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WESTWORD

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Cuarón crafts bleak masterpiece

Children of Men frightening yet empowering

Seth Motel
Editor in Chief

After reviewing *Children of Men* on *Ebert & Roeper*, Richard Roeper mused that there will eventually be a movie set in the future in which life is *not* bleaker than it is now. We may have seen the dystopic movie before, but *Children of Men* is too superb to be classified in any one category or set to any one standard.

Director Alfonso Cuarón (*Y Tu Mamá También* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*) should give *The Departed*'s Martin Scorsese a run for his Oscar trophy with his searing vision. The movie is a remarkable contrast of minimalism and constant action, packing social issues, intense emotion and art into 109 minutes.

If you have already decided to see this movie, you may want to stop reading this review now. Part of the strong impact *Children of Men* had on me was due to my surprise at the sequence of events. Feel free to run to a theater right now if you wish; otherwise, here I go.

Theo Faron (Clive Owen) is a depressed and depressing worker in England's Ministry of Energy in the year 2027. England, in fact, is the only country that has survived the preceding years of violence and nuclear destruction. Society's longevity is doubtful due to an 18-year epidemic of infertility and a constant barrage of terror on the streets.

The movie starts with Theo in a coffee shop, futuristic only in its uber-thin television, when the news comes that the youngest person alive has died at age 18. This shatters the people around him, but Theo unemotionally walks out of the coffee shop and onto the street. Behind him, the coffee shop gets blown to pieces by a bomb. Then, the screen reads, "Children of Men." Buckle up.

Theo's first adventure takes him to the remote countryside home of his pot-smoking friend Jasper, comically played by Michael Caine. Here, they relax to Radiohead music while smoking up and discussing life, in particular the mysterious Human Project. The Human Project is a group dedicated to saving the species (aren't they all?) by some sort of scientific process/human nurture philosophy that isn't explained in detail. People are unsure as to the group's existence, and the audience is kept in the dark as to its mission.

Theo returns to the hustle and bustle of London only to be kidnapped by a radical political group that has a stake in the future of fertility. Its leader is Julian (Julianne Moore), who is—not coincidentally—the mother of Theo's dead child. She contacts him because of their personal connection and because his brother is a high-ranking government official capable of obtaining a forged passport for somebody in need. He agrees to get the papers from his brother in exchange for a hefty fee.

What Theo doesn't plan on doing is getting himself dragging into the mess of transporting an immigrant (a severe no-no) through England for the purpose of—no, it couldn't be. In a scene almost straight out of the Bible, the immigrant girl Kee (brilliant newcomer Claire-Hope Ashitey) reveals in a barn to Theo that she is eight months' pregnant. Can you say, "In too deep"?

Theo takes the initiative to transport Kee to the Human Project, a task that isn't as easy as he hoped. There is a plan involving a police officer, an immigrant prison, a hidden warring society and a boat that will supposedly take care of Kee. All that they have to provide is Jack Bauer-like fierceness and a lot of luck.

The screenplay (based on a P.D. James novel) avoids delving into the details of this society's pitfalls. While some people have criticized Cuarón and his four co-writers' less-than-bulky script, I think the movie's quick pace is one of its best assets. The dialogue is good enough to do justice to the fine direction. Subtle details in the script, such as a man being forced to put on a mask virtually replicated from Abu Ghraib Prison, are haunting and effective without being heavy-handed.

Owen gives a spot-on performance as the disillusioned middle-ager, but it's Ashitey who steals the show. She displays an enormous range of emotion from teasing Theo about an immaculate conception to dealing with the understandable difficulty of delivering a baby in the middle of a war zone.

Although the writing and all-around acting are solid from start to finish, the movie's claim to fame is Cuarón's depiction of hope in the face of destruction. I was uncomfortable in my seat watching the action unfold even though the movie wasn't as bloody as *Black Hawk Down* or as torturous as *Kill Bill*, which is a real testament to the movie's power.

Cuarón does not waste a frame of this movie, and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki's fourth Oscar nomination may result in his first win. There's a scene toward the end of the movie that still has not left me. The camera takes the audience through an abandoned bus in the thick of senseless battle when a gun goes off and a few drops of blood spurt onto the camera. Cuarón decides to keep this blood on the camera and depict the next few minutes of the movie with a few red dots still on the screen. There isn't enough to qualify for a Wes Craven movie, but just enough to remind the audience where we are: Hell.

Perhaps the most jarring aspect of *Children of Men* is the imminence of the future it depicts. There are no aliens or flying cars, only 2007 technology with a few minor upgrades. And this violence? It's taking place on the streets of Baghdad right now. It's been going on for more than a decade in Mogadishu, Somalia. This movie is yesterday, today and tomorrow, a thought that isn't necessarily bleak. If through destruction and carnage, mankind will still fight to keep society alive, perhaps we should be almost optimistic about the future.

It is the nature of animals to engage in war, so moviegoers shouldn't expect to see a realistic future in which "pastels are allowed," as Roeper quipped. We have to face the inevitable deterioration of society, but we are not helpless. *Children of Men* shows just one of the paths we can take. It doesn't delve into the meaning of life or man's true purpose because it only has so much time. However, Cuarón crafts this movie with a jarring sense of timelessness, a feeling that is both frightening and empowering.

