Liquid Cinematography and the Representation of Viral Threats in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*

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Recent cinema has been a reliable purveyor of dystopian tales that focus on the global spread of viruses. The anxiety and fascination over the end of the world and, in particular, over the invasion of infectious pathogens has turned these films into apt modes of expression of a post-9/11 context of pervasive fear that sociologists like Ulrich Beck have termed "world risk society." This article provides a close textual analysis of one of these films, Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), situating it at the forefront of this trend. Following Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid fear, this article aims to explore how the visual language of the long take and the continuous superposition of intertextual references help to construct a liquid space and time in which viral threats, like epidemics and immunological fear mongering discourses on terrorism and migration, easily proliferate. The infertility epidemic works as a suitable metaphor of this liquid environment, representing not only the barren malaise of our globalized times but also every invisible fear that spreads across borders, invades and segregates individuals into healthy *Us* and contaminated and dehumanized *Others*.

Keywords: *Children of Men*; Alfonso Cuarón; long take; *virality*; liquid fear; Bauman

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Cinematografía líquida y la representación de amenazas virales en *Children of Men*, de Alfonso Cuarón

El cine reciente ofrece numerosos ejemplos de distopías basadas en la propagación de epidemias. La ansiedad y fascinación que provocan la idea del fin del mundo y, en particular, la invasión de enfermedades infecciosas han convertido a estas películas en el modo de expresión preferido de un contexto post-11S de miedo generalizado que sociólogos como Ulrich Beck han denominado "la sociedad global de riesgo." Este artículo ofrece un análisis textual de una de estas películas, *Children of Men* (2006), situándola como representante

destacada de esta tendencia. Siguiendo la noción de miedo líquido de Zygmunt Bauman, este artículo sostiene que el lenguaje visual de los abundantes planos secuencia y la continua acumulación de referencias intertextuales ayudan a construir un espacio y tiempo líquidos en los que proliferan amenazas globales como pandemias o discursos del miedo sobre el terrorismo y la inmigración. La epidemia de infertilidad funciona como vehículo metafórico de este ambiente líquido, representando todos aquellos miedos invisibles que se extienden más allá de las fronteras, invaden y segregan a los individuos en sanos e infectados.

Palabras clave: *Children of Men*; Alfonso Cuarón; plano secuencia; *viralidad*; miedo líquido; Bauman

1. INTRODUCTION

Communicable diseases have become one of the preferred agents of global disaster in the post-9/11 fantasies of destruction and apocalypse that abound in cinema today.[1] The invasive, invisible and stigmatizing quality associated with viruses, and their disregard of borders, is fictionally exploited in contemporary films to match a social reality in which the term *virality* has acquired undertones that surpass those of biological contagion (Sampson 2012). Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men* makes use of those qualities ascribed to the virus in order to explore a contemporary context of growing "*debounding* and uncontrollable risks" (Beck 2002, 41, emphasis in original) that sociologists Ulrich Beck (2002) and Zygmunt Bauman ([2006] 2013) have labeled "world risk society" and "liquid fear," respectively. Although there has been extensive writing on the film from the perspectives of racial alterity and bare life (Chaudhary 2009; Latimer 2011), disaster capitalism (Boyle 2009) and transnational cinema (Shaw 2013), among others, and analyses that focus on technical aspects like sound design (Whittington 2011) and, especially, the film's consistent use of long takes (Udden 2009), *Children of Men* has rarely been considered under the lens of *virality*. In this article I argue that Cuarón, together with cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, engender what I call a "liquid cinematography," a combination of mobile long takes, long shots and the compression of time and space through the conglomeration of intertextual references that endow the film with a fluid imaginary condition. Cuarón thus challenges, as he will also later do in *Gravity* (2013), the long-assumed relation of the long take with locality and with *cinéma verité*, playing with those assumptions and at the same time making long takes encompass the global and the fantastic. This liquid environment is presented in the film as a facilitator of *virality*, of the boundless spread and contagion not only of biological conditions like infertility but also of threatening risks and fear mongering discourses like those employed by the film's dictatorial regime on the pervasive and polluting nature of terrorism and migration. Following Stephen Keane's argument that "[g]eneric cycles are sparked by resonant ideas [and] that they are acutely reflective of social, cultural and political developments" (2001, 4), I will take a zeitgeist and symptomatic reading of the film, arguing that it works as a cautionary tale that presents future dystopia as a hyperbolic representation of the contemporary global state of war which Hardt and Negri (2004) ascribe to post-9/11 capitalist democracies.

2. THE LIQUID QUALITY OF TIME AND SPACE

Set in 2027, *Children of Men* makes use of a genuinely bleak and gloomy filmic style in order to depict the atmosphere of despair that envelops a futuristic London. An epidemic

of female infertility has spread globally. The epidemic has lasted for eighteen years and has turned the world into a daunting childless place. As a consequence, humanity has been brought face to face with its own extinction and imminent death. The film opens with a black screen and the voiceover of two TV reporters reading the global news, comprising city sieges and army occupations, with an ordinary tone that implies their routine occurrence in this dystopian society. Britain seems to have resisted the dominant international chaos. As the journalist announces, the ratification of a Homeland Security Bill is underway to try to protect the British nation by keeping its borders closed and by deporting any illegal immigrants who try to gain access to the island. This introductory news item, which serves as political contextualization for the story, is followed by what the reporter calls the "lead story"—the death of the youngest person on Earth, an Argentinean boy who was "just" eighteen when he was stabbed. The death of this young man sets up the pandemic of infertility as the main backdrop from which global violence stems. In order to emphasize this premise, the black screen is replaced at this point by a shot of people gathered in a coffee shop looking at the television news and silently crying for the loss of "baby Diego" while a diegetic melodramatic tune accompanies the images of the famous "child's" life. At that moment, Theo (Clive Owen) enters the coffee shop, heads for the counter and asks for a coffee. Once he gets it, the handheld camera follows him out of the shop and the emotional TV music is replaced by the sound of horns and engines coming from the city cars. Without a single cut, the camera pans 180 degrees to the left and we get a vision of the entire street. Buildings are covered by huge screens and digital notice boards, but 2027 London does not seem to be a flashy futuristic city. The atmosphere is hazy and dark, with a mixture of gray and brownish tones. Theo walks some steps to his left and stops to pour liquor into his coffee. The camera follows him, circles around him from his back and, still in the same shot, pans 180 degrees again, this time to the right. At that precise moment a bomb explodes in the coffee shop he has just left. The handheld camera leaves Theo behind and moves towards the shop trembling and shaking. Corpses are lying on the street among the wreckage, and a disoriented armless woman wobbles towards the camera. The screen turns black again and the movie title appears in big white letters accompanied by the sound of a disturbing high-pitched tone.

This opening scene both sets up the main subject matters of the film and introduces some of the fundamental elements that characterize its visual style. The most notable stylistic aspect, and that for which the movie has gained critical praise, is the long take that shows Theo as he comes out of the store and ends with the bomb explosion fifty-two seconds later. Elsewhere, the movie makes extensive use of this stylistic device. In fact, the longest uncut fragment, which is a notorious war-like action scene that takes place at the end of the film ("the Uprising"), has a staggering length of three hundred and sixty two seconds (that is, approximately six uninterrupted minutes).[2]

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[2] I have used the online site *Cinemetrics* to measure the number and length of shots. The results are published in the following URL: http://www.cinemetrics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=6671.

The technically acclaimed scene of a car ambush also gives the impression of having been filmed in a single shot even if, as James Udden notes (2009, 30), these long takes are multiple shots digitally disguised to give the impression of being a single unedited take. *Children of Men* shows an average shot length (ASL) of more than fifteen seconds and has just 375 shots in total, a striking figure taking into account that the ASL of most contemporary Hollywood films is less than four seconds and that they usually have over one thousand shots in total (Bordwell and Thompson [1979] 2004, 327).

The long take has actually become one of Alfonso Cuarón's personal trademarks, as scholars James Udden (2009) and Deborah Shaw (2013) have remarked. Shaw argues that its use in *Children of Men* has consolidated the "auteur credentials" (2013, 226) Cuarón earned with *Y tu mama también* (2001), while Udden reads it as "an assertion of aesthetic distinction" (2009, 42) and directorial prestige in spite of the film's relative lack of box-office success. Cuarón's short *Parc Monceau*, included in the multiple-directors film *Paris, je t'aime* (2006), lasts nearly five minutes and has barely a cut in it—for the most part the camera tracks, at a relatively long distance, the two protagonists who are walking down a street. And *Gravity*, his latest film (2013), opens with a spectacular thirteen-minute-long take in outer space. Cuarón's preference for the long take articulates a distinctive film language that runs contrary to current mainstream cinematic trends, which, as David Bordwell highlights, tend to rely heavily on editing and fast-cutting—what he refers to as "intensified continuity" (2006, 121). In his 2009 article, James Udden discusses that the long take is probably one of the most risky stylistic devices for a big studio (*Children of Men* was released by Universal Pictures), both economically and aesthetically, precisely because of this mainstream fast-editing tendency. Udden claims that "Alfonso Cuarón has accomplished the seemingly impossible: he proffers a dystopian message concerning globalization, yet he does it under the auspices of one of globalization's key cultural players—Hollywood" (29). For Udden, *Children of Men*'s "defiant" style fits with the film's dystopian counter-message, a fact he finds unlikely for a Hollywood production. Udden even asks himself whether Cuarón will ever get a chance of using this "rarified yet more revered style" (42) of the long take in a studio film again, a question that he recently had answered by the enormous box-office and critical success of the Warner Bros.-produced *Gravity*, and which Alejandro González Iñárritu further corroborated with *Birdman* (2014) and its illusion of an almost single uninterrupted take.[3] What for Udden is a 'seemingly impossible' accomplishment, Deborah Shaw explains in terms of *auterism* (2013, 225-230). Shaw posits that, despite its Universal production, *Children of Men* navigates between commercial cinema and independent filmmaking. The long take, which is normally "taken as a mark of a certain type of art cinema filmmaker" (206), is, according to Shaw, one of the stylistic devices that, together with other transgenre modes of narration and

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[3]   In *Birdman*, Iñárritu also collaborates with Cuarón's long-time partner, the Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, of whom Iñárritu has referred to as his and Cuarón's "shared secret weapon" (Milliken 2015).

styles, makes *Children of Men* closer to an independent production (211). However, in ideological terms, and unlike other authors such as Udden, Chaudhary and Boyle have noted, Shaw believes that the film's apparent subversive message gets diluted through its rejection of a real "political revolution" (2013, 217), and by its falling into commercial conventions like the happy ending and "the privileged status of the white male hero" (217). Leaving aside whether the film provides a political alternative to its dystopian society, the fact is that the use of the long take in *Children of Men* remains a source of admiration and wonder. As Bordwell (2015) points out, there is something about this technique that speaks of technical virtuosity and prowess. Bordwell even employs the word "braggadoccio" (2015) to refer to the sense of pride and search for recognition that directors seem to share whenever they refer to the challenging difficulties of their sustained shots, an attitude that has been branded as "macho" by Christine Vachon (Bordwell 2012) and that Udden (2009, 41) also detects in Cuarón. But Alfonso Cuarón's deliberate choice of the long take does not simply confirm an aesthetic trademark, a risky "macho technique" that distinguishes him as *auteur.* It also serves to construct, along with other visual strategies that I will explore in this section, a liquid atmosphere of viral threat that challenges the local connotations of this technique. So, what effect does the long take have on *Children of Men?*

Long takes provide an impression of organic continuity. In the case of the opening scene, the camera seems to move freely around the film space, showing everything within it, apparently without any artificial intervention. Instead of introducing the setting of the action by means of the more conventional establishing shot, the long take helps spectators become immersed in a fluid way in this futuristic city by embedding the surrounding setting within the long take by means of camera movements. Thus the long take creates a credible live mood that stays closer to the documentary style, conferring realism to this dystopian scenario. Long takes have actually been traditionally considered more faithful to reality because of the supposed correspondence between fictional and real time duration and the presentation of an uncut space. Cuarón's intention was "to try to create a moment of truthfulness" (quoted in Shaw 2013, 207) that brings to mind the footage of journalists in war zones. André Bazin, one of the most notable defenders of this technique, famously claimed that editing breaks the spatial unity of an event, changing it "from something real into something imaginary" ([1967] 2005, 50) while long takes "reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them" (38). This idea, which has been deeply questioned (Bordwell 2015), is particularly misleading in this case, taking into account that Cuarón's long takes are the result of premeditated digital manipulation and that neither the long takes nor the space they portray are real, but highly fabricated (Udden 2009). But Cuarón plays with these long-standing assumptions, and the handheld camera ratifies this realistic documentary mood with its self-conscious shaky movements. Indeed, the camera becomes almost an individual entity, as if it (and, hence, we) were another character roaming around the film space. It usually follows

Theo from behind or moves around him, but we find hardly a single subjective POV shot during the film, adding to this impression of realism.

The fluidity provided by the floating camera and the illusory spatial and temporal continuity achieved acquire undertones of threat in the film. The longest uncut fragments (the opening bomb scene, the car ambush and the final Uprising) coincide with moments of higher risk in the narrative. These long takes build up tension visually in the way music does in a horror film by elongating the notes and delaying the resolution of the chords. The bomb explosion of the opening scene like Julian's (Julianne Moore) unforeseen murder during the car ambush—strikes us all the harder precisely because it is embedded within the documentary-like mood of the long take, making us first-person witnesses of an unexpected event. The scene is similarly crafted to the opening long take of *Touch of Evil* (1958), with the difference that in Orson Welles's film the bomb is presented, and hence the explosion expected, from the very beginning of the long take, generating suspense instead of surprise. The shock effect achieved here is more akin to, albeit that it does not use long takes, the prologue of another dystopian movie, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), in which a terrorist bomb explosion abruptly silences the advertisements and jingles of the multiple TVs displayed in the shop windows of a store. Even the way the title appears in both films has its similarities, introducing us directly into an Orwellian dictatorial system. Technically, the surprise attained by the bomb explosion in *Children of Men* is also comparable to the revelation of Gaspard being a baby in Cuarón's short *Parc Monceau* or to the famous appearance of the twins in the corridors of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick 1980)—a way of playing with the sustained tension of the long take in order to introduce new unexpected elements and information into the frame. In *Children of Men* this effect is used to articulate the uncertainty, insecurity and mistrust aroused by the various dangers that seem to lurk everywhere within the fluid space fabricated by the mobile long take, as I will analyze in the following section.

A further distinctive aspect of long takes is that, in order to facilitate camera movements, they "tend to be framed in medium or long shots" (Bordwell and Thompson 2004, 286), presenting space as if it were a theatrical stage where spectators can choose where to look, and avoiding close-ups as much as possible. This is a conspicuous visual strategy in *Children of Men*. The first consequence of having almost no facial close-ups or POV shots during the film is that it prevents spectators from fully identifying with characters, forcing us to adopt a more distant attitude towards them. The absence of close-ups accentuates the feeling of threat by generating mistrust towards every character, even towards the protagonist himself, who, especially at the beginning, wanders listlessly and skeptically through the streets of London, claiming he just "feels like shit." One of the few moments where we get a glimpse of his motivations (or lack thereof) is when his friend Jasper (Michael Caine) tells Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey), the only pregnant woman whom Theo has the mission to save, and Miriam (Pam Ferris), a former midwife, the story of how Theo used to be an activist and relates his current loss

of faith and commitment to the death of his son. This revelatory moment is emphasized with the handheld camera slowly zooming in and focusing on Theo's pained expression while he overhears his friend's conversation. This powerful close-up stands out amidst the film's abundance of long shots and allows us, if not to identify, at least to become closer to Theo in his reluctant hero's journey from apathy to active involvement.

A second visible effect that both the mobile camera and the long framing distances have on the film is that the spectators' focus falls on the surrounding setting, sometimes even at the expense of the narrative. In the DVD commentary, cultural critic Slavoj Žižek claims that the content of *Children of Men*'s background has more relevance than the protagonist's journey itself, arguing that "the fate of the individual hero remains a kind of a prism through which you see the background even more sharply" (2006), instead of the other way around. In fact, performance and the story are somehow outshined at some points by Emmanuel Lubezki's stunning photography and by the detailed mise-en-scène, which seems, in accordance with Žižek's claim, to encapsulate the film's essence. Even though the film's setting is clearly marked as being Britain and the year 2027, *Children of Men*'s carefully constructed and visually enhanced background contains an improbable accumulation of references and cross-references to different historical, artistic, religious and mythical landmarks that seem to coexist in fantastic juxtaposition. The superposition of intertextual references is most notable in a scene in which Theo visits his cousin Nigel (Danny Huston), the Minister of Arts, to ask him for transit papers for an illegal immigrant, and again in the final long take of the Uprising. Both scenarios, the Ministry of Arts and the refugee camp, are turned into timeless spaces of, respectively, artistic and historical conglomeration. In the case of the Ministry of Arts, the scene starts with the image of a car driving Theo through the crowded streets of London while the 1969 *King Crimson*'s song "In the Court of the Crimson King" plays extradiegetically. Each line of the lyrics perfectly matches the surrounding setting. The central line, "In the court of the crimson king," the red king of the song being a metaphor for the devil, is accompanied by the climactic image: the Battersea Power Station, the seat of the Ministry of Arts, with a floating pig above it—a recreation of the album cover of Pink Floyd's *Animals* (1977), whose songs, in turn, are based on George Orwell's novella *Animal Farm* (1945). Thus, there is an almost endless string of multiplying intertextualities. The song announces that Theo is about to enter the court of the devil. Once Theo is inside the Ministry-Hell, the lyrics continue with ominous references to a witch and to "the keeper of the city keys." These references bring to mind William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, particularly Act 2, Scene III, when the tipsy porter of Macbeth's castle exclaims: "Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key" ([1623] 2007, 148). This scene seems to be reenacted here by Theo leaving his bottle of Scotch at the entrance of the Ministry when the security guard stops him at the metal-detector arch—the modern-day "pilgrim's door" of the song or *Macbeth*'s 'hell-gate.' Then, as Theo enters the corridor that leads to the Ministry's dining room, the spectacular sight

of Michelangelo's *David* strikes him deeply, and just as the lyrics state 'crimson king' again, Nigel finally appears in scene, becoming within this intricate net of references the embodiment of the devil (Crimson King/Macbeth) himself. He is then constantly framed with the flying pig behind his face, thus extending the connotations both to George Orwell's novella and to Pink Floyd's album, the first being a critique of the communist regime and the latter of capitalism. In both narratives, pigs are presented as the exercisers of a tyrannical totalitarian regime with *Animal Farm* containing the famous final motto "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others," which seems to correspond with Nigel's discourse. Nigel's function consists exclusively in looting works of art from different devastated countries in order to "save" them, collecting them discretionarily. Picasso's *Guernica*, for instance, is hanging in the Ministry's dining room, and he also mentions *La Pietà* and *Las Meninas*. The arbitrary accumulation of works of art rounds up this scene by crowding it with an excess of references that, as scholar Zahid Chaudhary states, "signal a surplus of meaning" (2009, 85).

Following Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the movie, Chaudhary claims that "[e]ach of these images references a certain history. But taken together, the barrage of images signals a reality in which the historical referent seems to have disappeared" (2009, 85). This stream of signifiers with no unitary historical or spatial referent, this heterotopia capable of, in Michel Foucault's terms, "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces . . . that are in themselves incompatible" (1986, 25), continues for the rest of the film. In Bexhill, the immigrants' refugee camp, an amalgamation of cultures and civilizations are forced to live together in the midst of a medieval-like scenario. In the camp, Islamic references (an Arab march and wall paintings with the word "Intifada") coincide with veiled allusions to the 1789 revolution (a waving French flag) and with Christian connotations (the Nativity scene); and Jewish Holocaust suggestions (the immigration cop responds to the coded message "you're a fascist pig" and the camp itself has clear resonances with Nazi concentration camps) are superposed by references to the Iraq prison of Abu Ghraib through the recreation of the infamous Hooded Man—all of which converts the refugee camp into a timeless space of torture and insurrection, just as the Ministry of Arts was a timeless space of artistic conglomeration.

The film's ceaseless accumulation of references to different times and places, embedded within the continuity of the sustained long take, functions as a catalyst for the compression of time and space without the need to resort to the effects of cross-cutting or other editing techniques. This invites the spectators' imagination to wander along with the camera through a space and time that are, in effect, ungraspable and elusive, and that flow in continuous movement and change. Thanks to the long takes, the film space in *Children of Men* becomes a borderless continuum, a space of cinematic fluidity with no apparent authorial intervention and no apparent borders or cuts. It becomes a visual expression of our "liquid modernity," borrowing Zygmunt Bauman's term ([2000] 2006): an expression of a liquid cinematography that manages to encompass the global

in its apparent locality. Bauman claims that in our contemporary light modernity (as opposed to what he calls "heavy modernity," which was the era of territorial conquest) space has lost its value because of the "annihilation of time" ([2000] 2006, 117). As any place can be reached almost instantly now in the age of globalization, space has lost the worth it used to have. By stretching local time and space, or, as Bazin would say, by showing the unity natural to an event ([1967] 2005, 38), Cuarón seems to apparently contravene the shrinking world logic that is associated with globalization, and which in many films is commonly expressed by means of the compression of remote parts of the world and different time intervals in an almost instant speed-up squeeze of shots. However, Cuarón's use of the opposite technique—the display of a natural (if highly contrived) flow of time and space—, instead of signifying locality, illustrates this light and liquid quality of our times precisely by *liberalizing* the camera and by displaying a mise-en-scène packed with references. The camera's uninterrupted journey turns into an imaginary fluid navigation through different historical and artistic landmarks, all contained in the same place, as if space had indeed become irrelevant and time had actually been, in Bauman's terms, annihilated.

3. LIQUID FEARS

In *Children of Men* this liquid cinematography serves to introduce the dangers and threats that spread easily and circulate boundlessly within such a fluid environment. One of the most distinguishing features of the constant threats presented in the film is that they usually seem to have neither a cause nor a traceable executor. In a conversation with his friend Jasper after the opening explosion, Theo wonders who may have planted the bomb in the coffee shop, asking himself: "Islamic? Fishes [a terrorist group fighting for the equal rights of immigrants]? Fuck knows," to which Jasper replies, "I'll bet it was the government. Every time one of our politicians is in trouble, a bomb explodes." This difficulty in ascribing an author to an act of terrorism, which leads characters to equate a religion (Islam) or a government with terrorists, brings to mind Bauman's notion of liquid fear, which he establishes as an inseparable counterpart to our liquid times:

> Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause; when it haunts us with no clear rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but is nowhere to be seen. "Fear" is the name we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and of what is to be *done* . . . to stop it in its tracks. ([2006] 2013, 2)

In a similar way, sociologist Ulrich Beck makes use of the term uncontrollable risks to refer to those global risks such as terrorism, financial crises and ecological conflicts that are "difficult to impute to a particular agent and can hardly be controlled on the level of the nation-state" (2002, 41). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, on their part,

argue that in the twenty-first-century war against terrorism "[t]he enemies are posed not as specific nation-states or political communities or even individuals but rather as abstract concepts or perhaps as sets of practices" (2004, 14). The bomb explosion of the opening scene, for which no one claims responsibility during the film, points to that floating quality of threat that makes it all the more dreadful. It sets the tone of the film, immersing us in an unsafe liquid territory where risk is pervasive and uncontrollable. Both terrorists and immigrants are portrayed through the mise-en-scène as invisible faceless enemies that trespass borders, invade territories and attack or threaten its citizens' security, apparently with no clear or valid cause. In the story these liquid fears are partly elaborated and constructed by the media, which seems to be completely controlled by the government. The city of London appears wrapped in advertisements and propaganda that compel British citizens to report terrorists and illegal immigrants with such statements as "Suspect it? Terrorism relies on surprise"; "Terrorism: Trust No-One"; "To hire, feed or shelter illegal immigrants is a crime" and "Suspicious? Report all illegal immigrants," obliquely lumping together immigrants and terrorists as the stigmatized and evil Other. As Hardt and Negri state, "[p]osing the enemy as evil serves to make the enemy and the struggle against it absolute and thus outside of politics—evil is the enemy of all humanity" (2004, 16). These threatening messages, which appear continually in digital billboards and videos, are complemented by other prescriptive announcements that force women to undergo fertility tests, and by disturbing advertisements for a suicide kit (Quietus) and what seems to be a female Viagra (Niagra). The governmental messages point to a highly regulatory regime which exerts, using Foucault's term ([1975-1976] 2003, 243), a biopower that aims to control not only immigration and terrorism but also the most intimate biological matters.

There is a scene which is particularly relevant in this respect where Theo gets a train to meet his friend Jasper. In the carriage a governmental advertisement plays showing fast-cutting images of different cities around the world—Paris, Moscow, Washington and many others—in which chaos prevails. The short war-like images, in which we see corpses and ruined cities, appear like quick flashes, accompanied by apocalyptic music. At one point, the shots and the city names frantically succeed one another to the point of becoming unidentifiable as we read in big letters "The world has collapsed." After that, the Houses of Parliament appear majestically to the sound of ceremonial music and the message "Only Britain soldiers on" comes into view over a waving British flag and an exaggerated zoom into Big Ben. After focusing on this video, the camera moves to capture what is happening inside the train and we can see Theo looking out of the window. The landscape is devastated. Crowds of people are throwing stones at the train, and there are small fires and piles of trash, just as in the video images of other collapsed cities. When Theo gets off the train, he passes enormous cages full of immigrants guarded by armed soldiers waiting to be driven to the refugee camp. The patriotic video and the sentence "Britain soldiers on" acquire at that point their most ironical meaning.

The train video, like the newscast of the opening scene, is presented as a manipulative strategy that emphasizes British grandeur, the reality of which is continually challenged by the surrounding dystopian setting. This manipulation is accentuated by the fast-cutting images that contravene the film's general live mood pace set by the long takes. If these come to be unconsciously associated by the audience with realism and authenticity, then the excessive editing of these videos implies dishonesty and trickery. Music and sound play a central role in this manipulation as well. Both in the case of the Baby Diego video clip of the opening scene and the patriotic video of the train, the deceiving melodramatic and majestic music is replaced, respectively, by the harsh reality of the bomb explosion and by the noise of the stones hitting the train's grilled windows. By presenting a manipulated idealized image of Britain, these videos seem to validate the use of dictatorial measures against those who attempt to disrupt the "peaceful" order. The shots of collapsed foreign cities work as cautionary images that are never actually corroborated in the film. This is so in part because the organic use of the long take restricts the action solely to Theo, never allowing us to see what is going on beyond Britain. The actual means by which the British government tries to 'soldier on' against the dominant prevailing chaos is by implementing extremely tough military policies that are somehow justified through patriotism and through the spread of fear. The prescriptive omnipresent messages against terrorists and illegal immigrants and their seclusion and torture in the Bexhill refugee camp point to a suffocating military regime in which, quoting the words of Hardt and Negri again, there has been "a passage from the welfare state to a warfare state" (2004, 17), best exemplified in the final war scene of the Uprising.

The excessive editing of the videos also works as a visual metaphor for the border policies that the authoritarian government implements to try to stop the undesirable waves of threatening Others from freely floating within the liquid environment outlined by the long take. As the opening voiceover of the reporter states, British borders have remained closed for eight years following the Homeland Security Bill. And the refugee camp uses walls and barbed wires for the confinement and reclusion of the "disgusting" (as one of the camp officials says) immigrants. The media configuration of a dangerous and repulsive Other promotes the creation of defensive borders (or the reinforcement of existing ones) to stop them from metaphorically infecting the general population. As Bauman claims,

> [r]efugees are the very embodiment of "human waste," with no useful function to play in the land of their arrival and temporary stay, and with neither an intention nor a realistic prospect that they will be assimilated and incorporated into the new social body. . . . A distance large enough to prevent the poisonous effluvia of social decomposition from reaching places inhabited by the natives is the main criterion by which the location of their permanently temporary camps are [*sic*] selected. (2007, 41)

The British town of Bexhill has been turned into a large refugee camp where all this 'human waste' coming from neighboring European countries is contained. The Uprising, the upheaval planned by the terrorist group The Fishes, aims specifically at liberating the immigrants from Bexhill, claiming their equal rights as British citizens and trying to fight back against the dictatorial system. But their seemingly just and legitimate cause with their all-means-justify-the-end stance is discredited throughout the film, especially when they plan to use the first baby born in eighteen years as a political weapon, stealing it from its immigrant mother. Terrorists (except for Julian, Theo's ex) are portrayed as untrustworthy and fundamentalist as the totalitarian government, which is the reason why scholar Deborah Shaw criticizes the lack of a true political alternative to the film's supposed revolutionary message.

The infertility epidemic plays a fundamental role in the construction of this allegoric tale of our barren times. It succeeds in setting an apocalyptic background scenario that is far more gripping than other ecological potentially destructive disasters. Global infertility means the slow ageing and decay of populations. It becomes a factual omen of humanity's impending nightfall, which is emphasized visually in the film by means of the frequent use of sunset lighting and the gray and barren urban space. Civilization, in its developed and apparently stable scientific stage, is presented as rather weak and feeble, prone to crumble and revert, as the desperate images of the Repenters point out, to a dark medieval-like stage where unscientific religious sects and apocalyptic ideas proliferate. Infertility becomes a metaphor for the contemporary political, social and ecological malaise of the world, and of the hopeless future that awaits us.

But the epidemic's metaphoric power goes far beyond that. There are many references in the film to different plagues—foot-and-mouth disease, as depicted in the country's burning animals and the global flu pandemic that Jasper relates to the death of Theo's son. The emphasis on epidemics in contemporary culture stems from their pliable and evocative capacity. The three basic principles of epidemics are that they *spread*, *invade* and *segregate*. Just like the different liquid fears that circulate boundlessly within our liquid modernity, viruses are invisible contaminants that can propagate globally, across borders, with no traceable executor or apparent cause. Bauman's notion of liquid fear applies perfectly here. An infectious disease can float unanchored, it can be "glimpsed everywhere but is nowhere to be seen" (2013, 2), it trespasses borders and borders are erected to try to stop it. The uncertainty provoked by the threatening expansion of an immaterial uncontrollable risk that transcends the nation-state is comparable to the fear spread by the media in the film regarding terrorism and migration. The epidemic works thus as a powerful metaphor of everything that spreads following a pattern of contagion within this liquid context. Tony D. Sampson argues that the language used during the War on Terror "exceptionally merges the language used to describe the terrorist with that used to describe the microbial virus" (2012,137) and that the US government's politics of fear followed a pattern of *virality*, "a continuous contagious rumour (or

phantom event)" (137), in order to infuse the population with fear and anticipation of an attack: "The enemy remains advantageously unknown and always at hand to incite (and spread) further anxieties" (137).

Moreover, epidemics are usually envisioned in fiction as microorganisms that not only spread but also invade or attack territorial and body frontiers. A war rhetoric of invasion and defense, what Susan Sontag calls "the military metaphor" (1991, 65), is applied in the fictional representation of viral infections. Infertility is presented here as affecting the female body, even if the cause of it remains unknown. The government's harsh regulation of biological matters in the film compares with the regulation against other "invading agents" like migrants and terrorists, who are also presented as infecting and attacking the healthy organism of the community. This principle of invasion results in the third aspect, segregation. The virus marks a dichotomy between infected, thus dangerous and dehumanized, individuals (carriers of the contaminating illness) and healthy ones, vulnerable to being exposed to it. As Sontag claims, "there is a link between imagining disease and imagining foreignness. It lies perhaps in the very concept of wrong, which is archaically identical with the non-us, the alien. A polluted person is always wrong" (134). This dichotomy, although not represented directly through infertility in the film, is certainly employed in the construction of terrorists and immigrants as the polluted Others, depicted by the government, in Bauman's words (quoted before), as the 'poisonous effluvia of social decomposition.' Bauman explains how modern genocide (the Nazi Holocaust in particular) was possible precisely because of the ruling elite's aspirations of an idealized, homogeneous, ambivalence-free society where those who did not fit in had to be necessarily exterminated. The way in which these unfitting agents were rendered as inadequate was by presenting them as a "diseased organism, 'both ill and infectious, both damaged and damaging'" (Gilman, quoted in Bauman 1991, 47). The destruction of the diseased organism was, in the Nazi discourse, a service to humanity, a question of sanitation and a way of "exterminating the pest" (47). Bauman argues that "[d]efining the Other as vermin harnesses the deeply entrenched fears, revulsion and disgust in the service of extermination. But also, and more seminally, it places the Other at an enormous mental distance at which moral rights are no longer visible. Having been stripped of humanity and redefined as vermin, the Other is no more an object of moral evaluation" (48).The immigrants of Bexhill are regarded by the elite as just such disgusting diseased organisms. Extermination is made possible following the same rhetoric of the Nazi Holocaust, which is compared in the film with more contemporary forms of politics.

The use of a liquid cinematography—the combination of uninterrupted shots with the compression of time and space—becomes the ideal medium for representing the proliferation of literal and figurative epidemics. The sustained tension of the long take and the "liberalization" of the camera match the invisible fluidity of viruses: their abstract, threatening and unpredictable nature. One of the greatest achievements of Cuarón's cinema may indeed be his ability to endow the long take, usually associated

only with the organic and the local, with the capacity to express and evoke a liquid global space. The infertility epidemic also brings to the fore the instability and friability of human bonds that Bauman relates to our liquid modernity. The prospect of a childless world destroys the notion of family itself, as the different estranged and dysfunctional couples illustrate in the film. Liquid modernity is finally materialized in the film through the metaphorical ending, with Theo, Kee and the baby in the middle of the sea waiting for the *Tomorrow*, the boat of the scientific organization of the Human Project that would save Kee and her baby. As Žižek highlights, the fact that the film closes in the open sea (challenging the film's general reliance on barren atmospheres) has important connotations. The sea is a borderless surface; it has no demarcation lines and boats are completely rootless in it. In Foucault's words, the boat "is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea . . . The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*" (1986, 27). The liquid accumulation of references ends up being conglomerated in the timeless image of the floating boat on a borderless infinite sea, synthesizing visually what the film has been expressing cinematographically, and adding a touch of hope and of mythical regeneration to the general dystopian panorama.

4. Conclusion

The manifold metaphoric implications of epidemics and the representation of other liquid threats like terrorism and migration that proliferate boundlessly within the fluid space and time fabricated by the long take become a wake-up call to specific policies in place at the moment of the film's release in 2006. *Children of Men* has a clear political stance in relation to the War on Terror and the so-called politics of fear. In fact, the film's Homeland Security Bill brings to mind the infamous 2002 Homeland Security Act that the US government of George Bush passed after the September 11 terrorist attacks to increase its border protection and control. The 2003 invasion of Iraq is also mentioned various times throughout the narrative. In Jasper's house there are explicit references to it through newspaper cuttings against the Iraq War. These references obliquely hint at how humanity's downfall started way before the pandemic of infertility broke out in 2009 (the past for the film's narrative, the near future for the film's actual date of release). And this seems to be what Theo refers to when he claims that the world was already a hopeless place before "the infertility thing" happened, as he expresses it. In addition, the aforementioned recreation of the Hooded Man, which became a famous symbol of torture in the Iraq prison of Abu Ghraib, adds very specific connotations to the film's refugee camp and to the battle ground which Bexhill finally turns into. The film's political environment seems to be an embodiment of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call the "contemporary global state of war" (2004, 16) specifically in relation to George Bush's administration. As these authors claim, the characteristic factor of this continuous state of war against an immaterial enemy is that, unlike in old

wars, this war's spatial and temporal limits are indeterminate, extending globally and for an indefinite period of time. The representation in the film of a continuous liquid space and time full of interrelated references to different historical, popular, pictorial and literary works of art serves to build up this indeterminate space-time continuum that situates contemporary politics within a wider timeless perspective. The refugee camp of Bexhill encapsulates this idea. Its endless accumulation of references turns it into a synthesis of every kind of prison, torture chamber and historical genocide, from the Jewish Holocaust to Guantanamo and, of course, to Abu Ghraib, converting it into a place in which war is continuous and never-ending.

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