

Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*

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Ethics are the aesthetics of the future.
—V. I. Lenin¹

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in
 cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the
 violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*²

The DVD release of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) may herald the first global blockbuster marketed as a teaching text. Both the director's statements in interviews for the popular press and the DVD's extra features offering commentary and analysis from Slavoj Žižek, Naomi Klein, Tzvetan Todorov, Fabrizio Eva, Saskia Sassen, John Gray, and James Lovelock suggest a film ready-made for cultural studies analysis. Moreover, the film, with its numerous allusions to contemporary geopolitics and dense network of

high-culture and popular cultural citations, offers a doubly coded model of this type of analysis, combining an ideological critique of post-9/11 global politics with a meditation on cinematic aesthetics and their interpretation. As this essay will elaborate, Cuarón's film organizes its generic take on the dystopian science fiction film—responding in particular to the strain that Fred Glass conceptualizes as the “New Bad Future Film”³—through a critical reading of the themes and referential aesthetics of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Expanding on the diverse interpenetrations of the film's ideological and aesthetic critiques, I argue that Cuarón's film provides a compelling response to the aphorism attributed to Lenin: that ethics are the aesthetics of the future.

**“I will show you fear in a handful of dust”:⁴
Visualizing the Dystopian Present**

The movie is loosely adapted from P. D. James's novel *Children of Men* (1992), which, according to the author, sprang from the question “If there were no future, how would we behave?”⁵ The film, which links its vision of the future to contemporary political, economic, and environmental concerns that did not yet exist when James wrote her novel, intimates that we would behave very badly indeed; Cuarón portrays a dreary future after the nuclear and environmental destruction of the entire world outside of England. Public service announcements and news programs provide much of the expository information, so that the viewer's knowledge of the dystopian world of *Children of Men* is delineated by what appears via its omnipresent audiovisual media. As co-viewers (along with the film's characters) of the various audiovisual stimuli that saturate the film's mise-en-scène, we are drawn into the dystopian world envisioned, so that our own perspective on events resembles that of the characters. This self-reflexive emphasis on media and representation can be related to the director's overarching concern with the politics of the present and how they inform the way we imagine the future.

Children of Men opens with a black screen while a series of voices belonging to television announcers recite the day's lead stories: “The Homeland Security Bill is ratified. After eight years, British borders will remain closed. The deportation of illegal immigrants will continue.” Whereas most viewers will be prepared for a sci-fi film set in a future United Kingdom, the mention of the term “Homeland Security” in this opening sequence actually links the narrative on several levels to the sociopolitical reality of the

present-day United States. The establishing shot that emerges from the initial blackness is a coffee shop interior in which a transfixed public gazes at a television monitor off-screen; thus, as the film opens we view another audience who, at the same time, watches another screen. In this way, Cuarón establishes a formal parallel between the fictional world of the diegesis and the real world of the spectator while emphasizing the omnipresence of the media in the global age.

The film's opening introduces the central thematic and structural elements that form the entire narrative: an omnipresent media, the problem of anonymous terrorism, and a dire biological and ecological reality, all photographed with an utterly realist style. Through Cuarón's diegetic use of media images and other textual elements (such as newsprint clippings papering walls, and graffiti), the viewer learns that through the success of its xenophobic militarist policies and aggressive program of particularist protectionism, Great Britain has managed to remain the only nation in the world to avoid total civil war and economic-political collapse. Like Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), the film is set in a future police state in which defeated bureaucrats mindlessly make their way through a society saturated by absurd consumerist advertisements and ominous propaganda informing citizens that "Suspicion Breeds Confidence" (*Brazil*), "Suspicious? Report All Illegal Immigrants," and "Report Any Suspicious Activity" (*Children of Men*). With its heavy emphasis on moving images and television screens, constant government warnings, and security checkpoints, matter-of-fact representation of terrorist violence, and ironic depiction of a banal and sensationalistic mainstream media, the opening shots of *Children of Men* offer a clear reference to the dystopian quotidian reality envisioned by *Brazil*. But while Terry Gilliam's absurdist image of the future functions as a patent critique of a "society that defines itself through consumption,"⁶ Cuarón reserves his criticism for the neoconservative politics that have enjoyed so much influence in the United States after 11 September 2001 (aka 9/11).

The starkly current sociopolitical background of the film is complemented by a correspondingly bleak depiction of ecological decay that brings to mind the sobering scientific realities of global warming and the concomitant environmental ruin that will increasingly attend it. The film's scenario is not terribly futuristic. So, while there is no mention of why humans have ceased to be able to reproduce, the polluted natural environment appearing in the film implies a connection between ecological destruction and human sterility. And although the film is based in England, even the most unobservant viewer will notice the conscious construction

of images evoking recent American foreign and domestic policy. When Theo (Clive Owen), Miriam (Pam Ferris), and Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey) enter the Homeland Security Bexhill Refugee Camp by bus, for example, there appears in the background a series of tableaux borrowed directly from the photographs that brought the Abu Ghraib prison scandal to global attention in 2003. And immediately following the apparition of these particular images of military brutality—menacing German shepherds on short leashes, huddled groups of naked prisoners, caged immigrants with black hoods on their heads, and the now-infamous image of a hooded prisoner standing on a block, arms outstretched with electrodes attached to his fingers—the protagonists file through a mazelike system of fences, above which appear, again, the words “Homeland Security.” These images, plucked straight from the ongoing reality of the American occupation of Iraq and simultaneous internment of “illegal enemy combatants” at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and elsewhere, form an important part of the film’s ethical perspective, and function as an overt statement that no New Bad Future fiction film can imitate or surpass the images of sheer sickening brutality that appear every day in the international media.

Slavoj Žižek observes in a commentary included on the US DVD release that Cuarón “reminds us that, of all strange things we can imagine, the weirdest is reality itself. . . . *Children of Men* is a science-fiction of our present itself.” This is, in fact, a crucial part of Cuarón’s aesthetic strategy. Although the director mentions that his art department wanted to make the film look a lot like *Blade Runner*—perhaps the iconic dystopia film—Cuarón insisted that his goal was to make the “anti-*Blade Runner*”:

The problem was, when I started working with the art department, they would send me these amazing designs of futuristic cars and high-tech buildings and gadgets. And I was excited to see all of that stuff, but then I said, “OK, guys, thank you, but that’s not the film, the film I’m going to do is this.” And I’d bring my own file of photographs I’d been putting together through all the years I’d been developing the project. There were photographs from Palestine, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, the Balkans, Chernobyl. I said, “No, this is the movie we’re making.” The constant mantra was, “We’re not creating; we’re referencing here.” Everything has to have a reference to the state of our times.⁷

Thus, while *Children of Men* takes place in the near future, its liberal borrowing from contemporary social and political themes and iconography implies that the dystopian future is now. This concept of *referencing* is a central element of Cuarón’s aesthetic strategy that can be seen in tableaux strategically placed throughout the film (figure 1).



Figure 1. A richly referential collage appearing at Jasper's (Michael Caine) house links dystopian future London to Bush II-era United States. This creative appropriation and recontextualization of elements taken from a variety of media and cultural contexts embody Cuarón's visual style, which mobilizes the aesthetic in the service of the political. This and all subsequent images are frame captures from the DVD.

“You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frere!”⁸

Alfonso Cuarón's Cinematic Humanism

As Americans saw in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, perceived national crises are often linked to an increased awareness of borders and the proliferation of outward signs and symbols of nationalism. In Cuarón's film, worldwide political crisis and the impending extinction of humanity is met in England with an increased militarization of national boundaries and xenophobic paranoia sponsored by the state. As nearly all commentators of the film have observed, *Children of Men* pictures a world that is a lot like our own, but perhaps more precarious.⁹ But quite unlike *Blade Runner*, *Brazil*, or even *V for Vendetta* (dir. James McTeigue, 2005), *Children of Men* is most noteworthy for the utter realism with which it represents the dystopian future/present. While production designers Jim Clay and Geoffrey Kirkland made an effort to imagine and represent new technologies—such as moving print media and a video screen that replaces the car's rearview mirror, for example—in keeping with Cuarón's concept they nevertheless envision a future London that is frighteningly similar to the images of “Palestine, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, the Balkans, Chernobyl” that have become commonplace in world media.¹⁰ The disturbing realism of the *mise-en-scène* is complemented by the extensive use of long takes, handheld shooting, and subtle continuous editing that together create the illusion of an unmediated reality. Indeed, from state- and media-sponsored immigration hysteria

to the explosive rebellion that finally consumes the refugee camp at the film's conclusion, *Children of Men* functions as a dark distillate of the present.

Cuarón points out that his approach to making this film was not so much “about imagining and being creative” but “about referencing reality.”¹¹ Thus, he and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki began with the idea that “not a single frame of this film can go by [without] making a comment about the state of things. So everything became about reference . . . how this has relevance in the context of the state of things, of the reality that we are living today.”¹² He continues, saying that “the exercise was to transcend not only reality, but also to cross-reference within the film to the spiritual themes of the film.”¹³

While in interviews and DVD bonus materials Cuarón is very forthright about his references to the sociopolitical realities of global late-capitalist society, he has been less explicit about what he calls the “cross-reference” that he makes between that reality and the “spiritual themes” that he mentions in interviews. Although he makes no explicit mention of it, one of the most relevant of Cuarón's references is to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, from which I have drawn the second epigraph for this essay. My epigraph appears in the last section of the poem, entitled “What the Thunder Said,” in which the poet dwells upon three interrelated themes: the New Testament journey to Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous, which is the final stage of the Grail Quest, and the destruction and decay of Eastern Europe after the Russian Revolution, as described in Hermann Hesse's *Glimpse into Chaos* (1920).¹⁴ The quotation evokes the dystopian flavor of the film's opening sequence in which Theo walks through a sterile London very reminiscent of the “Unreal City / Under the brown fog of a winter noon” described in Eliot's poem.¹⁵ These lines, which Nancy Gish has linked to the poem's overall “mood of despairing recognition,”¹⁶ were inspired by Baudelaire's “Les Sept Viellards” (The Seven Old Men), from the “Parisian Scenes” (“Tableaux Parisiens”) section of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Theo, much like the sullen individuals who inhabit Eliot's postapocalyptic cityscape, goes through life not searching for meaning but hiding from the world and awaiting his inevitable death. The barren urban landscape of Cuarón's London and the existential malaise of his characters generally reflects the atmosphere of Eliot's London and the shadowy characters who inhabit it:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.¹⁷

Within this description of modern London, Eliot embeds a loose quotation from the *Inferno*, which Frank Kermode translates as “so long a stream of people that I should never have believed that death had undone so many,” part of Dante’s allusion to “the spirits who in life knew neither good nor evil.”¹⁸

The basic premise of *Children of Men*, which rests on the dreary contradiction of being alive during the last days of human existence, is indeed a recurring theme in Eliot’s poem. *The Waste Land* describes a world inhabited by the lackluster living, who exist in a kind of half-life: “I was neither / Living nor dead;” “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience.”¹⁹ Taken together, all of these references, embedded quotations, and translations form part of the poem’s composite structure, “depicting impersonal masses swarming through streets oppressed by death and unrelieved by memory or religious experience.”²⁰ In *Children of Men*, the omnipresent advertisements for the euthanasia drug Quietus, whose tagline offers ominously, “You Decide When,” further emphasizes the overwhelming atmosphere of and impatience for death in this near-apocalyptic milieu while also hinting at the nefarious motives of the corporate state within the film.

The bleak tone of *Children of Men* echoes that of T. S. Eliot’s modernist vision of the decline of civilization and the quest for meaning in the sterile, infertile modern world. Indeed, the second epigraph at the beginning of this essay describes the same kind of apocalyptic world in which anonymous hordes of people walk “over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth.” Yet, despite its bleak depiction of the future/present, the film does offer a hopeful mediation on peace and personal redemption that corresponds to Theo’s transformation from disillusioned bureaucrat to committed ethical actor.²¹ And not unlike the symbolic journey undertaken by the poet in *The Waste Land*, the film narrative ends at the water—not the sacred waters of the Ganges River, but at the sea near Bexhill—where Theo expires after having delivered Kee and her child to their rendezvous with the Human Project. Perhaps the most striking similarity between *The Waste Land* and *Children of Men*—which indeed makes necessary this initial thematic comparison between the two texts—is that both conclude by invoking the Upanishads, with their exhortation to self-control, charity, compassion and, most importantly, peace.

But Cuarón's debt to *The Waste Land* goes further than this brief thematic analysis has allowed. Indeed, it is the rich intertextuality of Eliot's poem—drawing from a broad array of cultural references appropriated from a variety of national contexts—that also informs Cuarón's own dialogic film structure. The maternal lamentations heard by the poet during his journey through *The Waste Land*, for example, can be connected to the various visual intertexts that give symbolic depth to *Children of Men*: in their different ways, Michelangelo's *La Pietà*, Picasso's *Guernica*, and the childless mothers who weep for the film's Baby Diego all mesh with the sad sterility and motherly grief that echo through T. S. Eliot's masterpiece. But whereas both Eliot's poem and Cuarón's film share a collagelike structure, it should be noted that Cuarón's practice of referencing is fundamentally different from Fredric Jameson's formulation of the "depthless" postmodern pastiche, which he defines alternately as either "blank parody" or "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion."²² Jameson has decried pastiche as one more symptom of the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style that, in turn, points to the "increasing unavailability of the personal style" in postmodern culture.²³ I want to suggest that Cuarón's visual strategy, as reflected in *Children of Men*, in fact represents a pedagogical response to Jameson's lamentation of the disappearance of the radical critical past and his corollary condemnation of what he sees as the apolitical aesthetics of postmodernism.²⁴ As I will suggest in the concluding pages of this essay, just as E. L. Doctorow elaborates "his work by way of that very cultural logic of the postmodern which is itself the mark and symptom of his dilemma," so Cuarón exploits the modes of cinematic production of the multinational capitalist entertainment machine to effect his own substantial critique of that very ideological-economic system.²⁵

While Eliot and Cuarón envision a blighted urban space peopled by unknowing drones, both *The Waste Land* and *Children of Men* not only conclude at the water's edge but also with the repetition of the ancient Sanskrit words "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih," which come from a formal ending to the Upanishads, defined by Eliot as "The Peace which passeth understanding."²⁶ It is significant that Theo's friend Jasper and the midwife Miriam are also given to repeating the phrase.²⁷ It seems clear, then, that *Children of Men* draws upon Eliot's poetic (indeed, at times cinematic) depictions of an apocalyptic cityscape; the symbolic sterility that is reflected in Eliot's work becomes quite literal in Cuarón's *The Waste Land*, as an "extensive and most savage commentary on the homogenization

of modern urban middle-class or lower-middle-class experience,”²⁸ represents an appropriate and effective intertext for *Children of Men*, even though Cuarón reserves his implicit criticism for the neoconservative ruling classes.

In her analysis of *The Waste Land*, Gish concludes that Eliot’s masterwork achieves its narrative and aesthetic cohesion through the voice of the narrator, who “sustains through the poem a very personal, immediate anguish and desire.”²⁹ She continues,

[T]he allusions, quotations, and references to fertility rituals, Christ, and the Grail place individual emotion in the contexts of history and myth. The poem can thus be read in many layers, as a personal expression of horror at life and longing for a saving spiritual value, as a commentary on the historic human condition as always faced with human failure and in need of transformation, and as a symbolic portrayal of the modern world as a spiritual waste land waiting for the voice of a new vision.³⁰

As an oblique adaptation of *The Waste Land*, *Children of Men* adopts similar representational strategies, at once fusing the *real* and the *aesthetic* as key components of its critique of late modernity’s denigration of the human spirit. It is in his explicit political (and aesthetic) appraisal of sociopolitical reality that Cuarón diverges most meaningfully from Eliot’s text.

The film’s aesthetic strategies—its self-conscious realism and referencing—are staged alongside Theo’s parallel development as a character. The only point-of-view shots of the film come through Theo, who functions as an identificatory nexus for the viewer: at the same time that his journey provides narrative cohesion and interest, his heroic trajectory forms an important part of Cuarón’s ethical vision. Throughout the film, the handheld camera that steadfastly follows Theo also draws the viewer’s attention to signs and symbols that tend to escape his attention. Towards the beginning of the film, for example, while Theo numbly and obliviously makes his way through the contemporary Waste Land that is London, the viewer is made aware of the caged illegal immigrants who, in the background, wait to be deported or sent to the refugee camp at Bexhill. These images simultaneously evoke some of the iconic photographs of the Nazis’ genocidal campaigns of the last century while also referencing the tragic realities of the present.

As in Cuarón’s earlier film, *Y tu mamá también* (2001), the anonymous victims who share the screen with the protagonists appear only peripherally and in the background. Although they are essentially invisible to the characters as they go about their lives, they are nonetheless presented prominently to the viewer, who is invited to see more than the protagonists can. (In *Y tu mamá también*, an

extradiegetic narrator calls direct attention to the people in the background and their stories.) In both films, the main characters begin their narrative trajectories insulated from the economic, social, and political blight that surrounds them.³¹ But as both stories develop, the viewer becomes aware of the camera's contrasting point of view as it reflexively leaves its protagonists behind in order to explore some of the world that lies beyond their spheres of interest.³² It is through this tension between background and foreground that both films construct their political critiques.

Whereas the camera that follows Tenoch, Julio, and Luisa on their sexual adventure in the earlier film does not seem to favor any one of them, the camera eye of *Children of Men* functions as Theo's humanist companion, not only following him and documenting his adventure but also pausing occasionally to contemplate noteworthy images and happenings that escape his notice. Indeed, it is perhaps the camera's mechanical qualities—unimpeded as it were by anthropocentric horror or any sense of shame—that enable it to represent for the viewer what we might otherwise not see. In this way, the camera's nonhuman qualities contribute to its elaboration of a humanist perspective.³³ The appearance of Michelangelo's *La Pietà* in a scene just previous to the climax is a prime example of this visual strategy (figure 2). Here, as the dramatic tempo begins to increase, the camera slows down, allowing the protagonists to move away while it pauses to contemplate a distraught mother who cradles her dead son in her arms. This is a clear visual quotation of Michelangelo's *La Pietà*, which Theo's cousin, Nigel (Danny Huston), mentions earlier in the film.³⁴ The image also evokes Picasso's monumental painting *Guernica*, which hangs prominently in Nigel's dining room. Thus, the anguished woman cradling her dead son in *Children of Men* simultaneously references Michelangelo's sculpture, Picasso's painting, and (we may assume from the Cuarón interview by Voynar) a photograph taken during the



Figure 2. A real-life *La Pietà* for the dystopian present.

Balkan war. These interrelated visual intertexts further reflect the film's themes of maternity, death, and loss, while drawing attention to the complex, interconnected series of real and figurative extradiegetic contexts from which Cuarón draws his inspiration.

In addition to *La Pietà*, Cuarón deploys religious iconography that functions as a further symbolic component of his aesthetic practice. While the vaguely religious title of the film is clearly relevant to its content—the end of human days and a meditation on the pathos that comes with the contemplation of human insignificance in the grand scheme of things—the Christian subtext of “Children of Men” as it appears in Psalm 90 is perhaps more germane to P. D. James’s novel. Nevertheless, Cuarón’s deliberate use of religious themes on the soundtrack plays a central role in the construction of his ethical perspective on political, economic, and social reality. Indeed, religious hymns often accompany the development of the plot and Theo’s simultaneous embrace of ethical engagement with the Other. The British composer John Tavener’s “Fragments of a Prayer,” for example, is used throughout to impart symbolic gravitas to turning points in the plot. In a barn scene reminiscent of the biblical manger story, for example, Kee stands among cattle and industrial milking equipment when she reveals to Theo that she is pregnant. She prefaces her *revelation* by talking about the human cruelty of cutting off cows’ teats just so they will fit the machines. In addition to the clear Christian symbolism of the scene, when she reveals her swollen belly, Kee adopts a position that is immediately reminiscent of Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (figure 3).

At the same time that the film draws upon religious iconography, it also provides a subtle counterreading of that same imagery in its recreations of those images and through the deliberate use of its soundtrack, which alternates between the sacred and profane. In a scene in which Theo visits his well-connected cousin Nigel at his secure compound in the heart of London, they talk beneath Michelangelo’s *David*—which Nigel has saved for his “Ark of Arts.” In the background, a giant inflatable pig floats between the two front chimneys of the Battersea Power Station. Neither man refers to or seems to notice the floating pig, nor is there a diegetic explanation offered as to its significance. Many viewers, however, will recognize it as a visual quotation of Pink Floyd’s 1977 album, *Animals*, which, in turn, was loosely based on George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945). While Nigel and Theo converse, the Pink Floyd pig floats outside as an ironic synecdoche for Great Britain (figure 4). When the camera cuts to Theo, in contrast, the viewer sees Picasso’s *Guernica* behind him (figure 5). These overt references to Pink Floyd’s album, as seen from the ivory tower in which Theo’s cousin lives



Figure 3. Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* staged in a mechanized industrial manger.

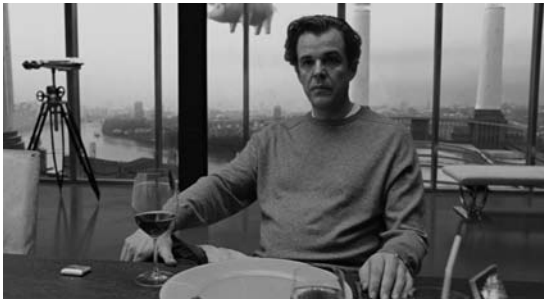


Figure 4. The telescope behind Nigel, the bourgeois pig, hints at the distance he maintains from the bleak reality outside. Appearing in the background is a version of the cover of Pink Floyd's concept album, *Animals*, based on Orwell's *Animal Farm*.



Figure 5. Theo, on the other hand, is associated with Picasso's *Guernica* and the reeking reality of war, civil unrest, and sociopolitical disaster. In the beginning of the film, he drinks in order to remain oblivious to the world around him; later, he becomes a committed ethical actor.

(Nigel unself-consciously confides that he just does not think about the crisis going on in the world outside), adds emblematic depth to the film's criticism of contemporary capitalist class systems and the exclusionary cultural practices that sustain them.³⁵

***Children of Men* as Political and Aesthetic Critique**

In the face of the erasure of all other nation-states, the England that appears in *Children of Men* (and in *V for Vendetta*) responds to the political, social, and economic constraints of a postnational world by fueling fear of illegal immigrants and anonymous terrorists. The immigrants and terrorists that figure so prominently in the fictional media of *Children of Men* and in the real media of the contemporary United States and Europe have been the object of some of the First World's fundamental fears after the Cold War, and, as such, they have tended to function as Others upon which these states have sought to base their increasingly embattled notions of national integrity. Apocalyptic and dystopian sci-fi films, after all, are not just popular entertainment. They respond in different ways to the outcome of the Cold War, the consolidation of Western-style liberal democracy, and the gradual incorporation of global societies into late-capitalist modernity. Thus, while the conventional wisdom held that the Cold War was won by democracy, capitalism, America, and the West, this supposed victory turned out to be, at the psychological and cultural levels, a somewhat hollow one because it left the West without a distinctive Other against which it might continue to define itself.

Christopher Keep has convincingly analyzed *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996) in terms of Francis Fukuyama's neo-conservative treatise, *The End of History and the Last Man*, in order to expose some of the ideological underpinnings of the ongoing "War on Terror" and how liberal democracies have sought to maintain and defend their legitimacy after 9/11.³⁶ Fukuyama's text is itself a kind of apocalyptic sci-fi that, in its merger of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, continues to provide ideological justification for the sociopolitical disasters that *Children of Men* addresses. Like the aliens that appear in *Independence Day* to provide new meaning for the post-Cold War United States as the leader of the free world, in *Children of Men*, it is quite literally the immigrant illegal alien who functions as the foundational mark of difference upon which a fictional future England bases its insular national identity.³⁷

Returning to my introductory assertion about the pedagogical aims of the film, included on the U.S. DVD release of *Children of*

Men is a minifeature, entitled “The Possibility of Hope,” conceived, written, and produced by the director. The feature is divided into five sections—“Reality,” “Fear,” “Walls,” “Fever,” “Hope”—in which a series of philosophers, scientists, and cultural critics comment on the state of an increasingly globalized world. These commentaries by Žižek, Klein, Todorov, Eva, Sassen, Gray, and Lovelock can be heard over real news footage, documentary clips, and excerpts taken directly from *Children of Men*. All of these images and observations support the pedagogical subtext of the feature film, which sets out to instruct the viewer on sociopolitical reality. While the mere mention of these critics’ names will remind the informed viewer of the leftist politics to which Cuarón clearly adheres, each figure offers a series of critical comments on the effects of neoliberal late capitalism in the twenty-first century: mass global migration and mobility, the proliferation of boundaries and borders, the brutalities of the late-capitalist state, environmental disaster, food crises, the politics of fear, the weaponizing of urban space.

Several of the DVD commentaries address the paradox that lies at the center of ideological globalism: at the same time that neoliberal economics has called for the abolishment of any barriers to the movement of capital and goods, we have seen the massive production of physical boundaries established to block the flow of people across borders (figures 6 and 7).

Through its themes, visual structures, and bonus materials, *Children of Men* points to the fatal weaknesses of ideologies (be they implicit or explicit) that rely upon fears of the Other as a method of maintaining a seemingly homogeneous, well-defined nation. Using the political reality of the contemporary United States as a point of departure and an exemplary case, *Children of Men* demonstrates the



Figure 6. The Great Wall of Tijuana, erected by the United States to prevent unregulated Mexican migration. In voice-over, Saskia Sassen posits the “weaponizing of urban space” and comments on the uneven politics of membership and identity in global society.



Figure 7. A closed-circuit television image from Spain's Civil Guard shows illegal immigrants streaming over the borders of what appear to be Ceuta and Melilla, the country's last colonial possessions in North Africa. Right-leaning observers in the European Union have tended to view Spain as Fortress Europe's first line of defense. The country's several recent regularizations of illegal immigrants have provoked intense criticism.

perils of state-sponsored xenophobia, the militarization of borders, and the dangers that accompany the noncritical adherence to certain nationalist ideologies. Expanding on the real inspiration for his film, Cuarón asserts, plainly addressing the U.S. case,

What's scary is that America is slowly, slowly changing its own definition. The concept of democracy is slowly changing its meaning, and we're accepting it. We're accepting that democracy comes together with gated communities. It's the same thing about the concept of America, this beautiful country created by immigrants—this safe haven for people suffering injustice. In terms of ideology, it was the land of opportunity. Now it's becoming the land of the zealot. I think a lot of that is manipulation of what reality is.³⁸

Indeed, *Children of Men* imagines a possible future in which unseen political authorities have exploited a civilizational threat from abroad in order to control a country and implement a series of draconian anti-immigrant, anti-human-rights measures. The uncomfortable poignancy of *Children of Men* resides in Cuarón's vision of a future so closely resembling the post-9/11 United States, where the so-called neocons gained control for a time of both houses of Congress and the Oval Office and used their influence to extend executive power; authorize extralegal detentions without warrants; allow indefinite imprisonment of suspects in a worldwide web of clandestine prisons that remain outside all legal control and supervision (of which Guantánamo Bay is the most notorious example); facilitate *extraordinary rendition*, which allows for the kidnapping of foreign nationals from their homelands to be shipped secretly to

other countries where they can be interrogated on behalf of the American government; authorize interrogations using torture and other methods that lie outside of Geneva Conventions; and engage in illegal wiretapping and the surveillance of bank operations without judicial oversight.³⁹

Children of Men is not just an allegorical critique of post-9/11 United States. While the film draws reflexively from the more dystopian realities of Bush II-era political culture, its rich visual structure also invites the viewer to imagine a hopeful alternative to the dystopian present. It is through its implicit and explicit emphasis on political and social *reference* and its final stress on self-sacrifice that the film constructs its ethical commentary. Cuarón's England represents a closed, finite space in which the future of humanity depends on an unmarried young black immigrant woman, Kee, who bears the first child in eighteen years. As an optimistic antidote for the inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric that saturates the media culture of the film—and the real culture of present-day United States and Europe (see figures 6 and 7)—Cuarón places confidence for the future on an immigrant body (Kee) and her once again ethically engaged protector (Theo).

That the future hope of humanity lies with a woman, her daughter, and an alcoholic former political activist can be read as an ironic inversion of the Christian iconography that appears in the film's pseudo-Nativity scenes. Thus, although the critic Steffen Silvis complains that the film's "message of Christly redemption becomes heavy-handed, down to a risible Bethlehemite finale,"⁴⁰ if we take into account Kee's status as an illegal immigrant who gives birth to a *girl*, Cuarón's message becomes far more subtle than the Holy Family image would suggest. Further, the viewer must also consider the film's self-referential humor: when Theo asks Kee who the father of her child is, she responds that she is a virgin. But before spectators can roll their eyes at the obvious implausibility of this Christian reference, Kee laughs and says that she does not know who the father is: "Fuck knows. I don't know most of the wankers' names." The humor of the scene is emphasized when she tells Theo that her child will be called Froley.

Through its thematic emphasis on compassionate solicitude and personal sacrifice (Theo embodies these virtues, as the cynical, depressed, self-interested everyman who is awakened from his existential stupor and commits himself again to the political and humanist ideals that he lost with the death of his son),⁴¹ and through its critical use of audio and visual quotations that alternately criticize the status quo and propose constructive alternatives to it, *Children of Men* represents an apotheosis of what Homi

Bhabha called for on the eve of the American “War on Terror.” In his essay “Terror and After . . .,” first published shortly after 9/11 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Bhabha wrote,

To confront the politics of terror, out of a sense of democratic solidarity rather than retaliation, gives us some faint hope for the future. Hope, that we might be able to establish a vision of a global society, informed by civil liberties and human rights, that carries with it the shared obligations and responsibilities of common, collaborative citizenship.⁴²

Unfortunately, the events of 9/11 provided certain political actors the occasion to do exactly the opposite, and they instead seized upon the opportunity to bring the United States and the world into a dystopian reality in which discourses of civilizational conflict have been purposefully perpetuated to justify a *reduction*, we might argue, of civil liberties and human rights, and where the possibility of constructing a global society based on collaborative citizenship seems an ever-distant dream. It is this general context that inspires the political themes, cinematic forms, and musical textures of *Children of Men*.

Unlike the dystopian future of the *Terminator* series, which Kevin Pask has discussed as ideologically evading “human responsibility for its nightmare of the future,”⁴³ *Children of Men* envisions a renewal of human responsibility and ethical action that responds to the very particular politics of the Bush II era. Through the example of Theo, Cuarón calls the viewer to look up from the television screens that deliver sentimental stories like that of the fictional Baby Diego, and advocates for the compassionate engagement of average citizens to a cause greater than themselves. Through Theo, *Children of Men* encourages individual action as a preemptive response to the New Bad Future. So, while Ben Wheeler has argued that “in most dystopian representations, characters who attempt to free themselves . . . generally end up dead” or, in the case of *Brazil*’s Sam Lowry (Jonathan Price), insane, in *Children of Men* (and *V for Vendetta*) an improved future indeed *depends* on the sacrifice of the hero.⁴⁴ These recent dystopia films are unique in that the death of their protagonists makes possible a New Hopeful Future based on human solidarity and the individual will to question the hegemony of dominant political structures.

Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future

Ludwig Wittgenstein, like Lenin, posited a vital connection between ethics and aesthetics.⁴⁵ In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote, echoing

Lenin's statement that appears as an epigraph to this essay, that "[e]thics and aesthetics are one and the same."⁴⁶ Wittgenstein explains the assertion by suggesting that both ethics and aesthetics correspond to what he calls the realm of the "unsayable." In his "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein elaborates on the idea, positing that "ethics and aesthetics are both forms of *vision*," since they both evade language.⁴⁷ It is precisely because of its privileging of the visual that cinema is perhaps uniquely suited to representing that crucial connection between the ethical and the aesthetic. Whereas a wide range of critics academic and popular have displaced their moral, aesthetic, and political panic onto the proliferation of the image in the postmodern era, as W. J. T. Mitchell avers, visual culture actually allows us to ask important questions about the politics of representation (and the representation of politics) and the dialectical construction of the social. Of his eight countertheses on visual culture, the last is particularly germane to my discussion of ethics and aesthetics in *Children of Men*. Mitchell insists that "the political task of visual culture is to perform critique without the comfort of iconoclasm."⁴⁸ In this respect, T. S. Eliot's modernist vision of the future goes only so far: as Mark Erwin concludes in his essay on Wittgensteinian ethics in *The Waste Land*, tradition

is never a stable foundation for cultural consensus; it is merely an assortment of allusions, a cultural aggregate that does not cohere but shifts suddenly with each new perspective. Set against this fragmented tradition, the individual proves equally unstable . . . the hope of sharing social values or of publicizing a consistent moral identity seems doomed.⁴⁹

Erwin proposes that *The Waste Land* instead represents within its richly allusive poetic form itself "the complexity and dissonance of competing value claims that we must confront whenever we presume to engage in serious moral reflection."⁵⁰

As should be clear at this stage of this essay, Cuarón's ethical reflections are far less ambiguous than Eliot's. The connection between aesthetic appreciation and ethical expression is central to Cuarón's filmic practice, representing a key element of his personal style. *Children of Men's* complexly allusive cinematic structure invites the viewer into a mutual contemplation of shared cultural traditions at the same time that it restages those traditions in the service of a pointed ideological critique of post-9/11 neoliberal globalism. While the bulk of Eliot's extensive quotations place enormous demands on the reader—indeed, the poem would be largely incomprehensible without some attention paid to its sources—*Children of Men* stands alone as an enjoyable, if disturbing, popular movie. In this way, Cuarón refuses the tired binary of enjoyment or

engagement that Jameson and others have placed at the center of their political and economic critiques of postmodern culture. As a postmodern, doubly coded text, Cuarón's film is at once appealing and comprehensible to nonspecialized viewers while it can also be read as a complex, highly allusive—indeed transformative—reading of *The Waste Land* that expands the political horizons of Eliot's modernist masterpiece.

If in the 1980s and early 1990s we did “not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match” the new economic, political, and aesthetic regimes that surrounded and fragmented us as postmodern subjects, perhaps it is now that we are beginning to discern the place for a new leftist political discourse and aesthetics.⁵¹ Having reached a point at which the sly workings of multinational capitalism have become increasingly apparent in the social, cultural, economic, and political structures of the present, perhaps we are beginning to see—well after 9/11 and the setback that event provided to the free expression of radical politics of any stripe—the new formulation of what Jameson hoped would someday be an expansion of “our sensorium.”⁵² The aesthetic, political, and pedagogical structures of *Children of Men* can be understood as part of Cuarón's pragmatic response to Marxist critics' call for a new political art that “will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital.”⁵³ Indeed, we can read the film as a rebuttal of Jameson's doubtful dictum that “the political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale.”⁵⁴ If *The Waste Land* was the definitive poem of the modern condition, *Children of Men* will likely be remembered as the definitive film of the postmodern condition precisely because of its critical melding of the political and the aesthetic.

I conclude by repeating that the key to understanding *Children of Men* lies in its purposeful connection between aesthetics and ethics; the “Ark of Arts” sequence I mentioned earlier can be interpreted metonymically as a manifesto in which Cuarón alternately indicts the global political status quo while envisioning a brave new future for the film medium. Nigel's government-sponsored Ark of Arts is a project predicated upon the *extraction* of art masterpieces from their cultural contexts for the sake of ivory-tower preservation. The emblematic appearance of Picasso's *Guernica* there represents a willful, institutional decontextualization of one of the preeminent twentieth-century works of political protest. In contrast, *Children of Men* consciously puts some of the foundational works of the Western tradition back on the streets while giving them

a functional politicized meaning. The film's referential complexity, drawing from works by T. S. Eliot, Botticelli, Michelangelo, John Lennon, Donovan, John Tavener, Pablo Picasso, and the Upanishads, among many others, imparts figurative *depth* to what may be the most realist sci-fi film ever. By injecting these diverse subtexts into a harshly realist representation of a future that owes its terrible evocative power to its reflection of and on the sociopolitical present, Cuarón turns *Children of Men* into a call for individual action, a hopeful prayer for peace, and an encouraging example of what cinema might do to change the world. In his cinematic depiction of a world in which being human has been completely devalued, Cuarón delves into the aesthetic archive in order to remind the viewer of what has been lost and where we might go from here. As Slavoj Žižek states in his commentary of the U.S. DVD release of the film, "only films like this can guarantee that cinema as an art will really survive."

Notes

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¹ Lenin, quoted in David Sterritt, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*, Cambridge Film Classics series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 56.

² T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), verses 367–76.

³ Fred Glass, "Totally Recalling Arnold: Sex and Violence in the New Bad Future," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1990): 2–13. Glass defines the New Bad Future (NBF) film, which depicts a future in the grip of social decay:

The NBF scenario typically embraces urban expansion on a monstrous scale, where real estate capital has realized its fondest dreams of cancerous growth. Amnesia-stricken characters and advanced gadgetry tangle against the backdrop of a ruined natural environment, while drug gangs compete with private security forces to provide the most plentiful opportunities for employment. The heroes, by themselves or with rebellious groups, go up against the corruption and power of the ruling corporations, which exercise a media-based velvet glove/iron fist social control. This repressive structure of society provides the [NBF] films' rationale for lots of action and bloodletting. Despite their penchant for gratuitous gore as well as other problems . . . many NBF films tilt toward an intelligent, leftish politics, leavened with a sense of (black) humor. (2)

⁴ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, verse 30.

⁵ P. D. James, quoted in Kenneth Turan, "Movie Review: *Children of Men*," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 2006, www.calendarlive.com/moview/reviews/cl-et-children22dec22,0,6890626.story.

⁶ Ben Wheeler, "Reality Is What You Can Get Away With: Fantastic Imaginings, Rebellion and Control in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*," *Critical Survey* 17, no. 1 (2005): 95–108, quotation on 100.

⁷ Jim Ridley, "The Connecting of Heartbeats: Director Alfonso Cuarón on the Movie of the Moment, the Sci-Fi Thriller *Children of Men*," *Nashville Scene*, 11 January 2007, www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/the-connecting-of-heartbeats/Content?oid=1194162.

⁸ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, verses 76–77. These lines are a direct citation from the last line of "Au Lecteur," the first poem in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The original French: "Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!" is typically translated as "Hypocrite reader! You!—My twin!—My brother!"

⁹ Manohla Dargis, "Apocalypse Now, but in the Wasteland a Child Is Given," review of *Children of Men*, dir. Alfonso Cuarón, *New York Times*, 25 December 2006, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/12/25/movies/25chil.html>; Scott Foundas, "Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow: The Future's Uncertain in Thrilling, Bleak *Children of Men*," review of *Children of Men*, dir. Alfonso Cuarón, *LA Weekly*, 20 December 2006, www.laweekly.com/2006-12-21/film-tv/don-t-stop-thinking-about-tomorrow/; Keith Phipps, review of *Children of Men*, dir. Alfonso Cuarón, *Onion A.V. Club*, 22 December 2006, www.avclub.com/articles/children-of-men,3653/; Steffen Silvis, "Mother and Child Reunion: A World That's Lost Playgrounds, Toys and Hope," *Prague Post*, 8 November 2006; and Turan, "Movie Review."

¹⁰ Ridley, "Connecting of Heartbeats."

¹¹ Alfonso Cuarón, "Interview: *Children of Men* Director Alfonso Cuarón," by Kim Voynar, *Cinematical*, 25 December 2007, www.cinematical.com/2006/12/25/interview-children-of-men-director-alfonso-cuaron/.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, verses 105–6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, verses 207–8.

¹⁶ Nancy K. Gish, *The Waste Land: A Poem of Memory and Desire*, Twayne's Masterwork Studies series (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 55.

¹⁷ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, verses 62–65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, verse 99, n. 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, verses 39–40, 328–30.

²⁰ Gish, *The Waste Land*, 56.

²¹ While Cuarón's more optimistic revision of *The Waste Land* may be inspired in part by the imperatives of global commercial cinema, we can see in his interviews and DVD commentaries that he is very critical of that system. I address this issue directly in the concluding pages of this essay. See *Children of Men*, dir. Alfonso Cuarón (2006; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

²² Frederic Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions series (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 1–54, quotations on 17, 18.

²³ *Ibid.* 16–18.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 46–48.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 25.

²⁶ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, verse 75. In the film, the words appear at the conclusion following the main body of the credits.

²⁷ Miriam intones the words during a death ritual for Julian (Juliette Moore). Later, Jasper says, "Kee, your baby is the miracle the world's been waiting for. Shantih, Shantih, Shantih."

²⁸ David Trotter, "T. S. Eliot and Cinema," *Modernism/Modernity* 13, no. 2 (2006): 237–65, quotation on 257.

²⁹ Gish, *The Waste Land*, 114.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Emily Hind argues that the "nearly invisible and literally marginal oppression that transpires on the shoulder of highways between authorities and seemingly impotent locals ventures an explanation for the general tolerance of the criminal state and unsatisfying social conditions" that appear throughout *Y tu mamá también*. Quite unlike the protagonists of this earlier film, Theo finally takes a stand against institutionalized injustice and sacrifices his own life for Kee's and her baby's survival ("Provincia in Recent Mexican Cinema, 1989–2004," *Discourse* 26, nos. 1–2 [2004]: 26–45, quotation on 39).

³² In his essay "Sex, Class, and Mexico in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*," Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz calls this technique "the wandering eye (or 'I') of the camera," which, along with the extradiegetic narrator's voice, "exists outside of the story and instead of giving us framing or clarifying information" seems to function in an editorial fashion, "qualifying information that is neither always pertinent nor essential to the main narrative" (*Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 34, no. 1 [2004]: 39–48, quotation on 43).

³³ I am grateful to James Leo Cahill for this observation.

³⁴ Cuarón points out that this image "was a reference to a real photograph of a woman holding the body of her son in the Balkans" and that

it's very obvious that when the photographer captured that photograph, he was referencing La Pietà. . . . So: we have a reference to something that really happened, in the Balkans, which is itself a reference to the Michelangelo sculpture. At the same time, we use the sculpture of David early on, which is also by Michelangelo, and we have of course the whole reference to the Nativity. And so everything was referencing and cross-referencing, as much as we could. (Cuarón, "Interview")

³⁵ Though it lies beyond the scope of the present essay, considerable symbolic depth is added to the film's aesthetic structures through the soundtrack's alternation between sacred and profane themes, intermixing John Tavener's religious compositions, such as "Fragments of a Prayer" (2006), "Eternity's Sunrise" (1999), "Song of the Angel" (1994), "The Lamb" (1982), "Mother and Child" (2002), and

"Mother of God, Here I Stand" (2004), with Krzysztof Penderecki's nonreligious but markedly apocalyptic "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima" (1960). As part of its reflexive criticism of the sociopolitical present and hopeful call for peace, *Children of Men* also makes purposeful use of (decidedly secular) classic British antiwar, pro-peace songs of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as John Lennon's "Bring on the Lucie (Freda Peeple)" (1973), King Crimson's "The Court of the Crimson King" (1969), and Donovan's "There is an Ocean" (1973), the latter of which also draws upon biblical imagery of life, death, and salvation. Added to these classic rock tunes are several contemporary songs that, when considered alongside the film's overarching political critique, introduce a none-too-subtle denunciation of the inequities implicit in late-capitalist class systems, such as the Libertines' "Arbeit Macht Frei" (2004), Digital Mystikz and Spen G's "Anti War Dub" (2006), and Jarvis Cocker's bitingly humorous "Running the World" (2006), which is featured in its entirety as the penultimate song over the final credits. Cocker's pithy refrain is "Cunts are still running the world."

³⁶ Christopher Keep points out that "the alien, the terrorist, the other that returns to us does so not to bring our culture down, but to realize our deepest needs and desires" ("Of Technology and Apocalypse, or Whose Independence Day?" *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 4, no. 1 [2004]: 15 paras., quotation in para. 5, <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/041/keep.htm>). Keep exposes the paradox that lies at the heart of late-twentieth-century apocalyptic discourse, in which the dream of national homogeneity in fact "requires the continual reinvention of difference . . . as part of the deep logic of that dream" (para. 15).

³⁷ Mexico's uneven experience of neoliberal economic policies since the 1980s and its current position within the global world system clearly contribute to Cuarón's pointed ideological critique of neoconservative globalism.

³⁸ Ridley, "Connecting of Heartbeats."

³⁹ "The Imperial Presidency 2.0," editorial, *New York Times*, 7 January 2007; Lluís Bassets, "2006 Internacional: La Guerra No Cesa," *El País Semanal*, 31 December 2006, 32–43; Jane Mayer, "A Reporter at Large: The Black Sites," *New Yorker*, 13 August 2007, www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/08/13/070813fa_fact_mayer; Hugh B. Urban, "The Secrets of the Kingdom: Spiritual Discourse and Material Interests in the Bush Administration," *Discourse* 27, no. 1 (2005): 141–65; "The Must-Do List," editorial, *New York Times*, 4 March 2007; "Spying on Americans," editorial, *New York Times*, 2 May 2007; and Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ Silvis, "Mother and Child Reunion."

⁴¹ In the end, this valorization of personal sacrifice is different from the sort of libertarian individualism espoused by the fictional corporate state in the film. Theo's death and the film's final elegiac contemplation of his body slumped at the prow of the rowboat—drifting towards Tomorrow—not only represents an exemplary *ethical* death for the Other (as opposed to a selfish escape from the politics of the present or a convenient, for the state, reduction of the population) but also envisions a possible post-postmodern politics, an ethical contemplation of a new form of protest of Friedman-style neoliberalism. We might read Theo, then, allegorically as a new kind of political figure for the new millennium: having seen that traditional modes of political protest in his youth led only to violence and disillusionment, Theo's character represents a new model for a post-Marxist leftist critique of the kind Naomi Klein offers in her book *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). It is not

surprising, perhaps, that Cuarón in 2008 made a short film with Naomi Klein that was based on the book.

⁴² Homi K. Bhabha, "Terror and After . . .," in *Transnational Cinema, the Film Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, In Focus: Routledge Film Readers series (London: Routledge, 2006), 197–98, quotation on 198.

⁴³ Kevin Pask, "Cyborg Economies: Desire and Labor in the *Terminator* Films," in *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*, ed. Richard Dellamora, New Cultural Studies series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 182–98, quotation on 186.

⁴⁴ Ben Wheeler, "Reality Is What You Can Get Away With: Fantastic Imaginings, Rebellion and Control in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*," *Critical Survey* 17, no. 1 (2005): 95–108, quotation on 106.

⁴⁵ David Sterritt writes that Jean-Luc Godard's own practice of referencing par-takes of both reality and artifice—the ethical and the aesthetic—in order to demonstrate "the inseparability of our mental lives from our perceptions of the social world we inhabit" (*Films of Jean-Luc Godard*, 56). Cuarón, like Godard, views "ethics and aesthetics as overlapping domains" (56). The epigraph attributed to Lenin that opens this essay is uttered by the protagonist, Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor), in Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1963), which Sterritt interprets as an implication that, according to Godard—and in agreement with Lenin—"a more enlightened age will make no distinction between the imperatives of beauty and morality" (56). In a subsequent interview, Godard says that the quotation is Gorky's, but regardless of its provenance the linkage between aesthetics, ethics, and the future is central to Cuarón's filmic practice (Jean-Luc Godard, "Learning Not to Be Bitter: Interview with Jean-Luc Godard on *Le petit soldat* by Michèle Manceaux," in *Focus on Godard*, ed. Royal S. Brown, Film Focus series [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972], 25–27, esp. 26).

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein, quoted in Carolyn Wilde, "Ethics and Aesthetics are One," in *Wittgenstein, Aesthetics, and Philosophy*, ed. Peter Lewis, Ashgate Wittgensteinian Studies series (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004), 165–84, quotation on 165.

⁴⁷ Mark Erwin, "Wittgenstein and *The Waste Land*," *Philosophy and Literature* 21, no. 2 (1997): 279–91, quotation on 280.

⁴⁸ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 165–81, quotation on 170.

⁴⁹ Erwin, "Wittgenstein," 288. For a more complete survey of the ethical in Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Yeats, and Beckett, see Lee Oser, *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf and Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Erwin, "Wittgenstein," 290.

⁵¹ Jameson, "Cultural Logic," 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*