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Future Shock

Director Alfonso Cuarón revisits *Children of Men*, his overlooked 2006 masterpiece, which might be the most relevant film of 2016.

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On Christmas day, 2006, a curious twist on the Nativity debuted in a handful of movie theaters. Directed and co-written by Mexican auteur Alfonso Cuarón, *Children of Men* told the story of (decade-old spoiler alert) a near-future dystopia in which women are inexplicably unable to have babies — a state of affairs upended by the advent of a miraculous pregnancy. The film is set in the deteriorating cities and countryside of southeastern England — vividly rendered with alarming realism and minimal use of sci-fi futurism — amid geopolitical chaos that has led to a massive refugee crisis, which has in turn led an immigrant-fearing and authoritarian U.K. to close its borders to outsiders who seek its shores. Terrorist attacks in European capitals are just routine items in the news crawl. The world stands on the brink, and no one has any clear idea of what can be done. The film, in hindsight, seems like a documentary about a future that, in 2016, finally arrived.

In 2006, however, the film was a commercial flop. It grossed less than $70 million, a huge loss for a film that cost $76 million to make. At Oscar time, it was largely overlooked, earning three nominations but none for acting, directing, or for Best Picture. Its studio, Universal, never quite figured out how to sell it — an astoundingly bleak sci-fi picture devoid of fun gadgets or futuristic set design, in which Julianne Moore, the most marketable star, gets shot dead 28 minutes in. It debuted at the Venice Film Festival on September 3, 2006, and received a standing ovation, but by the time it had its U.S. release on Christmas Day, the studio had opted to focus its late-season marketing resources on obvious Oscar bait like *United 93*. For his part, Cuarón, frustrated with the whole experience, retreated from public life and endured what he calls “the five most intense and difficult years of my life.” He would eventually return to write and direct 2013’s massively successful *Gravity,* but for a while, it seemed like *Children of Men* might have turned out to be the last Alfonso Cuarón feature film.

Now, in 2016, *Children of Men* is having a remarkable resurgence — not just because of its tenth anniversary but because of its unsettling relevance at the conclusion of this annus horribilis. There have been glowing reappraisals on grounds both sociopolitical (*Children of Men* is “obviously something that should be on people’s minds after Brexit and after the rise of Donald Trump,” political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared in September) and artistic (“*Children of Men,* like no other film this century, and perhaps no other movie ever, solves the meaning of life,” [wrote](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160822-the-21st-centurys-25-greatest-films) *Vanity Fair* columnist Richard Lawson in August). It’s getting the kind of online attention it sorely lacked ten years ago, generating recent headlines like [“The Syrian Refugee Crisis Is Our *Children of Men*Moment”](http://paleofuture.gizmodo.com/the-syrian-refugee-crisis-is-our-children-of-men-moment-1728761526) and [“Are We Living in the Dawning of Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*?”](https://tribecafilm.com/stories/children-of-men-movie-alfonso-cuaron-immigration-issues) As critic David Ehrlich [put](http://www.indiewire.com/2016/11/children-of-men-10-years-clare-hope-ashitey-interview-president-trump-1201746204/) it in November, “*Children of Men* may be set in 2027,” but in 2016, “it suddenly became clear that its time had come.”

Cuarón, however, is not feeling like taking an overdue victory lap. Curled over a table in an upscale Mexico City restaurant recently, the 55-year-old director gets a little irritated when I laud the film’s imaginative prescience. “This thing was not imagination,” he says, jabbing his index finger into the tablecloth. By Cuarón’s estimation, anyone surprised at the accuracy of his movie’s predictions was either uninformed or willfully ignorant about the way the world already was by 2006. “People were talking about those things, just not in the mainstream!” he says. He was reading about refugees, know-nothing reactionaries, and eerie disruptions in biological processes during the early '00s. If *Children of Men* can be said to have a message, Cuarón encapsulates it: “What’s really relevant now,” he tells me, “is to stop being complacent.”

The film’s hero — insofar as there is a hero — is Theo Faron, a cynical and oft-drunk civil servant played with grim aplomb by Clive Owen. Theo sleepwalks through a decaying London until his past as a progressive activist catches up to him, literally, in the person of his radical ex-wife, Julian (Julianne Moore). She resurfaces and offers to pay him for his assistance in shuttling a mysterious young West African “fugee” — the movie’s shorthand epithet for “refugee” — named Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) to the coast. Hard up for cash, Theo agrees. Only after Julian is murdered in front of him does he learn about the young woman’s significance: She is, glory be, pregnant with humanity’s first baby in 18 years.

A grueling Via Dolorosa ensues, in which Theo and a hippie midwife named Miriam (Pam Ferris) race to get Kee to a ship piloted by the Human Project, a secretive science collective devoted to ending infertility. Along the way, they get aid from Theo’s pot-smoking, potty-humor-aficionado friend Jasper (Michael Caine) and run from Julian’s erstwhile comrade and assassin Luke (Chiwetel Ejiofor). The trio sneak into a sprawling seaside refugee camp, where Miriam is captured and Kee gives birth just as Luke’s radical cell breaks in and goes to war with the army. As the camp explodes, Theo and Kee escape in a flimsy rowboat. Before the rescuing ship arrives, a gut-shot Theo slumps dead in the rowboat. He, like us, never finds out whether the world is saved.

Cuarón was initially unimpressed by the project, which was an adaptation of 1992’s *The Children of Men,* a dense sci-fi novel by English novelist P. D. James. “I was not interested in a science-fiction thing about upper classes in a fascist country,” he says. He first encountered the story in mid-2001, just after the surprise success of his sex odyssey *Y Tu Mamá También,* when the power brokers of Hollywood were eager to snatch him up. Script after disappointing script was tossed his way, and it got to the point where he told his agent to just send him summaries, because “reading Hollywood screenplays is really sad.”

One such pitch was a screenplay based on James’s novel, about a world wracked by infertility. Cuarón found the premise interesting enough to ponder it with his writing partner Tim Sexton, but they concluded that it felt too much like a glorified B-movie. “Then,” says Cuarón, “there was 9/11.”

When the September 11 attacks occurred, Cuarón was in Canada screening *Y Tu Mamá También* at the Toronto Film Festival alongside its boyish stars, Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna. After air travel was suspended, “we were stranded for three or four days, and I was talking with Gael, I remember, and thinking about what’s going to happen, trying to understand what was going to shape this new century,” Cuarón recalls. One cataclysmic event had tilted the world off its axis, and chaos loomed. That weird tale about global infertility lit up in his brain.

Emmanuel Lubezki and Alfonso Cuarón.

Photograph by Jaap Buitendijk/Universal Studios

“Alfonso called me from Toronto and said, ‘We now have an approach into that story,’ ” Sexton says. “Our point of departure was, we’re at an inflection point. The future isn’t some place ahead of us; we’re living in the future at this moment.” Cuarón refused to read James’s novel. He and Sexton decided they would throw out nearly everything but the character names, the English setting, and the concept of the first pregnancy in a barren era.

They got the go-ahead from the producers, Eric Newman and Marc Abraham, who had been shepherding the adaptation. Once the travel ban was lifted, Cuarón and Sexton embarked on a fervent and globe-trotting period of observing, interpreting, and writing. First, they went to the scene of the crime, the still-smoldering New York City. Then came Milan, where they carefully took note of Italian progressives’ anti-globalization protests. Finally, they decamped to London to finish the first draft of their script. “London in November and December is a pretty great place to imagine the end of the world,” Sexton says. “It’s relentlessly bleak. I’m fairly certain the sun didn’t shine while we were there.” Newman and Abraham’s company, Strike, had a deal with Universal, and Strike enthusiastically presented the studio with the script.

The response was apprehensive at best. Abraham recalls some of the concerns: “ ‘The guy dies at the end? This woman’s on a boat?’ I mean, you’re talking about a very intense, obviously very artistic film that’s not going to be cheap and has a political angle to it,” he says. “Not an easy thing to finesse under the best of circumstances.” But Cuarón was adamant about his vision. As Abraham puts it, “There’s not a lot of back-off in Alfonso Cuarón.” While they were stuck in that impasse, a massive opportunity came Cuarón’s way: Warner Bros. wanted him to direct *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.* “I went to the studio,” Newman recalls, “and I said, ‘Listen, we’re going to lose this guy. He’s going to go do *Harry Potter.*’ And they didn’t jump, so he went and did *Harry Potter.* I remember thinking, *That’s the end. Nobody ever comes back from a franchise.*”

When I ask Cuarón if he thought much about *Children of Men* while he was making *Azkaban,* his response is swift: “All the time,” he says. “Even more. I was in London full-time, going through not the prettiest side of London.” What’s more, a director’s responsibilities are circumscribed on a carefully managed corporate property like *Harry Potter,* so he had time to himself. “I was reading like crazy. Talking to people. Taking pictures. It starts to be a tapestry of information. Everything was around one centerpiece, and that was this *Children of Men.*” The project hadn’t been fully abandoned — screenwriter David Arata had been brought in to make additions and changes in order to keep the movie on life support — but Newman and Abraham had low expectations that it would ever get off the ground. “And then, one day, Alfonso called me,” Newman remembers. “And he said, ‘I’m in post [-production on *Harry Potter*] and I’m really happy with this movie, but I want to make *Children of Men.* It’s never gone out of my mind.’ ”

Post-*Azkaban,* Universal was suddenly more willing to play ball. Cuarón met with studio chair Stacey Snider, who, in Cuarón’s recollection, told him, “I don’t understand this film, I have no idea what you want to do, but go ahead and do it.” It got the green light in 2005, and Cuarón mapped out a plan of aesthetic attack. He recruited his longtime friend and frequent partner Emmanuel “Chivo” Lubezki to be his cinematographer. Together, they hit on the idea of loading up the background with information — graffiti, placards, newscasts — and thus limiting the kind of expository dialogue that often plagues dystopian stories. Cuarón recalls Lubezki declaring, “We cannot allow one single frame of this film to go without a comment on the state of things.”

They also came close to having another artistic collaborator: the infamously anonymous street artist Banksy. “Banksy was not yet the famous Banksy that he is now, and I dug him,” Cuarón says. He wanted to have the graffiti artist work on the film in some way, so he tracked down Banksy’s manager and arranged a meeting at a coffee shop. Cuarón sat across from the manager, who started grilling the director on his ideological stances. Banksy was nowhere to be seen. The meeting ended without resolution. Only after it was over did a person nearby excitedly tell Cuarón that a silent figure had walked in during the meeting and placed himself behind Cuarón the whole time, hidden from view, then left before Cuarón could turn around. Cuaron suspects it was Banksy — who didn’t sign on for the film but reportedly gave permission through his manager to use one of his works, a stencil of two cops smooching, in the background of one of the shots.

This being Hollywood, the most important missing ingredient was the star. Russell Crowe, George Clooney, and Matt Damon were all approached for the role of Theo, but then-41-year-old Clive Owen — a smaller but much-buzzed-about name owing to his role in 2004’s *Closer*— was the one who landed it. “I liked the themes of the script, but it’s an unusual read, in that I couldn’t see the character,” Owen recalls. “I never really did. It just became clear to me that Alfonso had a vision.” Confident that Cuarón knew what he was doing, Owen helped him and Sexton refine the script during fevered discussions in the final months before principal photography began in the summer of 2005. The following few months were grueling.

“I have to say,” Cuarón says, leaning back and scratching his stubble, “it was a very troubled production.” He speaks of people involved in the production “hiding [budget] numbers to try and please the studio,” but others recount different sources of discord. Part of the trouble, according to some of the producers, was Cuarón’s quickness to anger in his dogged pursuit of perfection. “When he arrived on a set, if it wasn’t exactly as he wanted, he could just lay it out on somebody,” Abraham says. “He would say, ‘This is bullshit! This isn’t what we talked about!’ He didn’t say, ‘Oh, this isn’t exactly right. Can we do it a little better?’ It’s like, ‘This didn’t work. If you guys don’t get it right, I’m not shooting it.’ ” As another producer, Iain Smith, puts it, “Alfonso has what I would call a performance temperament, meaning that he expects the best from everybody. He wasn’t doing it to be egotistical. He was doing it because, like all good filmmakers, he was frightened of failing his subject. That was a good thing. It was a tempestuous experience.”

Cuarón liked the premise but thought it sounded like a glorified B-movie. “Then,” he says, “there was 9/11.”

That tempestuousness manifested itself early on, when the real world tragically and eerily burst into the world of the film. A few weeks before they shot the first scene, in which a terrorist bomb blows up on Fleet Street and nearly kills Theo, real-life Islamist radicals detonated four bombs across London on July 7, 2005, killing 52 and wounding nearly 800. The government reluctantly honored its existing agreement to let the *Children of Men*crew film the scene, but there was no way it was going to grant them more than a day to do it. That day was, thanks to Cuarón, chaotic. “It’s a Sunday morning, it’s about 6 a.m., and Alfonso has already said, ‘We’re not shooting today,’ ” Newman recalls. “I said, ‘Why not?’ and he said, ‘Well, look at the cars!’ ” They were all new-looking models, which Cuarón found unacceptable for his worn-down dystopia. They needed damage. He walked up to one of them and reared back.

“He jumps up on the hood and starts jumping up and down, smashing the hood,” Newman recalls. “He goes, ‘Eric, do we own these cars?’ I go, ‘Well, we own that one, that one, that one.’ And he just starts smashing them.” Newman said to him they could just insert the damage with CGI later. The new plan was to put orange stickers on the ones they wanted to tweak in post, so the effects supervisor started picking a few but was quickly interrupted. “Alfonso takes the sticker book and he puts stickers on every single car,” Newman says. “We probably had 30 cars, and he's just sitting there and going, *This one and this one and this one.* It was becoming a multimillion-dollar shot because of all of the animation. But Alfonso figured out a way to shoot it where all we had to do was digitally remove the tracking dots from the cars. He always made the camera work for him.”

That’s an understatement. In the weeks that followed, Cuarón and Lubezki put together some of the most technically daunting and aesthetically stunning action sequences in modern cinema. Cuarón and Lubezki wanted to shoot the movie almost like a documentary: with wide shots and long, continuous takes without a cut. “It was this whole idea of being there in the moment with the character and experiencing violence,” Cuarón says. “When you constantly cut out, back, forward, you’re presenting the cool ways for a car to crash, as opposed to the random way in which violence happens.”

Fans will debate which of the movie’s remarkable single-shot tracking sequences is most impressive, but there are two acknowledged contenders. The first comes about 26 minutes in and lasts for 247 uninterrupted seconds, as Theo, Julian, Kee, Luke, and Miriam are driving through the countryside. Theo and Julian flirt; the car is attacked by a gang of marauders; one of them shoots Julian in the neck; Theo tries to save her while they drive backward, then onto a side road; they’re stopped by a pair of cops, both of whom Luke shoots; then they all drive away — all of which is filmed in one continuous shot. Not to mention being filmed in a cramped automobile. To do all of that in a cramped automobile while retaining the 360-degree range of motion necessary to focus on each character at any given moment would be impossible, Lubezki said at the time. So Cuarón concocted a plan to convince the *artiste*. “I say, ‘Okay! I know how to do it in green screen,’” the director recalls. “I knew exactly why I was saying that, because then Chivo says, ‘If this shot is green screen, I quit!’” Determined to prove his mettle, Lubezki recruited American cinematographer and inventor Gary Thieltges a mere ten days before they had to shoot the scene. Thieltges hurriedly devised an astounding, Rube Goldberg–esque [contraption](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJprbCuWdHo) that the actors nicknamed the Doggicam. Atop the car sat a massive, wedge-shaped container, within which Cuarón and three crew members crouched, one of them using a joystick to move a camera jammed down through an H-shaped hole ripped into the roof. Drivers lay on go-kart-like platforms attached to the car’s fore and aft, one moving it forward and the other moving it backward. From the outside, the vehicle looked like Optimus Prime souped up by Mad Max.

When the bulky camera swiveled and glided, the actors on the opposite end of the lens at any given moment had to lunge down to horizontal positions in custom-rigged car seats that prevented them from being bashed in the head. Before a single reel was filmed, everyone spent two whole days on choreography that would have made Busby Berkeley’s head spin. “It was just like a ballet, really,” recalls Clare Hope-Ashitey, who played Kee. They got the shot and, somehow, made the finished product look seamless.

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And yet, that may not even be the film’s most famous shot.

That’s likely the 379-second-long take in which a battered Theo races through the refugee camp, dodging gunmen and tanks in order to find Kee and the baby. There were hundreds of moving parts, necessitating D-day levels of planning and setup.

“I think we had 14 days to shoot the whole set piece, except by day 12, we hadn’t rolled cameras yet,” Cuarón recalls. On the afternoon of the 13th day, they were finally ready to film. But around the 90-second mark, Cuarón yelled “Cut” because, as he puts it, the take “was just wrong.” The reset took five hours, meaning they lost the daylight and had to go home. The morning of the final day dawned, and they gave it another stab. The cameras rolled, the scene commenced — then camera operator George Richmond tripped and the camera fell. Five hours of reset later, Cuarón had only one chance left.

Action. Owen ran, Richmond followed, and astoundingly, all was going smoothly. They got to a hollowed-out bus filled with people, through which Theo is supposed to scamper. Suddenly, one of the squibs misfired and, horror of horrors, a squirt of fake blood landed on the lens. Cuarón, watching on a monitor, felt his world collapse. “I yell, ‘Cut!’ ” he says, recounting the moment like a ghost story. “But an explosion happens at the same time, so nobody hears me.” The camera kept rolling, and Cuarón realized he had no choice but to let it play through, even though he was sure the shot was ruined and had no idea how he would proceed. “When we said, ‘Cut,’ Chivo starts dancing like crazy,” he says. “And I was like, ‘No, it didn’t work! There’s blood!’ And Chivo turns to me and says, ‘You stupid! That was a miracle!’ ” Chivo was right. One of the film’s enduring strengths is how it uses hyper-minute details to lull you into accepting the plausibility of this dire reality: bus advertisements that hawk trendy clothes for dogs (kids may be gone, but capitalism isn’t, so wouldn’t the Gap push you to dress your pets?); Theo casually asking Julian if her parents were “in New York when it happened” and never explaining what terrifying event “it” might have been; or the elderly, white, German refugee using her native tongue to indignantly weep about being herded alongside *Schwarzen*. The blood-squib shot encapsulates this aesthetic, and has since become famous — an eerie moment that, once seen, can’t be shaken, even ten years later. This dystopia doesn’t feel like a metaphor or a cautionary tale; it feels like a revelation of deeper truth. As one of *Children of Men*’s biggest fans, Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, put it in a documentary featurette that accompanied the DVD release, “A good portrait is more you than you are, yourself, and I think this is what the film does with our reality … It simply makes reality more what it already is.”

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As it turned out, the troubled production had an even more troubled postscript. Snider, the studio head, had been bullish on Cuarón’s idiosyncratic ambitions, but before shooting wrapped, she left Universal. As is often the case with such Hollywood transitions, the new regime didn’t have much skin in the game for projects they hadn’t launched. As Dylan Clark, the film’s liaison with Universal, recalls, “Had Stacey been present for the release of it, she might have done a better job handling fears and anxiety in the marketing department than somebody coming in cold going, ‘Yeah, this one's a toughie.’”

A toughie, indeed. The studio was suddenly stuck with an astoundingly bleak sci-fi picture devoid of fun gadgets or futuristic set design, a movie where the biggest star gets shot dead 28 minutes in, and a high-concept piece of world-building that prides itself on its dearth of exposition. Universal never quite figured out how to sell *Children of Men*. Its trailers misleadingly included lots of expository voice-over from Owen about infertility and, in a massively off-brand move, used Sigur Rós’s swellingly optimistic “Hoppípolla” as a soundtrack. The posters either confused you with an image of a golden fetus against a black backdrop or, worse, made your eyes roll, with a smirking Owen next to a clichéd tag line about how “He must protect our only hope.” Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the film's disappointing theatrical run was the fact that so few people were able to see its warnings, much less heed them.

**I saw *Children of Men***by accident on January 1, 2007, after finding that the movie I’d intended to see — Clint Eastwood’s *Letters From Iwo Jima,* if I recall correctly — was sold out. I picked *Children of Men* despite knowing absolutely nothing about it, and seeing it was one of the most profound experiences of my life. I came back to the theater to see *Children of Men* at least a half-dozen times over the following weeks. Then, a strange thing started to happen at night. I would dream about the final scene, in which Theo and Kee sit in the rowboat, awaiting the ship whose existence Theo won’t live to confirm. Upon waking, I’d find myself sobbing uncontrollably, soaking my pillow and heaving my gut.

Only after speaking with Cuarón did I realize why I wept: not with sorrow, but with hope for my own future. *Children of Men* imagines a fallen world, yes, but it also imagines a once-cynical person being reborn with purpose and clarity. It’s a story about how people like me, those who have the luxury of tuning out, need to awaken. This has been a brutal year, but we were already suffering from a kind of spiritual infertility: The old ideologies long ago stopped working. In a period where the philosophical pillars supporting the global left, right, and center are crumbling, the film’s desperate plea for the creation and protection of new ideas feels bracingly relevant.

Even though that lesson eluded me for a decade, I retained a passionate affection for *Children of Men*, long ago losing count of the number of times I’ve watched it. So it’s been deeply satisfying to see its robust second life among critics: It was particularly gratifying to see that, when the BBC [polled](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160822-the-21st-centurys-25-greatest-films) 177 critics for a master list of the greatest films of the 21st century, *Children of Men* clocked in at number 13, beating out canonical flicks like [*12 Years a Slave*](http://www.vulture.com/2013/10/movie-review-12-years-a-slave.html)*, Brokeback Mountain, Lost in Translation,* and [*The Master*](http://www.vulture.com/2012/09/edelstein-on-the-master.html)*.*

Oddly enough, Cuarón doesn’t seem interested in talking about the film’s critical reappraisal, nor in agreeing that it is more relevant now than it was in 2006. We met up 12 days after Trump’s victory, and I expected him to be in full end-is-nigh mode, but he was relentlessly pleasant. He said he was not surprised that the atavistic rage of the Brexiters and Trumpists had overcome the weakening forces of centrist democracy. But most important, Cuarón was, against all odds, confident that better days lie ahead. “I used to think that any solution would come from the paradigms that I know,” he says. “Now I think that the only thing is to think of the unimaginable. For the new generation, the unimaginable is not as unimaginable.”

But, I counter, thanks to climate change, won’t we all be underwater pretty soon? Sure, he says, climate change could decimate humanity, but that’s no excuse to give in to fatalism. “There would be, still, pockets of populations that will scatter around the world,” he says. “What’s at stake is the culture as we know it.” Humans will continue to exist — and we have a responsibility to build a culture of respect and mutual assistance. It seems so dreadfully unlikely, but we are obligated to hope.

Cuarón is very specific about what he means by that word. For him, it is not a passive thing. It is not a messianic thing, either — he speaks derisively of the idea that you could vote for Barack Obama, then sit back passively and feel disappointed. “The hope is something that you create,” he says. “You live by hoping and then you create that change. Hope is trying to change your present for a better world. It’s pretty much up to you.” The gap between our world and that of *Children of Men* is closing rapidly, but he refuses to give up his faith in our wayward species. There are dark days ahead, to be sure, but perhaps they will also be days of transformation. “Look, I’m absolutely pessimistic about the present,” Cuarón says. “But I’m very optimistic about the future.”

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