by Michael Caine). Suspense arises from the centralization of the question “Will Theo and Kee escape their pursuers and meet the Human Project ship?” and the inclusion of numerous obstacles that threaten their chances of achieving this goal.

Elements of the novel that do not contribute to this driving question have largely been minimized or jettisoned entirely; scenes depicting the mass suicide of the elderly and the inner workings of the ruling council have been omitted as dystopian social critique becomes primarily visual, with thrills and suspense taking the narrative foreground. The romance between Theo and the pregnant mother has also been omitted. Within this generic context, the reveal of the pregnancy here functions as a moment of suspense—in allowing Theo to see Kee’s pregnant belly before the camera reveals her pregnancy to the audience, Cuarón makes the revelation suspenseful. Moving the

childbirth to earlier in the film serves as an additional obstacle and goal for the characters, who then must try to escape while hiding and protecting a newborn.

There are clear advantages to this genre shift in terms of marketing the film. While a P.D. James novel brings a built-in fan base accustomed to the more meditative detective drama, the film must attract a wider audience in order to be financially lucrative. Popularity of the action thriller genre with the young male demographic makes a story fundamentally about pregnancy marketable as a film centering around the recognizable trope of the flawed but ultimately triumphant male action hero, a blending of male melodrama with action thriller that Clive Owen has in years since all but trademarked. In this context, the omission of the romance plot between the two protagonists, displaced onto allusions to a failed past marriage between Theo and the martyred Julian, serves to make the pregnant woman little more than a prop to be moved from one physical location to another by this brave hero.

### **Political and Social Contexts: Dystopia as Social Critique**

While both novel and film function fit comfortably within the genre of dystopia, significant differences exist between the social and political critiques enabled by this defamiliarization. If an analysis of medium specificity offers unique insights regarding differences in representation of pregnancy and the lens of genre theory particularly lends itself to discussing shifts in narrative structure, a turn to context of novel and film enables a reading of variations in images of future Britain as reflections of differing social commentaries. Hutcheon identifies both time and place/nation as necessary considerations in adaptation and acknowledges that “transcultural adaptations often mean

changes in racial and gender politics. Sometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular time and place might find difficult or controversial; at other times, the adaptation ‘de-represses’ an earlier adapted text’s politics” (Hutcheon 2006, 147).

Context plays in central role in each chapter of this project. In this first chapter, I read the novel and film through the political contexts of 1990s Britain and the global American “War on Terror” of the 2000s, respectively. Much work on dystopia has been devoted to the attempt to identify specific social critique in individual dystopian texts (most notably Booker 1994). Of course, it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw definite conclusions about real life referents from a text alone, but at this point I am less interested in making claims about authorial intent than about simply proposing some textual features that suggest that the texts might lend themselves to this type of reading. I will return to the stated intentions of the authors in the second chapter as I discuss interviews with Cuarón.

Remaining with the texts for the moment, however, the first question must be whether the stated political concerns of James’ dystopia—state tyranny, immigration, treatment of the elderly, prison reform, and reproductive control (James 111)—can be seen reflected in British politics of the early 1990s. The novel saw publication in the wake of the Thatcher era (1979-1990), characterized by privatization efforts, limitations on the welfare state, union crackdowns, and tax cuts similar to the American policies of Ronald Reagan (Rubinstein 2003, 332). Thatcher’s policies met with heavy critique from the Church of England as well as from the “academic, educational, and welfare public



sectors” (Rubinstein 2003, 325) although in 1992 when *The Children of Men* was released, the Tory party remained in power.

In particular, immigration policies under the Tory government of the 1980s and 1990s severely restricted who could enter Britain and who counted as British citizens. The 1988 Immigration Act revoked the right of people to “appeal against deportation on compassionate grounds” and severely limited the rights of members Parliament to intervene on immigration decisions (Skellington 1996, 72). Sociologist Richard Skellington argues that British immigration policy has historically been characterized by “first, the need to meet the demands of Britain’s labor market by providing cheap, unskilled labor and, second, the need to control the entry of dependants, particularly from New Commonwealth countries, [fostering] a climate of opinion where people of Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin are seen as unwelcome ‘outsiders’” (Skellington 1996, 79). Skellington goes on to associate these immigration policies with often-unacknowledged systematic racial discrimination in Britain, a problem that British cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy earlier discussed in his book *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987). Gilroy asserts 1980s Britain was plagued by a “new racism” that linked “discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism and gender difference” (Gilroy 1987, 43) even as it disavowed the existence of racial discrimination.

These issues lurk at the edges of James’ *The Children of Men*. Most obviously, the inclusion of immigration in the agenda of the Fishes would seem to nod to contemporary political debate on the topic. Furthermore, the novel seems implicitly to address racial injustice—the most detailed account of injustice on the prison colony

comes from Miriam, the only character in the novel explicitly identified as black, whose brother was sentenced to the island for robbery with assault. Miriam explicitly attributes this, at least in part, to his race, stating about the judge, “We could see that he agreed with the prosecution that Henry ought to be sent to the island... And, then, he’s black.”

Another rebel, Rolf, quickly interrupts her, however, stating “impatiently”: “Don’t start all that crap about racial discrimination. It was [his act of violence] that did it to him, not his color” (James 61). Yet notably Theo identifies Rolf as the least bright of the characters from his first appearance, and by the end of the novel he has become a villain; it is significant, then, that James places the disavowal of racial discrimination in the mouth of one of the novel’s least sympathetic characters.

On the whole, though, issues of race and nationality remain in the margins of the text, alluded to but never fully developed. James seems aware of and interested in issues of difference in Britain, but her critique largely remains partial or veiled. The novel’s cursory and marginal treatment of Julian’s disability suggests that this may serve as a stand in for more contentious issues of difference that James must avoid as a mainstream British novelist. In light of this reading, Cuarón can be read as enacting what Hutcheon would call a “de-repression” of race and nation, teasing out undertones of the novel by casting a black actress as Kee and audibly (through accent) and narratively foregrounding her immigrant status, making visible issues that lurk largely submerged in the source text.

However, Cuarón’s film also originates in a different time and place: thirteen years later, produced by Hollywood. Particularly visually, certain elements of the film seem clearly intended to allude to and function as critiques of the global consequences of

the American “War on Terror,” so named by George W. Bush after terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Legal scholar Peter Jan Honigsberg identifies the detention of enemy combatants in Guantánamo Bay and CIA Black Sites as human rights violations on the part of the United States government (Honigsberg 2009, 8); his description of treatment of in these camps closely mirror the abuses of prisoners by guards as Theo and Kee enter Bex Hill. The interior of Bex Hill echoes the dangerous environment of many refugee camps, and the climactic bombing that destroys the prison island and its inhabitants nods to American bombings of Iraq. Related, the depiction of Britain as a nationalistic police state seems to draw upon heightened nationalism, security, and police power in the years after 9/11.

As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, these allusions are so blatant as to be read by nearly all reviewers as intentional, and indeed, Cuarón himself deliberately draws attention to these elements of critique in interviews. Notably, however, the setting of the film remains Britain; no geographic shift occurs. Given that Hutcheon notes that Hollywood films in general tend to either Americanize foreign source texts or “actually deemphasizing any national, regional, or historical specificities” (Hutcheon 2006, 147), the retention of the non-American setting suggests that those involved in the production of the film, while using the genre of dystopia to foreground controversial political critique, perhaps did not want the film to read too transparently as a critique of American governmental policies.

In the next chapter, I attempt to unravel further some of these contextual questions by moving away from textual analysis of the novel and film in order to analyze the

production of the film through discourse analysis of Cuarón's publicity interviews.

While I have here offered readings of the adaptation through analysis of medium specificity, application of genre theory, and consideration of political context, these are necessarily and unavoidably my personal interpretations, shaped by my own political positioning, theoretical interests, and academically-trained interpretive lens. While I do believe that unraveling texts through close reading in this way can be useful, subsequent chapters turn to the equally viable readings of the novel and film produced by the film's producers and audiences.

## **Chapter Two: Production Contexts and the Discursive Construction of Authorship**

Released as a joint production of Universal Pictures, Strike Entertainment, and Hit and Run Productions, *Children of Men* did not have an untroubled journey to the screen. In fact, over ten years passed between the beginning of negotiations for the rights and the film's theatrical release, during which time numerous producers and screenwriters played a part in shaping the adaptation. Allen J. Scott describes contemporary Hollywood production as characterized by an increasing tendency for major film studios to pair with smaller production companies that assume various levels of responsibility for production tasks. This system benefits both smaller production companies, who lack the financial capabilities to produce big-budget films, and major studios, who increasingly use affiliations with subsidiaries and independent production companies "to spread their risks, to diversify their market offerings, and to sound out emerging market opportunities" (Scott 2005, 45). In its decade of affiliation with various production companies, *Children of Men* proves a characteristic example of this trend.

The adaptation process began when talent agent Hilary Shor of Hit and Run Productions, a small United Kingdom based production company that at the time had produced nothing except a straight-to-video release of a Genesis concert, read the novel soon after its British release and approached producer Mark Abraham, then of Los Angeles-based Beacon Pictures, to partner in securing the film rights to the novel. Although at the time many of James' detective novels had already been adapted for television, she had yet to have one of her novels made into a feature film, and she proved quite demanding in negotiating the conditions of the film rights with Beacon, a process

which took almost a year (Cox 1997). At the time of the rights acquisition in June 1997, London newspaper *The Independent* reported that the film would “begin shooting next year, although there’s no word yet on either the writers or the stars” (Literator 1997, 11).

In actuality, attaching screenwriters, director, and stars to the film took far longer than the anticipated year. After an initial attempt at adapting the script by Paul Chart, who did not receive writing credit on the final screenplay, Shor approached Hollywood newcomer writing team Marc Fergus and Hawk Otsby. At the time, the two had only written one script for Hollywood—an eventually rejected first stab at adapting science fiction writer Phillip K. Dick’s 1977 novel *A Scanner Darkly* (2006, dir. Richard Linklater). According to Fergus, they were tapped to craft a script that would attract a strong director to the project primarily because of a lack of interest in *The Children of Men* on the part of other screenwriters—he describes the project as an “ugly duckling” and “the one that [wasn’t] going anywhere” (Tribeca Film Festival 2007, n.p.). Fergus and Otsby’s script, which retained the love story between Theo and Julian, remained quite close to the novel; Shor shopped this adapted screenplay to directors.

Alfonso Cuarón signed on to the project in October 2001, expressing his intention from the beginning to rewrite the existing script with writing partner Timothy J. Sexton (Fleming 2001). At the time, Cuarón’s career had yet to take off, with adaptations of the novels *The Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998) as his biggest films, although the US release of the critically acclaimed *Y Tú Mamá También* that same month would greatly raise his profile as a talented young director to watch. According to the *Daily Variety*, at this point Beacon intended to put the film into production in early 2002

(Fleming 2001). The project was delayed again, however, when Mark Abraham left Beacon Pictures in May 2002 to found his own production company, Strike Entertainment, taking with him thirteen in-development projects including *Children of Men*. Strike, financed in part by Universal, signed a four-year first-look deal with the major studio; Abraham professed a desire to bring Universal “big tent-pole movies... that are also intelligent and finely crafted” (Bing 2002, n.p.). But when Warner Bros. tapped Cuarón to direct *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) in late 2002, production on *Children of Men* was pushed back yet again (Brodesser and Bing 2002).

While the project waited for Cuarón to become available, Universal gave David Arata, who had recently co-written the action film *Spy Game* (2001, dir. Tony Scott) for the studio, a stab at rewriting the script. Although Arata was awarded screenwriting credit on the final film, information about this script seems practically non-existent, aside from a disparaging remark from Cuarón that Arata “was trying to turn [the film] into a generic action movie” (Voynar 2006, n.p.). Cuarón and Sexton both allege that upon actively returning to the project they rewrote the screenplay almost entirely from scratch (Voynar 2006, Hyogutchi 2007). Production began in 2005, with Clive Owen cast first in April 2005, followed by Julianne Moore and Michael Caine; Cuarón claims that once cast, Owen also collaborated heavily on the script (Voynar 2006). Ultimately, Cuarón was credited not only as director, but as first screenwriter and co-editor; four other screenwriters and nine producers were also credited for their involvement with the film’s development.

*Children of Men* premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September 2006 and continued to tour the festival circuit, although several sources suggest that despite positive critical reviews, Universal executives were nervous about the film's potential for box office success. While at the time of the premiere the studio seemed to have high hopes for the film, pushing its release date from September to December in hopes of forwarding it as an awards contender (Munoz 2006), by November sources were claiming that the studio had lost faith in the film. *The Hollywood Reporter* alleged that "Universal executives had already written off the movie... as a failure... the industry types were seeing a downer film that was going to lose money," failing to recoup its \$76 million budget (Risky Biz 2006, n.p.); accordingly, the studio invested relatively little in publicizing *Children of Men*, with *The Village Voice*'s J. Hoberman going so far to state that the film was being treated as a "communicable disease" by Universal (Hoberman 2006, n.p.).

Regardless, *Children of Men*, which opened in limited release on Christmas Day 2006 and wide release on January 5, 2007, met with moderate success on the awards circuit. The film was nominated for three Academy Awards, as well as numerous film critics awards, and won the National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Cinematography and BAFTA Awards for cinematography and production design. Despite studio concerns, it did recoup most of its budget in theatres, earning \$35.5 million domestically and \$34 million overseas. The DVD of *Children of Men*, released in March 2007, contained fairly extensive bonus materials. In addition to deleted scenes, these materials included several featurettes in which academics, activists, and cultural



critics, most prominently Slavoj Žižek, discussed the film in relation to contemporary global politics. Cuarón, along with actors, producers, and crewmen, also narrated several short featurettes illuminating specific elements of the film's production: the technical mastery demanded by the long takes, the production design, the visual effects, and the casting of Owen and Moore. Taken together, these features attempt to construct a mythology of the film as a technical masterwork of great cultural significance.

### **Perspectives on Production: Industrial Factors and the Question of Authorship**

Media scholars have applied several different types of critical analysis to excavations of production details, perhaps most prominently tackling questions of political economy and authorship. What can be learned from such a chronology of production and distribution, as with any scholarship, depends on what questions one wants to ask. Importantly, constructing a history of *Children of Men*'s troubled journey to the screen brings into focus one element of cinema that tends to fall out of focus in a strictly textual analysis approach: the role of the film industry in shaping cultural texts. Any study of production demands recognition of cultural texts as products of institutions with economic concerns, acknowledging that the meanings of a text, especially a film text produced by a multi-million dollar industry such as Hollywood, cannot be divorced from their function within "production networks organized by the logic of capitalist enterprise" (Power and Scott 2004, 13). One might, then, consider the adaptation "through frameworks of industrial control, cultural imperialism, or media flows" (Caldwell 2008, 235), employing a political economy approach. While extant adaptation studies often largely avoid analysis of industrial and economic factors, perhaps because

many of these essays originate with scholars based in the literary field, such attention to industry and capital certainly holds particular relevance for the study of adaptations. As Jack Boozer asserts, any adaptation project meets with particular financial constraints from the beginning, given the significant expense of securing film rights before the process of adapting novel to screenplay can proceed. Adapting demands “the kind of track record and financial risk that most individuals outside the Hollywood money loop cannot afford” (Boozer 2008, 19), and the ability to adapt a bestselling novel must be understood as implying economic as well as artistic capital in addition to some level of insider status.

While I choose not to undertake a full production analysis here, a nod to these sorts of concerns raises important issues about film as an industrial product, driven largely by economic factors which inevitably impinge upon film as creative endeavor. Thus, Hit and Run Productions needed to attach to Beacon, which needed to shop the film to Universal in order to acquire the budget necessary to make *Children of Men* as a big-budget action thriller. A film adaptation of the novel not funded by a major studio would necessarily have produced a vastly different result, in part because of inevitable budget constraints, but also because the attempt to produce the adaptation as a “tent-pole” film for Universal demanded that well-known industry names be attached to the project in order to draw audiences. Indeed, this intention was voiced from the beginning as those involved in the adaptation actively attempted to secure a well-known director (Tribeca Film Festival 2007) and expressed intentions for the film to serve as “a vehicle for a big male star” (Fleming 2001, n.p.). Importantly, this means that Cuarón as director cannot

be considered the sole force in shaping the direction of the film, and indeed, even his attachment to the project depended at least in part on assumptions of his ability to produce a box-office draw.

Consideration of production in adaptation studies, however, has largely followed a different critical vein: that of authorship studies and auteur theory, which attributes creative control of a film to its director. The notion of the cinematic auteur originated in the 1940s and 1950s with attempts by leftist intellectuals in French cinema to distinguish the cinematic from the literary by privileging the visual aspect of film (Gerstner 2003, 4). Following François Truffaut's highly influential piece, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (1953), which elevated the filmmaker as author of and creative force behind cinematic masterworks, auteur theory gained increasing traction in film criticism. American film critic Andrew Sarris first applied this approach to Hollywood cinema in 1968, using the method to evaluate American directors as auteurs based on evaluative criteria including "technical competence, presence of a distinct visual style, and the emergence of 'interior meaning' that... arose from the tension between the director (auteur) and the conditions of production with which he or she worked (i.e., Hollywood studio system)," a model of auteurship that was rapidly "marketed both within the academy and Hollywood" (Gerstner 2003, 8-9). As Janet Staiger outlines, various conceptualizations of authorship pervade film studies, from the notion of author as singular origin of a film text (Staiger 2003, 30) or as a worker within a system of production (Staiger 2003, 41) to "post-author" theories of authorship as a reading/reception strategy (Staiger 2003, 45) or, drawing on Michel Foucault and Roland

Barthes, as a “site of discourses” (Staiger 2003, 46). Ultimately, Staiger advocates considering authorship as a technique of the self, mobilized by individuals who believe in the author-function and “conceive a self as able to act” (Staiger 2003, 50), a conceptualization that aims to avoid reifying the author as creator while still leaving space for the agency of the subject. More broadly, Robert Stam summarizes the current thrust of auteur studies as expanding to “see a director’s work not as the expression of individual genius but rather as the site of encounter of a biography, an intertext, an institutional context, and a historical moment” (Stam 2000b, 6). In other words, while investigations of authorship have turned away from valorizing the author as the only figure shaping a film text, many contemporary scholars retain an investment in attributing some agency to the filmmakers.

Yet significantly, several scholars have argued that the more traditional auteurist view of director as singular genius continues to hold some influence for those involved in film production and even for the industry in general. Looking specifically at the ways that screenwriters and directors discuss their own roles in filmmaking, John Thornton Caldwell argues that contemporary creative film personnel conceptualize themselves through notions of individual vision in the face of a systematic struggle for control that very much mirror the premises of auteurist theory in the studio era (Caldwell 2008, 199). Michael Allen suggests a periodized timeline of the rise and fall of auteur theory within Hollywood, claiming that in the late 1960s and the early 1970s financial crisis in the industry resulted in small “idealistically radical” films in which directors were allowed to function as the central governing force in film production. By contrast, “blockbusters

with personal vision,” or auteurist blockbusters, dominated in the late 1970s, before the rise in the 1980s of the studio-driven “blockbuster without personal vision.” While Allen claims that this last category continues to prevail, he notes a trend in the early 2000s of audiences and studios again beginning to express interest in “personal,” director-driven films (Allen 2003, 93-6)—or, as I will argue, at least the *mythology* of the auteurist film. Caldwell and Allen both speak to the fact that theory does not necessarily remain in the academy—indeed, a version of auteur theory seems to have disseminated through Hollywood producers and audiences, becoming not only an artistic strategy, but also an interpretive strategy and a marketing strategy.

### **The Search for an Authorship in Adaptation Studies**

Recently, several scholars have argued for considering authorship as a driving force of adaptation, and even as the single most important approach to an adapted film, in part because locating an author proves especially difficult when dealing with adaptations. After all, in these texts narrative, characterization, and even tone result from layered visions of at least the literary author, the screenwriter, and the director, in addition to cast members and other crew who may have played a constitutive role in shaping the film.

Scholars offer differing solutions to this critical dilemma although most concentrate on some combination of directorial and screenwriter authorship. Linda Hutcheon points to the director as primary adapter, claiming that he or she is “ultimately held responsible for the overall vision and therefore for the adaptation *as adaptation*” (Hutcheon 2006, 85). While Hutcheon concedes that the screenwriter also holds some claim over the title of “adapter,” she dismisses the possibility of collaborative adaptation

beyond this pairing, concluding that other participants in the making of an adapted film “may be inspired by the adapted text, but their responsibility is more to the screenplay and thus to the film as an autonomous work of art” (Hutcheon 2006, 85). Colin MacCabe similarly identifies adaptation as collaboratively authored by director and screenwriter, making the claim that this collaboration makes adaptations uniquely able to reveal shared “structures of feeling” among those involved in their production (MacCabe, forthcoming). In contrast, Boozer points out that the Academy Award for an adaptation goes to a screenplay and not a film in order to argue that the screenwriter, rather than the director, is primarily responsible for the adaptation as an interpretation of a literary source text (Boozer 2008, 13) and thus deems a screenplay “the most direct foundation and fulcrum of any adapted film” (Boozer 2008, 4).

But regardless of whom these scholars ultimately credit with responsibility for the adaptation, these approaches to authorship and adaptation share an assumption that finding traces of the authorial on film allows some level of access to the motivation behind the specific choices made within an adaptation and thus offer a way to make sense of the text. Ultimately, Hutcheon, MacCabe, and Boozer suggest fairly similar methods, turning to textual analysis of the novel, film, and/or screenplay, perhaps paired with production accounts, in order to search for evidence of motivations for characteristics of the final film; case studies interested in authorship tend to follow this trajectory as well. There are certainly advantages to considering to one or more adapters as authors. As Hutcheon points out, it acknowledges that the myriad reasons that one might become an adapter—she cites economic motivations, legal considerations, cultural capital, and

personal and political motives—have demonstrable effects on the final adaptation (Hutcheon 2006, 96). In addition, it acknowledges the agency of producers as self-aware subjects acting with intentionality. As Staiger notes in considering the “articulated reception” of the director and screenwriter of the Mickey Spillane adaptation *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955, dir. Robert Aldrich) as expressed in interviews, the taboo status of authorial intentionality in media studies emerges as particularly problematic in light of discussions of agency raised by reception studies (Staiger 2008, 285-6).

I want to be clear, then, in expressing my acknowledgment of the value of the questions that authorship studies bring to adaptation. Indeed, as a middle-aged man of Mexican nationality working within Hollywood, Cuarón indisputably brings a particular personal voice and vision as both screenwriter and director to the adaptation of a work by James, a British baroness and former civil servant who was in her early seventies when she wrote the novel. Cuarón has publicly stated, for example, that in designing the look of the film, he used Mexico as his visual reference: “All the time we were shooting, we kept saying, 'Let's make it more Mexican'. In other words, we'd look at a location and then say: yes, but in Mexico there would be this and this. It was about making the place look rundown. It was about poverty” (Time Out 2007, n.p.). A director with a different personal background may not have had the same reference points. In other words, authorship matters because identity matters, and because recognition of personal agency matters: on this point I want to be clear. Just as an in-depth industrial analysis offers unique insights into film-making and adaptation as a product of capitalist industry,

authorship studies brings to adaptation studies important questions of why a film is adapted, and what might be driving these choices.

However, for the rest of this chapter I would like to turn away from the film itself and to the discourse constructed around the film in order to ask a different set of questions. Some recent scholarship, most notably Caldwell's *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008), has begun to interrogate the reflexivity of those involved in film production, an approach that offers yet untapped possibilities for considering adaptation from a producer-focused perspective. Caldwell uses as his material for analysis in large part interviews with industry workers, arguing that those involved in film production are in fact constantly engaging in "critical analysis and theoretical elaboration" of their own roles in the production process and self-representation (Caldwell 2008, 7). Informed by Caldwell's approach, this chapter will read a sample of eight interviews by Cuarón as self-conscious public performances of authorship and auteurship, offering an interpretation of the interviews themselves rather than using them to access a "truth" of film production. In order to maintain some uniformity of sources, all eight selected interviews are taken from publications aimed at a self-selected audience of cinephiles, either online or in print.

With five screenwriters credited, including Cuarón, even ascertaining primary authorship of the screenplay proves murky, especially given that copies of Fergus and Otsby's and Arata's screenplay drafts are not widely available. Yet Cuarón himself denies that these earlier drafts contributed at all to the final screenplay (Voynar 2006). Furthermore, although Cuarón received first screenwriter credit, he has claimed in



interviews either that he never read the novel (Voynar 2006) or that he read only an abridged version (Guerrasio 2007). What do we make of an adapter who disavows classification of his film as an adaptation? What is at stake in this discourse? Discussing Hitchcock and Kubrick as adapter-auteurs, Thomas Leitch argues that adapters become established as auteurs outside the film industry and the academy through circulated accounts of their on-set authority and successful efforts to wrest authorship away from authors of literary source texts (Leitch 2007, 237); clearly, these strategies depend on a popularization of the assumptions of auteur theory. However, Leitch offers no evidence as to how these impressions of Hitchcock and Kubrick were circulated, aside from based on the films themselves. Using Cuarón's interviews, I argue that he himself attempts to evoke popular conceptualizations of auteurism, taking control of his own mythology by explicitly casting himself in the role of auteur/author through three strategies: distancing the film from its literary source text and from earlier screenplay drafts, claiming personal responsibility for the "look" of the film against the demands of the Hollywood system, and explicitly positioning himself as a distinctly cinematic film-maker, emphasizing his responsibility for the visual and the technical artistry of the film.

### **Director/Screenwriter/Author/Auteur: Alfonso Cuarón on *Children of Men***

Across the interviews, certain patterns emerge: Cuarón clearly began publicizing the film with a set story. Reliably, Cuarón maintains a dismissive or disparaging stance towards James' novel as a source text for the film. When not confronted directly with questions about the novel as source, Cuarón conducted interviews without mention of the film as adaptation (O'Connell 2006, Pride 2006); however, six of the eight interviewers

explicitly asked about the novel as inspiration or about changes made between novel and film (Voynar 2006, Brevet 2006, Fetters 2006, Vespe 2007, Guerrasio 2007, Roberts 2007). In each of these instances, Cuarón immediately deflects attention from James' novel as a source in order to position himself as primary author of *Children of Men*. He emphasizes that he retained only the premise from the novel and supports this assertion with the claim that he did not even read James' book before writing the screenplay with Sexton.

Even his relationship to the novel's premise is continually framed as an act of total refashioning, as he repeatedly describes the moment when he realized the premise could serve as a "point of departure" (Roberts 2007, Fetters 2006, Vespe 2007). Labeling the book as "science fiction," "upper-class drama," and "a look at Christianity"—three genres for which he explicitly expresses disinterest (Voynar 2006, Guerrasio 2007, Roberts 2007)—Cuarón states clearly that he felt no obligations to the source text, telling *Filmmaker* magazine that "our whole idea was let's find out what elements are relevant to what we're doing and let's disregard what we think is irrelevant" (Guerrasio 2007, n.p.). In fact, he gives the impression that the book on the whole was mostly irrelevant, stating in various interviews that he either did not read the novel (Voynar 2006, n.p.) or that he read only an abridged version (Guerrasio 2007, n.p.) and describing the film as presenting a "parallel story" rather than an adaptation (Roberts 2007, n.p.).

Cuarón performs even more vehement disavowals of earlier screenplays for the film, variably claiming that he read "only the beginning of one and didn't like it" (Guerrasio 2007, n.p.) or that he did not actually see any other drafts at all (Voynar 2006,

n.p.). If he hedges a bit in discussing James (“I respect, I love P.D. James. I enjoy the book but I couldn’t see myself making that movie” [Roberts 2007, n.p.]), likely in order to avoid alienating this relatively prominent figure, Cuarón expresses no qualms in vitriolically dismissing the other credited screenwriters, even going so far as to state “they did not exist in this movie... it’s just studio development work that I’m not even interested in discussing, because I don’t know what they did and I couldn’t care less” (Voynar 2006, n.p.). While there may be truth in this claim, one must ask what is at stake in Cuarón’s insistent distancing of the film from other possible authors.

At the time of the release of *Children of Men*, Cuarón’s identity as a director seemed to be at a crossroads. On one hand, his work as a Hollywood director consisted entirely of adaptations of beloved classic British literary texts: *A Little Princess* (1995), adapted from the 1904 children’s novel by Frances Hodgson Burgess; *Great Expectations* (1998), adapted from the 1861 canonical tome by Charles Dickens; and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), the third film in J.K. Rowling’s best-selling children’s series. On the other hand, *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), a small Spanish-language coming-of-age road movie co-written by Cuarón and his brother Carlos and produced by Mexico-based production company Anheo Producciones, gained Cuarón critical acclaim as an edgy writer-director of cutting-edge independent film.

At first glance, *Children of Men* might seem a continuation of the first trajectory: another adaptation of a well-known British novel. Yet Cuarón instead places this project as his successor to *Y Tu Mamá También*, either implicitly or explicitly. Indeed, in one of the interviews he plainly discusses *Children of Men* as continuing in the vein of *Y Tu...*,

stating “even if the camera was bigger and the production value was way bigger, the production was going to be the same as *Y tu mamá también* in which a character has the same weight as the social environment” (Guerrasio 2007, n.p.). But even in interviews in which Cuarón does not explicitly mention *Y Tu...*, he evokes this type of independent filmmaking by positioning himself as primary screenwriter of *Children of Men* and distancing the film from its status as an adaptation. De-emphasizing his role as an adapter, Cuarón frames himself instead as an auteur who guided all stages of the filmmaking process and who functioned as the single most important figure in shaping the final product.

Other recurrent elements in these interviews also contribute to this discursive construction of an auteurist persona. In addition to positioning himself against other possible authors, Cuarón also repeatedly articulates the centrality of his own vision in shaping the look of the film by evoking the moments in which his vision clashed with that of other members of the production team and emerged victorious. In three of the eight interviews, he recounts the same encounter: his clash with the art department, who wanted to create a future populated by “futuristic buildings and cars and... gadgets” (Voynar 2006, n.p.). In each case, the anecdote culminates with Cuarón asserting his authority as director, as when he states, “I was like, ‘You guys this is brilliant, but this is not the movie we're doing. The movie we are doing is this,’ and I brought in my files. It was about Iraq, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Chernobyl and I said this is the movie we are doing. The rule I set is this movie is not about imagination, it is

about reference” (Brevet 2006, n.p.). Important here is the notion of the director as the one who “sets down the rules,” whose authorial voice eventually dominates.

Similarly, five of the eight interviewers ask Cuarón about the film’s long takes. In his article “Child of the Long Take: Alfonso Cuarón’s Film Aesthetics in the Shadow of Globalization” (2009), James Udden uses formal analysis to argue that the film’s long takes establish it within an auteurist tradition; he states, “Cuarón is not simply defying contemporary Hollywood with this audacious long take style; rather he is joining an older tradition where the long take occasionally has emerged as a marker of aesthetic and authorial distinction even within the Hollywood system” (Udden 2009, 30). Udden goes on to provide a straightforward auteurist reading of the film—in his reading, the use of long takes elevates *Children of Men* beyond typical Hollywood fare to a “masterpiece” of “artistry and profundity,” achieved by Cuarón in spite of the Hollywood system. This interpretation of the film closely aligns with the reading that Cuarón himself deliberately courts in publicity interviews when he discusses the long takes as a personal decision and an authorial signature—for example, when he states, “That is the fearless decision. I am going to make everything in one. Once you make the decision there is no way back.... I have to say these guys [the producers and crew, presumably] were so patient with me in the sense of knowing the risk that everything entailed and at the same time being nothing but supportive” (Brevet 2006, n.p.). While Cuarón nods to the existence of other deciding voices on the set here, he frames the inspiration and the final decision to use these artistically challenging shots as definitively his own.

Finally, as performed by Cuarón, this authorial voice is artistic in a specifically cinematic way. Several of the interviews elaborate upon Cuarón's own visual philosophy of cinema: minimal use of editing and montage, few close-ups, a de-emphasis on narrative coherence, and an intertextual symbolic referentiality. In an interview with the New York City cinema blog *The Reeler*, Cuarón articulates a textbook argument for medium specificity:

What I hate is when cinema is hostage of narrative. Then I say, 'Come on -- don't be lazy, read a book.' If you want to see performances, go to the theater; it's fantastic. It's an actor's medium there and a dramatic medium - - at least conventional theater. But come on, leave cinema alone! Let cinema breathe, in which narrative is an element of the cinematic experience, but it's [just] an element, as acting is an element, cinematography is an element. Music and decors, those are elements. But right now? Cinema becomes just about seeing illustrated stories as opposed to engaging audiences in an experience in which you don't explain much. (Pride 2006, n.p.)

Cuarón's articulated appreciation of the aesthetic value of film over its use of narrative, especially as discussed in a cinephile publication such as *The Reeler*, constructs a distinct type of authorial identity that draws implicitly on the broad strokes of auteurist film criticism. In evoking these associations, Cuarón places himself within a tradition (and notably, a historically masculine tradition) that continues to hold not a little cultural capital among cinephiles and consumers of "quality" art cinema. By discussing *Children of Men* in the context of this aesthetic conversation, Cuarón attempts to frame a big-budget blockbuster as the product of personal artistic vision.

Expanding upon chapter one of this project, which offered several critical readings of *Children of Men* based on the text itself, this chapter attempted to address questions of production and authorship using interviews to analyze Cuarón's presentation

of the film and of himself as auteur. Yet while I have suggested certain ways to read the adaptation and the film itself, drawing from analysis of political context and theories of genre and medium specificity, and Cuarón seems to suggest others, based on a reading of himself as auteur, these approaches offer little insight into how audiences actually interpreted *Children of Men*. In contrast, the next chapter turns to questions of reception, undertaking analysis of mainstream, Christian, and feminist reviews of the film.

### **Chapter Three: Value and Meaning in Reception of Adaptation**

In this final chapter, I take a reception studies approach, analyzing reviews of *Children of Men* in order to ask how a range of viewers interpreted the adaptation. As Janet Staiger outlines extensively in *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (1992), scholars of literature and film have long made claims about how readers understand texts based on theoretical or assumed reading practices. These theories of reception have tended to focus on hypothetical readers who understand texts “correctly.” Implicit in such theories, of course, is the assumption that meaning primarily lies within a text itself. Staiger pays particular attention to theories of “ideal,” “coherent,” or “competent” readers (Staiger 1992, 24-32); as these appellations suggest, all three theories hypothesize that a “best” reading of a text exists and that trained readers/viewers will make meaning of a text in this fashion. A reception studies approach rejects this text-based and homogenizing impulse, turning instead to accounts of how viewers actually interact with texts in order to ask the questions “What kind of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changes over time? And do those meanings have any effects? Cognitive? Emotional? Social? Political?” (Staiger 2005, 2). Methods of gathering these accounts vary widely, from collecting survey data, to conducting focus groups or oral histories, to analyzing published accounts of reception such as reviews.

Considering reception proves particularly important for studies of adaptations, as viewers of this genre inevitably have variable knowledge of and relationships to source texts. Linda Hutcheon claims that variable relationships to a source text prove integral to



the ways that viewers construct meanings from an adapted text, asserting that studies of the reception of adaptations must consider first whether viewers are “experiencing adaptations *as adaptations*” (Hutcheon 2006, 114). Hutcheon claims that the “knowing viewer” of an adaptation will experience film and novel simultaneously, a sort of “interpretive doubling, a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing” (Hutcheon 2006, 139). Conversely, the “unknowing viewer,” who experiences the work in isolation from its source text, merits little consideration for her approach.

Several scholars have attempted to explain the popularity of film adaptations as a genre, all based on the supposed pleasures that the “knowing viewer” gains from this type of film. Leo Braudy, speaking of remakes as well as adaptations, suggests that stories are revisited because audiences find previous incarnations somehow incomplete. He states that adapted or remade films are always concerned with “unfinished cultural business” (Braudy 1998, 331); thus, new versions can succeed only when viewers do not believe they have already experienced the definitive version of a certain story. Hutcheon suggests that the pleasures of an adaptation lie precisely in the act of re-viewing the same “formulaic” stories as a sort of ritual comfort (Hutcheon 2006, 115). And finally, Mark Axelrod maintains that viewers determine the relative quality of an adaptation and its literary source based on which conforms more closely to notions of linear, “Realistic” storytelling; in this framework, viewers watch for “a ‘strong’ storyline and ‘relatable’ characters, since storyline and characters are needed to ‘tell a good tale’” (Axelrod 1996, 202). Importantly, however, while each of these scholars offers some form of theory of

adaptation reception, none undertake what I would consider a “reception study”; all theorize on the basis of a hypothetical ideal, knowledgeable viewer rather than investigating actual accounts of reception.

In contrast to this existing work on reception of adaptations, in this chapter I consider actual reception accounts in the form of published reviews of *Children of Men*, with particular attention to variable readings of the film by two groups of non-normative spectator positions: feminist viewers and Christian viewers. While I chose to focus on Christian and feminist audiences specifically because of textual features—striking changes in religious content and gender representation between James’ novel and Cuarón’s film—I chose not to limit my analysis to reviews that compare the film to the novel. Instead, one of my concerns is whether variable knowledge of the novel does indeed change reception of the film for these specific groups.

After reviewing existing literature on feminist and Christian viewing practices and briefly considering several methodological cautions accordant to undertaking a reception study based on published reviews, this chapter analyzes three clusters of reviews for evidence of shared reading practices. For each group, I focus on trends in the ways in which each group of reviews addresses the film as an adaptation, what elements of the film are deemed “valuable,” and what message or meaning each group of reviews tends to emphasize. Beginning with mainstream reviews of the film in order to establish a basis for comparison, I argue that these critics tend to de-emphasize James’ novel as source material, emphasizing instead the film’s aesthetic quality and the broad cultural relevance of the film’s pervading sense of hopelessness. In contrast, Christian reviews

are more likely to compare the film to its explicitly Christian source text and to de-emphasize aesthetics in favor of analysis of moral and political messages based on plot and characters. Finally, feminist reviews tend to foreground issues of gender, reproduction, and motherhood both when considering the film as an adaptation and as a stand-alone text. In order to support this interpretation, they tend to emphasize different elements of the film than either mainstream or Christian reviewers.

### **Feminist and Christian Identification as Non-Normative Spectator Positions**

The analysis of subcultural or “minority” media reception has merited considerable attention in reception studies. Certainly, and significantly, reception studies offers a means for analysis of the ways in which meaning is necessarily produced “historically and socially *by individuals*” (Staiger 1992, 96, italics mine). However, individuals always exist within various intersecting identity categories or social communities. As Staiger explains in *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (2000), viewers come to any given text for a variety of reasons and with different strategies of reading (Staiger 2000, 39) that influence the process of constructing meaning from a text. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that many of these reading strategies can be in part attributed to factors such as race, gender, sexuality, or class (see literature review in Staiger 2005, 139-164).

Yet little work has been done on the specific reading strategies of the two groups that I discuss here: self-identified feminists and Christians. Much of existing feminist film theory hypothesizes about the viewing practices of women, rather than about specifically feminist reading strategies. This trend seems to have extended to feminist

reception studies, which tend to use a theoretical feminist lens to analyze media reception by various groups of not explicitly feminist-identified women: black women (Bobo 1995), lesbian women (Weiss 1991), or primarily lower-class women (Seiter, et al 1989). S. Craig Watkins and Rana A. Emerson suggest that even if these types of reception studies do not focus explicitly on “feminist” media consumption, their subjects are employing essentially feminist reading strategies in that they reflect “sensibilities and practices that are designed to empower women” (Watkins and Emerson 2000, 158). Yet this seems to erase the fact that feminism represents not only an ideology, but, in many cases, an identity. Indeed, Diane Waldman has criticized feminist film theory for conflating the “female” and “feminist” spectator (Waldman 1988, 81); alternately, I would argue that the practice of making feminism a *mode* of analysis rather than a *subject* of analysis actually holds the danger of erasing the feminist subject position as one that shapes certain viewing practices of its own.

Existing analyses of feminist reception practices focus primarily on texts that have been claimed by feminist audiences as progressive or positive images of women. Both Chris Straayer and Elizabeth Ellsworth have written about lesbian feminist reception of *Personal Best* (1982, dir. Robert Towne). Analyzing a questionnaire distributed to lesbian feminists, Straayer argues that this audience simultaneously enjoys and critiques the film; feminist pleasure, she claims, “is bittersweet and coexists with a conscious discomfort with equally obvious sexism and heterosexism in the film’s images and narrative” (Straayer 1984, 41). She attributes this tension to the stress produced by conflicts between participation of lesbian feminists in a subcultural group and inability to

escape mainstream culture. Similarly, Ellsworth argues that feminist communities collectively develop interpretive strategies in order actively to resist patriarchal discourses (Ellsworth 1986, 46). In the case of *Personal Best*, she discovers, these strategies include rewriting the film's ending, ignoring large sections of narrative material, redefining main and supporting characters, and taking pleasure in identifying both "inadvertent lesbian verisimilitude" and failed lesbian representations (Ellsworth 1986, 53-54).

Reception studies of Christian audiences likewise represent a sparse body of scholarship from within the academy. Yet various publishers have released prescriptive discussions of Christian film reception (May 1997, Marsh 2007), clearly demonstrating efforts on the part of this community to standardize a set of Christian-specific viewing strategies. According to studies by Harry Benshoff and Thomas Leitch, some generalizations about reception can be made based on religious belief. In a study of the reception of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, dir. Ang Lee) in North Central Texas, Benshoff argues that in this context "Christian" analysis became synonymous with anti-gay political views. He finds that Christians in this region tended to reference the queer content of the film in order to "proselytize, citing the Bible and/or using 'fire and brimstone' rhetoric to condemn the film as an example of contemporary culture's moral depravity" (Benshoff 2008, n.p.). Leitch (2007) discovers slightly more variation in Christian reception of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004, dir. Mel Gibson), looking specifically at whether Christian viewers discussed the film as a successful or failed adaptation of the Bible. Leitch identifies a tension between Christian audiences'

enjoyment and promotion of the film as an evangelical tool and their uneasiness with changes in content and tone from the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion.

In part, the paucity of data on these groups may result from neither of these identity categories representing an inborn trait. Not only do religious and political/theoretical identifications often change over the course of a person's life, each has potential to have drastically different meanings to different individuals. Yet existing scholarship does suggest that members of "feminist" or "Christian" communities may share certain viewing strategies. And indeed, more oft-studied racial, class, sexual, and gender identities also all hold potential for shifting self-classification and infinite gradations of differences, even as these categories have historically been posited as fairly stable. While recognizing that *any* broad grouping inherently and necessarily reduces the complexity of an individual's intersectional identities, I attempt to mediate some of this difficulty of categorization by selecting reviews based on the authors' self-identification.

### **Methodology: Analysis of Reviews**

An analysis of published reviews, especially of such a recent film, poses unique methodological concerns. Staiger cautions that reception researchers must be conscious that "no approach to meaning-making and effects avoids doing textual analysis" (Staiger 2005, 13); because of this reliance on interpretation, this type of scholarship inherently includes a degree of subjectivity. Furthermore, critical reviews must be understood as mediated instances of reception. As Staiger advises, "Texts such as reviews are produced for one reason and appropriated by reception scholars for another. Reviews, interviews, and ethnographies have conventions that must be dealt with in the textual analysis of the

material” (Staiger 2005, 14). In other words, each critic has an investment in conveying a certain level of authority, and, in the cases of niche-targeted blogs or periodicals such as the feminist blog *Pandagon* or *Christianity Today*, reviewers are expected to discuss the film from a certain vantage point. A critical review cannot be read as conveying the initial interpretation or affective response of the critic; it can perhaps not even be claimed that a review describes how a single person experienced watching the film that is reviewed. This type of analysis must instead consciously contextualize the critic within discourse, as an individual who is inevitably aware of his or her own role as a public figure and potentially a source of authority.

In addition, with the proliferation of internet reviews, the process of selecting a reasonably-sized sample to discuss inevitably feels incomplete. How does one put parameters on such a project? How many reviews must one select in order to present a cross-section of opinions? Certainly one review cannot be taken to speak for the film’s “Christian” or “feminist” audience as a whole—how many reviews must one analyze to make claims about trends in the way these niche audiences might have viewed a film at the time of its release? Even the category of “mainstream” reviews, which these niche reviews in some sense construct themselves against, represents in some sense a false delineation. For this first section, I chose nine reviews appearing in publications with national readership, since to analyze all reviews that might be considered “mainstream” would of course be very difficult. Similarly, for the second and third sections, I have chosen to select five “Christian” reviews and four “feminist” reviews, so defined based

on their appearance on a self-identified Christian or feminist website or blog; however, I make no claims that this sample is representative.

In addition, one of the advantages of using online sources is the frequent presence of a comment section. Because these sites tend to draw a self-selected and invested audience, several of these reviews are followed by highly active comment threads in which participants debate, disagree, and critically engage as a virtual community that often shares some similar interests or perspectives. While only one of my selected reviews included an extensive comment thread, this review, by Amelia Marcotte on the feminist blog *Pandagon*, received 134 comments offering agreement or alternative feminist readings. Significantly, the end of this specific thread marks a crossover between my two audiences, as Christian users who were apparently not regular participants in *Pandagon*'s discussions shift the topic to a religious debate. Because these threads offer rich accounts of film reception by many more viewers than have actually written full reviews, I have included this thread as part of my analysis of feminist reviews.

### **Mainstream Reviews: Cuarón's Technical Artistry**

Perhaps following the trend of Cuarón's publicity interviews for the film, which tended to diminish the role of James' novel as contributing anything but a basic premise to the film's script (see chapter two), mainstream reviews either glossed over the film as adaptation or explicitly diminished the importance of the novel. Reviews in *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The New Yorker* each give only a brief note that the film was "based on a novel by PD James" (Lane 2007,



Phillips 2006, Turan 2006, Hornaday 2006), while reviews in *USA Today* and *Variety* fail to mention the source material at all (Puig 2006, Elly 2006). In these shorter reviews by generally less widely well-known critics, these omissions simply display interest in the film primarily as a stand-alone text. Yet other mainstream reviews go so far as to disparage the James novel. Although James has been a best-selling author since the publication of her first detective mysteries in the 1960s, Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times* dismisses the novel as “lesser-known” and refers to James herself with the offhanded qualifier that she “usually writes about a detective.” Similarly elevating Cuarón as transforming a mediocre novel into an artistic and highly relevant film, Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* credits Cuarón and his co-authors of the screenplay with adding a “nod to Orwell” to the novel’s premise—precisely the quality that she goes on to laud. These reviews indicate that for some viewers, assumptions about the “quality” of the source material and the adaptation may affect which is viewed as superior. In support of this hierarchy of quality, Dargis includes a brief chronology of Cuarón’s previous films, presenting *Children of Men* as the latest in this director’s already impressive body of work; Ebert evokes James’ previous popular mystery novels to diminish her credibility as a storyteller and thus relocate innovation in the film’s directing and cinematography.

Only David Edelstein of *New York Magazine* devotes significant space to James’ novel, and indeed, he is the only critic to suggest that the novel may have strengths that the film does not. While giving Cuarón’s adaptation an ultimately positive review, Edelstein suggests the screenwriters “twisted” the novel and oversimplified the plot.

Alone in my sample of mainstream reviews, he succinctly identifies the different projects of novel and film:

In James's book...the focus is on the tortured inner landscape of people with no faith in the future: She has a crack whodunit writer's grasp of repression, of what it hides and what it liberates. Cuarón isn't indifferent to that theme, but he doesn't have the patience of a septuagenarian female former civil-service worker. He's a youngish Mexican moviemaker with an FX budget; he's burning to get to the horrific spectacle of authoritarianism and military occupation...to a world like our own.

While Edelstein's evocation of the genders/nationalities/professions must be identified as problematic, his argument here is essentially, and notably, about medium specificity—books are good at depicting inner feelings, movies tend to be geared at spectacle. And as with many early academic adaptation studies, Edelstein implicitly seems to privilege literature as a medium. Part of this may be the venue of the review—self-described as a “lifestyle” magazine, *New York Magazine* attempts to cultivate a cultured, bourgeois reader. Keeping in mind the cultural capital of reviewers and Tamara Shephard's assertion, drawing on Bourdieu, that “a publication appeals to readership of a certain educational level, creating its own distinct discursive system that actively promotes this distinction” (Shephard 2009, 31), reviewers in “highbrow” publications would seem particularly invested in maintaining a reputation as critical authorities—and, especially in the case of *New York Magazine*, as arbiters of taste for the (well-read) intellectual.

Yet reviews that do not privilege the novel also cultivate authority and cultural capital through self-conscious attention to film aesthetics, rather than exclusively narrative, as a determinant criteria of “quality.” John Fiske argues that a bourgeois valuation of aesthetics, which “centers its values in the textual structure and thus ignores

the social pertinences through which text and everyday life are interconnected” (Fiske 1991, 130), plays a central role in constructing the authority of the critic. Indeed, notions of “quality”—that is, the creation of an opposition between the artistic and the popular—seem to be at stake in many of these reviews. Dargis effusively praises Cuarón’s skill as a director, lauding *Children of Men* as a film that “the greatness of its filmmaking” and “the beauty of its form.” Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post* gushes about the film’s “masterful use of cinematic grammar” and likens Cuarón to heavy-hitting directors Orson Welles and Stanley Kubrick; similarly, Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times* credits the film’s “brilliant visual look and style” for “elevating” it above its “pulpy premise.” Several reviews (Ebert 2007, Phillips 2006, Elley 2006, Puig 2006) extensively discuss the film’s long takes. All of these reviews emphasize that Cuarón’s skill as a filmmaker, not the film’s plot, marks *Children of Men* as worthy of praise; the artistry of the film’s cinematography elevates it beyond other thrillers.

However, many mainstream critics paired attention to aesthetic quality with an emphasis on *Children of Men* as uniquely relevant to the contemporary social and political state of either America or Britain. If the *value* of the film lies in its artistic merit in these reviews, the *meaning* of the film rests in its dark tone, critiquing the flaws of the contemporary world. Hornaday calls attention to the “chilling familiarity” of the scenery, terming the film a “frame-by-frame essay, not on the future but on the past and present”; Puig lauds the film’s “powerful social and political message” as “bleakly compelling.” Indeed, several critics close their reviews with some political or philosophical commentary on the lessons the film offers for dealing with a world that often seems

hopeless or doomed to disaster. Quoting Kurt Anderson that “we Americans are in an apocalyptic frame of mind [as] aging baby boomers confront their own impending doom,” Dargis reads the film as offering “different ways of waking up” to the state of the wider world. More broadly, Ebert uses the film as a starting point to muse on amorphous fears of a bleak future, asking a series of rhetorical questions throughout the review (“Is this what we are all headed for?”; “Are we living in the last good times?”) before concluding that “the film serves as a cautionary warning. The only thing we will have to fear in the future, we learn, is the past itself. Our past. Ourselves.” The ability to be “in” on the message of broad global critique lends these reviewers authority as social critics. However, on the whole, they tend to read any social criticism in the film as generally as possible. Turan offers the most specific analysis of the film’s social critique, linking it to a laundry list of modern ills including “racism, terrorism, decaying infrastructure, threatened environment, government-inspired paranoia and more”; however, he too concludes that the meaning of the film lies in its depiction of hopelessness of remedying these social problems in the present day.

Notably, in seeking a lesson from the film, mainstream reviews almost entirely ignore identity politics—in these accounts, the hopelessness evoked by the film targets a shared fear of incipient global doom, rather than injustice aimed at specific groups. None of these critics allude to the gender politics of *Children of Men*. Edelstein notes the change in race of the last pregnant woman from novel to film but does not offer any explanation as to why this would be significant. Similarly, Ebert mentions that discrimination against immigrants seems to replace racial prejudice in the future world of

the film, but only in passing; he draws no parallels between this observation and the “lesson” he attributes to the film.

Nearly all the mainstream reviewers surveyed also ignore or downplay the religious subtext of the notion of child as salvation. Referencing the film’s Christmas Day release date, Hornaday calls it “a nativity story for our age,” yet in the same paragraph she deems the message “humanistic.” This seems to be an inoffensively areligious nativity story. And while Dargis titles her review “Apocalypse Now, But in the Wasteland a Child is Given,” a clear allusion to Isaiah 9:6 (“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given”), the idea that the film might have a religious referent remains only implied and affords no mention in the rest of the review. Repeated comparisons of the film to *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott) further place it within a wholly secular sci-fi dystopian generic tradition. Perhaps expectedly, Christian and feminist reviews foreground issues of gender and religion that these mainstream reviews elide, although conclusions are varied as to how successfully Cuarón deals with these issues. In order to make these arguments, these non-mainstream reviews tend to downplay aesthetic elements of the film and, in the case of Christian critics, elevate the novel as authoritative source text.

### **Christian Reviews: *Children of Men* as “An Act of Vandalism”**

While mainstream reviews seemed largely in agreement as to the meaning and value of *Children of Men*, reviews in Christian publications evinced a much wider range of responses to the film, reaching drastically different conclusions as to its message and merit. In part this results from the wide range of social, political, and even religious

views encompassed by the label “Christian”; as earlier stated, this is likely also in part responsible for the paucity of scholarship attempting to draw conclusions about Christian viewers. Each of the five reviews selected, however, comes from a publication or blog that explicitly labels itself as some form of “Christian.” Sources include *First Things*, an inter-denominational journal published by the socially conservative Institute on Religion and Public Life (Anthony Sacramone’s review); “evangelical Christian” magazine *Christianity Today*, founded in 1956 by prominent protestant evangelist Billy Graham (Jeffrey Overstreet’s review); the official website of the United Methodist Church (Gregg Tubbs’s review); the personal blog of Steven Graydanus, film critic for the *National Catholic Register*; and the independent Christian review blog of Scott Nehring, *Good News Film Review*. In themselves, these publications have varying religious and political bents, a fact reflected in their reviews of *Children of Men*.

Although this sample of reviews evinces varying knowledge of the novel *The Children of Men*, those critics familiar with James’ novel tend to rely heavily on comparisons between the two texts as evidence of authorial intentionality. Discussion of James’ novel proves central to Sacramone’s and Graydanus’s reviews, which use these comparisons to create a dichotomy between the novel (“good”) and Cuarón’s film adaptation (“bad”). Both reviews reference the same James interview, in which she refers to *The Children of Men* as “a Christian fable,” as an authoritative account of the novel’s message. Calling attention to a perceived evacuation of Christian themes from novel to film, Sacramone terms the film “an act of vandalism”; Graydanus notes that “the substantial Christian element of James’ story has been gutted.” In drawing this

conclusion, both reviews point to character changes and the inclusion of political themes that they claim were not present in the original novel. While Graydanus ultimately concludes that the film succeeds in its own right as a “downbeat dystopian thriller,” Sacramone displays a persistent investment in the film as a destruction of a superior and authoritative source text, arguing that the film destroys the coherence of the novel’s narrative structure and vitriolically concluding that “What’s insufferable is [Cuarón’s] pressing into service someone else’s vision as a commercial vehicle for a personal political screed.” Remarkably, he, like Hornaday, compares Cuarón to Kubrick—but Sacramone means it as an insult, a sign of the secularization of a religiously motivated source text.

In contrast, while also turning to James’ real life identity as a “professing Christian,” and understanding the novel as an example of her “moral vision,” Overstreet reads the film as an effective translation of this vision. Drawing from a personal interview with Cuarón, Overstreet does note that Cuarón, himself an atheist, attempted to make a secular film from religious source material; he states,

A director more interested in spiritual inquiry might have mined this material for richer insights. Cuarón’s adaptation suggests he believes the world can only be saved by human ingenuity. How odd—that a story so full of allusions to the Bible would conclude that God is not participating in the world’s salvation. . . . (In my interview with Cuarón, he confirmed this belief that we should place our hope not in God, but in “the next generation.”)

Yet Overstreet’s review interprets the film in direct opposition to Cuarón’s stated intent, describing it as a version of the nativity story that “conveys more powerfully than anything on film the darkness, damage, and despair of the world into which the Christ

child was born.” Indeed, he proceeds to recommend the film to a Christian audience—albeit “only to discerning adults.” Acknowledging that the film was not intended as a Christian text, references to James’ novel allow Overstreet to forward an oppositional reading of the film, one that he seems to believe could be deduced even by viewers who have not read the novel. In fact, critics not familiar with the novel form drastically different interpretations of the film. Tubbs does see the Christian undertone, terming *Children of Men* “a kind of post-apocalyptic nativity story.” However, Nehring reads the film as explicitly secular leftist “pseudo-intellectual rambling.”

These Christian reviews also display interpretations of the value and meaning of the film that differ markedly from those of the mainstream reviews. While mainstream reviewers paid considerable attention to the aesthetic value of *Children of Men*, all the Christian reviews downplay, or simply do not mention, formal elements of the film. Graydanus’s review, which focuses primarily on the film’s plot, characters, and ideological message, devotes not a single sentence to cinematography. Nehring and Sacramone actively disparage the clear attention to technical details, with Sacramone terming the film “high tech agit-prop” and Nehring concluding, “by the time the film comes to a stuttering end there is little to take from the piece other than ‘Hey, how about those two, long, unedited scenes? Cool, eh?’” Tubbs lauds the cinematography but carefully notes that its value lies in the “emotional wallop” that separates it from “empty showmanship meant to impress film buffs.” Furthermore, while mainstream reviewers spoke of the film primarily as an enactment of Cuarón’s vision, several Christian reviews carefully omit praise of Cuarón from any positive comments about the film’s technical



elements by discussing the film as a collaborative effort. Thus, Overstreet lauds “the effects team, the cast, and the extraordinarily talented cinematographer” of *Children of Men* while Nehrig gives grudging praise to the film’s cinematographer and production designers. In Overstreet’s case, this supports his efforts to read the film against Cuarón’s stated intent; for Nehring, it seems just to allow him to avoid saying anything positive about Cuarón whom he views as responsible primarily for the film’s political stance.

These divergent analyses of the value of *Children of Men* correlate strongly with varying interpretations by Christian reviewers of the film’s message. Mainstream reviewers lauded Cuarón for identifying and representing a pervading cultural sense of hopelessness; Christian reviews identify this tone as well. In fact, their interpretations of the film’s social and political critique are fairly consistent not only with mainstream reviews but with each other. Having identified these critiques, Christian critics seem predominantly concerned with the ideological implications of Cuarón’s depiction of hopelessness. For Overstreet and Tubbs, who both recommend the film to their readers, Cuarón’s vision of a grim future operates in service of a moral lesson about hope and how to treat others. Tubbs reads the film’s allusions to contemporary problems surrounding “immigration, racism, terrorism, the environment and rampant nationalism” as a critique of “‘us and them’ thinking—dehumanizing and demonizing those who are different in appearance, speech or beliefs.” Accordingly, he interprets the film as “a rebirth of hope and life for lost people... a powerful reminder that we are all children of God.” Overstreet similarly maintains that “by reflecting so much darkness, [the film] allows a beacon of hope to shine all the brighter.” In each case this reading of the film as

hopeful depends on agreement with Cuarón's political analysis paired with a religious belief in redemption—attitudes that these critics bring to the text.

Graydanus, Sacramone, and Nehring read the same social and political allusions as amounting to little more than leftist propaganda. Graydanus accuses the film of “soften[ing] and subvert[ing] the novel's more rigorous pro-life themes” and ultimately concludes that, “The relevance of James's bang-on critique of the banalities of post-human culture will continue long after Cuarón's topical allusions to Abu Ghraib and the like have become patently dated.” Here, the film's political and social commentary is evoked as evidence of its inferiority to the source novel. Sacramone and Nehring similarly condemn the centrality of political critique to the film as evidence of clumsy storytelling, with Sacramone accusing Cuarón of incessantly harping on a “‘We are living in a fascist state’ message with every artless swing of his cinematic axe handle” and Nehring stating disparagingly that “tedious cries of future fascism and police state policies litter this pompous pile of political mush.” These reviewers seem to find Cuarón's image of a dystopian future unsuccessful primarily because their existing political/religious views make such a future implausible.

That these critics, like all viewers, interpret the film through pre-existing ideological assumptions becomes particularly apparent in Graydanus's and Sacramone's disbelief at the reasons offered for pregnant Kee fleeing the government. Both express incredulity at the premise that “the government would never permit a fugee [immigrant] to be the mother of the reborn human race, and so presumably would kill her—and its own future, if you think about it” (Sacramone). Yet both critics misremember the

assertion made in the film that the government would take the baby from Kee “and parade a posh black English lady as the mother.” Indeed, this mental revision of a fairly significant plot point in the film suggests a broader denial of the possibility that a state government would ever operate on the basis of systematic racism. Graydanus’s deconstruction of this particular plot point seems to support this analysis; he states,

Surely, the business about the government not wanting to admit the fugees’ “humanity” can’t be meant literally, can it? The movie can’t really be asking us to accept that a mere two decades from now, the actual biological humanity of non-British people could be a point of serious dispute? But if not, surely the immediate crisis of the propagation of the species trumps all political concerns, even for fascist regimes. We aren’t talking about space-race nationalism here, and anyway, even in the 1950s we were pretty clear the Commies were human.

In this case, the reviewer not only misremembers the film but also history—indeed, for many imperialist governments, including the British, the “actual biological humanity” of non-British people *was* historically in dispute. Is it possible that this selective remembering arose precisely because the politics of class and race alluded to in this scene are in fact outside of the range of possibility imagined by these reviewers’ worldviews?

As discussed earlier in this chapter, all viewers experience any text through learned reading strategies that can differ across groups and even person-to-person. However, it does not seem coincidental that ideological biases emerge far more clearly in these reviews than those in mainstream publications. Is this because Christians are somehow more ideologically driven than others? This seems unlikely. Instead, I would argue that this frankness can be attributed at least in part to these reviews appearing in publications that are targeted specifically and explicitly at members of a group that presumably shares the same moral, religious, and political perspectives. Indeed,

reviewers in this community seem as, if not more, invested in establishing themselves as moral authorities than as arbiters of aesthetic taste. The same phenomenon becomes apparent in reviews targeted at an explicitly feminist audience.

### **Feminist Reviews: Gender Dynamics and Reproductive Rights in a Dystopian Future**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, considerably fewer publications target an explicitly feminist audience than an explicitly Christian audience. As a result, the majority of contemporary feminist film reviews are published on either group or personal blogs on which usually unpaid authors attempt to create a demonstrably feminist public persona. The four blogs whose reviews I discuss here boast varying notoriety in the world of online feminism. Natalie P.'s *Bitchatorial*, a spin-off from the active feminist forum *Heartless Bitches International*, features a combination of personal narrative, political commentary, and reviews; the similarly structured *Thinking Girl* blog, written by an anonymous self-described "feminist philosopher," seems to have had two years of a fairly regular readership before ceasing publication in October 2007. Political feminist blog *Pandagon*, founded in 2001, and its editor Amelia Marcotte, hold a fairly high profile in the feminist blogosphere; although the blog now requires registration for comment, at the time of Marcotte's 2007 review of *Children of Men*, commenting was open and garnered extremely active participation from both feminists and hecklers. All three of these reviews have posted comments, which I will include in this discussion. Finally, *Feminist Review*, written collectively by fifteen editors and 150 writers, has published over 3,500 reviews of everything from books and films to eco-themed clothing since 2006; the site,

however, continues to be hosted by a blogspot account and disallows comments. These four reviews demonstrate far more homogeneity than the reviews by Christian critics, suggesting a fairly coherent set of shared feminist viewing strategies.

These feminist reviews tend to compare the film favorably to James' novel, largely crediting Cuarón with making a feminist film from a non-feminist source—although notably, only one of the critics states that she had read the novel. These reviewers and commenters perhaps predictably seize on changes in representations of women and of reproduction, particularly those that can be mobilized to valorize the film's feminism in the face of a less progressive source text. Moore, who writes a paired review of novel and film, notes that “the book's vaguely Christian Madonna is abandoned in favor of strong female activists” but ultimately posits an essential equivalency between the two texts in that both “have at their hearts... a reverence of motherhood.” Natalie P. devotes three paragraphs of her review to changes between the film and the novel, as described to her by friends—she admits that at the time of writing the review, she had not yet read James' book.

Natalie P.'s review emphasizes the switch in the source of infertility from men to women, a relatively negligible plot point in both texts. Although neither Marcotte nor “Thinking Girl” mention James' novel at all in their initial reviews, both mention the same plot point to emphasize the film's feminist message. Marcotte interprets this representation of female infertility as “a worldwide uterine strike against the mess we find ourselves in” and Thinking Girl asks “Is the overall message that we – women in particular – have to continue having babies or the world is going to hell in a handbasket?”

(a message that, it should be noted, she goes on to interpret as “feminist”). In both cases when participants in the comment thread mention the existence of a literary source, debate ensues as commenters focus on the myriad implications of this same plot change. As it does in the initial reviews, this discussion ultimately becomes detached from the film itself, instead serving as a space for conversation about the medicalization of childbirth or condemnations of narratives that valorize the potency of sperm. In other words, while the reviews seem primarily interested in providing a judgment on whether or not the film displays a feminist sensibility—Natalie P. gives it “two feminist thumbs up”—commenters especially tend to use the film as a jumping off point to engage with social issues pertaining to gender.

As in the Christian reviews, aesthetic value merits relatively little attention here. Instead, feminist reviewers locate the film’s value in its strong female characters and valorization of motherhood. Similar to the viewing strategies of Christian critics, for these feminist critics, the alignment of the film’s message with an ideologically feminist position is the source of its value. This lack of concern with technical “quality” extends to discussions of characters: while mainstream and Christian reviews discussed characters primarily in order to evaluate the quality of the performances of the film’s actors, only *Thinking Girl* offers any comment on the performances; these reviews are more concerned with character development within the narrative. Natalie P. comes the closest to mainstream reviews in regards to consideration of aesthetics with two mentions of the film’s visually stunning cinematography and praise of the film’s technically complicated and oft-lauded twelve-minute single shot. Yet she ultimately recommends the film

because “Kee’s position in the movie [serves] as a metaphor for every woman who is pregnant today.” More important than the film’s aesthetic quality in these reviews is its social relevance and, specifically, its relevance to the unique experiences of women. Similarly, while Marcotte does make mention of the film’s aesthetic quality in an early paragraph, she goes on to refer to this as a “perfunctory disclaimer” that she needed to “get out of the way” before discussing the more significant topic of the film’s feminist themes. The bulk of the review is then devoted to elucidating the ways in which *Children of Men* “critiques male dominance as inherently damaging and egalitarian relationships between men and women as the only real source of hope.” Moore and Thinking Girl make similar interpretive moves, identifying the film’s value as its “reverence for motherhood” and its “statement about women’s reproduction and how perhaps medicalization of reproduction and fertility is the wrong way to go,” respectively.

Obviously, while these feminist reviews share similar concerns, neither mainstream nor Christian reviewers attribute *any* of these meanings to the film. In order to produce their interpretations, these feminist reviewers emphasize plot details, characters, and scenes that other reviews either do not mention or dismiss as of secondary importance. Plot details that other critics omit, such as which sex is the source of infertility, the child’s gender, and the gendered power struggles in the leftist activist collective led by Julian, are afforded central importance in feminist reviews. In addition, while mainstream and Christian reviews tend to focus on the male characters of Theo and Jasper, all of the feminist reviews devote far more space to discussion of the most prominent female characters, Julian and Kee. Finally, two of the four reviews, and

several other comments, identify the scene in which the refugee camp falls silent as Kee carries the baby out of a war zone as film's most important moment—a scene not mentioned in any of the Christian or mainstream reviews. This redefining of the film's main characters and important moments supports Ellsworth's (1986) findings that feminist audiences of *Personal Best* chose for interpretation those aspects of the film text “that occupied positions of saliency in relation to feminist challenges to hegemonic power relations” (Ellsworth 1986, 48).

Certain interpretive trends, then, emerge in the ways in which reviewers in each of these three clusters find meaning and value in *Children of Men*, as well as how they discuss the relationship of the film to the novel. Rhetorician Celeste Michelle Condit's distinction between polysemy, or the capability of a text to bear multiple meanings, and polyvalence, which occurs “when audiences share understandings of the denotations of a text but disagree about the valuations of those denotations to such a degree that the produce notably different interpretations” (Condit 1989, 107), proves useful in distinguishing these interpretive strategies. In some cases, reviews by different groups seem to reflect variant interpretations of the text itself, supporting theories of the text as polysemic. For example, feminist reviewers' understandings of the film as “about” the medicalization of childhood or the dangers of patriarchal dominance reflect an interpretation of the film that is fundamentally distinct from some Christian reviewers' reading of the film as a version of the nativity story. Yet in other cases, reviewers attribute similar meanings to the film but value these meanings differently, as when



mainstream and Christian reviewers see the same liberal political critique in *Children of Men* but view this critique as more or less valuable.

On the whole, however, these reviews suggest that polysemous readings may be more possible for Cuarón's film than for James' novel. Indeed, reviewers in mainstream, feminist, and Christian publications all reflected a more polyvalent reading of the novel, nodding to its Christian subtext although they attributed different valuation to this theme and only Christian reviews mourned its loss. This would seem to contradict claims by Hutcheon and Axelrod that the appeal of adaptations lies in their repetitive or formulaic nature. For feminist and mainstream critics, at least, part of the pleasure in the film lay in its success at fundamentally revising a flawed source text. Instead, this aligns with Braudy's theory that new iterations of an existing text function in part to speak to something that audiences view as incomplete in an earlier incarnation. As discussed in mainstream and feminist reviews, Cuarón seems to have used the premise of James' novel to create a more open text, one that lends itself to a wider range of interpretations than its source text.

## Conclusion

Responding to calls by Robert Stam (2000a), Linda Hutcheon (2006), and others for considerations of adaptation that move beyond textual analysis and fidelity criticism, this thesis began by proposing to conduct a more thorough study of adaptation. In part, the process of undertaking a large-scale analysis of *Children of Men* has entailed a sort of review of media studies as a field. Using adaptation studies as a backdrop, this project has “sampled” a bouquet of approaches to theories and methods of film analysis by testing what each might bring to this particular case study. Beginning with textually-based critical analysis, a prevalent method of literary and film studies, my first chapter proposed to explain differences in James’ novel and Cuarón’s film through theories of medium specificity and genre and through an analysis of the political and social historical contexts reflected in each text. In the second chapter, I recounted a history of the production of the adaptation, nodding to theories of political economy and authorship. I then analyzed Cuarón’s publicity interviews in order to argue that he deliberately positions himself within a tradition of auteur criticism to de-emphasize the film as an adaptation. Finally, I traced interpretive patterns in reception of the film by mainstream, Christian, and feminist reviewers, revealing differences in the way that each group tended to discuss the aesthetic value and political and social messages as well as its status as an adapted text.

At the beginning of this project, I noted that extant adaptation studies tended to employ one or two of these approaches—usually textual analysis—and, drawing from Hutcheon, I posited that a more expansive approach was necessary to construct a full

picture of how adaptation functioned as always simultaneously a product and a process of both production and reception. Privileging either medium, producers, audiences, or contexts of an adaptation, I hypothesized, implicitly made the fallacious claim that, in any given adaptation, one of these elements proved more important than others.

Certainly, each of these approaches to the adaptation has spoken to vastly different interpretive questions. A consideration of the features of literary and filmic texts—whether of their use of the features of their medium, their conformity to generic tropes, or their reflection of certain historical moments—takes the objects themselves as its concern. At stake here is the ability of the critic or scholar to read these objects for some inherent meaning. In contrast, the interpretation of interviews by Cuarón allows other types of inquiries: about how those who produced the film interpreted the novel, about the role of industrial contexts on artistic production, about the role of author or *auteur*. Turning to these types of sources also opens up questions about the ways in which authorship is performed within the public sphere. And studies of reception, of course, ask what audiences actually do with texts.

On one level, all three types of questions always merit consideration precisely because they serve different functions. As rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli suggests in her discussion of polysemy as a theoretical concept, privileging the interpretation of critic, author, or audience necessarily engages with issues of power (Ceccarelli 1998, 409). Textual analysis affords the critic with agency. Depending on how closed or open one deems the text, the astute scholar adopts the position of unraveling the meaning within the text or making meaning from the text by using it to produce theory. Alternatively, the

turn to production affords agency to the author or producer of a text as a subject who at least imagines him or herself to speak through a text. Janet Staiger's point about this function of authorship study is worth mentioning again here: especially "for people in nondominant situations, who is speaking does matter" (Staiger 2003, 49). Finally, the position that audiences have some degree of agency to construct differing meaning from the texts that they consume—meanings that should be understood as never more or less "correct"—cannot be divorced from questions of power. Indeed, as Staiger asserts, studying reception must be seen as a political move; she states, "Interpreting films is not an isolated, merely aesthetic act. It is a practice transforming the material world for our use. Researching how this happens can make a difference for the future" (Staiger 1992, 97). If nothing else, conducting this project has firmly convinced me of the worth and importance of each of these approaches for media studies as a field, as accordingly, for the subfield of adaptation studies.

However, I am not sure that this type of large-scale, multi-approach case study proves the best way to ask these questions, about adaptation or about any media text. If future projects make the baseline assumption that power to shape literary or media texts always lies with the critic, the producer, *and* the audience—in itself an admittedly contentious claim, but bear with me—does every study need to address all three levels of meaning-making? Indeed, in the end I am unconvinced that these three critical approaches, when juxtaposed, have much to offer each other. While *Children of Men* proves a particularly valuable case for issues of representations of pregnancy and for interrogating the performance of authorship, I ultimately believe that other texts might

have been more productively used to talk about medium specificity, about generic shifts, and about reception of adaptations. Although all of these factors inevitably play into adaptation, I am ultimately not convinced of Hutcheon's claim that they all need to be considered together. Perhaps we can, ultimately, relegate this insight about the always multi-faceted nature of adaptation to an obligatory disclaimer at the beginning of smaller projects that choose individual texts for their relevance to and interest for specific critical approaches.

While this might seem to validate the very case studies currently being done within the field of adaptation studies with which I expressed concerns at the beginning of this thesis, it is worth noting that many scholars are not including such a disclaimer. As a result, many of these individual case studies seem implicitly to posit adaptation as product *or* process and rarely consider reception at all. A more productive project might be to consider a selection of adaptations through one critical or methodological approach—for example, one future project might consider how feminist audiences interpreted a variety of adaptations, in order to attempt to discern whether these audiences use any of the same interpretive strategies across texts. Thus, while this case study of *Children of Men* succeeded in raising questions that I hope to explore in future work on adaptation, it has also persuaded me of the value of structuring such inquiries around one or two methodological approaches or critical questions rather than around a single text.

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