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## **CHILDREN OF MEN (2020) BY DAN DINELLO**

Review by Ezekiel Crago

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**Dinello, Dan. *Children of Men*. Auteur Press, 2019. 132 pp.**

In “Exposé of 1935,” (2003) Walter Benjamin observes that “empire is the style of revolutionary terrorism, for which the state is an end in itself” (4). Authoritarian states are ends for which any means are considered reasonable, and these states are the product, the offspring, the children of men. Dan Dinello’s analysis of Alfonso Cuarón’s film adaptation of P. D. James’ novel comprehensively documents the many ways in which *Children of Men* (1992, 2006) predicts and critiques the increasing xenophobia and rising fascism of our contemporary reality. Dinello’s book examines how the style of the film’s presentation works in conjunction with the narrative content as a mass-media entertainment spectacle that also engages viewers affectively, encouraging them to notice marginalised and oppressed groups of people who are often invisible in popular culture and not represented in expensive Hollywood productions. Set in a near-future England, the plot traces the transformation of a middle-class white man, Theo, from a state of political malaise to one of willingness to sacrifice himself for the hope of the future. This alternate timeline is struggling through a fertility crisis: no new babies have been born for some time, suggesting the end of humanity. Theo helps a pregnant black immigrant, protecting her from both government and revolutionary forces who vie for control of her body. The film adaptation juxtaposes the terrorist bombings of revolutionaries with the state of terror that the UK has become. Dinello argues that Cuarón’s realistic style, which employs extensive long takes and deep focus – what he calls the film’s “visual density” – allow the frame to be filled with background images of imprisonment and torture that are hard to ignore (9). These elements are combined with the film’s real-world references to form an “antiauthoritarian political critique” (9).

The book begins with an overview of Cuarón’s career as a director, situating this film within his attempts to be a successful filmmaker and his class-conscious series of earlier movies like *Great Expectations* (1998) and *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001). After providing this background, it examines the P. D. James novel on which Cuarón’s film is based (titled *The Children of Men*), noting the differences in the film that are the result of its historical context; released five years after the events of 9/11, the film shows a marked paranoia about terrorism and pandemics. As Dinello remarks, the film has only become more relevant over time, especially in the way that it depicts the treatment of people displaced by global turmoil: “the immigration crisis has exploded with the number of displaced people increasing more than 49%” (13). As Dinello shows using shots from the film, such people are treated worse than animals – locked in cages and dehumanised. The film’s climax takes place in a walled refugee city – a decaying urban setting with no civil services, where immigrants are placed to be ignored in a policy of benign neglect. A heterotopia comprised of many cultures and languages, it acts as synecdoche for people displaced from the equatorial areas of the globe.

After discussing the difficulty Cuarón faced in making the film due to budgetary problems and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Dinello examines an important intertext for *Children of Men*: Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). The film depicts the Algerian revolution and the atrocities committed by the French military, using a pseudo-documentary aesthetic to make the horror more real for an audience distanced from the conflict in space and time and viewing it comfortably in a movie theater. Using such a style, Dinello notes how "*Children of Men* ventures beyond standard entertainment: [for example] the character played by the film's biggest star [Julianne Moore] is shockingly murdered 28 minutes into the picture," and the camerawork and editing make it appear to be "war reportage" rather than action film footage (13).

Dinello's book then situates the film within a tradition of apocalyptic Science Fiction (SF) film and the theories of cinematic realism espoused by André Bazin. Bazin celebrated a technique of using the camera to capture reality, producing the illusion of verisimilitude wherein the camera serves as present observer of spontaneous actions unfolding, rather than following a script to portray a specific planned narrative. Dinello argues that by using this technique, and referencing actual historical events happening in the background of the action, the film creates for itself a "transhistorical mise-en-scène" that allows it to evoke past events – such as the use of Nazi concentration camps – and link these to contemporary events, like the caging of migrant populations (59).

Dinello argues that the film demonstrates the cultural logic used by a reactionary society facing an infertility crisis informed by nationalist rhetoric, resulting in xenophobia and the fear that other people's babies will populate the future – the imagining of a racial 'contamination' via a post-white world, what he calls "national apartheid" (67). According to Dinello, the film allegorises Albert Camus' figuring of fascism as a plague, a contagious social sickness, and in the film's diegesis, "the British government has succeeded in creating a counter-contagion [to the threat of racial contamination], which infects their subjects with the totalitarian virus...[and] the power of tyranny has been freely given to the government" (73). This social plague deprives people of moral choice and agency in the name of security.

Dinello's analysis of the film would benefit from an intersectional approach to the identity politics it illuminates. Although the book successfully illustrates how the film critiques the fascism of our current xenophobic nationalism, I would like to have seen more discussion of the masculinism that informs fascism, especially considering the story's name, chosen by an author known for feminist mystery novels about the evils men do. Although the book's analysis addresses the film's title as a biblical reference to Psalm 90:3, suggesting that humanity has "the opportunity to repent and find redemption," it does not interrogate the specific wording of this choice as framing device for the narrative (Dinello 109). Men do not give birth, but patriarchal society grants men ownership over children and women symbolically. This is why, as Rebekah Sheldon argues in *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (2016), a fertility crisis narrative such as this often results in captive women to ensure that this proprietary relationship between men, women, and children is maintained. An analysis of this aspect of the film's messianism would complicate the redemption suggested by Dinello. By opening up a conversation about the character of a "black female Jesus"

who is also the Virgin Mary in the figure of the miraculously pregnant Kee, Kee's role in the narrative can be understood less as messiah and more as vessel – but also as threat, bearing the possibility of a post-white future (Dinello 105).

Rather than spending what I think is too much space in the text talking about Donald Trump – who is a symptom of what the book diagnoses – and rather than discussing the biological possibility of a virgin birth, the book is missing a discussion of why this mother of the future *needs to be desexualised* by the status of virginity, making her less of a threat to men. The book reaches a compelling argument near the end when it suggests that the film articulates the possibility of a post-male world through this figure of parthenogenesis – a world which would be the Children of Women – but it does not examine how this is imbricated in the imagining of a post-white future in this figure of racialised motherhood.

This book is a very good extended analysis of the film, arguing that it welds the form and content into a political and social critique of the trend of authoritarian politics currently spreading through the Western world. Its message is particularly relevant as I write this during daily protests against authoritarian violence in the United States being met with authoritarian violence. It would have been a more persuasive argument, however, if it was grounded in a broader range of current research besides just that of biology, especially that being conducted in gender studies and critical race theory. This being said, it is a useful study of how a speculative film can provide an anamorphic lens on our contemporary social situation by shocking its audience both visually and narratively.

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#### BIONOTE

**Ezekiel Crago** earned a PhD in English at the University of California Riverside, US. He specialises in Post-Apocalyptic fiction, among other genres, and has a book forthcoming with Peter Lang entitled *Raggedy Men: Masculinity and the Mad Max Films*. He is currently a lecturer at Morgan Community College and the University of Colorado Denver.