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**The Vulture Transcript: Alfonso Cuarón on *Children of Men***

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Alfonso Cuarón on the set of Children of Men. *Photo: Universal Pictures*

Alfonso Cuarón has a knack for disappearing. The Mexico-born writer-director became one of the 21st century’s most acclaimed filmmakers after he helmed his 2001 odyssey of sex and social realism, *Y Tu Mamá También*, and the stunning 2004 franchise picture *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. But after the troubled production and financial failure of his 2006 dystopian epic *Children of Men*, he more or less vanished from Hollywood, only to reemerge with a vengeance for 2013’s *Gravity*, which garnered seven Academy Awards, including Best Director. But after that, he once again vanished, eschewing nearly all interviews in recent years.

However, his name is on many cinephiles’ lips these days due to a resurgence of interest in *Children of Men*, and its eerily prophetic resonance in our present geopolitical climate. After nearly a year of searching, Vulture was able to track Cuarón down in the city of his birth, Mexico City, where he’s been working on a mysterious, not-yet-titled film set in that city during the 1970s. For [our story on the legacy of *Children of Men* ten years later](http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/children-of-men-alfonso-cuaron-c-v-r.html), Vulture’s Abraham Riesman spoke with the director at a sunlit restaurant in the hip neighborhood of La Condesa.

The primary topic was *Children of Men*, but given that film’s ambitious attempt to seek the meaning of life and the reasons why societies fail, it’s unsurprising that the conversation was wide-ranging. Over lunch, dessert, and many glasses of chia fresca, Cuarón touched on everything from climate change and Picasso’s *Guernica* to his frustrations with Universal Pictures and the global rise of right-wing populism. We’ve presented the bulk of the discussion here, with some portions edited or condensed for clarity.

**I saw *Children of Men* on New Year’s Day, 2007. I knew nothing about it. I saw it on a whim because the movie I was trying to see was sold out.**Exactly. [*Laughs.*]

**Okay, yes, it wasn’t marketed all that well, so I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who saw it for that sort of reason. But I’ve seen, at least anecdotally, that people are giving word-of-mouth endorsements recently, what with the coming of Brexit and the Trump victory. There’s a lot to talk about when it comes to *Children of Men* now.**There’s so much, man. A very sad fact is that people, they’ve been talking about the stuff that’s been happening. People have been warning about it. The thing is, we are surprised now, but it’s been talked about. *Children of Men* is a product of that. *Children of Men* is not a prophetic piece. It’s just a compound of studies and essays of other people around the time [when it was made].

**Who were you reading back then? I know Slavoj Žižek was one person, but who else?**Naomi Klein and [political philosopher] John Gray. But also, in terms of population studies and stuff, it was [sociologist] Saskia Sassen. What I find of these people — Chomsky, too — they are amazing at diagnostics. It’s not that most of these people have tried to come out with solutions. They are just stating the diagnostics of the situation, the state of how things are. One thing they started talking about, because of the environment, was [geographer] Fabrizio Eva. He’s talking about the natural thing that happens with that, which is migration. The natural thing was to explore migration. You go and you start talking with people or researching about the effects. This is stuff that they’ve been setting up for a long time. Now we’re in shock because the paradigm suddenly seems to be changing. It’s not. It’s just the natural evolution of what has been happening the last few years.

**In the past few months, I’ve been thinking a lot about the bit in *Children of Men* where Theo talks to Nigel, who’s been rescuing Europe’s great artworks and preserving them. Theo tells him, “In a hundred years, there won’t be one sad fuck to look at any of this. What keeps you going?” and Nigel says, “You know what it is, Theo? I just don’t think about it.” I used to think that was an appalling way to look at the world, but lately, I’ve been wondering if he had the right idea. After all, if you focus on the coming apocalypse, you might become fatalistic or even nihilistic. So maybe you should just not think about it.**That’s so funny, because I never saw it as so philanthropic. I don’t think it’s philanthropy there, with this character. I think it’s just what gets him through the night. He has the means and the power to put [the art collection] together and yes, he can claim that it is for the good of humanity like everybody claims that everything that they do is for the good of humanity. But ultimately, he is using those just as subjects of décor. It’s decoration. [Michelangelo’s] David belongs to a context. A context that is a cultural context that deals with ethnic, spiritual, religious, aesthetic use. You know? You cannot just strip that part and put it in your living room as décor. You’re going to put *Guernica* as a backdrop for your fancy dining table served by butlers? At that point, what does it mean anymore? It becomes wallpaper. Also, there’s the line where [Nigel’s] just talking about all these cities and the catastrophes how it’s a blow to art.

**Right, and then Theo says, “Not to mention people.”**[Nigel] does not mention people. But you cannot divorce people from art or from culture. Otherwise, it’s just an object. If an alien civilization comes one day, I don’t know that they’ll be able to distinguish a piece of marble in the shape of the David from just marble in nature. Art has to do with the culture. The moment that you divorce from that, there’s nothing left. And [Nigel] is divorcing art from the people. You know, it’s either decoration or a turn of power, at that point.

**So, let’s get into the chronology of *Children of Men*. The project was first tossed your way in 2001, right?**Right, it was when I was promoting *Y Tu Mamá También*. I had already told my agent that I didn’t want to read screenplays. This thing of, “for your consideration” — none of that. I don’t want to read it. Send me just the summary. And the summary is a two-pages-long thing. I don’t want to read 120 pages of … Look, reading Hollywood screenplays is really sad. And the problem is, you may think that you’re working, but you just waste time. And then you don’t create. At that time, I didn’t have a computer or anything, it was still paper [screenplays]. On flights, I would take one and I would read it there. And I remember reading [an early draft of *Children of Men*], traveling to L.A.

When I read the summary, immediately, I don’t know why, it’s one of those things where you start and you see everything. I start reading the thing and it’s like everything started unfolding. But I was not interested in the book or the [existing] story and I didn’t want to read the screenplay, because it was just a literal adaptation [of the novel], and what I like is some elements in the summary. Then, with *Y Tu Mamá También* at Toronto Film Festival, we were stranded there because it was September 11. And I was there with [the movie’s stars,] Gael [García Bernal] and Diego [Luna], and we were stranded for three or four days. It was a very odd climate. The streets are quiet and all in fear. Powerful people — they didn’t have the power to make the plane go up there, the private plane go up, you know? It was strange to see.

I was talking with Gael, I remember, and thinking about what’s going to happen. That is when. Because it was clear that something had happened that was going to change things, and it was at the turn of the century. It was this thing that I started, this thing of trying to understand what was going to shape this new century. That is when I started reading a lot of stuff.

**If you had all these ideas right when you read the summary, why weren’t you interested in actually moving forward with it?**It was because I was not interested in the screenplay. At that time, I was not interested in a science-fiction thing about upper classes in a fascist country. Then, it was 9/11. That is the change. Then I went with [co-writer] Tim Sexton to London that winter. Tim read the book. I told him, “You tell me if there’s anything relevant that we can use.” He read it, and there was one or two things that he said. We wrote the draft. [Universal] didn’t want to green-light it. This is when *Harry Potter* came through.

**Do you know why they didn’t want to green-light it?**They didn’t like it.

**That’s a good reason, I guess.**Mm-hmm. While I was doing *Harry Potter*, they called me. The producers called me and said they need to keep the project alive. “We’re going to bring in another writer.” [The writer was David Arata.] They did a write-up. The work was not to change anything that we have done.

**While you were working on *Harry Potter*, were you thinking much about *Children of Men*?**All the time. Even more. I was in London full-time. Going through, you know, not the prettiest side of London. *Harry Potter* is the time that gave me more space for research. Because once you get into the *Harry Potter* world, it’s very intellectually intensive the first few months that you have to put everything together. Then, after that is a long time that is just like clockwork machinery. You go to work certain hours. It gave me time. I was just researching like crazy. Reading like crazy. Talking to people. Just looking around. Taking pictures. Just observing, you know? Reading a lot and trying to process. What is great about reading is, you read something that’s really what you find relevant, then it relates to something else that then is relevant. It kind of starts to be like a tapestry of information, and everything was around one centerpiece, that was this *Children of Men*. Chivo [cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki] was very influential as well.

**Even before it was a sure thing that *Children of Men* would happen, had you already decided that Chivo would be your cinematographer if it all came together?**Always. Always.

**What ideas was he contributing in those early stages?**He says, “We cannot allow one single frame of this film to go without a comment on the state of things.” I said, “Okay. That’s exactly it.” He was so articulate about what it was, you know? I can communicate about zillions of specifics that sometimes only Chivo can decipher. He says, “Okay. It’s about that.” That just helps so much. For some of the sweep of London, Chivo and I said we wanted it to look more like Mexico City, you know? Also, there’s almost no close-ups. Everything is very wide because the environment is as important as the character.

**Yeah, which you guys had already done in *Y Tu Mamá También*.**Yeah. One thing informs the other. You know, from a main-narrative standpoint, you can follow the story. You hope as a director, that you can follow. *Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba,* by numbers, more or less. What is more relevant, in many ways, is what is told behind. Even with the characters, the mission of the characters, or even the dialogue of the characters. The little pieces of information that are in the frame.

**So you’ve been thinking and talking with Chivo, and then you finish *Harry Potter*. Did you jump into *Children of Men* right away?**  
What happened is one of those magical things. I go to do *Harry Potter*, and suddenly, the same people who [said no before], they want to green-light the film. Stacey Snider was the head of Universal. She was really awesome. I passed through her office, and she said, “I don’t understand this film, I have no idea what you want to do, but go ahead and do it.” Then it began, but it was the beginning of a very gruesome process. It was very tough. I have to say, it was a very troubled production.

**What was troubled about the production?**Boring Hollywood bullshit. Like producers hiding numbers to try to please the studio.

**Before we get into the production, let’s talk about Clive Owen. How did he get cast? I heard that the folks in charge initially wanted an American actor.**The thing is, they would only green-light it if we used one of their five names of the moment. I was so lucky that, that year or the year before, I think was *Closer* [in which Owen starred]. Everybody was hot for Clive. I loved that because I had loved him in *Croupier*. Then we met. He didn’t really understand what I was talking about at first. Then I asked him to see *The Battle of Algiers*. He loved *The Battle of Algiers*. The battle we lost was that Theo was going to have thick glasses. Not thick, but more like Michael Caine in *Alfie*. They didn’t want it because it would make him less handsome.

**Why do you think Clive was right for the role?**You know, the moment you talk to Clive, there’s a saltiness to the guy.

**A cynicism, too, I’d imagine.**That’s the thing. Listen, he can be aloof as hell. Then, this warm kind of thing. I immediately dug the guy. I really liked him. I think he was offered, that year, to do this film about blood diamonds.

***Blood Diamond*? The one that Leonardo DiCaprio ended up doing?**Mm-hmm.

**Oh, interesting. Clive made the right pick**.  
Well, no, because Leo was nominated for an Oscar.

**Fair point.**I was very happy that he decided to come and do this. He was, from the beginning to the end of this, a collaborator.

**He ended up helping to write it, right? You and him and Tim?**Man, we would just sit and riff with Clive. He has such a great smell for bullshit. Very important also is he understands the kind of feeling, of making what we’re making. The rhythm of the scenes was on his shoulders because everything was pivoting around him. He’s the pivot of the scene, so he arrives and stuff happens, so in many ways he was an amazing filmmaker. At the end of a long shot he says, “You know, I think we can speed it up.” You know? You’re not going to be doing that in the editing room, you need to do it in this scene. The whole film was a triad with Chivo, Clive, and me.

**And how did you end up casting Julianne Moore?**What a great chance. The studio had a bunch of names, and there were some other names, but Julianne … For me, it was relevant for either Theo or Julian to be non-British.

**Why?**Because of the whole thing of immigration. We were even considering some French actress and some others of all nationalities. But the moment when you got over there, the studio right away gets very concerned about accents. Unless you have some foreign actress that was nominated for the Oscar that year in a movie that made a lot of money, they’re not very keen to cast her.

**Why was Julianne right for the role?**Man, she’s as cool and laid back as any American woman, and that was important for her character. She’s absolutely laid back, but she can be fiery in a second, and she’s as smart as hell.

**Was it hard to convince Michael Caine to play a hippie? He’s a pretty conservative guy.**I didn’t know he was a conservative. When we met, I guess we connected because he met John Lennon, and he said, “Can I play as if I was John?” I said, “That’s fantastic.” But then we’re doing the pot-smoking scene, and at some moment, Michael started to get that I wasn’t very conservative. I can tell that for a second, Michael thinks, *Why am I sitting here?* I have to say, that guy, such an amazing pro. He’s a very technical actor. He knows where your camera’s going to be, where he’s going to stand, how he’s going to say his line here and how he’s going to say the line over there.

**While we’re on the topic of collaborators: I heard there was a moment where it seemed like you might work with Banksy. Is that true?**It’s a funny story.

**I would imagine.**Banksy was not yet the Banksy that he is now. He was more like an East London phenomenon, and I dug him. His stuff. And I thought it would be great to have his artwork throughout the whole thing. He had his first show, the one where Damien Hirst bought all of his stuff, and I was invited. I wanted to talk to Banksy, so I talked to his manager. We went to a coffee shop, and it was so strange. The manager walks in, and he just sits behind me. He starts asking me … It was like an interview. Like a scripted interview. Almost like ideological interview.

**Speaking of London, you started shooting right after the 7/7 bombings. Did the studio pressure you to stop shooting because of them?**No. No, this is London. If it had been any other country, if it had been Mexico, forget about it. For some reason, Americans feel very safe in the U.K. The interesting thing is that it was like what I was thinking about then, which was green zones. You see this Mexico. [*He moves his arm to gesture at the rest of the restaurant.*] Look around and see all these beautiful people drinking their cocktails. Man, we can go ten minutes away and you go to the absolutely other extreme. But we live in these green zones that are protected. Ultimately, the U.K. looks like a green zone for the world.

**Because it’s surrounded by water.**And inside that green zone you have other green zones. You have walls protecting the megarich in Pall Mall, going through Buckingham and stuff. But the thing is that those walls around green zones, they don’t work.

**They work until they don’t.**It’s just an appearance of safety. Ultimately, the masses are going to come.

**And that’s part of the point of the movie, insofar as it’s showing how the refugee crisis can easily penetrate the U.K.**The thing is that it was so obvious already then [in the early ‘00s]. But it needed to be so gruesomely obvious before the media would notice. Just think about for how long it was horrible before it became horrible to the media.

**So, at the time, you’re reading about these refugee crises that no one else is talking about?**A lot of people were talking about it, but it had an irrelevance. I don’t know how many thousands of these people drowned until it suddenly it got the world’s attention.

**Why do you think it eventually got that attention?**It was absolutely massive, that’s why. Earlier, it was, “Okay, this day, only eight drowned.” “This day, it was only 20. Not a bad day!” Suddenly, one day, there’s 200 coming to the shores of Italy. That’s finally news. So yes, we were worried about immigration. The work with the casting was very specific in doing demographics. The way of choosing the extras was, X amount of Germans, X amount of Hungarians, X amount of Algerians. It was a percentage. We tried to be as specific as possible with that

**That’s one of the most subtly brilliant parts of the movie: There are all these white people in refugee camps. People tend to forget that refugees aren’t just brown and black people.**We forget so quickly. That’s why I wanted to make the comment of all these white refugees in cages. For instance, there’s a German woman at one point. This German woman is pleading for help and as someone passes, she starts yelling to the soldier: How can they do this to me? How could they keep me with all these blacks?

**I’ve always thought that the infertility, whether this is deliberate or not, works as this really great metaphor for climate change and the challenge it presents to the global left. You have all of these lefty characters, the Fishes being the best example, who think of themselves as agents of  progress and justice, but there’s this existential threat to humanity and they’re not focused on it. The stuff they are focused on is honorable, of course: liberation for oppressed people. But at the same time there’s this thing that’s going to make all of our causes completely irrelevant at some point.**Right, like the U.S. left got sucked into a bipartisan election. The whole thing of having to chose the best of two evils. Then where’s your platform for proposal? If the time and energy is to defend someone that you don’t really fully believe in but is better than the other guy — that’s mad. You’re supposed to say, “There’s an alternative.”

**Is there, though?**I’m certain there is. Maybe everything is purely Darwinian and is always going to be like that, but what a sad way of living, if you don’t think that a difference can be made.

**That makes me think of something you said in an interview back in 2006: “There is no time for caution; there is only time for transformation.”**There is only time for transformation, and transformation begins with yourself, man.

**Do you feel like you’ve transformed since the movie came out?**I have been forced. Yeah, I have. Man, one thing is age. It does something to you in time. Pretty much after *Children of Men*, I lived the five most intense and difficult years of my life.

**You sort of disappeared for a while.**I disappeared for a while, yeah. Definitely. It’s definitely had an effect ever since. I needed to transform.

**How do you keep your head up and not feel that life’s not worth it anymore?**Because it’s worth it. Every day, it’s worth it. Every inch, man. It is worth it. Not in the messianic way of changing the world maybe, but in the less messianic thing of making a difference with your children, with the community, or in what you communicate.

**How worried are you about climate change?**It’s one more trouble. The thing is: If I’m worried, I’m worried. Yes, I’m not worried about me. I’ve had a good run in this life. I still go to forests and get to see the beach. It’s troubling in what I think for my children. It’s terrifying. It doesn’t seem that there’s a big reverting factor. It doesn’t seem like anybody really gives a damn. One more time, the election of one person becomes more important than … All the media reports, and all the left, and all the liberals just focusing on what, in Sanskrit, is *maya* — an illusion. Then, when all this change of power dynamic happens, we are shocked. We should not be shocked. All of this stuff was happening around us.

**Do you think we’ll be able to reverse the effects of climate change? Or at least survive as a species?**Look, what is at stake is not the world. The world’s going to be fine. Nature is going to be fine. Maybe another version of nature that is unimaginable for us, but still. There would be, still, pockets of populations that will scatter around the world. What is at stake is the culture as we know it.

**Let’s talk about a few of the most famous shots from the movie. How did you put together the car-chase scene where Julian gets shot?**It was a lot of planning. The problem that I have when I’m writing is, I start imagining the shots. Very early, it was very clear to me that it was going to be a one-shot deal. It was this whole idea of being there in the moment with the character and experiencing violence. We didn’t want glamorous violence. 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. So it was in the page, more or less. But then you get into the simple thing of how do you put it together?

Chivo and me, we had, like, a weekly meeting about that shot. I remember the week in which he said okay. First, Chivo says it’s impossible. I say, “I know how to do it in green screen.” I knew exactly why I was saying that, because then Chivo says, “If this shot is green screen, I quit!” [*Laughs.*] The next day he says, “Okay, I talked to my friend. We can do this.”

**The other big single-take shot is the one where Theo is running through the refugee camp. What visual references were you using for the camp, in general?**The camps that were in the Balkans. The ones in the Kurdish refugee camps. And a lot was also Calais.

**When Theo runs into a hollowed-out bus in that shot, blood splatters on the camera lens. Can you tell me how that happened?**Initially, there was going to be blood splatter on the lens when they killed Julianne Moore. We were going to add that digitally. But long story short — or long story long — is that for [the refugee camp] shot, we had like 14 days to shoot the whole set piece, except by day 12 we hadn’t rolled cameras yet. As you can guess, by day three that you don’t shoot camera, they send a production guy from the studio to visit you. By the sixth day that you haven’t done it, the creative executive comes to visit you. Well, by the time that you reach the 11th day, the head of the studio is there. That kind of stuff.

And the problem is that we had only two shots a day to do the thing. The morning, then you have to reset the explosions, the screams, the whole thing. Five hours to reset. So you only have another shot right before the light goes away. And the problem is that, we could not extend it to the 15th day, because there was already a commitment with the army or something, one of those things.

So we are in the 13th day, and in the afternoon, we do our first shot. Then after a minute and a half, it just was wrong. So we had to reset for the next day. The next morning we do the first take, and everything is perfect, and we’re about to reach the end. We were running towards getting inside the building, when [camera operator] George [Richardson] tripped, and so the camera fell. So we only had one more shot for one more before we have to move out. It was the end of my career.

**Were you panicking at that point?**You know, at that point, you’re just focusing.

**Okay, so you get to the final attempt at the shot.**And when we arrived at the bus, the camera goes in, and blood splatters the lens. With my little monitor, I see that I cannot see anything. I yell, “Cut!” But an explosion happens at the same time, so nobody hears me. And that gives me time to think, “Look, I have to roll to the end.” So we kept on going. When we said, “Cut,” Chivo starts dancing like crazy. 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! The blood goes here, not with Julianne Moore!” Yeah, that was supposed to go in the other scene, but it happened here.

**Let’s talk about the final scene, when Theo and Kee are in the rowboat, waiting for the Human Project’s ship.**What was important was the metaphor of the boat.

**What is that metaphor?**We are naturally migrants. I mean, the reason we’re having this conversation is that it’s in the nature of humans to migrate. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here. There wouldn’t be humans here; they would still be in Africa.

**Also, we’re all floating around in an unsafe world, so we have to be good to each other in the way that Theo and Kee are.**That is the thing. You want to have a safe neighborhood? Create social infrastructure around your neighborhood so the neighbors of your neighborhood are better off. It is going to be safer.

**Theo and Kee and the baby are, in that moment, a kind of blended family. It’s like the movie is telling us to think of family as something that goes beyond genetic bonds.**That is the other thing. Family is beyond this patriarchal thing of descendancy.

**The patriarchal thing where privilege and property are passed down from father to son and so on?**It is passed man to man, and so are loyalties. There is an identification thing: If you have a certain name, you are part of the lucky class.

**Speaking of gender: In P.D. James’s original novel, the infertility happens because men are sterile, but in the movie, it’s women who can’t have babies. Why change that?**It was something that someone told us was more likely [scientifically]. The male one was very unlikely. But it was more about a spiritual infertility. As a human culture, we have completely diverged from something very simple in nature. Darwinian nature is that we procreate and whatever we do is for the good of the commune. If you are an ant, it is for the ant colony. Your only reason to exist is to set the ground for next generation. Humanity had always been that. But in the 20th century, with rampant liberal capitalism, you went into this hedonism that I really think led to this kind of spiritual infertility.

**Hedonism meaning people only looking out for themselves?**Yeah. *I have my car, I have the party this weekend, I’m going to get a raise, and I’m going this winter to the Maldives, and I’m going to do this and that and everybody is going to enjoy themselves.* Like the reason we are here is to enjoy ourselves. That has been, pretty much since the ‘90s, what is going on. Even the left just retreated into watching foreign movies with their friends. But there are organizations that I give the benefit of the doubt. I’ve been intrigued by the ones that are breaking paradigms in terms of how they communicate.

**I don’t understand what you mean.**The stuff that comes out of social media and the internet. I find that it’s interesting how the stuff that you didn’t think that could work … and by way, I say that it “works” with a grain of salt. I’m just saying that it’s an interesting step to explore deeper and see how it can be potentialized. That they have captured the attention of a lot of people in joining causes. Sometimes the problem with all the joining causes is that the work of the left is not to click or add my signature to a thing and then think that you’ve done your job. But what I’m intrigued by is how social media changes the paradigm of social movements. As you can see, in their Arab Spring and more recently, in the U.S. election.

**Sure, but the role of social media in the U.S. election was sort of horrifying and detrimental.**But, in one way or the other, it changed things. The mainstream media have been relegated to irrelevance. The U.S. left should be embarrassed. While the left in the U.S. got institutionalized and mainstream, the right didn’t.

**The right remained radical.**They went into the trenches and they remained radical, and then see what happens. Now that they don’t need the mainstream media’s support because there is another paradigm, see what happens? Well, the left must feel a little bit stupid about having cozying up to the Obama administration. Yes, you can tell me, “Trump is coming; now you’re going to appreciate Obama.” Except that’s an absurd comparison. Obama didn’t deliver the dream, but the left seemed to have supported him.

**What dream didn’t he deliver?**Let’s talk about fundamental things. One, Guantánamo. He didn’t close it. One simple one. Two, a new way in which the U.S. was going to approach the rest of the world. It has been exactly the same as with George W. Bush. There has been no change. He was going to stop the war in Iraq, but now it’s back. He expanded the war in Afghanistan that he said he was going to get rid of. And that is not to mention drones. That’s not just to mention how the immigration record of Obama is way worse than the one of Bush.

**Do you think we have less hope now?**It’s so symptomatic that we can talk about hope in a fancy Mexican restaurant, being white and educated. We have been extremely lucky. But if you just happen to not be part of not the very lucky people in the world, you live in very desperate conditions most of the time. Just imagine being in western Russia in the winter of 1944. Think about being in the middle of Europe in the midst of the plague. You can ask the same question: Is there hope or not? The hope is something that you create. As long as hope doesn’t take you away from the present. 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.

I guess that the word hope, strictly speaking, is if you are refugee and you haven’t received any food. Then your only hope is that the helicopter arrives and the warlords don’t shoot the helicopter before it lands. Then you can think, can we have hope or not? That depends on what time the helicopter comes and if the warlord decides to shoot it down or not.

**I’m not sure I understand. Are you saying real hope can only come if it’s something that you earn under harsh conditions?**What I’m saying is that if you have no other options, then maybe hope is an option for something. For a miracle. This is another kind of hope: You see the world and you still believe that it can be another place for everything. I’m talking in a more philosophical standpoint. The hope when you have a terminal disease and the only hope for life is some weird chemical reaction happens. That’s genuine hope.

**Is *Children of Men* about seeking that harder-won hope?**Look, *Children of Men*, more than anything, was an essay, a diagnosis of the state of things at the time. The thematic element is it has to do with humanity’s drive to move forward. That life impulse that — same as anything else in nature — makes humans keep on going. Except with humans, there’s this specific particularity that is consciousness. That consciousness turns into ideology. Those are tools of separation because ultimately, ideologies are mental tools of separation.

**Do you think we need to get back to a pre-ideological mindset?**Look, I think that is very difficult nowadays to even think of, that we can strip ourselves of ideology. We would need to strip ourselves from contemporary society. I don’t think that anybody of my generation or the generation in power right now can come up with the right decisions to face the world that we’re living in. We’re at a point where our knowledge is not enough. Coming from where I come from, I have a more ideological kind of structure and I have my Marxist ideas. I’m talking about Marx in terms of understanding history. Historical change, dialectics, that stuff. More and more, I see that younger generations are farther and farther away from those things, and that doesn’t mean that they are necessarily unconcerned or unaware, socially unaware. It’s just that they are not tainted with ideology, the way that I’ve been tainted. Instead of trying to solve problems, [older generations] should create platforms for the next generation to try to come up with more untainted concepts.

**What do you mean by platforms? Spaces where people talk?**Yes, spaces. They can be virtual spaces, real spaces. They trigger political changes. Even now, your new president pretty much was triggered by social media. You see the power that is there, an empowering which, for good or for ill, is more democratic. By the way, I’m very skeptical about democracy.

**How so?**The problem with democracy is that democracy is a process, and it turned into a doctrine. This idea of, you have two things to choose from [in an election]. Then that process becomes the ideology. Democracy should be means to an end.

**Are you more or less optimistic now than you were when you made *Children of Men*?**Look, I’m absolutely pessimistic about the present. But I’m very optimistic about the future. I’m a pessimist about the present because I know my generation. But every time I see younger generations, I’m hopeful. That’s the word. Hope. There you go.

**As a young person, it’s hard for me to be hopeful about my generation. But maybe I’m not actually young.**Yes, but gosh, your generation is not in Brooklyn alone. I’m very hopeful, in particular, of the millennials because it’s the first generation in recorded history that was born with a new cosmo-vision. Born with a new set of tools. I used to think that any solution would come from the paradigms that I know. Now I think that the only thing is to think of the unimaginable. For the new generation, the unimaginable is not as unimaginable. You know what I mean?

**Which is why the movie is, maybe, hopeful at the end: It’s saying there will be at least one person that outlasts the awful present.**Then there’s going to be more. That possibility of tomorrow exists. What’s really relevant now is to stop being complacent. If you’re less complacent, you are disappointed when this stuff happens, yes — but you say, “Yeah! It was coming.” By being complacent, you remove your critical muscle. If anything, what’s happening now is everything’s out in the open. Racists are going to be racist institutionally. They don’t hide now, into norms of etiquette. This is great, because now you know where you are.

**That’s one of the things I like about apocalyptic fiction. Because the Greek translation of apocalypse is *unveiling*. You want the truth to be unveiled so people can be knocked out of complacency.**That is very important. My girlfriend was very anxious about the Trump thing. The first day, she was really depressed. She was here in Mexico, visiting me. She was in tears. The second day, then we could talk. She was so sad and she says, “It’s just that you’ve been living this thing that we call a dream of what liberalism is, and how you spread flowers and everybody’s going to get along. But I see now it doesn’t work like that.” You know, I think it’s a good call to arms. Do you think those people who are mean are tired? No. They’re afraid, and there are bastards that manipulate them.

**You were good at imagining how bad things could get before most people did.**Not imagining. This thing was not imagination. People were talking about those things, just not in the mainstream! We were very concerned about other stuff, but these are the things that are relevant. Not presidential elections.

**I dunno, man — presidential elections are pretty important.**But it should be a process. It should not be one year of the American psyche. The imagination of the American psyche, for one year every four years, is gone in this parade. It’s a way of focusing on two people. I find it a bit scary. It should be about the world, what is happening, and trying to figure out, “You guys, what are you proposing to do?” Otherwise, it just becomes about, “No, he’s worse!” “No, she’s worse!” “No, he’s worse!” “No, she’s worse!” You know?

**What do you think of *Children of Men* when you watch it these days?**You have to know that when I finish a film, I never see it again.

**Oh, so haven’t seen it in a decade?**Actually, this is not true because I was given an award in this festival in Italy, and my kids were there. They gave me the award and then they showed the movie. I went to get my kids and they refused to leave the theater. I said, “Okay, I’ll wait for you guys outside.” And they refused. They forced me to watch the film with them. This was a year and a half ago.

**What did you make of it, watching it again?**It was interesting. I watched it as if I was watching somebody else’s film. I thought it was a little weird.

**What part worked best? What part were you most proud of?**I cannot get into that. I have, with all my films, my loves and hates. But something that happened in that film, is when the film was released the reports are that the only audience members that went to see it is a guy who went there because his other film was sold out. [*Laughs.*]

**Yeah, yeah, okay, no need to make fun of me.**I’m so clear, believe me, I’m clear. They had me very informed that that had happened. When you flop, you know that you flop. I don’t really read reviews, but I learned there were lukewarm reviews. It had been such a tough process. I was completely divorcing from the film. Then it was nominated for some stuff and my friends were nominated. I said, “Okay.” I joined the party with my friends. But then it was more about the party with my friends than the film.

**It’s sad to hear that you didn’t get to take a victory lap.**I just wanted to finish and move on. I was a bit disappointed that with the three people that had seen the film, I was not able to communicate what I was trying to communicate because most of the people and reviews it was like, “Yes, this science fiction thing, it’s not my thing.” But then you move on. I went through my years of hell. Then you start getting, from friends and agents and stuff, articles. These articles saying, “It was greater now at the second view.” I was very proud of *Children of Men*. More than anything, I was proud of the research that was done.

**If nothing else, you learned.**That we did.