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Children of Men Review

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Who You Calling Illegal, Pilgrim: Children of Men review
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“The public face of immigration in the USA is not a rainbow; it is brown. Don't get me wrong. People from Asia, Africa, Europe AND Latin America are migrating to the USA, among other places. Yet in the popular media the portrayal of the immigrant is usually that of a Latino.” Bill Fletcher, “Another Side to Race and Immigration,” ZNet, July 30, 2007

Alfonso Cuaron, director of the 2006 release *Children of Men*, mighta wanted to have a sit down with brotha Fletcher before filming his potential-filled, but ultimately disappointing, film about immigration and race. Well, *Children of Men* is about race, but spends the entire length of the film consciously avoiding the topic of race.

Children of Men, set in London in 2027, looks to a future where humans aren't reproducing: the last baby popped out 18 years before. The world has fallen to pieces, the economy at an all time low. England's response to the global turmoil is shown in the film through a commercial on the subway: “The world has collapsed; Only Britian soldiers on.” Soldiering on means lining up refugees (called “fugees”) and shooting them in the street. And though we are led to imply the collapse in Britain is a result of the infertility, because it adamantly refused to address the issue of race, this is just another of the plot holes the film has that are big enough to drive a mack truck through.

To be clear, this film is not about the fugees, or their struggle to free themselves from oppressive and genocidal situation. It's not even about Kee [Clare-Hope Ashitey], an underage Black fugee prostitute who gives birth to the first baby born in almost two decades. Predictably, the story is yet again about white man: Theo, [Clive Owen], a white former radical. This story is his journey to find something worth believing in again.

In the end, the fugees, other than Kee, are faceless, nameless, powerless, and often grotesque stereotypes. The only images we see of Middle Eastern fugees is after an uprising in a ghetto occurs; screaming “AllahuAkbar” in the street, masked, waving rifles, some riding horses. Where they found horses in a fugee relocation center (read concentration camp), I have no idea, but clearly it would not have been a complete racist caricature without them.

Even Kee, the hope or “key” of the future, is powerless in the film. She follows Theo blindly, and seems helpless without him. This characterization of her denies the fact that for any young Black immigrant sista to stay alive on the mean streets of London as a sex worker, she'd have to have some pretty baaaad survival instincts and intuition of her own.

Instead of addressing the fact that immigrants are portrayed as being brown around the world as the opening quote shows, and therefore allowing us to engage in a conversation

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about the ways the debate around immigration is racialized (and to understand this is a big part of the demonization of immigrants), the film runs from the discussion of race at all. The fugees are shown as being of all races, with eastern Europeans just as prevalent, and just as oppressed and brutalized as immigrants of color. This is not the reality of the world we live in, and by avoiding that reality, Cuaron leached this film of the majority of political relevance it could have had.

Who is seen as "illegal" in this society we live in? Who is suspect, stopped and asked for i.d.? Whose very existence is made to be illegal? As we see from SB 1070 in Arizona and other copycat laws, immigrant is a racially coded word for Latino, regardless of the reality - and though England's situation is different than the U.S., the English debate around immigration is also a racially coded conversation. The only overt reference to race in the film is when a white female fugee is in one of the police cages, complaining that she was put next to a "schwartz" (German for Black), gesturing to the Black man next to her. That's the only race reference, and if you don't understand German you would miss it, and the powerful commentary around white supremacy that it makes: the very important fact that this woman is more worried about being next to a Black person than the fact that they are going to put a bullet in her head. That is the reality of the dialogue about immigration today, that it can never be severed from a discussion of race.

"Recognizing the racialization of immigration should help one understand that much of what we are witnessing is a scapegoating of Latinos for much larger forces and factors that are underway in US society... the restructuring of capitalism that has been underway and that immigrants are the victims rather than the source," says Bill Fletcher.

Replace "U.S." with "England" and you have an inkling of the kind of message and dialogue *Children of Men* could have prompted - a dialogue that explored the mechanisms of global capital and global restructuring that has forced hundreds of millions of people around the globe to migrate - "economic refugees" is a more apt term that acknowledges this is a decision crippling economic pressures. As the rapper Olmeca says of undocumented people immigrating, "You must be stupid/no one crosses a desert because they want to/ it's a necessity/ a sacrifice for the family/ you don't call em illegals/ you call em economic refugees."

Without this explicit necessary dialogue, the film ultimately repeats the same, flawed, current day political debate; Regardless of what side you're on, left or right, we only see it through the eyes of white u.s. born citizens while the voices, experiences and agency of immigrant populations, especially of color, are completely erased.

homegirl with a handgrenade