**Mise-en-scene Analysis: Children of Men**

Mise-en-scene is “the way space is articulated withing the image….. encompasses everything that happens in the frame” ([Kolker, 2002, p. 64](#_ENREF_2)). The director carefully constructs the mise-en-scene in order to visually communicate key concepts to the viewer. In the opening sequence of ‘Children of Men’, the mise-en-scene communicates to the audience the idea of an authoritarian, pessimistic state through important details in setting, character and storyline. Allusions to historical events heighten the reality of the film.

The setting of the film, a dystopian London in 2027, is reinforced with a number of visual clues in the opening sequence. Icons that we associate with London today are depicted with a futuristic twist. For example, when Theo exits the coffee shop, we see a number of red double decker buses drive past which have moving advertisements on the sides. This well-known iconography immediately suggests the London setting, and the animated advertisements implies that the film is set in the future. When the camera pans around the city after Theo exits the coffee shop, we see more moving advertisements on bicycles and billboards. The futurist setting is further reinforced by the look of the computers at Theo’s work. However, these moving advertisements and the computers appear to be the only technological advances that London has made by 2027. The cars on the street and televisions in the coffee shop appear to be very similar to those of today, which communicates the idea that many industries have come to a standstill since the global infertility epidemic in 2009.

As “low-key illumination creates stronger contrasts and sharper, darker shadows” ([Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 130](#_ENREF_1)), the use of low-key lighting in the opening shot in the coffee shop reinforces how pessimistic people have become as a result of having no hope of a future generation. The lighting in this scene creates darkness and shadow on the civilians faces and communicates a sense of sadness. The colours used in the mise-en-scene add to this sense of gloom. Costumes are in dark, neutral tones, and much of the set, such as the coffee shop walls, and the cubicles at Theo’s work, is painted a dark blue-grey colour.

Another important aspect of the film’s mise-en-scene is the prevalence of propaganda around the city. The sign seen when Theo is going through his work security check, states ‘REPORT ILLEGAL WORKERS – JOBS FOR THE BRITS’, and the billboard which Theo’s train passes states ‘AVOIDING FERTILITY TESTS IS A CRIME’. The frequent use of such propaganda helps to communicate the grim, authoritarian political setting of the film, which is reminiscent of past totalitarian governments such as that of Nazi Germany. This authoritarian setting is further communicated by the presence of bars and cages. For example, the window of Theo’s train is barred, and when he gets off the train we see a barbed-wire enclosure, filled with illegal immigrants, guarded by policemen with guns. This aspect of mise-en-scene is suggestive of the Jewish concentration camps of the Holocaust.

The mise-en-scene in this opening sequence also helps develop the main character of Theo. Early in the sequence, we see Theo push through a crowd in a coffee shop transfixed by the news item playing on the television. He looks up to see what they are watching, but as soon as he receives his coffee he promptly leaves. This action in the frame communicates the pessimistic nature of his character. Theo’s character is further communicated to the audience through his use of props. After getting his coffee, he takes out a flask from his jacket and pours some of its contents into his coffee. This suggests to the audience that Theo deals with the insipid reality he is surrounded by through turning to the bottle. The mise-en-scene also communicates the gloomy nature of the general population. The costumes worn by all characters in the sequence are noticeably plain and boring which alludes to the drab, dull fashions of the 1940’s during World War Two, when clothing was worn merely for utility.

Mise-en-scene also helps communicate important aspects of storyline. As the sequence opens, we see a coffee-shop full of people watching the newstory on the television about ‘Baby Diego’. The actors are frowning with concern at the news, and are watching in silence. Later on in the sequence in Theo’s workplace, people are watching the same news on their computers, some even crying about the event. This acting communicates the significance of Baby Diego’s death, as not only was he the world’s youngest person, he was also the ‘tragic reminder of the 18 years of infertility humanity has endured’. The significance of Baby Diego’s death is further communicated by the seven different screens that are shown playing the story within the sequence. The use of a hand-held camera throughout “gives the frame a shaky look” ([Lacey, 1998, p. 20](#_ENREF_3)) and helps make the action appear more documentary-like, therefore more realistic to the viewer.

The details of the mise-en-scene in the opening sequence of ‘Children of Men’ enables the audience to understand the setting, characters and story more effectively than just through the dialogue. Many of the details reference real-life events that have occurred in history, such as the Holocaust and World War Two, which increases the authenticity of the film.

Word count: 876

References

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