Representability and Realism in Cuarón's *Children of Men* and Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

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In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh explores, among other issues, why literature has not been able to represent the calamities we are facing in the Anthropocene. Around the world there have been floods, fires, abnormal weather, rising tides—and of course, plague. And yet science fiction is where climate change is often consigned to the edge of the thinkable. Ghosh deplores this conspicuous absence but encounters a challenge. For Ghosh, the novel as a modern form is cemented in and constructs an understanding of reality that he deems deeply unreal: an understanding that pushes the uncanny unpredictability of nature aside. The novel fashions improbable events into probable ones; and climate change induces improbable, unthinkable catastrophes on a near-daily basis across the globe. Such an extreme contrast, argues Ghosh, explains climate change's relative absence from literary fiction. But is nature unpredictable, and is this unpredictability really to blame for a dearth of climate change novels? If the novel as a form elbows nature to the periphery, might not this marginalization—this sidelining of cataclysm in fiction—actually help to accentuate the very hurdles Ghosh lays bare? In other words, couldn't this practice of redirection be intentionally deployed, almost as misdirection, to make us aware of the omnipresence of climate catastrophe, and its political ramifications? Climate change events while met with skepticism by some, feel like a slow-motion car crash to others. The term "glacial" almost sounds invented to describe it: as we slowly watch glaciers melt away. The problem is not simply that disasters feel improbable, and therefore challenge the modern novel as a form. Rather, as I will contend, these disasters feel very probable and can be assimilated into a fictional reality even as, and even because, they are pushed to the margins. Climate change catastrophes are all around us, but are also peripheral. What is then needed may be a central periphery, namely a focus on that which seems to happen in the background. Aesthetic modalities can draw attention to that which we would ignore or place to one side, which I term, the central periphery. As such, this essay suggests that partial, tentative answers to Ghosh's questions may reside in Alfonso Cuarón's cinematic masterpiece *Children of Men* (2006), which, I

argue, uses the aesthetic device of the long take to center our attention on the background calamities that transition from unthinkable to the predictable and thus ignorable. My hypothesis, in contrast with Ghosh's emphasis on the unthinkable, is that there is also something very predictable about climate change: something slow, gradual, obvious and expected. This is a hypothesis reinforced by repeated views of this prophetic film.

Ghosh acknowledges that hegemonic, capitalist nations will need to enforce margins and borders in increasingly militarized ways around the world as he prophetically conjures states of Agambian perpetual emergency in a not-too-distant future. *Children of Men*, too, frames this introduction of emergency measures, but almost perversely, the camera work places them in the background. As such, political, literary and cinematic realisms provide the nexus for this inquiry—however ontological and metaphysical conceptions, while gestured to (when necessary), fall outside the purview. Instead, the aim of this article is to speculate on how *Children of Men* could present a contrast with Ghosh's contention, suggesting ways that art and particularly literature and film can encounter the reality of climate change.

Ghosh and the Thinkable

The comparable lack of novels exploring climate crisis is a central theme of Ghosh's branching analysis which spans politics, the ethical responsibility of the writer, class struggle, postcolonialism, and literary and philosophical criticism. Although Ghosh acknowledges that there are indeed writers who have explored climate change, he suggests that they are few when evaluated for their global significance. Ghosh observes that when novelists write about climate change, they tend to do so from the vantage of nonfiction. On Arundhati Roy and Paul Kingsnorth, he writes that the former "is passionate and deeply informed about climate change" yet has confined her interventions to nonfiction, while the latter "has yet to publish a novel in which climate change plays a major part" (8). Stopping short of a *J'Accuse*, Ghosh freely admits that he, too, has not penned an adequate climate change novel (though he alludes to *The Hungry Tide,* which is certainly a novel about the Anthropocene). Rather, Ghosh insists that there is some sort of hesitancy to exploring climate change-related phenomena that penetrates to the heart of the novel as a literary form. Climate change fundamentally challenges a shared ontological and epistemic framing of nature: linking the emergence of the novel with the emergence of modernity.

Ghosh's characterization frames modernity as affirming an ability to measure and make sense of surroundings, or to record patterns, anchored by a recognition of gradualism that has become the nucleus of the novel. The novel therefore shuns all that is not predictable and causal. In Ghosh's inimitable prose, he argues that "[t]he victory of gradualist views in science was similarly won by characterizing catastrophism as un-modern" (22). Thus, according to Ghosh, both science and the novel share, at least historically, a preference for gradualism over catastrophism. Sagas and epics could explore large issues and questions about nature, but the modern novel turned away from untameable Gaia. This is why Ghosh does not admonish literature *per se*, but rather implicates novels in a larger cultural tendency, asking: "What is it about climate change that the mention of it should lead to banishment from the preserves of serious fiction? And what does this tell us about culture writ large and its patterns of evasion?" (11).

This is a strange contention. Culture writ large is not incapable of depicting the climate crisis. Contemporary artists, for instance, have arranged melting slabs of ice; photographers have documented scenes of emaciated polar bears or refugee koalas; and eco-poetry mourns and attempts to feel the earth's pain. Furthermore, cinema has often depicted cataclysm and suffering, floods, tornadoes, tidal waves—and often not even in a science fiction context. Indeed, film and TV think this unthinkable effortlessly. We have giant meteors signalling the death of all-life in the universe in von Trier's *Melancholia* (see Apter, "Planetary Dysphoria"; Shaviro, "Melancholia or, The Romantic Anti-Sublime"), and in the British television series *Years and Years*, we see climate crises mount peripherally: rain falls more heavily in Britain as the government becomes ever more repressive.

Nevertheless, Ghosh does recognize that this problem of silence about cataclysmic events is more pronounced within literature, given that there are in fact attempts to recognize that nature may not be as predictable as thought. Ghosh instead argues that nature is uncanny, threatening and weird, and draws attention toward swerves in contemporary philosophy and cultural theory that accentuate this weirdness. Climate change having led to a renewed interest in the weirdness of the world, Ghosh rhetorically asks:

> how else do we account for the renewed attention to panpsychism and the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead; and for the rise to prominence of object-oriented ontology, actor-network theory, the new animism, and so on? (*The Great Derangement*, 31)

Literature is especially implicated in a desire to hide from the uncanniness of the world. Ghosh implies that literature moulds nature into a given, transmogrifying it into a known entity, freezing it until it is virtually inanimate. Ghosh asserts that "the novel [was] midwifed into existence around the world, through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday" (17). The novel's order of things orders things. In contrast, the word *uncanny* connotes a jolt, whereby what we assume to be inanimate transpires to be animate; disrupting the everyday; *un-every-day-ing* the everyday. After all, the uncanny as described by Jentsch (1906) and Freud (2003), often relates to the uneasy feeling that something thought dead or unliving may in fact be alive.

Charting the origin of literary realism, Ghosh postulates that the challenge of penning a modern novel requires guiding the reader through a constructed world. To illustrate his point, he quotes from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Chatterjee's novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*. In both instances, Ghosh notes that "the reader is led into a 'scene' through the area and what it beholds." Ghosh follows Moretti in deeming the extraneous description as literary fillers that "are an attempt at rationalizing the novelistic universe" (17). However, Ghosh claims, literature nevertheless paradoxically depends on moments that are exceptional, but such moments do not disrupt the idea of probability. For Ghosh, probability accords with the statistician's desire to understand bourgeois life, but also the desire to comfort and comport with bourgeois life (19). Ghosh ponders:

> The modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning. It is this that makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel.
>
> Here, then, is the irony of the "realist" novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real (23).

Immediately on reading these passages, I recognized Ghosh's conception of literary realism, because it seemed so much to echo André Bazin's in *What Is Cinema?* where Bazin argues that cinema rests on "an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image —an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time" (21). According to Bazin, "the cinema is objectivity in time" (14), elevating photographic realism in the filmic production of the image. For him, cutting too often "interrupts the lovely spatial flow of the action," mirroring the novelistic need for gradualism. What in literature is filler becomes mise-en-scène in cinema, elevating visibility.

Ghosh also describes the need of modern novels to show:

> The literary movements of the twentieth century were almost uniformly disdainful of plot and narrative; that an ever-greater emphasis was laid on style and "observation," whether it be of everyday details, traits of character, or nuances of emotion—which is why teachers of creative writing now exhort their students to "show, don't tell." (27)

Ghosh does not celebrate this tendency as Bazin does. For Ghosh, movements other than realism deserve consideration:

> fortunately, from time to time, there have also been movements that celebrated the unheard-of and the improbable: surrealism for instance, and most significantly, magical realism, which is replete with events that have no relation to the calculus of probability. (27)

But Ghosh also recognizes the need for reality. Ghosh praises Steinbeck's realism (80) while acceding that the fragmentary or the magical cannot bring reality to "these highly improbable occurrences [which] are overwhelmingly, urgently, astoundingly real. […] To treat them as magical or surreal would be to rob them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling—which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time" (27).

This is why *Children of Men* could serve as a challenge to Ghosh's thesis. *Children of Men* engenders a sense of reality and realism in events that Ghosh would call improbable. It does so by making these events the background of this scene. This panoramic dimension, this ability to intimate the peripheral, is precisely what makes *Children of Men* so powerful as a film and so credible. Indeed, recently Gavin Jacobson (2020) opined about how chillingly prescient the film remains amid COVID in *The New Statesman*:

> Unlike the neon-flushed cityscapes of *Blade Runner*, Cuarón's capital is more like the "Unreal City" of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a place in which people stumble in "the brown fog of a winter noon", neither dead nor living. On set, Cuarón insisted, "We're not creating; we're referencing." There are no gadgets or techno-punk settings in *Children of Men*, only allusions to the colonised lands and war zones of Palestine, Iraq, Northern Ireland and the Balkans. (n.p.)

The quality of "referencing" rather than "creating" renders the film immune to Ghosh's potential objection levied at science fiction. Indeed, Ghosh celebrates Atwood's observation that speculative fiction, slipstream and fantasy "all draw from the same deep well: those imagined other worlds located somewhere apart from our everyday one: in another time, in another dimension, through a

doorway into the spirit world, or on the other side of the threshold that divides the known from the unknown" (quoted 72).

However, the film jettisons any sense of an "unknown" realm. As Slavoj Žižek states in a documentary special feature of the DVD of *Children of Men* (Special Feature: The Possibility of Hope 2007), "the changes that it [the film] introduces do not point towards an alternate reality; it simply makes reality the more what it already is. It makes us perceive our own reality as an alternate reality; like we already live in [an] alternate reality. We didn't do it properly. History took the wrong turn." The reality of *Children of Men* is more or less our own, but with further stresses on the system, stresses that exist now and are already reconfiguring our reality.

Children of Men

Children of Men is a film set in the near-future—the events occur in 2027—where no one, or apparently no one, can give birth. This widespread and seemingly total infertility engenders an atmosphere of despair. At the same time, people still go about their day as normal even as society faces mounting pressures—we see refugees in cages; there are frequent terrorist attacks; and the government implements authoritarian measures (though still seems nominally democratic, or at least not fascist).

The film opens with the protagonist, Theo (Clive Owen) going to buy a cup of coffee. In the shop, people are huddled watching a TV news announcement that the youngest man, the last person ever to be born, has been killed. In a world of infertility, where no future generations can be conceived, the last person born has been venerated as a celebrity, and so his death is a cause of widespread grief and mourning— though Theo coldly remains uninterested in the news of his demise. Seconds after Theo leaves the shop and the huddled grievers, the shop explodes due to a terrorist attack and we see a woman covered in blood emerge from what had been the shop, clutching her dismembered arm. This is accomplished in a single shot, capturing what James Udden (2009) terms "a grim, dying world in which the Clive Owen character is but one small, languid part" ("Child of the Long Take" 29). This is the near-dystopia of *Children of Men*. I say *near* because unlike other works of dystopian fiction, the film does not focus on the government or suggest Orwellian levels of surveillance. After the terrorist attack, Theo still goes to work but asks to take the rest of the day off—not because of the terrorist attack. No, that would be a too ordinary occurrence apparently. Rather his excuse is the sad news that the youngest man has died.

In short, amid calamity, Theo carries on until he is kidnapped by his ex-wife, who conscripts him to her cause. She is part of an organization, known to have committed terror attacks. It transpires that the group is looking after a woman who amazingly is pregnant. She and the child are the last hope for humanity amid the widespread infertility. Theo must shepherd her to a mysterious organization, called "the Human Project," working on restoring human fertility. In so doing, he ultimately sacrifices himself to protect her and her child. On hearing or reading the plot, the film may not seem especially realist. But what renders the film realist is the way that the catastrophes are framed. They are not arbitrary occurrences but rather exist as part of the slow and gradual decay of society and the democratic order. Cuarón uses wide-shots and long takes to persuade us of the reality of the events that we see on screen. The traumatic opening with the explosion of the coffee shop, for instance, appears as one single take. Similarly, we see refugees in cages in the background of shots, or refugees transported in militarized, armored buses, but the camera appears almost to glance at them. Infomercials for easily available suicide kits appear on television screens in the background of scenes, and key information about the existence of the Human Project is discussed, not with dramatic pauses between characters, but rather as casual conversation, with no particular emphasis or focus placed on the exposition.

Before proceeding, I should tackle the disanalogies between *Children of Men* and the problems Ghosh believes hinder the novel from exploring climate change: 1) it is a film and film historically has not depended as much on gradualism, instead favoring spectacle and taking from various artforms; 2) it is a film that does not principally explore climate change as such, even if climate change is evidently in the background of the film; 3) it is not a novel, or rather it is a filmic adaptation of a novel, which also presents the question: why not analyze the actual novel?

The potential objections provide good reasons to analyze the film; First, it is not a film based on what Tom Gunning (2006) would call a "cinema of attraction" or a "cinema of effects." While the cinema of attraction survives in blockbuster films that prioritize spectacle and "exhibitionism," Cuarón's film is not based on "stimulus and carnival rides" (Gunning,"Cinema of Attraction[s]" 387). Disasters are not treated as spectacles. The film instead adheres to realism, setting a scene in a way that may be described as literary or novelistic (in the Ghoshian sense), and is certainly gradualist. Second, the film does explore huge apocalyptic events, gesturing to ecological catastrophe. The film also does possibly explore climate change as the film is set

against human infertility, which may relate to the environment. It certainly shows polluted landscape and the destruction of nature. More generally, the film maps what E. Ann Kaplan (2016) describes as "dangers that are inherent in the corporate capitalism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, capitalism that is directly related to environmental degeneration" (59). Third, although the film derives considerable benefit as a film from being able to show and not tell, the film still fits Ghoshian concepts of literary realism as outlined. It is for this reason that I have chosen to analyze the film rather than the P.D. James novel it is based on.

James' novel, *The Children of Men*, seems much less realist in some ways and also verges on scarlet prose in places, as James' writing style echoes George Orwell's, whereas Cuarón's film is repeatedly compared to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*; Jacobson, "Why *Children of Men* haunts the present moment"). The problem with the Orwellian legacy in science fiction is precisely that it distorts Orwell's realism into a set of hackneyed tropes designed to conjure another, more extreme form of a surveilled, totalitarian state. In reality, Orwell drew on his experience of working at the BBC during the Second World War, and what is interesting about *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* is the microcosm rather than the macrocosm. Cuarón expresses the everydayness of terrors associated with the war on terror, only subtly amplifying their incorporation into the backdrop, with most of the dire situations already existing in today's world (the war on terror, displaced refugees in inhumane facilities, massive pollution, and a sense of not having a political alternative to the system). So, for instance, we see on multiple occasions refugees incarcerated in outdoor cages that Theo passes, without him stopping to speak to them or even really registering their precarious, bare life (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*).

These reasons seem sufficient to analyze the film. Yet there is another reason: the film combines science fiction with elements of magic realism, thus suggesting that magical-realist fiction can have magic elements while also exploring real disasters in realistic ways. Ghosh's contention that magic realism does not suit actual catastrophes is both affirmed and contested in the ingenious way that Cuarón inverts the magic. The magic becomes what was an everyday occurrence, namely childbirth. This hall-of-mirrors reversal extends as much as challenges Ghosh's rules. The only thing that is rendered improbable is what is currently probable, i.e. female fertility. Widespread infertility may seem improbable but the film renders the infertility believable and realistic in the film's world construction, as we see possible, very natural causes for the infertility. Not only may

we think of there being a virus in the globalized world, but the film itself intimates that pollution is the cause. We observe dead cows on fire and we see animals drinking polluted water—suggesting the pollution is having a strange effect on animals (Fallopian Films 2021).

In fact, the pregnant woman, Kee, who is black, is introduced to us amid a pastoral scene surrounded by cows, affirming the idea of nature. This is arguably the most problematic aspect of the film. The notion of a black savior echoes a sort of black Jesus story, complete with a manger. But we see an association with African identity with a possibly exoticized, "natural" other, with what has been described as a "postcolonial child" (Hodapp, "The Specter of the Postcolonial Child and Faux Long Takes in Cuarón's *Children of Men*"), while Theo traces a kind of white savior trajectory. However, even here there is a challenge to the magic. Theo asks: "Who's the father?" She replies: "Excuse me, I'm a virgin." Theo is incredulous before Kee reveals it was a joke, adding, "fuck knows…."

Curiously the magic of the arguably postcolonial magic realism is subverted in another way, suggesting a possible reason for her fertility: she is closer to nature and away from pollution. While her pregnancy plays with magic realism, it does so because of its improbability. Even then, it is not clear that everyone is infertile. It is just assumed that everyone is and so the hope for change has dissipated. Perhaps the greatest touch of magic realism is in the Human Project—the idea that humanity as a project can survive and be redeemed.

Otherwise, Cuarón emphasizes realism affirming "recognisability" (his term). As Cuarón explains, "[w]e didn't want to do *Blade Runner*. Actually, we talked about being the anti-*Blade Runner* in the sense of how we were approaching reality. That was difficult for the art department because I would say, 'I don't want inventiveness, I want references to real life'" (Barber 2016). This latter point is central for Bazin's focus on mise-en-scène; the background is the focus as well as the locus of reality. The images do not appear heavily graded, and the settings all seem real. Technology, if anything, seems underdeveloped. Cars have rear-view cameras (not common in 2006), and soldiers have glass-eyewear (not dissimilar to Google glass) (Fallopian Films 2021). There are no self-driving cars, but the type of autos common in Asia populate the streets. A sense of pollution is apparent from the fact that people wear masks while driving bikes. We also see factories everywhere and images of evidently toxic water. The horrors are not otherworldly. No wonder, then, that Mark Fisher, in his description of how we have learned to cope with the disasters of daily capitalism, sought to draw on the film to introduce his iconic book, *Capitalist Realism* (2009). In Fisher's words, "[t]he catastrophe in

Children of Men is neither waiting down the road, nor has it already happened. Rather, it is being lived through. There is no punctual moment of disaster" (6).

Žižek goes so far as to assert that "the true focus on the film is the background. And it is important to leave it in the background" (Special Feature: The Possibility of Hope). This itself has some similarity with the notion of literary fillers, as it too is an "attempt at rationalizing the novelistic universe." Udden (2009) succinctly captures the significance of the long take in Cuarón's film, explaining: "What do these long takes imply? Ultimately, they imply that as much as certain things change, other things do not" ("Child of the Long Take" 27). Udden seems here to intimate that Cuarón uses the long take in part to gesture to his role as an auteur, but irrespective of this, the idea of things carrying on as normal helps locate the realism of *Children of Men*. The periphery then is central to the meaning of the film, creating what could be called a sort of "central periphery," or what Žižek locates as the film's anamorphosis.

While the film's "world" is sometimes read as pre-fascist (see Kaplan 2016), it can be more credibly interpreted as fusing what Hee-Jung Serenity Joo (2015) frames as the "banality and terror" that "is now the very function of contemporary democratic governmentality" ("Reluctant Heroes and Petty Tyrants" 62). The authoritarian measures depicted are already taking place in a world that could best be described as a "post-democracy" (Crouch 2004), a world of "inverted totalitarianism" (Wolin 2008), a world dominated by "the extreme centre" (Ali 2015). These terms are already used to explain our present and have been for a while.

Political Realism in *Children of Men*

How then should we frame the sort of realism that we face, and that Theo faces in *Children of Men*? Fareed Zakaria coined the term "illiberal democracy" in 1997 to describe a situation where "democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedom" ("The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" 22). But Zakaria's conception relates to a divorce between democracy and liberalism, echoing a liberal elitist perspective where "democracy is flourishing; constitutional liberalism is not" (23). Rather, the situation we are faced with more accurately grows from an excess of liberalism in the form of liberal managerialism, neoliberalism and an all-powerful finance sector. Indeed, such forces provoke illiberalism as well which in turn

provides cover for liberals to compromise their liberalism: centrist liberals can now justify harsh border security (Clinton) and the use of drone strikes (Obama). Similarly, *Children of Men* wisely does not mention which party is in power. Rather, what we have witnessed in real life is the use of severe, inhumane methods such as torture (see the Bush administration) or cruel policies of "border protection" that punish refugees (in Australia, often implemented by Labor governments). Hence I prefer Colin Crouch's terminology of *post-democracy* where finance has taken over (*Post-Democracy* 4), or Sheldon S. Wolin's term *inverted totalitarianism*, which depends on "the *political* coming of age of corporate power and the *political* demobilization of the citizenry" (*Democracy Incorporated* x). Both framings can give rise to what Tariq Ali calls the "extreme centre" where two parties can agree on horrific measures, and fringe positions become mainstream. It is for this reason that "what is unique about the dystopia in *Children of Men* is that it is specific to late capitalism" (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 1).

Mark Fisher (2009) powerfully describes the setting of *Children of Men* when he states:

> In its world, as in ours, ultra-authoritarianism and Capital are by no means incompatible: internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist. In *Children of Men*, public space is abandoned, given over to uncollected garbage and stalking animals (one especially resonant scene takes place inside a derelict school, through which a deer runs). Neoliberals […] have celebrated the destruction of public space but, contrary to their official hopes, there is no withering away of the state in *Children of Men*, only a stripping back of the state to its core military and police functions. (2)

Ghosh himself argues that these tendencies will intensify, as democracies have no longer become answerable to the collective, the people or workers, Ghosh arguing that consumers have replaced workers (and therefore that their protests become forms of consumption via "ethical consumerism"). (Ghosh even goes so far as to trace this dramatic shift not merely to Reagan and Thatcher but to the change from coal to oil.) Ghosh predicts that more and more governments will rely on the military, who will be tasked with dealing with climate change and increasing revolts by the people in a brutally divided world.

Not only is this to some extent already happening, but such a situation is very reminiscent of the constructed reality of *Children of Men*. The film is able to capture large and troubling issues, to represent the unthinkable or the unrepresentable—achieving this through localizing (the setting being Britain), and centering the journey and redemption narrative of the protagonist. While *Children of Men* is able

to achieve world building in ways that may be hard for a writer, it is not impossible to suggest that a mounting problem or mounting global problems could be localized and experienced as many experience them: in the background. Indeed, even when these problems are right in front of us and affecting our lives, they can be repressed to a backdrop, to the edge of the literary or cinematic frame.

The disintegration of democracy into post-democracy amid capitalist realism is not the focus, or rather not the focus in the conventional sense, of the film. The focus or rather narrative arc is on the atomized, alienated individual, Theo, overcoming his aloofness, and coming to see his surroundings, to care about what is going on and ultimately sacrifice his life for a cause. While the film explores incredible disasters, these disasters are nevertheless realistic, no longer rendered as *other* to the everyday but turned into an everyday backdrop. The horror comes from the assimilation of disaster into a "carry-on" mentality, which is why the British setting is so perfect for the film, namely its evocation of the Blitz.

Hence, the film almost constitutes a postcolonial work, sharing concerns with postcolonial literature in its examination of shifting identities, the periphery and marginality—concerns increasingly vital given that climate change is already hitting developing nations from the Global South the hardest.

Postcolonialism, Ecology and the Center-Periphery as the Central Periphery

The reason that the film is almost a postcolonial work of fiction does not relate to its central narration which focuses on Theo. It lacks the hybridized central subject, but as with postcolonial literature depends on adapting conventions of the "social novel" to a contemporary setting. Moreover, we see in the film's background the violence of colonization, of the colonial heritage of Britain, and hybrid and broken identities of bare life. As Lu Zhengwen (2018) notes, "[v]isual and aural foreign presences leak into Cuarón's diegesis just as they leak into the British landscape, rendering England's *topos* as a composite of inside and outside, rather than 'purely British.'" Daringly, the film almost answers Spivak's (1993) famous question: 'Can the Subaltern speak?' The film suggests not, since subalterns are frequently visible in the frame but denied a voice; or when they speak, they are not heard or understood. The migrants featured in *Children of Men* overlap with Spivak's conception of the subaltern who is characterized as "the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe" (66). The peripheral figures in *Children of Men* do not inhabit the Global South but instead find

themselves in "formerly" colonial UK, but the film nevertheless frames issues of colonialism and its resistance as re-emerging within neoliberal contexts. As migrant precariat workers become detained and silenced, this social position of being visible in the frame but denied a voice indicates that there are those who speak but are not heard. Such refugee labour forces remain the Other of Europe, as the center-periphery in what Wallerstein terms the world-system, repeats itself within the core of the industrial revolution and colonial empire. The aesthetic of the central periphery therefore underscores the confusion and hybridization of British identity.

Zhengwen highlights key moments that support a postcolonial reading of *Children of Men*, drawing attention to one scene where Theo passes a cage where refugees of different nationalities are huddled together. One caged refugee speaks in German. Zhengwen highlights a reversal in character, a sort of de-essentializing, where the idea of British identity—which in part is forged as England standing alone against Hitler—is subverted. It is now British soldiers and police who resemble fascists as they herd refugees into camps (in one scene, a camp officer is called a "fascist pig"). Curiously these postcolonial elements further affirm the inverted totalitarianism of a society in a state of ecological collapse. It explores these issues as filler, as asides, as glances of the camera, where the camera momentarily leaves Theo to focus on what he tries to ignore or has learned to adjust to: namely the normalization of massive violence and repression—a device Cuarón honed in *Y tu mamá también* (2001).

The periphery increasingly becomes central to Theo's plight: hence a relation between what can be called "center-periphery politics" and the central periphery. Oxford Reference concisely defines "Centre-Periphery Politics" as "a theory of the international political economy rooted in a perspective which argues that since the rise of capitalism and the nation state in the sixteenth century global market forces, not domestic ones, have determined national economic development or underdevelopment" (n.p.). However, this politics also exists within nations regarding divisions of wealth, labour and marginality. The concept has also been adapted to issues of climate justice and ecology; both in relation to how the wealthy may have protections the poor will not have; as well as how resources are allocated (themes Ghosh meditates on), and also effects on species (Samuel Pironon *et al*., "Do geographic, climatic or historical ranges differentiate the performance of central versus peripheral populations?"). The camera-work and realism, as well as the narrative arc of the film, are able to capture the increasing tensions between periphery and center within colonizer nations such as Britain (which curiously may be the only nation able to

remain comparably stable). What I call the central periphery is an aesthetic device that captures these tensions as part of reality: showing both why the spill-over (what Žižek terms "subjective violence" in his *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*) feels random, but able to also reveal that this intrusion, this jolt, is a result of objective and systemic forces of wealth concentration (what Žižek [2009] has called "objective violence"). By focusing on Theo who has a desk job and a wealthy relative that is a government minister, we can see the increasing intrusions of violence and resistance spill over from the periphery to the center.

As such, the film affirms Ghoshian concerns about atomization and the difficulty of depicting large scale violence and destruction, but manages to still avoid the epic style Ghosh argues would aid in the analysis of climate change. The camera tends to follow Theo—even if it glances at his surroundings, it tracks Theo and his experiences. The film avoids montage and resists showing the events that led up to human infertility or the consequences of Theo's heroism. It does not provide an origin myth or showcase the apocalypse. The closest thing to a conventional recap of events is shown on a television screen with a government propaganda-style commercial stating in big uppercase text: "The World has collapsed. Only Britain soldiers on." But otherwise the only glimpses of television and adverts reveal that the society of *Children of Men* is still capitalist, with pharmaceuticals advertising suicide pills, and cigarette companies claiming to reduce the nicotine dosages of their product (Fallopian Films).

Toward a Conclusion: Ghosh, *Children of Men* and the Possibility of Realism in Climate Novels

It is these details—from the "healthier" cigarettes to the caged refugees—that construct a reality that is as miserable as it is believable, a reality that is utterly recognizable. As such, Ghosh's interrogation concerning the novel becomes more perplexing. Why then would literature not have more novels on climate change? Or rather, more realist novels? Ghosh suggests that climate change feels unreal in part because it disrupts the conceit at the heart of the novel, namely that the "reality" of modernity and of the novel depends on hiding from the lack of stability that comes from inhabiting nature. However, while climate change renders nature unpredictable, it does so predictably. The fact that the reality of climate change has been known for so long, and its consequences also known, reveals less a need to break from modern rationalizing (after all, this rationalizing has proven accurate). Instead, it may suggest that the novel as a form could be suited to its

exploration. After all, much of *Children of Men*, despite its notional status as science fiction, provides a realist depiction of everyday events and cleverly plays with inversions of magic realism.

Perhaps, then, Ghosh overstates the case that freak events necessarily disrupt a sense of reality. Ghosh reasons that it is hard to render believable such extreme disruptions since they are so outside the order of things:

> consider how much harder a writer would have to work to set up a scene that is wildly improbable even in real life? For example, a scene in which a character is walking down a road at the precise moment when it is hit by an unheard-of weather phenomenon? (24)

But is this so? Why not construct a literary universe that renders these events not only the order of things, but even boring—as *Children of Men* does? What if, for instance, that character was reading about climate change earlier, and the constant news reports of climate events had been mounting peripherally? Then such a happening would be established as part of the reality. The presence of literary fillers then could come to occupy the central periphery.

This does not mean that Ghosh is wrong about the challenge to the novel's form as such. Perhaps the least convincing aspect of *Children of Men* is precisely what Ghosh argues is one of the central limitations of the novel, at least in its most recent form. Quoting John Updike, Ghosh notes that novels are expected to be centered on an individual and the individual's journey (76-80). It is possible that the focus on Theo, which also limits the extent to which the film can be framed as postcolonial fiction, has a tad of sentimentality. His individual bravery, rather than collective action, may save the day. The film ends though before any final triumph and closes with Theo's death, commending a sort of self-sacrifice. Given just how unrelentingly bleak *Children of Men* is, this slight intrusion of sentimentality and dusting of individual heroism may rally necessary hopes for action. But it may also reveal a limitation on the novel's form that Ghosh highlights; a tendency that cinema often amplifies, namely the focus on the individual. But this is a cerebral objection to the film, rather than one that is phenomenological. While Ghosh surely does highlight challenges to the novel's form presented by climate change, *Children of Men* suggests ways in which the novel could perhaps overcome them.

There are other explanations available as to why novels tend to avoid the topic. One may be the fact that climate science entails scientific literacy. Science itself can be daunting for many—and it has been a long time since writers like Goethe could occupy both novelist and scientist. Ghosh also gestures to other compelling reasons for the

absence of novels about climate change that are less concerned with the novel as a form and more concerned with current cultural production. Ghosh argues that literature has become divorced from urgent and pressing social and political questions. If there is truth in this observation, I suspect that it stems in part from the emergence of the writer as a global commodity. Novels are understood as a particular market and are in turn divided into different markets. Information technologies may also have supplanted print and therefore the written word, in favor of an imagistic, gluttonous and exhibitionist visuality. While this line of argumentation cannot be developed here, it is sufficient to note that there may be a variety of reasons that so few novelists explore climate change.

It is true that the film has an advantage that novels do not have; novels conjure images with words while films conjure images with images (and also words and sound). The sheer number of events and occurrences in *Children of Men* would face the problems Ghosh describes and seem less credible in a book than in a film. One feature that is unique to the photographic as opposed to literary quality of *Children of Men*, is the recreation of horrific imagery associated with the war on terror. The torture scenes of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay are recreated in the film. To describe the scenes in a novel may not work so effectively or resonantly. Perhaps, the challenge has been passed from literature to other media to raise awareness of certain moral and political concerns.

Throughout this essay, I have nevertheless sought to analyze the ways in which the film *Children of Men* commends a method of realism that can be reconciled with Ghoshian considerations. Indeed, as argued, the film contains "fillers" that establish the scenes, but also contribute to the central meaning of the film. Thus, the central issues to works of art, and presumably literature, can be highlighted while also existing as part of the filler, as a sort of literary mise-en-scène. Given, though, that this is such a speculative account, I have shied away from a conclusion proper. Rather, I have sought to complicate Ghosh's analysis and my own, in hope of further raising Ghosh's concerns to the surface, or rather to the central periphery.

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