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New York Times | Movie Review | 'Children of Men'

Apocalypse Now, but in the Wasteland a Child Is Given

By MANOHLA DARGIS

The end is nigh in “Children of Men,” the superbly directed political thriller by Alfonso Cuarón about a nervously plausible future. It’s 2027, and the human race is approaching the terminus of its long goodbye. Cities across the globe are in flames, and the “siege of Seattle” has entered Day 1,000. In a permanent war zone called Britain, smoke pours into the air as illegal immigrants are swept into detainment camps. It’s apocalypse right here, right now — the end of the world as we knew and loved it, if not nearly enough.

Based in broad outline on the 1992 dystopian novel by P. D. James about a world suffering from global infertility — and written with a nod to Orwell by Mr. Cuarón and his writing partner Timothy J. Sexton along with David Arata, Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby — “Children of Men” pictures a world that looks a lot like our own, but darker, grimmer and more frighteningly, violently precarious. It imagines a world drained of hope and defined by terror in which bombs regularly explode in cafes crowded with men and women on their way to work. It imagines the unthinkable: What if instead of containing Iraq, the world has become Iraq, a universal battleground of military control, security zones, refugee camps and warring tribal identities?

Merry Christmas! Seriously. “Children of Men” may be something of a bummer, but it’s the kind of glorious bummer that lifts you to the rafters, transporting you with the greatness of its filmmaking. Like Clint Eastwood’s “Letters From Iwo Jima,” another new film that holds up a mirror to these times, Mr. Cuarón’s speculative fiction is a gratifying sign that big studios are still occasionally in the business of making ambitious, intelligent work that speaks to adults. And much like Mr. Eastwood’s most recent war movie, much like the best genre films of Hollywood history, “Children of Men” doesn’t announce its themes from a bully pulpit, with a megaphone in hand and Oscar in mind, but through the beauty of its form.

It may seem strange, even misplaced to talk of beauty given the horror of the film’s explosive opening. For Theo, the emotionally, physically enervated employee of the Ministry of Energy played without a shred of actorly egotism by Clive Owen, the day begins with a cup of coffee, an ear-shattering explosion and a screaming woman holding her severed arm. The Mexican-born Mr. Cuarón, whose previous credits include the children’s films “A Little Princess” (1995) and “Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban” (2004), as well as the supremely sexy road movie “Y Tu Mamá También” (2001), has always had a dark streak. But nothing in his résumé prepares you for the shocking realism of this explosion, which proves all the more terrible because here it is also so very commonplace.

Britain, it emerges, is in permanent lockdown. As the specter of humanity’s end looms, the world has been torn apart by sectarian violence. Britain has closed its borders (the Chunnel too), turning illegal

aliens into Public Enemy No. 1. Theo and the other gray men and women adrift in London don't seem to notice much.

Everywhere there are signs and warnings, surveillance cameras and security patrols. "The world has collapsed," a public service announcement trumpets, "only Britain soldiers on." The verb choice is horribly apt, since heavily armed soldiers are ubiquitous. They flank the streets and train platforms, guarding the pervasive metal cages crammed with a veritable Babel of humanity, illegal immigrants who have fled to Britain from hot spots, becoming refugees or "fugees" for short.

Among the fugees is Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey), the linchpin of the story and its defiantly hopeful heart because she's pregnant, the first woman on earth to carry a child after 18 barren years. Theo meets Kee through his former lover, Julian (Julianne Moore), the leader of an underground cadre, the Fishes (Chiwetel Ejiofor and Charlie Hunnam, among others), who, having renounced violence if not their heavy guns or lugubrious rhetoric, are fighting for immigrant rights.

Avowedly apolitical, Theo agrees to help the Fishes deliver Kee into the ministering care of a shadowy, perhaps apocryphal utopian group, the Human Project. En route, though, the plan goes violently awry, forcing Theo, Kee and a Fish member and former midwife, Miriam (Pam Ferris), to go on the run, first by car and then by foot.

Where they eventually land is in a hell that looks chillingly similar to the Iraqi combat areas of newspaper reportage, television news and mostly uncensored documentaries. There are several heart-gripping set pieces before then, including a hugely unsettling ambush scene shot almost entirely from inside a car crammed with passengers.

The action is swift, ferocious, spectacularly choreographed, with bodies careening wildly amid a fusillade of bullets and flying glass. Yet what lingers isn't the technical virtuosity; it's that after the car screeches off, Mr. Cuarón's camera quietly lingers behind to show us two dead policemen, murdered in the name of an ideal and left like road kill. He forces us to look at the unspeakable and in doing so opens up a window onto the film's moral landscape.

"Children of Men" has none of the hectoring qualities that tend to accompany good intentions in Hollywood. Most of the people doing the preaching turn out to be dreadfully, catastrophically misguided; everyone else seems to be holding on, like Theo's friend Jasper (Michael Caine, wonderful), a former political cartoonist who bides his time with laughter and a lot of homegrown weed while listening to Beatles covers and rap. Still others, like Theo's wealthy cousin, Nigel (Danny Huston, equally fine), who's stashing away masterpieces like Michelangelo's "David" for safekeeping in his private museum while Rome, New York and probably Guernica burn, can only smile as they swill another glass of wine. Hope isn't the only thing that floats, as a song on the soundtrack reminds us.

The writer Kurt Andersen observed not long ago that we Americans are in an apocalyptic frame of mind. Mr. Andersen thinks that the latest in apocalypticism partly owes something to the aging baby boomers confronting their own impending doom, Sept. 11 and global warming notwithstanding. That's one way to look at it, though the recent elections suggest that more than a few of those boomers are looking past their own reflection out at the world. Working with his cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, Mr. Cuarón manufactures war zones of extraordinary plausibility in this film, but

equally amazing is how, through a carbon-blue palette, handheld camerawork and the sag of a man's shoulders, he conjures the hopelessness and the despair that I imagine many of us feel when we wake up to news of another fatal car bombing in Iraq.

There are, Mr. Cuarón suggests in "Children of Men," different ways of waking up. You can either wake up and close your ears and eyes, or like Theo you can wake up until all your senses are roaring. Early in the film Theo and the restlessly moving camera seem very much apart, as Mr. Cuarón keeps a distance from the characters.

Every so often the camera pointedly drifts away from Theo, as it does with the dead policemen, to show us a weeping old woman locked in a cage or animals burning on pyres. In time, though, the camera comes closer to Theo as he opens his eyes — to a kitten crawling up his leg, to trees rustling in the wind — until, in one of the most astonishing scenes of battle I've ever seen on film, it is running alongside him, trying to keep pace with a man who has finally found a reason to keep going.

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