




ARTICLE

Refugees, Extinction, and the Regulation of Death in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi 

University of Silesia, Poland

Email: ewa.macura-nnamdi@us.edu.pl

Abstract

This article is an attempt to make sense of the paradox structuring the narrative of extinction in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), which juxtaposes a romanticized image of survival and rebirth and the ugliness of senseless death. Departing from a biopolitical framework, the article argues that Cuarón's story represents extinction as beyond redemption yet as subject to regulation. Given the fact that the narrative is structured around the citizen/refugee nexus, I read the film as a story about the eschatological value of refugees to both cultural conceptualizations of human extinction and a reproduction of statist political identities. The film is thus not only about unequal access to death but also about how the difference between the citizen and the refugee can still be maintained in the face of climatic extinction when the regulation of life is no longer sufficient.

Keywords: extinction; refugees; *Children of Men*; Alfonso Cuarón; climate

The end of Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men* has rightly been recognized as a key (we might even say Kee) moment in the narrative.¹ It shows Theo and Kee in a rowboat, sailing away from the British coast, anxious to find a buoy where they hope to be taken aboard a mysterious Human Project ship. Theo is an English government employee and former activist, just about to die from a gunshot he sustained while assisting Kee in her flight from Britain; Kee is an African refugee holding her day-old daughter, a child miraculously conceived in a world marred by incurable infertility. The Human Project is a secret humanitarian organization allegedly dedicated to alleviating the global sterility. As Theo and Kee debate whether they missed the ship, their voices accompanied by nothing but the sound of the lapping waves, a squadron of military planes whisks above their heads, toward Bexhill, a refugee camp from which they have just

¹ *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón); DVD, 2006. All subsequent quotations from the film are from this source.

escaped. The flare of explosions lighting the grayish horizon stands in sharp contrast to the relief and tranquility of the scene, and it briefly interrupts their conversation as they look toward the coast, slightly puzzled though largely unconcerned about the destruction at the camp. Moments later, Kee spots the Human Project ship, emerging from the dense mist, puncturing the retro aesthetics of the image and dwarfing the small wooden rowboat rocked relentlessly by sea waves. Seconds later, the camera recedes, restoring the nostalgic haziness and monochromatic feel of the images that end the film.

There are, no doubt, reasons why these scenes prove such a memorable finale. They cast a Black female refugee in a boat as an agent of planetary redemption rather than as just a victim of states and seas. They speak to the visual tropes of the “public representations of migration crisis today,”² replacing death with life, danger with innocence, and neglect with rescue. They have been given ample critical attention in their cinematic capacity to sustain ambivalence, brimming as they are with conflicting sentiments, purposeful understatement, and subdued aesthetics. My focus falls, however, on the less remarked detail of those closing scenes, and it extends beyond the moral triumph that marks the ending. It turns to the flare of explosions and the whisking planes puncturing the otherwise serene landscape of the lapping waves, rocking boat, and the solemn score of John Tavener’s music. Something seems amiss in the tension the film creates between the promise of survival embodied, however problematically, by Kee and her child and the massacre going on at the camp. This article is an attempt to make sense of the paradox structuring the narrative of extinction the film proposes as it juxtaposes a romanticized image of survival³ and rebirth and

² William Walters, “Migration, Vehicles, and Politics: Three Theses on Viapolitics,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 18.4 (2015): 469–88, esp. 475.

³ This promise is tenuous at best given that the film earlier casts human extinction explicitly as beyond repair (as Theo says to Jasper, his hippie friend, when they speak about the Human Project: “You know, even if these people existed with these facilities in secret locations... Even if they discovered the cure for infertility, it doesn’t matter. Too late. The world went to shit.”). Importantly, the film never reveals how Kee’s fertility might or could be used in the future (the very fact that it would have to be *used* already compromises the promise she holds). In fact, as has been noted, it is precisely what mars the optimism of the film’s ending. Latimer, for example, asks us to “Consider that neither Kee nor any of the other characters is concerned about what might happen to her and her body once she makes it to the Human Project, although she will undoubtedly undergo a huge array of medical tests, including the potential harvesting of her eggs”; Heather Latimer, “Bio-Reproductive Futurism: Bare Life and Pregnant Refugee in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*,” *Social Text* 29.3 (2011): 51–72, esp. 66. Alys Eve Weinbaum takes this argument further arguing that the celebratory readings of Cuarón’s film rest on certain assumptions: “that the *Tomorrow*’s crew will treat Kee as a full human being rather than as a less-than-human refugee, an experimental animal from whom they may extract eggs and other biological products; second, that Kee’s infant will likewise be treated as a full human being rather than as a black womb in the making, a natural resource whose fertile eggs are waiting to be mined”; Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism’s Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 182. Also, the ending of the film remains ambiguous in that it never reveals Kee’s embarkation on the ship she so desperately strove to meet. As Heather Latimer notes, the film “ends before we see if Kee actually makes it to the Human Project” (67). Apart from these ethical ambiguities, the film simply shrouds Kee’s fertility in a symbolism that avoids pragmatic answers and proceeds from an assumption that one woman’s fertility could redeem a world barren for eighteen years.

the ugliness of senseless death. The scenes of violence unfolding at the refugee camp are represented metonymically only, as the camera, focused on Kee's redemptive beauty rather than the carnage the audible bombing no doubt effects, withholds our access to any visual details. This article aims to examine the relation between the invisible destruction of refugee life and the promise of life perpetuation the Human Project ship named *Tomorrow* brings in its wake and Kee is made to hold and fulfill.

Children of Men has already generated an extensive and compelling body of critical work that engages with its manifold meanings and offers fascinating insights into a number of important issues. For instance, some critics focus on biopolitics and racism thus drawing our attention to "the production of racialized subjects"⁴ and Black surrogacy as "the afterlife of reproductive slavery."⁵ Heather Latimer develops a feminist critique of Cuarón's cinematic representation of bare life arguing that his cinematic take on biopolitics juxtaposes the refugee to the fetus, which, as Sparling likewise notes, turns Kee into a contradictory figure who is an object of both the politics of death and life.⁶ Sarah Trimble, too, centers her reading around Kee, placing it in the context of speculative fiction and its "fantasies of in/fertility and reproductive control," on one hand, and the transatlantic slavery on the other.⁷ For both Latimer and Trimble, Kee is *the* figure for biopolitical order, her body pregnant with the future as well as the past. Along similar lines, Alys Eve Weinbaum argues *Children of Men* is a narrative that reiterates the "racialized exploitation of human reproductive labor"⁸ in how it makes narrative use of "black womb" and its fertility.⁹ In this reading, the staging of Kee as a character is tied to what Weinbaum calls the "slave episteme," a way of thinking that enables "forms of gendered and racialized exploitation of human reproductive labor."¹⁰ A number of other critics have focused on Cuarón's aesthetic strategies and his unique cinematic style, which comprises technicalities such as camerawork but also the cultural citations underlying the story he narrates.¹¹ Nearly all critics note the film's engagement with post-9/11 politics (for example, its direct allusions to Abu Ghraib and the Guantánamo Bay camp) as well as its references to the Holocaust.¹²

⁴ Zahid R. Chaudhary, "Humanity Adrift: Race, Materiality, and Allegory in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," *Camera Obscura* 24.3 (2009): 73–109, esp. 75.

⁵ Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 181.

⁶ Latimer, "Bio-Reproductive Futurism"; Nicole L. Sparling, "Without a Conceivable Future: Figuring the Mother in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35.1 (2014): 160–80.

⁷ Sarah Trimble, "Maternal Back/grounds in *Children of Men*," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4.2 (2011): 249–70, esp. 251.

⁸ Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 1–2.

⁹ Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 179.

¹⁰ Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 1.

¹¹ Julia Echeverría Domingo, "Liquid Cinematography and the Representation of Viral Threats in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 37.2 (2015): 137–53; Samuel Amago, "Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," *Discourse* 32.2 (2010): 212–35.

¹² For example, see Amago, "Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," and Latimer, "Bio-Reproductive Futurism: Bare Life and Pregnant Refugee in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*."

The wealth and breadth of these readings are both impressive and compelling, yet none engage the environmental underpinnings of the film's premise, that is, the global infertility that positions the world in the film on the brink of extinction. Tyler Austin Harper is, to the best of my knowledge, the only critic to more extensively examine the ecological implications of *Children of Men* and to also situate the narrative in a broader context of climate change and the Anthropocene discourses.¹³ According to Harper, Cuarón's film rests on a way of thinking he calls "paranoid anthropocentrism," that is, a logic "predicated on the notion that the human species is at once the site of a *permanent emergency* (always-already vulnerable to extinction at the hands of a hostile environment) and is a species with the unique capacity to self-consciously direct its own survival."¹⁴ Yet what enables this paranoid anthropocentrism is simultaneously a sacrificial logic, the idea that for some lives to survive and competently manage their survival, other lives must be sacrificed, used "as 'buffers' to terrestrial violence that characterizes the apocalyptic imaginary in the Anthropocene... . marginalized bodies are often tacitly conceived as exploitable *natural resources* in the struggle for human survival on the warming planet."¹⁵ It is precisely "the link between universalist fantasies of human survival and the sacrifice of highly particular forms of human life" that Harper identifies as structuring narratives such as *Children of Men*.¹⁶ He therefore reads Cuarón's film as a story premised on the exploitability of Kee's body meant to facilitate the survival of the dying world population. In this reading, Kee represents and also reveals the critical shift from the idea that the coming catastrophe can be alleviated to the racist idea that this alleviation requires "marginalized bodies" to become possible.¹⁷

Harper's intervention into the constantly growing body of scholarship on *Children of Men* is noteworthy for its recognition of the significance of the environmental script, which is more than a mere backdrop to the more prominent narrative elements. Rather, the script is what narratively enables the story itself. Kee must be cast as a "corporeal field open to" various forms of "extraction and exploitation" so that she can fulfill the project of salvation the "apocalyptic imaginary in the Anthropocene" requires.¹⁸ My own reading allies itself with Harper's in that it also zeroes in on the narrative of extinction Cuarón's film proposes; yet it also moves beyond paranoid anthropocentrism, which is read by Harper as ultimately working in the service of a biopolitical order and entails both a regulation of life and the politics of "unequal survival."¹⁹ If in Harper's reading, *Children of Men* is a work of speculative fiction in which the coming extinction can still be mitigated and undone, my take on Cuarón's story suggests the film represents extinction as beyond redemption, as an inexorable

¹³ Tyler Austin Harper, "Unequal Survival: Climate Fiction, Paranoid Anthropocentrism, and the Politics of Existential Risk," *Paradoxa* 31 (2019–2020): 425–43.

¹⁴ Harper, "Unequal Survival," 435.

¹⁵ Harper, "Unequal Survival," 427.

¹⁶ Harper, "Unequal Survival," 427.

¹⁷ Harper, "Unequal Survival," 429.

¹⁸ Harper, "Unequal Survival," 429, 427.

¹⁹ Harper, "Unequal Survival," 428.

catastrophe that has been accepted rather than combatted. In the face of such biopolitical undoing (where life is no longer in the interest of power), what's left is a regulation of death that redefines the familiar biopolitical protocol into a new dispensation: the management of *everyone's* death. At the same time, however, the narrative retains the sacrificial element of the dominant climate change Harper identifies. Yet here, in this postapocalyptic world Cuarón depicts, it is the refugees, hailing from a variety of places and cultures, who serve as the "corporeal field" enabling the British citizens' death by choice. Thus, the usefulness of this sacrifice lies not in its prolongation of the lives deemed worthy of living but in its provision of the power to control everyone's death. It could be said, in other words, that *Children of Men* is a story about the domestication of extinction through an orchestration of dying of those the film depicts as disposable, that is, the refugees. Given the fact that the narrative is structured around the citizen/refugee nexus, it is, therefore, a story about the eschatological value of refugees to both cultural conceptualizations of human extinction and a reproduction of statist political identities (it is how and when the people in the film can die that signals and defines their political status). As such, *Children of Men* is not necessarily about "unequal survival" but, rather, about unequal access to death. It is thus also about how the difference between the citizen and the refugee can still be maintained in the face of climatic extinction when the regulation of life is no longer sufficient.²⁰

Domesticating Extinction

If any sense of emergency marks the 2027 Britain where the plot of the film unfolds, it does not stem from the "sterilizing effect[s] of a contaminated world"²¹ but instead from the pervasive and overwhelming presence of refugees who, as it is suggested, seek asylum in Britain, which remains the only livable place in a world completely devastated by environmental degradation

²⁰ The narrative of Cuarón's film never moves beyond the political division into citizens and refugees. In fact, maintaining this division is what drives the story: Kee's narrative exceptionality lies precisely in her not being the citizen of the British state (much less than in her race). When the *Fishes* discuss her future after the assassination of Julian (Theo's ex-wife and head of the *Fishes*) and Kee's going public with her pregnancy is considered as one of the options, it is recognized that her *fugee* status would deprive her of her child. As one of the members of the *Fishes* says: "Look, the government will take her baby and parade a posh black English lady as the mother. And she'll never see it again... . We all know the government would never acknowledge the first human birth in 18 years from a *fugee*." The political value of her pregnancy stems from her political status. Also, the long and frantic escape from Britain (the travel to the coast and the ordeal it involves) where Kee must hide not simply her pregnancy but more importantly her identity, is primarily driven by her illegal status. This is why Theo and Kee are heading to the Bexhill refugee camp where Kee can literally disappear from the national radar becoming invisible to the state. It could be said that the film radicalizes the division by eliminating other political categories normally in place in relation to citizenship (e.g., immigrants, asylum seekers, or even foreigners) when the state illegalizes all foreigners as a matter of homeland security policy in advance defining everyone who arrives in Britain as a *fugee* intended to be reported on and removed to the camp.

²¹ Jayna Brown, "The Human Project," *Transition* 110 (2013): 121–135, esp. 125.

and wars. Indeed, the film opens with a news bulletin not only announcing the continuation of Britain's nationalist politics but also revealing it is a state under siege: "The Homeland Security bill is ratified. After eight years, British borders will remain closed. The deportation of illegal immigrants will continue."²² From the beginning, then, the narrative ties the ongoing crisis to the unabated influx of refugees, which also suggests that the closure is never quite complete. Indeed, this pervasive sense of emergency is heightened precisely by the apparent porosity of the heavily guarded borders and the related demands the state imposes on the citizens. Put on a permanent alert, they are required to carry out constant surveillance of the never-abating flow of refugees and denounce them.²³ We can see hundreds of them locked in cages and policed by the military; we can hear from megaphones about their ubiquity across national spaces and households; we see regular transports bringing them to a refugee camp. The reiterated announcements define the refugees as a ubiquitous threat to be contained through common forms of vigilance and in the name of a nationalized safety: "She's my house cleaner. He's the plumber. He's my dentist. He's the waiter. She's my cousin. They are illegal immigrants. To hire, feed or shelter illegal immigrants is a crime. Protect Britain. Report all illegal immigrants."

What's interesting here is that the narrative of the film evidently rests on a paradox: here is a proliferating body of illegal migrants beyond the formidable calculations of the forthcoming extinction, juxtaposed with the withering population of the British citizens hit by a fertility crisis. This proliferation of foreign bodies, also referred to as "cockroaches," thus figures what is disgusting but also beyond control and difficult to eradicate. They are, therefore, also represented as in need of constant military supervision. For example, fully armed soldiers in combat gear and police in heavy armor guard caged, defenseless *fugees* and public spaces as if they constituted the forthcoming apocalypse. The disparity between the vulnerability of the refugees and the scale of the statist response to their presence is not only revealing of the unswerving loyalty to political categories hardly tenable anymore, but also stands in a sharp contrast to the apparent composure maintained by the British state in the face of extinction. In the film,

²² Although it might be tempting to read the British state here as exemplifying the state of exception, it in fact does not exactly correspond to Agamben's definition of the concept in his *State of Exception*. According to Agamben, the state of exception is "a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism" (3), the assumption being that a return to democracy is possible or at least calculated as a possibility. It is clear, however, that the 2027 Britain lies entirely beyond any democratic parameters and no return to it is envisaged as possible. It may well be the reason why *Children of Men* exceeds biopolitical frameworks that rest on the segregation of bare life from the other politically viable forms of living. On the state of exception, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²³ Hee-Jung Serenity Joo also notes the proliferation of illegal migrants in the film, yet the question she explores is the clash between the "invasion of illegal immigrants (too many bodies) ... with the crisis of human fertility (not enough bodies)." Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, "Reluctant Heroes and Petty Tyrants: Reproducing Race in the Global War on Terror in *Children of Men* and *District 9*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 71.2 (2015): 61–86, esp. 69.

extinction becomes an incidental event, something that may be mourned but is not subject to intervention. That is, the coming end of times does not necessitate any extraordinary measures to be vigorously implemented but is, instead, placidly anticipated.

This composure, at times also represented as indifference, can be glimpsed at various moments in the narrative and is tied to a number of different actors: the government, the citizens, and also the antistate anarchic group called the *Fishes*. Strangely enough, there is only one government figure in the film: the Minister of Art, who is also Theo's cousin. Theo pays him a visit early on in the narrative to ask for a favor. He needs transit papers for Kee and himself so that they can reach the refugee camp at Bexhill. Nigel is preoccupied with the *Ark of the Arts* project, a collection of world art masterpieces looted from the collapsing world outside Britain. Although the visit has been read mainly for the abundance of cultural iconography that pervades the *mise-en-scène*, its high and popular registers such as Picasso's *Guernica* hanging on the wall or the giant inflatable pig hovering outside the window (an unmistakable reference to Pink Floyd's 1977 album *Animals*),²⁴ Nigel's demeanor is no less significant here. Shocked by Nigel's dedication to the project, Theo asks: "A hundred years from now, there won't be one sad fucker to look at any of this. What keeps you going?" Nigel responds coolly: "You know what it is, Theo? I just don't think about it." Busy saving works of art rather than people (the people of today and tomorrow), Nigel epitomizes the widespread acceptance of the end of humanity that pervades the narrative but also reveals this end to be something no longer battled against.

A similar disregard for the looming future characterizes the anti-government group the *Fishes*, whose political agenda includes a fight for the equality of all and for the end of the state's anti-immigrant policies. They are, in their own words, a group "at war with the British government until they recognize equal rights for every immigrant in Britain." As such, however, their fight never transcends the existing political paradigms, focused as it is on fixing the present rather than envisioning the future. Even their ruthless plan to claim Kee's child as a symbol of solidarity for the oppressed ultimately fails to address any agenda beyond the current politics of a single nation-state. Less interested in the redemptory potential (however tenuous it may be) with which she is credited by the narrative, the *Fishes* are committed to a politics that does not transgress the geographical borders of Britain nor the temporal borders of the present moment. Their political vision, therefore, does not account for the pervasive problem of infertility and the ecological degradation underpinning it and is directed only to the undoing of the Homeland Security Bill. Although the *Fishes*' struggle for the rights of refugees seems commendable at first, it does not promise liberation from the logic of the state. But then again, their planned appropriation of Kee's child reveals not only their politically myopic vision but also their apparent acquiescence to the ongoing extinction.

²⁴ See for example, Amago, "Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," 219; Chaudhary, "Humanity Adrift," 81.

This acquiescence also manifests itself elsewhere in the film. We can see it in Theo's old hippie friend Jasper, for whom infertility, and thus the extinction it brings in its wake, is an object of jokes, something to be spoken about in jest rather than to be worried about. Or we can glimpse it in the collective mourning of Diego, "the youngest person on the planet" who has just been killed in Buenos Aires as the film opens, showing us scenes of almost ludicrous despair and grief expressed and felt for a distant stranger. But this act of mass mourning renders extinction as already beyond redemption. Mourning entails loss; it is a reaction to it. It is clear that the loss at stake here is not Diego himself, but the dying humanity he represents. We might also want to note the images of quotidian life where the reproduction of the everyday goes on unaffected except by the ever-present threat of migrant illegality (hence the constant presence of the police whose task remains the maintenance of national purity). For example, the Ministry of Energy is depicted as a place of uninterrupted work, the regularity of which is interrupted only by events such as Diego's death. There is nothing to even remotely suggest that emergencies other than the influx of refugees might be unfolding in the vicinity of the routinized existence. Buses are taken, coffee is drunk, trains run according to schedule. The ending world is preserved in figurines, photographs, and newspaper clips decorating houses and work spaces, its departure domesticated and thus familiarized into an awaited event. Yet nothing in the film is more emblematic of the tacit acceptance of the coming end than the suicide kits the "daddy government" hands out for free to its citizens. *Quietus*, as the drug is called, advertised ubiquitously across both public and private spaces, high-lights, as Amago argues, an "impatience for death,"²⁵ which is also, at the same time, a corporate-driven circumvention of extinction.

These instances of a more or less tacit acceptance of the coming end of times are not only eerily surprising in how they reveal a domestication of human extinction, but they also indicate that a reinvention of the future is beyond the stakes of (the national) politics. What is not surprising, however, is the reproduction of the present, that is also, simultaneously, a reproduction of existing political categories and the brutal realities they bring in their wake in spite of the looming extinction and ecological degradation unfolding elsewhere in the world. This is to say that the acquiescence we witness across Britain's dystopian spaces comes to be fed by its opposite, a steadfast refusal to let go. Differently put, it requires a constantly policed and maintained difference between those unconcerned about dying out and those desperate to live. The latter are not, significantly, the beneficiaries of the widespread distribution of *Quietus*.

Looking closely at the widespread acceptance of the end demonstrated by the British citizens, it is difficult, therefore, not to see how the persecuted refugees progressively become a locus of the nation's psychic investments in the production of these affects of indifference. The narrative secures this function by representing refugees as always, and by definition, desiring of life (a desire that at times acquires ludicrous proportions when juxtaposed with the various

²⁵ Amago, "Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," 218.

manifestations of the nationwide composure). They arrive in Britain, it is suggested, escaping the global disintegration and environmental catastrophe. Their escape from the sites of political and ecological crisis (“Africa Devastated by Nuclear Fall Out,” “Russia Detonates Nuclear Bomb”) testifies to this will to live, especially given that Britain is represented as the only state to be surviving this planetary turmoil. When Theo travels outside London to visit Jasper by train, the TVs on board tirelessly broadcast world news showing us major cities and capitals as sites of irreparable destruction to simply conclude: “The world has collapsed.” Amid the all-encompassing worldwide crisis, “Only Britain soldiers on.” When Theo and Jasper are overtaken by a bus full of *fugees*, Jasper represents this desire to live as animal instinct: “After escaping the worst atrocities and finally making it to England, our government hunts them down like cockroaches.” Although cockroaches are seen as figures of contamination, disgust, and proliferation, they are also known for their resilient nature and adaptability.

The film ties these abilities to refugees not only by representing them as insects scurrying away from catastrophic disasters but also by depicting them as ready to adapt to squalor and make do within the junky environment of the camp. The way the Bexhill camp is visually introduced into the narrative as a smoldering dump site, a crawling and toxic rubbish heap belching out plumes of sooty smoke, only to be shown, from inside, as a space where life in fact persists, underlines the refugees’ desperate urge to live. The film consistently represents refugees as impatient for life rather than death, their arrival in Britain a clear manifestation of a refusal to die in the first place, yet it also goes to great lengths to make this desperation visible to the spectators within the narrative and beyond it. It is therefore represented as something that must be seen, something that is turned into a public spectacle (the caged refugees populating streets and platforms, in particular, evidence this visual dynamic), which the British citizens cannot evade but which they also require as a yardstick with which to measure their own distance to death.

Disappearance

This aesthetics of desperation highlights the division the story maintains into those who are desperate to live and those reconciled with dying. Yet it thus also brings into relief the refugees’ availability for destruction (it is only by representing them as desiring life that the taking of their life can acquire personal and political significance). What underlies this availability and thus aides the apocalyptic imaginary of the film is an assumption without which the story could neither proceed nor progress to its culminating moment, that is, the massacre at the camp. This is to say that the narrative fate of refugees is enabled by an assumption that exceeds the fictional parameters of the story: the already given political vulnerability of refugees persistently tied to both the tropes and realities of disappearance and destruction. The former follows logically from the legal specificity of refugeehood. In a sense, disappearance is already inscribed into the political category of the refugee. As Catherine Dauvergne succinctly, if

somewhat dreadfully, puts it, “All states want refugees to disappear.”²⁶ Although obviously not meaning it literally, Dauvergne reflects on the underlying assumptions of the refugee regime according to which refugees are generated by a temporary malfunction of an otherwise efficient structure of states: “The system ... embeds the idea that some states produce refugees, and that this production is because of a defect within the state.”²⁷ All refugee agencies, including the UNHCR, whose constitution “has to be renewed every five years,” were devised to be short-lived, reflecting the temporary existence of the refugee within the international system of nation-states, but also a conviction that whenever the defect was corrected, and protection no longer needed, refugees could shed their crisis identity and resume their national selves.²⁸ In his plea for a separation of the “concept of the refugee from that of the ‘Rights of man,’” Giorgio Agamben likewise captures the temporary character of the refugee status: “That there is no autonomous space within the political order of the nation state for something like the pure man in himself is evident at least in the fact that, even in the best of cases, the status of the refugee is always considered a temporary condition that should lead either to naturalization or to repatriation.”²⁹

If *Children of Men* takes this political nature of refugeehood to its logical conclusion, literally executing the refugees’ disappearance, it is also because it reflects what Achille Mbembe has called the society of enmity, a recent radicalization of hostility that turns enemies into objects of destruction. In his text, Mbembe defines and examines the present-day conception of the political as “a phantasy of extermination,” one that envisions, among others, the extinction of the enemy, also feeding on increasing acceptance of various forms of violence.³⁰ His analysis offers an insight into a political logic that entails more than a need for apartheid, for a “regime of separation” even if it derives from the colonial regimes of the past.³¹ The political originates in the desire to eradicate the enemies spawned by the “psychic life of nations.”³² In Mbembe’s formulation, “the desire for the enemy” generates zones of annihilation where the enemy’s “complete disappearance” can be both imagined and effected.³³ Hence the appearance of all sorts of “security structures,” the function of which is not only or merely to separate but, if need be, to facilitate destruction.³⁴

Cuarón’s film narrates this “psychic life of nations” and the way it transforms refugees from subjects of protection (as the traditional refugee regime defines

²⁶ Catherine Dauvergne, “Refugee Law as Perpetual Crisis,” in *Contemporary Issues in Refugee Law*, eds. Satvinder Singh Juss and Colin Harvey (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013): 13–30, esp. 18.

²⁷ Dauvergne, “Refugee Law as Perpetual Crisis,” 18.

²⁸ Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 31.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “We Refugees,” *Symposium* 49, no. 2 (1995): 114–19, esp. 116.

³⁰ Achille Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity,” *Radical Philosophy* 200 (2016): 23–35, esp. 24.

³¹ Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity,” 24.

³² Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity,” 26.

³³ Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity,” 23.

³⁴ Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity,” 23.

them) into objects of destruction. At the core of the refugee definition (however flawed it may have been) is both a loss and a provision of refuge. The historical development of this political concept (and the realities to which it has been understood to refer) testifies to this fundamental principle underpinning Western ideas of refugeehood. Irrespective of the actual reasons driving people from home (be it religious persecution as was the case with French Huguenots or political persecution in the times of the Cold War, to name just two), and also irrespective of the legal, historically contingent, recognition of what warrants asylum, the idea of protection has invariably driven the theory and practice of refugeehood. Significantly, the apparently unrelenting influx of *fugees* *Children of Men* narrates, reorients these optics, redefining the political stakes of this familiar regime even though it still clings to “the legal distinction between citizens and aliens,”³⁵ the lynchpin of the nation-state and the refugee regime that it conditions.³⁶ The postapocalyptic reality the film depicts renders this legal tradition and the instruments used in its service (such as the principle of *non-refoulement*) obsolete and irrelevant. The experiences of the *fugees* are neither an object of government examination nor subject to any form of humanitarian relief. Utterly uninterested in the causes of their displacement or in the provision of protection, the British state hunts, contains, and destroys them.

Thus, while in Mbembe’s diagnosis of the current times the security structures (be they physical barriers or racism) walling off the citizens from the aliens serve the purposes of reproducing native as opposed to foreign life, *Children of Men* takes a decidedly different turn by deploying these structures as a means with which to mark off native from foreign death. As such, Cuarón’s film departs from the tradition of “universalist fantasies of human survival,” which Harper identifies as defining a great deal of “science fictional engagements with the concept of human extinction” and relying on “the sacrifice of highly particular forms of human life.”³⁷ The film does not concern itself with survival even if the extractive logic this sacrifice relies on still defines Cuarón’s narrative of human extinction. Yet this sacrifice no longer furthers the survivalist project characterizing extinction narratives but instead undertakes to bring death (both the citizens’ and the aliens’) under state control. This control entails a management of dying, a peculiar way of meting out the means of dying for both the citizens and the aliens. It involves sorting out the lives to be legally destroyed from the lives voluntarily surrendered. It may, perhaps, be the reason why the visual and narrative strategies Cuarón adopts persistently align refugees with what is already or about to be destroyed. Hailing from places devastated by nuclear fallout, they become carriers of toxicity and thus signifiers of pollution and

³⁵ David Owen, *What Do We Owe to Refugees?* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2020), 18.

³⁶ As Owen puts it in *What Do We Owe to Refugees?*: “The norm of protection for persons liable to religious or political persecution by their own state is the source of the political picture of refugees; and the development of this norm is the first of the three lines of descent that will come together to compose the grounds of the modern refugee regime” (19).

³⁷ Harper, “Unequal Survival,” 427.

waste. Indeed, they are often visually likened to garbage, bits and pieces of detritus, segregated, sorted, and removed to be ultimately incinerated in the bombed camp.

Preempting Extinction

Interestingly, while obliterating refugees the narrative simultaneously works to sustain the difference between extinction and death endowing both with a set of contrasting values. It aligns refugees with extinction but ascribes death to the citizen. The British citizens whose ongoing demise the film ostensibly narrates are offered a *choice* to die anytime they want by using *Quietus*, the suicide drug given gratuitously to anyone who wants it. One of its commercials shows a white, middle-class, smartly dressed man, sitting outdoors, in a chair, waiting for the clock to chime 8, before he drinks up a liquid, smiles, and leisurely walks off into the blazing azure of the sky in front of him. “*Quietus: You Decide When*,” reads the ending of the commercial, deftly redefining the extinction that was assumed to be the subject of the film from what is inevitable to what is voluntary. There is nothing hopeless or alarming about the swift and quiet departure the drug expedites, no desperate hankering for life. On the contrary, it renders death cozy and agreeable and thus something to be embraced rather than dreaded. Tampering with the temporal obscurity of the demise of the human species (“*You Decide When*” stands in a sharp contrast to the indeterminacy of extinction), the *Quietus* allows the citizens to transcend the fearsome protraction characterizing extinction. Unlike the refugees who cling to life, the film tells us, the citizens are in the position to defy its temporal protocols. The refugees, by contrast, have to stay alive to be killed, to perform the spectacle of disappearance that is completely beyond their control and has nothing cozy about it. The refugees, who are represented as utterly desperate to live, end up figuring extinction as a “wait toward death”³⁸ they can neither help nor choose. The narrative underscores the disparity by depicting them as victims of political and ecological disasters driven by a will to save rather than terminate their lives.

The stunning contrast the film draws between the national suicide campaign urging citizens not to wait, to preempt extinction through choice, and the refugees who desire to live but end up having their lives degraded and turned into unsurviving flesh brings into relief the inequalities that mar the Anthropocene narratives. Although the last scenes of the film foreground Kee’s triumphant and miraculous escape from the horrors of the camp and the British state, the “redemptive ending” she brings into being to the accompaniment of John Tavener’s solemn music, it is essential to note that the background of those scenes powerfully impugns the political optimism of this angelic denouement.³⁹ As the music plays on, and “*Tomorrow* arrives to save the day, bringing a smile to

³⁸ I borrow this phrase, slightly out of the context, from Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 88.

³⁹ Chaudhary, “Humanity Adrift,” 92.

Kee's face and closing the film with a redemptive *deus ex machina* that promises that wrongs will be corrected, human ills set aright,"⁴⁰ Bexhill camp is being bombed, the sound of the whisking planes and distant explosions puncturing the coral music and the solemnity of the hopeful finale. The destruction of the camp follows a rebellion sparked off by the *Fishes* and the vicious fights between the state forces and the insurgents. Kee, Theo, and Marichka (a woman from the camp helping them navigate the place and access the sea) barely make it amid the massive blasts and heavy gunfire rocking the camp. The bombing is not only at odds with the survival-focused scenes at the end of the film; nor is it simply shocking in its juxtaposition of the sense of relief we as viewers are compelled to feel at Kee's miraculous escape *and* of the bloody massacre simultaneously taking place in the near vicinity. What turns the bombing into a pivotal moment in the film is the way it reveals access to voluntary death as the exclusive right of the citizen. It is the bombing that redefines the citizen as someone who does not have to live to die out.

The refugees, on the other hand, become bodies whose end remains beyond choice. Their eschatological value in the film's narrative of extinction, therefore, lies in their deprivation of choice to orchestrate their own death. It is at the camp that what Achille Mbembe describes as a society of enmity comes into full view. It is a society in which refugees, among others, are perceived as enemies to be annihilated. The narrative seems to make an unproblematic use of this value: in the British society reconciled with its upcoming demise and ready to euthanize itself, it is refugees who get to be killed (no other group in the film is subject to such violence). *Children of Men* seems to take their necro-availability for granted: the film's optimistic ending is logically and structurally dependent on the massacre unfolding at the camp. The film never questions the background extermination, the refugees' narrative fate, escaping which is a prerequisite of Kee's survival. There is something utterly incomprehensible about the diligence with which the British state goes about the segregation, containment, and destruction of the refugees it catches (let alone the sustained effort they put into the process) in the face of their own nearing extinction. In a commentary on the film, Slavoj Žižek argues: "The basic problem in this society as depicted in the film is literally biopolitics: how to generate, regulate life."⁴¹ And yet the basic problem seems to be different from what Žižek thinks it to be: it is the management of dying which in the face of the looming end seems the only thing that can still be subject to regulation. To generate and regulate death is what governs the world (who can die and who must be killed, that is, to die without the right to preempt extinction). In Cuarón's film, the refugees' have their political vulnerability, their political subjection to disappearance, exploited as the camp is a space that must literally cease to exist.

⁴⁰ Chaudhary, "Humanity Adrift," 91.

⁴¹ Slavoj Žižek, "Children of Men Comments," *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (Hollywood: Universal Pictures, 2006; DVD, 2007), quoted in Latimer, "Bio-Reproductive Futurism," 51.

Resuscitation

Depicting a dismantled refugee regime that nevertheless still abides by the statist logic segregating aliens from the citizens (one newspaper clip reads: “All foreigners now illegal”) even as it completely abandons the protective aspirations of the legal traditions of refugeehood, *Children of Men* ultimately offers only a compromised speculation of the future. The trouble does not only lie in its radicalization of the survivalist script, the way it replaces it with a more pernicious scenario of the regulation of death as the only viable power game in the face of an imminent yet accepted end. It does not only lie, either, in its radicalization of the society of enmity, the ways it renders refugees literally exterminable. The problem also lies in its inability to imagine the postapocalyptic world as in any way politically transformed. Instead, the collapsed and devastated world on the brink of extinction continues to abide by the dictates of “the trinity of state/nation/territory.”⁴² It might be said that the constant and consistent resuscitation of the political categories this trinity has generated is what enables the regulation of death Cuarón’s film narrates (it is also what propels the narrative itself).

As such, *Children of Men* remains within the orbit of the cultural discourses that, as Axelle Karera notes, relatedly, fail to transcend the current injustices and are marred by an “inability to imagine alternative futures outside an apocalyptic state of emergency.”⁴³ What interests Karera in particular is how “apocalyptic consciousness” “eras[es] racial antagonisms” simultaneously “maintain[ing] growing numbers of both new and old enemies along racial lines.”⁴⁴ The result is “a post-apocalyptic world without any signs of ethical transformation.”⁴⁵ Given the fact that matters of race are persistently erased from Anthropocene discourses that posit the “fetish of unity”⁴⁶ at the cost of more politicized visions, the “apocalyptic consciousness”⁴⁷ offers no emancipatory project with which to imagine the future. Despite its apparent claims to the contrary, Cuarón’s film proceeds along similarly flimsy lines. One of the most striking paradoxes of the narrative is the ways it juxtaposes the unfolding extinction that just continues uninterrupted, if occasionally mourned, with the systemic and violent maintenance of the political categories the ecological and political apocalypse simply leaves intact. Indeed, these categories are what is pictured as *surviving* the apocalypse. One of the scenes most vividly depicting this juxtaposition is Theo’s train journey when he travels outside London to visit Jasper. As the train TV keeps showing images of the collapsing world, the ghastly landscape outside offers glimpses of visual reminders of the ongoing extinction. There is a graffiti saying “The Last One to Die; Please Turn off the Light” as well as a government

⁴² Agamben, “We Refugees,” 117.

⁴³ Axelle Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7.1 (2019): 32–56, esp. 33.

⁴⁴ Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” 33–34.

⁴⁵ Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” 33.

⁴⁶ Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, and J. Hills Miller, *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols* (London: Open Humanity Press, 2016), 91, quoted in Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” 34.

⁴⁷ Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” 33.

campaign billboard admonishing “Avoiding Fertility Tests Is a Crime.” Seconds later, Theo gets off the train, his walk along the platform revealing cages with refugees guarded by heavily armed military.

The indomitable will to preserve the statist logic in the face of the end makes it difficult to grasp the narrative and the political significance *Children of Men* ascribes to extinction. If, as Ashley Dawson argues, “Extinction is a product of a global attack on the commons: the great trove of air, water, plants, and collectively created cultural forms such as language that have been traditionally regarded as the inheritance of humanity as a whole,”⁴⁸ Cuarón’s film has little to say about the nature and effects of this attack. Instead, it shows a state engaged in a parochial, defensive fight for political categories steadfastly used to organize a collapsing world. *Children of Men* neither offers any causes of extinction (here embodied as it happens to be by the barren womb) nor addresses the complexity of this attack. Instead, extinction is represented as an outcome of inexplicable forces, “an ultimate mystery” that Jasper and Theo jokingly speculate about but never seriously engage. It reduces extinction to a matter of conjecture (they wonder: “genetic experiments, gamma rays, pollution”), of contingency and incidental knowledge rather than of identifiable causes and deeds. This may be the reason why it can only offer, as a solution to the apocalypse, a quasi-religious salvation by a Madonna-like figure (Kee), whose miraculous pregnancy is no less mysterious than the origins of infertility she is supposed to redeem.

On one hand, therefore, the film renders extinction secondary to the more serious business of preserving the political order that, incidentally, has been contributing to the environmental degradations responsible for extinction in the first place. On the other, it erases from view the suffering caused by these degradations (nothing, except what Rob Nixon aptly calls newsworthy, spectacular “sensation-driven technologies of our image world” clearly addressed to and reflecting “our flickering attention spans” is ever shown in the film)⁴⁹ but foregrounds, instead, the suffering of the *fugees* at the hands of the citizens. The looming extinction, together with its potential causes, is simply no longer seen as a source of suffering (physical, or material or any other), at least not from the perspective of 2027 Britain because it has been dealt with by means of the preemptive effects of *Quietus* and also because, oddly enough, Britain is the only state in the world unaffected by the destruction elsewhere. Meanwhile, the widely advertised drug renders extinction beyond intervention (it also signals that intervention, whether political, economic, or biological, is no longer sought or believed to be game changing), depoliticizing its causes, meanings, and consequences.

The *fugees*, by contrast, become the locus of dread, the most typical apocalyptic affect associated with cultural discourses of extinction, their caged bodies represented as registering both the fear of dying and the will to live. This is why they are also such ideal figures for the regulation of death (they arrive in Britain precisely because they want to live and protect their life from destruction). Our

⁴⁸ Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (New York and London: OR Books, 2016), 12.

⁴⁹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3, 6.

sympathy for these abject illegals coalesces precisely around what is felt to be an unjust deprivation of life and their glaring mistreatment by the British state. But these affective investments the narrative invites keep us tied to a timeless, decontextualized category of the refugee as a repository of the desperate will to live that has no history, personal or collective, no geography, and no socio-economic provenance (this is, incidentally, one of the questions the film raises but fails to answer: Why are these refugees so desperate to survive and why are the British citizens so reconciled with their own death?). These investments trap us, as viewers, within the statist optics that encourage us to pity the refugees' lot purely because of what happens to them in Britain rather than in the places from which they come, but also at the end of the day, leave us subscribing, perforce, to the political protocols that define them as refugees. If extinction, as Dawson's aforementioned claim suggests, is a result of human destructive agency, *Children of Men* depicts refugees as figures on which the destructive exercise can be performed. A story about extinction needs lives whose death remains beyond preemption and thus beyond control.

Acknowledgments. This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under research project *Fictions of Water: Refugees and the Sea*, grant number 2019/33/B/HS2/02051.

Author biography. Ewa Macura-Nnamdi is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Literary Studies (University of Silesia, Poland). Her main research interests include postcolonial Anglophone literatures of Africa, refugees, and migration in cinema and literature. She is currently working on a book project provisionally titled *Fictions of Water: Refugees and the Sea*.

Cite this article: Macura-Nnamdi, Ewa. 2022. "Refugees, Extinction, and the Regulation of Death in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, 337–352. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2022.20>