READING FILM

ISSUE #4 | JULY 2023

Heroic Incomprehension in Cuarón's *Children of Men*

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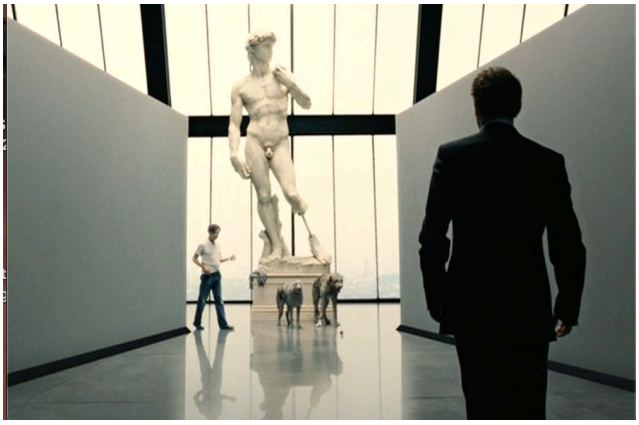
Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) imagines a whole world reduced to a single lifetime. Set amidst a global infertility crisis, it is a study of how people might live without the guarantee of an assumed future. It operates under the shadow of the "hero's journey"[1]—the cultural guide to a good life, framed by progress and redemption, shaping individual purpose as a responsibility toward collective being. Cuarón's film takes on this conventional mythic structure, but his rendition skewers its Western interpretations for the brutal realities they underwrite: in this story, the elixir is an illegitimate daughter of an African refugee who derisively jokes about being a virgin. Bereft of a future, the characters must also define their purpose vis-à-vis an altered relation to the past and to a cultural mythos now rendered impotent. Within this structure, Theo Faron (Clive Owen) becomes the hero almost accidentally, initially following his personal desire to rekindle a relationship with his ex-wife, Julian (Julianne Moore), but becoming the herald of new life among an otherwise desolate humanity. Through his character, Cuarón suggests that mythos should be relatively ignored—not to deny its impact (both positive and negative) or to disavow its beauty, but to raucously and instinctively safeguard against knowing, quietistic despair in a very real present.

Through its characterization, dialogue, mise-en-scene, and narrative purpose, the scene detailing Theo's visit to the Ministry of Art serves as the foundation for this idea. This stage in Theo's journey is his crossing of the threshold between the ordinary and special worlds, where he commits to escorting Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) to the coast and makes a false appeal to his cousin Nigel (Danny Huston) for transit papers. That Cuarón stages this checkpoint here is meaningful. Art overcomes the limitations of mortality with its attempt to capture mythos; its externally and internally referential system establishes a cultural continuity that exceeds the commentary of any of its parts. Its

1 This essay references the hero's journey, or "monomyth," through which Joseph Campbell articulated the pattern of what he saw as a universal narrative structure; in it, "a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968, 30. First published 1949.). The essay uses popularized terms for the stages of this journey, including "threshold," "guardian," and "elixir" (or boon).

presence in this distinctively calm and ordered scene offers the characters in it—Theo, Nigel, and Nigel's son, Alex (Ed Westwick)—a distance from reality and a closeness to these fragments of a collective consciousness. In turn, the scene offers us three alternative attitudes toward mythos, and by structurally favoring Theo's, we're encouraged to see it as a crucial facet of his heroism.



The sequence opens with Theo's entrance into the exhibit, which is modern in its interior design, security system, and Banksy piece, but tied to antiquity by its function and the "MMXXVII" creation date in its seal. Once Theo has made it through security, we're drawn, as he is, into Nigel's inner sanctum through an imposing shot of a one-legged *David*. Crippled by the violence of a world defined by a single collective lifetime, *David* has metaphorically lost the capacity to move, presumably at the hands of riotous individuals aiming to affirm their own temporary significance by removing the human aspects of myth or by destroying its artifice entirely. In contrast, the dogs at *David*'s feet seem to guard him in ignorance, literally and functionally operating under the shadow of art without understanding its significance. In steps Nigel, who laments that he couldn't also save the *Pietà*. Charged with gathering and securing the world's most significant works of art in this London fortress dubbed the "Ark of Arts," he is the guardian of cultural memory as well as of Theo's threshold. The works he has saved indicate a carefully curated endeavor, a planned *translatio imperii* of human meaning from the West to an unforeseen future.

The scene moves to an opulent dining table, around which art is placed in a possessive, vapid manner, especially emphasized in the personal display of Picasso's anti-war painting *Guernica*. This selfish, decadent arrangement indicates that Nigel interacts with mythos merely as a state-

approved owner. He salvages art as spoils of war, displaying it without understanding its condemnation of his wealth and status. This is confirmed by Cuarón's framing of Nigel in front of a recreation of Pink Floyd's *Animals* album cover; the industrial smog suggests urban exploitations of labor while the colossal inflatable pig references Orwell's animal allegory for the authoritarian manipulation of ideas (*Animal Farm*, 1945). In addition to his visual framing, Nigel's self-admitted relation to art and mythos is unthinking and apathetic. He deliberately remains a blind keeper of art, ignorant of its meaning and appreciative only that it signifies class and England as the cultural center of the world—even though it is assumed there will soon be no one left to interpret these signs.

If Nigel is a slavishly dead-end conduit for past glories, his son Alex is entirely absorbed in technology, which, while further removed from mythos than art like *Guernica*, contains the same key dissociation from individual reality. He is silent, and so removed from the present that Theo does not pause his discussion of illegal transit papers in front of him as he does with the servants. Nigel only addresses him once, to dredge up his consciousness and remind him to take his required medication—a forced interaction. Alex embodies an approach toward mythos as a virtual reality, beyond individual life. The camera breaks him into pieces, further equating his consummation of mythos and being. He wears art—tattoos, a bold argyle pattern, an intricate game accessory—signifying personal taste but subsuming personhood. On the opposite end of a spectrum from his ego-centered father, he effectively sacrifices personal autonomy and sublimates himself into a limitless mythos through his direct interaction with collective consciousness.

In contrast to these two, the film's ongoing dynamic between mythos and reality points through Theo towards the virtue of a different balance. More fully developed as a person than Alex, Theo

is aligned more with the dogs in the scene than with Nigel. Nigel's ignorance of the mythic takes the form of selfish opposition to its communal quality; he can curate its artifice only insofar as he does not consider his own relation to time, other people, or the confrontational intent behind the art he proudly presents. The dogs function in a different kind of unconscious relation to art and culture. Due to their limited understanding of mortality, they, unlike the vandals who crippled *David*, are able to contribute to communal purpose without personal hostility. Theo's entry into the Ark attaches to him both a wry mundanity and a capacity to be moved beyond himself. This is captured first by the personal effects he leaves on the metal detector tray, signs of both daily function and personal escape obscuring the pompous seal in a haphazardly aesthetic tableau. Then, as he enters the apartment and is greeted by *David*, his expressions register initial awe, then appreciation. When we see *David*, Theo is shot from behind, in silhouette—a relatively common choice by Cuarón, who also shoots him out of focus in multiple key moments. This is a series of characterizations that forecast his heroic journey in the film. Motivated first by a personal desire to ease the pain of his present by reconnecting to his past, he fulfills his heroic function even after Julian's death. Careless of his own mortality, he delivers Kee and her baby to the "Tomorrow" not as the bearer of the elixir but out of genuine concern for them, first, and what they promise for humanity second. In the film's threaded-in analogy to the birth of Jesus, Theo is the functional Joseph, uncomprehending of the mythic outcome of his actions but sensing enough to make it possible. His uncomprehending heroism, using mythos as an inherent, heuristic aid towards a personal understanding of reality, allows him to operate within collective consciousness without collapsing under its weight.

In addition to guarding the statue of *David*, dogs are a constant presence in Theo's journey. He gambles on dog races; he follows women who hold dogs like infants, first into the Fishes' plot and then through a large part of the Bexhill long take. They embody a kindred sort of senseless vitality that humanity lost with its fertility. Their diegetic barking also persistently contrasts with the score as background noise, rooting the characters and the audience in the realism of the film and reality of Theo's journey. The dogs' affinity for Theo, mentioned once offhandedly and reinforced through this constant narrative parallelism, is more than a passing attempt to signal Theo's likability—he, like them, is unaware of his identity in relation to mythos, symbolism, and the hero's journey, and is functioning within that role almost instinctively.

With its presentation of Theo, Nigel, and Alex in the Ark of Arts sequence and beyond, *Children of Men* solidifies its own relation to mythos and the long line of artistic representations that have attempted to embody it. Being formed from the same substance as such referential, timeless, and ultimately fruitless cultural mediums, the film finds itself tracing the border of their long shadow, incorporating their voices as foundational meaning and staking out their worth. T.S. Eliot's *The*

Waste Land, a fragmented and heavily allusive poem with similar themes, is one of these influences. It shows up throughout the film in a variety of ways, but its presence can be felt the most in a mirrored portrayal of the dogs that so aptly complement Theo. The dogs of *The Waste Land* are antagonistic forces of nature—their unthinking behavior is anathema to Eliot and his myriad speakers, whose method of fending off mortality is to directly and knowingly join the fragments of art, and by doing so, reach an absolute understanding. With his characterization of Theo, Cuarón rejects Eliot's path towards such meaningful conclusion, stopping instead to embrace the dog where it has been cast aside for its threatening simplicity of purpose. In other words, upon finally defining the bounds of that looming artistic shadow, *Children of Men* boldly steps out into the blinding light of an unwitting heroism by ceasing to wonder at the difference of its two paces. ❦

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Cuarón, Alfonso, director. *Children of Men*. 2006; Universal Studios, 2007. DVD.