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THE POLITICS OF MELANCHOLY IN ALFONSO CUARÓN'S *Y TU MAMÁ TAMBIÉN*,  
*CHILDREN OF MEN AND THE POSSIBILITY OF HOPE*

By

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B.A. English Literature, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 2007

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

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Literature

*English*

The Politics of Melancholy in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También*, *Children of Men* and *The Possibility of Hope*

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This thesis examines how three films directed by Alfonso Cuarón, *Y Tu Mamá También*, *Children of Men*, and *The Possibility of Hope*, represent the impact of globalization on society and the environment. These films are thematically related, and intended to be considered in connection with one another, as indicated by both interviews with Cuarón, and by critical commentary informing audience reception of these works. Each film uses melancholy as a plot device, and as an ambient presence to elucidate Cuarón's underlying message that we must re-examine the problematic social, economic and environmental consequences of neo-liberal capitalist models of globalization. Melancholy contextualizes Cuarón's technical de-stabilization of his central narratives, and informs audiences' consideration of loss as represented by these films.

The theoretical platform for this paper is provided by a combination of disciplines. Slavoj Žižek's observations about Cuarón's use of anamorphosis as a filmmaking technique serve as the basis for this analysis of these three films. The scholarship of several globalization theorists informs this consideration of Cuarón's depictions of the impact of global capitalism. Eco-criticism, especially Timothy Morton's work, provides a means of reading Cuarón's overt invocation of environmental issues, and more subtle themes concerning the interconnections between the films' central narratives and their environments. Queer theory provides a tool for investigating Cuarón's portrayals of bodies and their interactions, including the romantic threesome among *Y Tu Mamá También*'s protagonists, and the epidemic of infertility that shapes the dystopic *Children of Men*. Judith Butler's theorizations of melancholy also provide a basis for this paper's considerations of the disavowal of loss, and the political usefulness of experiences of grief.

**Introduction: Discussion of Frame and Content in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También*  
and *Children of Men***

Mexican born film writer, director, editor and producer Alfonso Cuarón has received both popular and critical attention, and is generally considered to be a formidable presence in global cinema as well as an innovator in the craft of filmmaking. Despite the fact that Cuarón appears to be a socially conscientious artist, only a few of his films are overtly political, and his relationship to any kind revolutionary philosophy is fraught by Cuarón's obvious comfort working on big budget, big studio productions like *Harry Potter: Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004). With the recent success of the film *Gravity*, which had an 80 million dollar budget (IMDb), it would be a tenuous proposition to assert that Cuarón was a serious anti-capitalist thinker. A comprehensive interrogation of Cuarón's relationship to capitalism generally is beyond the scope of this paper, but what is of interest here is the seemingly paradoxical commitment Cuarón demonstrates in two of his best know films, *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001) and *Children of Men* (2006), to a nuanced exploration of some of the most pressing socio-economic issues of our time. These two films, which have earned Cuarón all but his most recent Academy Award nominations, and which credit Cuarón as writer, director, and editor, are intended to be considered in tandem, though they are not directly related by content. The two films are complemented by a short length documentary entitled *The Possibility of Hope*, also directed by Cuarón for inclusion with the DVD release of *Children of Men*. Cuarón has indicated in interviews that upon completion of *Y Tu Mamá También* (a film which he co-authored with his brother Carlos), he began collaborating with Tim Sexton on the *Children of Men* script; he has always viewed the two films as sharing important thematic considerations ("Alfonso Cuarón Discusses his Accomplishments"). The relationship between the two films is discussed by Slavoj Žižek in an

interview segment also included with the DVD release of *Children of Men*, and therefore it would seem that Cuarón endorses Žižek's interpretation. This thesis will use these comments as a place to begin an exploration of the thematic and formal connection between these films, and will offer an evaluation of the interpretive apparatus provided by the director in the documentary (and other materials) that supplement the public reception of these works. Ultimately, these films exemplify Cuarón's commitment to addressing social and environmental concerns associated with the present model of global capitalism, and that this address is actualized by a complex invocation of melancholy intended to help audiences re-contextualize experiences of loss they both acknowledge and disavow.

At first glance, *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men* appear to have very little to do with one another. *Y Tu Mamá También* is a relatively small budget film (estimate \$2,000,000) (IMDb) in Spanish, which depicts a road trip adventure taken by two teenage boys and an older woman, and the love triangle that evolves between the three. *Children of Men* is the adaptation of a P.D. James novel of the same name, which concerns the politics of fertility in a dystopic near-future world where the human population is jeopardized by its inability to reproduce. However, upon closer examination, the two films share a number of significant thematic concerns. *Y Tu Mamá También* was written and produced in the wake of national political change, including the 1994 NAFTA legislation which dramatically impacted economic as well as socio-political relations between the United States and Mexico. The film was released just prior to the 2001 attack on the American World Trade Center, and the subsequent reinforcement of North American national borders, which the film seems to anticipate. *Children of Men* responds indirectly to the 2001 events at the World Trade Center, depicting the mounting global

intolerance of developed nations towards immigrant communities and the related escalating crisis of international human rights, exacerbated by ecological crisis.

These two works also speak to the influence of de-territorialization in a post-globalization world. *Y Tu Mamá También* explores the influence of global capitalism on a national environment, as experienced through the eyes of teens coming of age in a contemporary Mexico. *Children of Men* extrapolates the present international situation to its most extreme end, and contemplates the biologic-socio-political implications of the mounting global crisis. These two films explore the relationship between globalism and the construction of both personal and national identity; they also posit the need to revisit how liberal capitalism's reification of concepts like freedom and progress poses obstacles to the experience of a global community.

Globalization is the term used to identify the widespread socio-economic changes, which began in the early 1970s, and gained momentum following the culmination of the Cold War (Connell and Marsh xiv). These changes have been historically associated with neo-liberal ideology, and include,

the deregulated expansion of speculative capital; rapid technological development, especially in communicative technology; the transnationalization of production and the weakening of labor movements; the reforming of some international trade agreements and an increasing multinationalization of some corporations (xiv).

Cuarón's works are indirectly in conversation with a host of scholars, who have theorized the symptomatic de-territorialization attendant upon the global spread of capitalism. Like David Harvey and Frederic Jameson, Cuarón considers the ways that global capitalism influences our experience of time and space, and like Deleuze and Guattari, the way it changes how we self-

identify and align ourselves with various communities. Cuarón has made explicit that *Children of Men* addresses issues of immigration, but also issues of the environment in an age of eco-crisis (Murray 1), constituted by climate change and pollution. Cuarón's exploration of the relationships between risk, individuals, and the places they live is reminiscent of themes central to Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. Cuarón also interrogates the "dimensions of global cultural flow" theorized by Arjun Appadurai, particularly in his depictions of how globalization influences the distribution of diasporic populations, increases certain kinds of nationalism, and creates "disjunctive relationships" between various aspects of our individual and social lives (Appadurai 33).

The shared thematic concerns of the two films are exhibited not only by their central narratives, but also by their formal similarity. In both films, Cuarón and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki employ wide shots and extended takes, or a series of short takes edited into one seemingly continuous shot, and the intention is to convey a sense that the characters and the environment are of equal importance. Cuarón has said that this choice allows the camera to escape the particular subjectivities of the characters in the film and to observe the action from a more objective standpoint ("Alfonso Cuarón talks of his achievements"). Both films are also shot in 35 mm film, which lends to experience of realism. One must obviously be careful of the extent to which one indulges the fantasy of objectivity, for as Paula Williquist-Mar points out, "nothing is more ideologically predetermined than the so-called invisible style of classical cinema that strives to hide the constructed nature of images" (8). Particularly when dealing with representations of the environment in film, one must be mindful of the extent to which all representations of human interaction with the environment are ideologically predetermined. Williquist-Mar writes, "Nature in films is socially constructed by a number of factors: the

capabilities of the cinematic technology, the filmmakers' objectives, the economics of the entertainment industry, the prevailing concepts of nature, and the perceived tastes of viewers" (8-9). Likely Cuarón, with his attention to the subjectivity of filmmaking, must be aware of the futility of trying to construct a truly objective vantage point. Rather than insisting on the objectivity of the camera, Cuarón seems to use cinematic technique to temper any one vantage point with the suggestion of other subjectivities, providing a more nuanced experience of competing subjectivities existing in a single present moment and their diverging future potentialities. This technique allows Cuarón to place equal emphasis on his characters and the physical surroundings informing their story, while also allowing audience members to intuitively appreciate that no single subjectivity is capable of encapsulating the experience of globalization.

This technique is excellently demonstrated by two similar scenes that appear only a few minutes into each respective film, and correspond in meaningful ways, despite their ostensible sophomoric banality. Each scene is shot between two close friends, conversing in a car. In *Y Tu Mamá También*, the scene transpires between Tenoch (Diego Luna) and Julio (Gael Garcia Bernal) while they are stopped at a traffic jam in Mexico City. In *Children of Men*, the scene is between Jasper (Michael Cain) and Theo (Clive Owen) as they are driving along a British country road. In each scene, one friend asks the other occupant of the car to "pull my finger" before flatulence erupts, and the two friends laugh and tease each other. In both scenes, the camera drifts away from the non-action of the central characters, and occupies itself with an experience beyond the vehicle that is of greater social significance. In the case of *Y Tu Mamá También*, the camera and the accompanying disembodied voiceover comment on the nearby death of a construction worker who had recently moved to Mexico City from the south, only to be killed while he crossed a busy street. In *Children of Men*, a bus full of detained immigrants

passes the car being driven by Jasper, and context for the event is given in the friends' conversation, which turns to the increasing hostility of the British government towards immigrant communities. These moments provide important framing for the central narrative; the protagonists' relative security is demonstrated to exist within the space of the vehicle which serves as a visual and metaphorical frame for the narrative. The anxiety-provoking incidents outside the vehicle resonate for the contemporary audience as bearing similarity to real world occurrences (the escalating number of pedestrian deaths due to poor infrastructure in Mexico's urban areas (Hijar, Vazques-Xela, Arreola-Risa), or the xenophobic backlash witnessed in present-day Britain in relation to the lifting of restrictions against various demographics of foreign workers [(Sarbu)]. Now exacerbated by the anti-Bulgarian sentiment in Britain, this resonance also frames the narrative as a deeply engaged with diaspora, and human rights discourse.

In both instances, the scene serves not only to contextualize the central protagonists and the environment they inhabit, but also to contrast the different experiences of a single moment of time, and to draw attention to the different levels of public and private meaning making that collude to construct that moment. The quotidian joking-around of each set of friends is both satirized against the backdrop of real and immanent action, and used as a point of contrast to register the reality of the more desperate peripheral story. The movement of the camera serves to create parallel framing that calls into question the relationship between the central narratives and the films' broader objectives.

This story-telling technique is perhaps the most discussed aspect of Cuarón's filmmaking. In an interview segment included on the DVD release of *Children of Men*, Salvoj Žižek comments that Cuarón's "true art" is his command of anamorphosis. Anamorphosis, literally is

an artistic effect, consisting of an image which is distorted, and can only be reconstituted by the viewer occupying a particular vantage point or viewing the image through a special lens. In this instance, Žižek is referring to the way that the actual focus of Cuarón's films appears to exist in their background, or rather that the central plotline obtains meaning through its contextualization against the environment. Žižek states that,

If you look ...too directly at the oppressive social dimension, you don't see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background...The fate of the individual here remains a kind of prism through which you see the background even more sharply”  
(“*An Interview with Slavoj Žižek, Children of Men DVD*).

This observation provokes Žižek's discussion of the connection between *Y Tu Mamá También*, and *Children of Men*. He concludes that the central narratives of these films serve largely as a lens through which Cuarón creates the opportunity for his audiences to more accurately perceive the complexity of our current situation.

Like the critical edition of a text, *The Possibility of Hope* and Žižek's additional commentary provides viewers with a way of reading Cuarón's films, or at least a historiography of how the works have previously been read. However, since Cuarón is also responsible for the selection of the interpretive apparatus provided with the text, it is as though the author of the text has crafted the critical edition himself. This fact invites another level of theoretical contemplation, since Cuarón is supplying both the text and the method of interpretation, thereby making the intentional fallacy of authorial intent more difficult to negotiate.

Cuarón's films do not gesture overtly to a crisis of capitalism, yet the interpretations of his work selected for inclusion directly discuss the implications of the spread of capitalism across

the globe. Cuarón's endorsement of these interpretations is demonstrated not only by their inclusion, but also by comments he has made in interviews (askmen.com). When viewed through the lens of the supplemental commentary, it becomes apparent that Cuarón is after a very serious investigation of the influence of economics on politics, community, and individualism. Despite Cuarón's engagement with the issues of globalization, it is a risky proposition to unequivocally assert his dedication to an artistic critique of capitalism, in part because of his own hedging about the intended political implications of his films, and partly, as discussed above, because Cuarón has shown himself to be amenable to doing big budget-big studio productions. To be clear, this paper will not try to assert that Cuarón is an anti-capitalist, but rather that these two films provide a particular way of critiquing the effects of globalization in its present neo-liberal manifestation.

Žižek is the perhaps the most radical anti-capitalist among the scholars assembled for *The Possibility of Hope*, and certainly *Children of Men* shares some thematic similarities with Žižek's *Living in the End Times*, which came out not long after. *Living in the End Times* reads contemporary notions of apocalypse, and their broader psychological and political implications. Žižek's reading of apocalypse as a genre lends retrospective insight into his interpretation of the near-apocalypse represented in Cuarón's film. Žižek postulates that "the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero point," exemplified by among other things the ecological crisis, systemic imbalances including the struggle for raw materials, and the "growth of social divisions and exclusions" (*Living in the End Times X*). Žižek attempts to diagnose the ways that our global social consciousness copes with the imminent demise of the capitalist system, which he characterizes as an experience of grief, complete with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (XI – XII).

According to Žižek, "...today, we live in a state of collective fetishistic disavowal: we know very well that this [collapse of the capitalist system] will happen at some point, but nevertheless cannot bring ourselves to really believe that it will (x-xi). Only by working our way through the stages of grief, from denial to acceptance, can we as a global society begin to adequately address the challenges that face us, and conceive of the possibility of a "new beginning" (Xii). For Žižek then, and perhaps Cuarón, *Children of Men* and by thematic extension, *Y Tu Mamá También*, deal with the "ideological despair of late capitalism," the crisis of meaning and subsequent desperation that result from the need for action and the lack of relevant historical context to guide it (*Children of Men* DVD). Whatever hope that may exist for the future must be couched in the necessity of a meaningful historicizing of our current situation that allows for a social realization of the costs associated with the capitalist global system, both human and environmental, that are not presently acknowledged or addressed. For Žižek, at least, the only solution is a radical reworking of communism.

Certainly Žižek is not the only scholar to have theorized the relationship between politics and grief, and many have done so without his fervent commitment to reworking communist ideology. Judith Butler extrapolated on her previous considerations of grief following the 2001 attack on the American World Trade Center, to speculate about what might be "gained in the political domain by maintaining grief as part of the framework within which we think our international ties (*Precarious Life*, 30). Butler has written that,

The disorientation of grief... can be a point of departure for a new understanding if the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others. Then we might critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain human

lives are more grievable than others. From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability? (30).

Butler argues that the human condition entails an enduring vulnerability to others, and that it is the responsibility of every society to attend to this primary human need for protection. Butler points out that,

... There are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable' (31-2).

Butler draws on Giorgio Agamben's assertions about the way that "bare life," "life exposed to death" (88) or as Butler describes it "life conceived as biological minimum" (*Precarious Life* 67), begins to merge with the political realm in the modern era as biopolitics, and comes to be meted out by the sovereign state in accordance with ideological agendas that define the citizen, and the functional or desirable human being. According to Agamben, sovereignty, defined as the capacity to decide on the state of exception to the rule of law (11), and bare life have been distinctive concepts mutually constitutive of one another, but have come increasingly to overlap due to the historical tendency of sovereignty to extend its own authority through the declaration of "exceptional" circumstances warranting suspension of the rule of law, which gradually becomes normalized, then "confused with the judicial rule itself" (168). Butler adapts this theorization to her analysis of the inequitable distribution of the right to grievability in an era of globalization, which she argues establish the limits of discourse around who counts

as a human, and what kinds of violence are legitimized (35). This discourse functions through the disavowal of loss in certain political and social circumstances, and the result is not only an inability to mourn particular lives, but also an inability to understand through mourning the commonality that is our deep bodily vulnerability to one another. “What follows...from prohibitions on avowing grief in public,” Butler writes, “is an effective mandate in favor of a generalized melancholia (and a de-realization of loss)...” (37).

Butler’s, and other contemporary theorizations of melancholy, derive to a greater or lesser degree from Freud’s early formulations. In *Mourning and Melancholy*, Freud characterized mourning as a successful act of grieving, during which the subject’s libidinal investment in a lost object is relinquished, and the ego, which chooses self-preservation over its attachment to its lost object, re-attaches its investments elsewhere. Melancholy, by contrast, results from ambivalence of the subject towards the lost object, and is by definition a failure to mourn, or to re-attach the subject’s investment in the lost object. Instead, the ego does not acknowledge a loss, but rather maintains its investment through the process of identification with the lost object. Abraham and Taylor’s popular reading of Freud associates mourning with the process of introjection, and ultimately with the express-ability of the loss itself. Melancholy, on the other hand, becomes associated with the incorporation of the lost love object, and with the failure of representation. Tammy Clewell explains in her piece “Mourning beyond Melancholia” that in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud revised his theory of melancholy to suggest that all mourning has a melancholic component, and that melancholy is not just a failed mourning but rather a primary factor in subject formation. The subject consists of a history of melancholic identifications, beginning with the subject’s stage of bisexual attachment, that are not simply reducible to desire or rivalry.

In her work *Gender Trouble*, Butler follows Freud's theorization of melancholy as mourning that is unsuccessful because the psyche of the melancholic individual is unable to acknowledge the loss it has experienced, or to transfer its attachment to another object. Instead, the psyche denies its identification with the lost object, and disavows the experience of loss. This disavowal results in a suspension of the grieving process, a suspension that manifests as melancholy, in which the psyche attempts to incorporate the lost object within itself so its absence is not felt as a loss (92). The process of incorporation, according to Butler, "is not only a failure to name or avow the loss, but erodes the conditions of metaphorical signification itself" by maintaining the loss as "radically unnamable" (92). In Butler's schematic, identity (especially gender and sexual identity) is largely constituted through the incorporation of 'others' lost through acquiescence to heteronormativity (93), which the body comes to wear oppositionally as a naturalized truth (95). Butler's later work maintains that melancholy is more than a mechanism of identity, but also an essential feature of ethical action. By acknowledging that our personal and cultural identities are as much constructed by the losses we disavow as by those we admit to, a space of critical reflection becomes available from which to appreciate our ubiquitous interdependence, and to challenge justifications of violence and disenfranchisement.

Butler's assertions about grief have been primarily couched in the context of homophobia and heteronormativity, and in the contemporary response of developed nations to the threat of terrorism, but her ideas have been adapted by other thinkers to address environmental issues as well. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands's article "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies" does the most articulate job expressing the relationship of melancholy to ecological politics. Mortimer-Sandilands writes that,

...At the heart of the modern age is...a core of grief...more accurately conceived as a condition of melancholia, a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically ‘ungrievable’ within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief...Loss becomes displacement: the object that cannot be lost also cannot be let go (333).

“Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies” rehearses Butler’s assertions that melancholy is not necessarily failed mourning, but a form of “socially located embodied memory” (333) that has the potential to transform memory into ethical reflection, and then political action (354).

Mortimer-Sandilands contends that despite abundant evidence of environmental loss, there are few places to socially acknowledge that loss and the impact it has on the human psyche (338).

Representations of “melancholy natures” allow a consideration of this loss, and suggest a present that is constituted by the past, and in which the ethics of future action are dictated by experience of past loss (340-1). They also function in defiance of capitalist imperatives to “move on” and “transfer attention to a new relationship/commodity” (354).

Mortimer-Sandilands’s work is not the first to suggest the usefulness of Butler’s theorization of melancholy to ecological art. Timothy Morton previously combined the above-mentioned perspective of Žižek regarding the ecological crisis with Butler’s notion of melancholy, to develop a materialist method of reading the content of any piece of art against the representations of the environment it occupies (3). Morton ascribes to Žižek’s professed belief that the idea of ‘nature’ is plagued by ideological baggage which interferes with the realization of meaningful action to address the ecological crisis. In *Living in the End Times*, and elsewhere in the documentary *An Examined Life*, Žižek has discussed his belief that the idea of a ‘nature,’

existing in a balanced and harmonious state prior to human interference, is an ideological delusion that narcissistically exaggerates the importance of human action, and presumes an autonomous thing, 'nature,' which does not exist – “there is no nature” (*An Examined Life*). Žižek also asserts that this model of balanced 'nature' may dangerously indulge fantasies of a world of meaning that also may not exist.

In the name of moving beyond these ideological issues and towards a more fruitful understanding of the dialectical relationship between 'nature' and 'culture,' Morton employs deconstructionist techniques derived from queer theory's interrogation of the categories of gender and sexuality to evaluate the notion of "nature." Morton refers to his technique as "ecocritique," which is at its core a practice of what he calls "dark ecology." "Dark ecology," Morton writes is a "melancholic ethics" which "undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature" and "preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe" (187). Like Mortimer-Sandilands, Morton draws heavily on Butler's notion of melancholy as the product of a loss that is disavowed to explain reactions to the ecological crisis.

We can't mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it – we are it. Just as for Butler 'the 'truest' gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man, so the truest ecological human is a melancholy dualist (185).

Central to Morton's ecocritique is the concept of juxtaposition, and specifically an appreciation of how the content of a piece of art is juxtaposed against its framing. "Ambient art," or art that lends to our understanding of environmental issues, according to Morton, rigorously explores what counts as content and frame, and the relationship between them. Morton points out

that the “most extreme example of ‘frame’ would be the ideological matrix that makes things meaningful in the first place,” and asserts that ambient art gestures at the “(dialectical) juxtaposition of writing with the ideological matrix” (144).

Radical juxtaposition plays with the frame and its contents in such a way as to challenge both dualism (their absolute difference) and monism (their absolute identity). Dialectics is shorthand for a play back and forth between contents and frame (145).

Morton analyzes what he reads as the radical artistic potential of works that practice this kind of juxtaposition, including works that consist of frames with no content, where the “frame becomes claustrophobic precisely because what is outside is now included,” as well as frameless works, where “we are compelled to identify with the object, and can’t quite maintain the appropriate aestheticizing distance (197).

Morton’s method of deconstructive analysis is especially useful to a reading of Cuarón’s work because it allows for an appreciation of the director’s experimentation with framing. The way that the narrative interacts with and is informed by its physical surroundings, the way the formal construction of the films frame, then shift away from the central narrative, the way the films are contextualized by Cuarón with real world concerns all speak to the centrality of the framing concept to Cuarón’s work . The continually transitioning relationship between subject and framing suggests that the juxtaposition is critical to an understanding of these films, particularly the way this juxtaposition evokes a sense of melancholy that is not always immediately explicable, and thus prompts an interrogation of both the losses we experience and those we fail to identify. For example, in the scenes discussed above, the dialogues between the two respective sets of protagonists are framed by the physical structure of the car itself, which is

framed by the environment the respective vehicles pass through. As the camera movement draws attention to the nearby pedestrian fatality, or the passing bus of detainees, the security of the private space within the car is juxtaposed to the tragedy and lack of protection afforded to those outside it. The peripheral narrative begins to encroach on the central one, and the frame distinguishing ‘plot’ from ‘setting’ becomes frustrated, such that the true focus of the film becomes difficult to discern. The events external to the vehicles are evocative of similar issues which contextually frame the transitioning relationships between central and peripheral narratives, and help the audience to locate what they observe within the parameters of their own experience, and encourage them to contemplate the real losses these melancholic images seek to emulate.

It might be said that the ethos of melancholy pervades both *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men*, which are at heart, stories of entropy and the resulting desire to nostalgically relive the past as in the case of the former, and hopefully reinvent the future, in the case of the latter. This ethos provides the basis for a defense of Cuarón as an artist seriously contemplating the various kinds of disavowal attendant on the “progress” of global capitalism. The formal construction and the central narrative of these two films express a melancholy that results from the collective disavowal of loss, both of human life and of the environment upon which it depends, and these works thereby function as a critique of the free market liberalism and its unrealized promises of equality and justice. When read from this perspective, Cuarón’s use of filmmaking techniques to play with the juxtaposition of frame and subject suggests a commitment on the part of the filmmaker to troubling the ideological relationship between personal identity, political community, and the realization of international rights discourse.

As part of their critique, these two particular films interrogate the notion that the freedoms sought through the right of privacy and the protection of the liberal individual are not sufficient to guarantee social and environmental justice to the majority of the world's population. Through the experience of film, Cuarón attempts engage the collective memories of his audiences, to allow recognition of the melancholy that forms the unspoken ethos of global events, and to utilize this ethos as a means of contemplation and action. It is the project of this paper to explore the role of melancholy in the films *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men*.

Using eco-criticism as well as queer theory to provide an adequate interpretation of this melancholy ethos, I maintain that Cuarón's work is more poignantly understandable when considered through the lens that these theoretical approaches provide. The combination of theoretical modes will enable a reading of the political and social implications of Cuarón's works, including ways of interpreting the environments these works occupy, the environmental changes they document, and the political and social circumstances that impact the central character's bodies and their experience of production, reproduction, and identity formation. It has been pointed out that eco-criticism and queer theory share an interest in deconstructing the notion of 'nature', and investigating the way that conceptions about the divide between 'nature' and 'culture' effect human social and political relationships. Sectors of queer theory and eco-criticism have been deeply influenced by the Marxist tradition, and provide ways of reading materiality, at the level of interaction between human bodies, and between bodies and their environments. Both queer theory and eco-criticism inevitably take issue with neoliberal solutions to social and environmental injustice, and push for more ethical consideration of the practices of capitalist production.

The first chapter offers a reading of *Y Tu Mamá También*, and the role of melancholy in Cuarón's consideration of the disavowal associated with personal and national development in the era of global capitalism. The second chapter will analyze the way that *Children of Men* completes the project begun by the earlier film, and employs melancholy to critique the inevitable consequences of these disavowals. The final section of this paper will address Cuarón's documentary *The Possibility of Hope*, including its relation to the melancholy of the other two films, ways of understanding what kind of hope Cuarón intends to foster, and what we are to make of the provision of this additional interpretive apparatus. Cuarón's invocation of melancholy through plot and formal technique, I conclude, serves as a critique of the present model of global capitalism to the extent that it creates an artistic space of absence from which to appreciate all that is lost and unacknowledged by global capitalism's pursuit of progress, insisting ultimately on the necessity of forging a different path.

## Chapter 1: The Implications of Melancholy in *Y Tu Mamá También*

Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También* ("And your mother too," 2001) is on its surface the story of the relationship between two young men, Tenoch Iturbide and Julio Zapata, and an older woman, Luisa Cortez, as it develops during a summer road trip following Tenoch and Julio's high school graduation. The three characters travel south through the Mexican landscape, from Mexico City to the beaches of Oaxaca. Along the way, their ill-conceived sex-capade evolves into a journey of revelations, including the discovery by Julio and Tenoch of the homoerotic attraction that forms the basis of their friendship, as well as the class antagonism that fuels their rivalry.

While the film employs the road trip motif as a means of exploring the quest for personal identity, Cuarón has intimated that he intends the film to be an exploration of national identity as well, that the film acts as an intentional allegory for Mexico's journey towards self-realization in a globalized world (Basoli 26). The film documents a national consciousness still digesting the implications of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the defeat of the national PRI party, and subsequent ascendancy to power of the Fox administration. Mexico is demonstrated in the film to be grappling with issues of political corruption, class divisions, uneven and often short-sighted industrial development, and the displacement of populations caused by the migration of significant numbers of individuals from southern Mexico to northern industrialized regions, or to the United States. Cuarón has said,

Saying 'I'm against globalization' in Mexico or saying 'I'm against modernity' is like saying 'I'm against the law of gravity'. You can be against them but there's no way

around them. The question now is how to democratize globalization and modernity in Mexico, and I think that's a big challenge... (Besoli 26).

*Y Tu Mamá También* is the film which earned Alfonso Cuarón his mention along with Guillermo Del Toro and Alejandro Iñárritu, as the directors inaugurating the “second Mexican New Wave,” a cinematic movement negotiating antagonisms “between the apparatus of the nation-state and the appeals of national culture” (Menne 71). According to Jeff Menne’s article “A Mexican ‘Nouvelle Vague’: The Logic of New Waves under Globalization,” films belonging to this movement tend to posit a notion of nationality detached from the state apparatus, and to insist on the “capacity of culture to impact the state” (70). Menne identifies Godard’s *A bout de souffle* (1960) as the paradigmatic new wave film, and explains that,

...a new wave announces itself...when national concerns, in both the cultural and more properly political sense, become the subject matter by which cineastes declare their difference from the prevailing cinema of their country, asserting in the process the new generation’s claim to a share of state power (71).

Menne describes *Y tu mamá también* as exhibiting characteristics of new wave cinema, including a self-referentiality used to declare the next generation of actors on the socio-political scene. However, Menne points out that in the contemporary global political climate, new waves, which historically rely on the backdrop of the nation state for visibility, must increasingly navigate the influence of globalization both ideologically and financially, on the national imaginary. The “second Mexican new wave” is no different in this respect and its films address, at least implicitly, the development of global, neoliberal democratic capitalism. Ironically, these films are primarily funded, not by state contributions, as were the films of the “first New Mexican

Cinema” (1970s), but by private institutions (70-3). Consequently, Cuarón’s film and other “second new wave” films derive their independence of vision through the same privileges of private financing they tend to critique, a fact significantly complicating any political reading.

If we as an audience are intended to consider the experiences of the three central characters as a microcosmic view of, or somehow analogous to, the story of Mexico’s adaptation to the global age, it is no wonder that the bulk of theory concerning *Y Tu Mamá También* has occupied itself with trying to understand the connection between the fore-grounded narrative of failed relationships and loss, and the context of global capitalism. This paper suggests that the most appropriate means of considering this connection is through an interrogation of the theme of melancholy, as it is both experienced by the characters, and formally rendered as an experience for the film’s audience. The true political thrust of the film is achieved by Cuarón’s invocation of a melancholy state that serves as a space of contemplation for what losses (both human and environmental) are disavowed in the name of the globalized capitalist ideology’s definitions of “freedom” and “progress.”

Nuala Finnegan’s article ““So What’s Mexico Really Like?”: Framing the Local, Negotiating the Global in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y Tu Mamá También*” describes how the film employs an exploration of death to address both local and global concerns. She writes that “death permeates the entire narrative,” citing among other examples, the voiceover story of a child’s death crossing the desert, which foreshadows the revelation of Luisa’s diagnosis with and eventual death from cancer (35-7). She also mentions the voiceover story of the death of migrant worker Marcelino Escutia in the film’s opening minutes, shared during the “Pull My Finger Scene” described in the introduction of this paper, and a later voiceover digression about a car accident along the road the protagonists are traveling (36). The entropic friendship between the

Julio and Tenoch is also described by Finnegan as exemplary of the film's preoccupation with loss (37). Though Finnegan doesn't discuss it, allusions by the film's plot and voiceover to the drastic changes impacting the national landscape, including the displacement of southern rural populations and development of multinational resort facilities, also represent allusions to change and loss explored in the film.

It is the assertion of this paper that the many allusions to death described by Finnegan are juxtaposed to the fantasy-like preoccupation of the protagonists early in the film, and by nostalgic depictions of the Mexican landscape, to evoke a sense of melancholy in the film's audience, and create a space for the mourning of something lost or sacrificed. Cuarón creates a sense of nostalgia for the present by invoking some unspecified future place and time, and allows audience members to contemplate experiences of loss they might otherwise be tempted not to acknowledge, as, or before they happens. Audiences are allowed to consider what present actions may lead to this sense of loss, and what ideological commitments compel them to those actions. The first part of this paper will consider how nostalgia and melancholy function in the film's central narrative to produce Cuarón's critique of identity models associated with development under the present mode of globalization. The second part of the paper will discuss how Cuarón renders an experience of melancholy through the film's formal construction, and will consider the juxtaposition of the film's form and content.

As previously stated, the plot of the film follows Tenoch and Julio during a summer road trip, accompanied by Luisa, the wife of Tenoch's older cousin, who unbeknown to the boys, has decided to leave her philandering husband. As the three travel south in Julio's family car, nicknamed "Betsabe," their relationships become increasingly complicated. Each of the boys has a respective sexual encounter with Luisa, which provokes the other to jealous fury, and leads

each, respectively, to make allegations that they have had sex with the other's girlfriend. The party manages to put their differences aside in the interest of reaching their destination, and shares an idyllic two days on a remote beach with a local fisherman and his family. Returning from their excursion in high spirits, Luisa, Tenoch and Julio share a tequila fueled ménage-a-trois, before the boys return to Mexico City. This incident reveals the extent of the boys' mutual and long-denied homoerotic attraction to each other, and once this attraction comes to light their already tenuous friendship is compromised. Though they return home together, they do not remain close. The final scene of the film chronicles their last encounter, which transpires a year after the conclusion of the road trip. While sharing a cup of coffee, Tenoch reveals to Julio that Luisa, who chose to remain in southern Mexico, died of cancer a short time after the trip, and had known she was dying for the entire journey.

Most interpretations of the film's plot address the intentionally allegorical naming of the central characters, particularly since each has a deep historical significance to the Mexican national imaginary. This significance is summarized nicely by Maria Josefina Saldana-Portillo (174-5). Luisa is a native of Spain, and shares a surname with Cortes, the infamous conqueror of Mexico. Tenoch, the audience is informed through voiceover, was going to be named Hernan (like Cortes), but was named Tenoch because it was convenient for his father's political career to appear reverent to the nation's indigenous heritage. Tenoch's last name makes allusion to Mexican emperor Augustin de Interbide (1822-3). Julio's last name, Zapata, is an obvious reference to revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, who advocated for land reform and indigenous rights, and from whom the political group the Zapatistas take their name. The class differences between Tenoch, the son of a wealthy PRI party politician, and Julio, the son of a middle-class single mother, have traditionally utilized this allegorical naming to read the boys' relationship to

Luisa, and their attraction to one another. Salindana-Portillo has asserted that the homoerotic attachment between the two boys is metaphorical for potential political cooperation between Mexico's former national party, the PRI, and the *mestizaje*, or the indigenous subaltern classes. Their eventual aversion to each other, she suggests can be read as the PRI's rejection of the popular classes; their mutual desire for Luisa can be understood as a desire for the incorporation of "colonial whiteness" (175). Margarita Vargas does a similar reading, comparing the internal corruption of the PRI to the dishonesty that plagues the boys' friendship. However, these readings do an injustice to the film by assuming an almost caricature-ish explanation of the central characters, and by reducing the homoerotic subplot to mere metaphor.

All explanations of the fixed referentiality of these names falls apart under careful scrutiny, suggesting that one must look outside the obvious allegory to garner a full appreciation of Cuarón's intended message. Each character's name corresponds to a stage of Mexican national development prior to globalization, including colonization (Cortes), national independence (Tenoch Interbide), and revolution (Zapata). Collectively, they personify the historical transition of Mexican national identity, towards an unknown future that can only be characterized by disembodied voiceover. The potency of this narrative device derives from the play between these signifiers, the plot itself, and its technically constructed contextualization.

If more is to be made of the film than a tale of failed gay identity, and a reminder of the inevitability and injustice of death and capitalist destruction, a nuanced critique must first be made of the relationship between Julio and Tenoch. This paper applies Eve Sedgwick's theorization of homosociality to better understand how the love triangle represented in Cuarón's film functions. While Sedgwick's work focuses on the study of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century British

literature, her explanations of the way homosociality, heterosexuality and homophobia participate with discourses of class seems directly applicable to *Y Tu Mamá También*.

Sedgwick asserts that sexuality and “what counts as sexuality” are dependent upon and have influence over historical power relationships (1). Developing Heidi Hartman’s definition of patriarchy, “relations between men, which have a material base, and which though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (2), Sedgwick theorizes a behavioral continuum between homosociality (social relationships defined by patriarchy) and homosexuality (1). She describes the way that homosocial behavior between heterosexual men is culturally encouraged as a means of consolidating male social and economic power, and serves the purpose of allowing men to appropriate the products of women’s labor. Power relationships are inherently gendered, according to Sedgwick, and therefore homosociality, while always on some level misogynistic, is also typically (though not always) homophobic, since homosexual relationships between men would not be capable of appropriating the labor of women through the institution of the heterosexual household (4). Sedgwick writes that,

...In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two (16).

These are useful observations to a consideration of *Y Tu Mamá También*, since the relationship between Tenoch and Julio seems to exemplify the “highly conflicted” and “intensively structured” combination of homosexuality and homophobia Sedgwick describes. As young men trying to find their place in society, the boys have certain socio-economic expectations based on their more privileged status. This is not to say that the boys share the same status, the difference in their socio-economic situations is depicted in the film most vividly in a scene composed of jump shots between their respective homes during a phone conversation. Though this class difference proves to be enough to fuel their rivalry and ultimately dissolve their friendship, both boys have stable housing, enough to eat, and even the means of attending college, privileges juxtaposed starkly against the lives of the rural poor they encounter on the road. Vargas observes that despite their class difference, “both have gained admittance into exclusive ‘clubs’ that will place them among Mexico’s intellectual or financial elite as long as they agree to be clean-cut, heterosexual members of society...” (75).

Tenoch and Julio are united in the beginning of the film by their shared expectations of a higher status, which depends on their families’ social positions, as well as their understanding of themselves as heterosexual men. They use heterosexuality as a way of bonding, discussing the objectified female body at length, even during episodes of mutual homoerotic masturbation, and encourage each other’s heterosexual conquests. Despite the fact that both boys have girlfriends, their primary bond is with each other, as evidenced by the creation of their “Charolastra Manifesto,” the behavioral code of their homosocial ‘imagined community’. The boys are capable of overcoming tensions arising from their different class positions through their mutual ability to access patriarchal power via the sexual possession of women, including Luisa.

However, we are made aware that on some level, this disparate access to power haunts their relationship. In a scene from the early part of the road trip, the film's voiceover explains,

Julio and Tenoch told Luisa many more anecdotes. Each story confirmed the strong tie that united them, the link that made them into a solid and inseparable nucleus. The stories they told, though adorned with their own personal mythologies, were true. Though as always happens, it was an incomplete truth. Among the many things they forgot to mention was how Julio would light matches after he used the bathroom at Tenoch's house to hide the smell. Or how Tenoch would lift the seat of the toilet with his foot when he used the bathroom at Julio's house. These were details the one didn't need to know about the other.

These little rituals speak volumes about way Julio and Tenoch understand their social position in relation to the other. This ambivalence, composed of love and jealousy, or love and a sense of superiority, has difficulty finding manifestation in a socially acceptable way. The two are depicted as having a tradition of competitiveness, including swimming races, which foreshadows their later competition for Luisa's affection. This relationship of ambivalence between the two male protagonists is critical, because it is indicative of the extent to which each young man constructs his conception of identity in relation to the other (both in a positive and negative sense), and predicts their later difficulty resolving their emotions toward one another.

The centrality of the relationship between the two male protagonists supports Sedgwick's theory about the way that erotic triangles, or situations where two male suitors compete for a female love object, function in literature. Following Rene Girard, Sedgwick contends that the bonds of rivalry between male characters are usually as strong as the bonds of love between the

woman and her respective paramours, due to the way that homosexual impulses are sublimated by homosocial society. The men, while seeking to consolidate their own social power, compete for the affections of a woman, and thus develop an ambivalent homosocial bond with one another, based on their competition for, essentially, female resources. Often, according to Sedgwick, the rivalry between men provokes the competition for love, more than competition for love provokes the rivalry (12-3).

Diana Fuss's "Identification Papers" also theorizes the relationship between desire and identification in ways that have significant impact to an interpretation of Cuarón's film. Fuss draws on assertions made by Sedgwick, and Judith Butler's reading of Sigmund Freud, to elucidate the ways that identity and identification overlap and diverge based on social context. Fuss rehearses Butler's idea that identifications which appear to be refused might more accurately be described as disavowed, since the connection has been made but denied by the unconscious (7). Fuss points out that in psychoanalysis, the process of identification is inherently violent, since on some unconscious level, the self making the identification always seeks to negate the other with which it has identified, and to take its place (9). Describing the inherent ambivalence of identification, Fuss writes,

Identification travels a double current, allowing for the possibility of multiple and contradictory identifications coexisting in the subject at the same time. What Freudian psychoanalysis understands by 'subjectivity' is precisely this struggle to negotiate a constantly changing field of ambivalent identifications...subjectivity can be most concisely understood as the history of one's identifications (34).

Discussing the concept of romantic triangulation, Fuss notes that there is always more at stake than heterosexual jealousy, since identification with the desire of the rival for love exists in the subject simultaneous to identification with the desire of the love object for the rival. The love object stands in for the disavowed desire for the rival, acting as an “identificatory relay for a socially prohibited...desire” (31).

This theorization allows for a more fruitful consideration of the relationships between identification and desire at work in Cuarón’s film. We can understand the romantic competition between Julio and Tenoch as a desire not just to possess the love object (Luisa or each other’s girlfriends), but also a desire to identify with a rival for power, and to redirect a socially unacceptable homoerotic attachment into homosocial competition for women. When Luisa chooses one, then the other for a sexual partner, the boys are forced to confront both jealousy over the other’s partnering with Luisa, as well as an unconscious jealousy over Luisa’s partnering with the other. The latter jealousy is disavowed, but still haunts the relationship by reinforcing their competition for Luisa. Julio and Tenoch’s respective allegations about infidelity with the other’s girlfriend have a disastrous effect on their friendship, though they go unsubstantiated, because they suggest not just a violation of the “Charolastra Code,” but the threat each poses to the other’s socio-economic position vis-à-vis the sexual possession of women. These rumors also signify a deep desire on the part of each young man to replace, not just the other with which he obviously identifies, but subliminally, a desire to replace the love object of the other.

Competition for Luisa also exacerbates tensions resulting from the boys’ class difference, and class antagonism becomes a recurring theme in their bickering. During the drunken evening leading up to the ménage-a-trois, while laughing about having sex with each other’s girlfriends,

Julio tells Tenoch that he has also had sex with “tu mamá también.” This moment, from which the film takes its name, plays on a standard juvenile joke much like the “pull my finger” moment, but attains significance from Julio’s claimed sexual possession of Tenoch’s mother, and the insinuated intimacy that foreshadows their sexual involvement.

Though the rest of the film contains relatively graphic representations of sex, and the scene in which the ménage-a-trois transpires does not spare details insofar as the boys’ interactions with Luisa, the sexual encounter between Julio and Tenoch is left deliberately vague. The fade out shot of the boys kissing becomes a shot of Luisa the next morning at breakfast, and the next jump shot reveals the boys waking up together in bed. Tenoch quickly runs outside to vomit, presumably because of hangover and panic at the realization of his own homoerotic desires. Once the homoerotic attraction which forms the unspoken background to their ambivalent relationship is exposed, Julio and Tenoch are no longer able to continue their friendship. Instead of experiencing the rural space of the beach as an ideologically undetermined area in which to explore their desires free of social stigma, as Scott Herring describes the experience of “queer anti-urbanism,” the boys do not find a place free of ideological preconception, and true to the phenomenon of globalization, find the course of their lives determined by forces originating in an un-namable and geographically distant place beyond their influence. The socially imposed homophobia regulating homosociality does not permit acknowledgement of their desires, and once these desires are manifest, the friendship that serves as its source must be forsaken in order for the boys to maintain their preferred personal identity. Tenoch and Julio not only deny their attachment to and identification with one another in order to establish themselves as mature, masculine heterosexuals, but also internalize their unacknowledged grief over the loss of the other as part of the melancholic structure of identity

formation. Butler explains in *Gender Trouble* that, “disavowed homosexual love is preserved through the cultivation of an oppositionally defined gender identity” and “heterosexual melancholy is...maintained as the price of stable gender identity” (95).

The loss of their friendship, and the boys’ subsequent refused identification with one another, provokes a sense of melancholy in the characters and the film generally. Each young man, refusing to acknowledge the identification that has led to their sexual act, disavows identification with his friend entirely. The loss of the other, which cannot be experienced as a loss by the psyche, continues to haunt the subjectivity of each young man. This is melancholy in its traditional Freudian definition, as “failed mourning,” or an inability to move successfully through the stages of grieving.

Fuss borrows from Freud’s later assertions that melancholy is not only inextricable from the grieving process, but from the process of identity formation itself. Fuss defines identification as an act of “repetition and remembrance (34), and describes the way that identification usually functions as a memorializing of the lost love object in the psyche (37). Fuss understands melancholy to result from the subject’s ambivalence towards the lost object; melancholy names the response of the psyche to its own unconscious refusal to incorporate the lost love object through identification (39). When this identification is refused, as it is by the characters in Cuarón’s film, the psyche is unable to completely move on to another attachment, and remains preoccupied to some extent with its sense of loss. Melancholy thus comes to inform identity antithetically, whether it is acknowledged or not.

Finnegan cites Stephen Cohan’s observations about the convention in “road movies” for the film’s characters to experience re-absorption into dominant culture (44). This is no different

in Cuarón's film, and Finnegan observes that the end of Julio and Tenoch's friendship, which coincides with the defeat of the PRI, and the dawning of a new political era, may be a foreshadowing of other, not necessarily positive, changes (44). The boys' journey is marked by the dystopic realization that the future, and the pleasures it promises, are drastically over-determined by ideologies in the present. As young members of a nation finding its way in a new era of global capitalism and political restructuring, the boys are unable to negotiate their subconscious desires and their own ideological expectations, and dissolve their friendship as a means of preserving a preferred conception of self. This loss, which must go unacknowledged by each, is a palpable force in the film, and acts as a placeholder for other losses that are denied because of ideological commitments to particular definitions of "progress." The two boys, though they are insulated from many of the damaging effects of globalization, still cannot be protected from the class restrictions placed on the private sphere, and thus internalize certain losses as inevitable consequences of development.

The relationship between Tenoch and Julio is not the only melancholic element of the film's central narrative. Luisa struggles through stages of mourning throughout her journey with the boys. On the first night of the road trip, Julio and Tenoch spy on Luisa through a window while she weeps quietly in her room. Her erratic sexual behavior with the boys might easily be interpreted as a kind of denial, or a physical distraction from the psychic burden she appears to be carrying. Luisa also experiences deep contemplations of death and memory, as illustrated by numerous voiceover divulgements, particularly one in which she contemplates the death of a child sharing her name. Initially, the film's audience is left to assume that Luisa is mourning all of those she has lost, including her parents, the aunt that raised her, her first love who died in a motorcycle accident, and for the recent loss of her marriage to Tenoch's cousin Jano. Jano

reveals his infidelity to Luisa in a phone conversation that occurs shortly before she decides to leave on the road trip. When Julio and Tenoch's conversation at the end of the film reveals that Luisa died of cancer shortly after the boys' return to Mexico City, Luisa's contemplations of death, and a previously cryptic scene of Luisa at a doctor's office early in the film, assume a meaningful context. The audience understands that Luisa takes this journey as a way of mourning the impending loss of her own life, and has a greater appreciation for her role as the only character that seems to find peace. A non-native Mexican, Luisa's desire to thoroughly appreciate the end of her life expresses itself as a desire to experience the place her life will end, and Cuarón's representations of the physical environment, at times idealistic, violent, and nostalgic, seem intended to correlate with Luisa's experience of seeing the nation all at once, for the first and last time. Though Luisa herself seems to resolve her process of mourning, Tenoch and Julio have difficulty acknowledging the impact of her loss, likely because of her association with their own transgressive behavior. Like the loss of their friendship, the loss of Luisa appears to them as another inevitability, and another factor defining the future by losses experienced in the present.

The melancholy elements of *Y Tu Mamá También* can be felt beyond the parameters of the film's central narrative, in Cuarón's technical rendering of the film's environment. Jeff Menne describes three distinctive levels of focalization at work in Cuarón's film, including the action of the camera, or "cinematic angle of vision," the voiceover narrative, and the plot itself, which depicts struggles by the film's characters to "appropriate narrative agency for themselves" (80). Menne observes that both the movement of the camera and the use of voiceover, seem to fundamentally destabilize the central narrative, and suggest that the film is about more than its plot (81). As Žižek's explains in his discussion of "anamorphosis" cited in this paper's

introduction, it is as though the story of the three protagonists acts as a prism through which Cuarón enables audiences to experience the “oppressive social dimension” that forms the backdrop to the story, and which is actually the purpose of the film (“*An Interview with Slavoj Žižek, Children of Men* DVD). This idea echoes Morton’s notion of ambient art, or rather art that is capable of juxtaposing its frame with its content in such a way as to demonstrate something about the ideological matrix the work inhabits. The plot itself becomes a tool for exploring the kind of world where these stories are possible. Most interpretations of Cuarón’s intentions for this technique in *Y Tu Mamá También* gesture towards an address of the socio-economic injustices existing in Mexico at the time of the PRI defeat, and the latter half of the first decade of NAFTA’s implementation. I will argue that the director’s technique (in addition to the narrative) creates a melancholic perspective from which audiences are able to more readily recognize and contemplate experiences of loss and its denial.

Hye Jean Chung’s essay, “Cinema as Archeology,” does a thorough job diagnosing the function of the narrative voiceover in *Y Tu Mamá También*. Like Menne, Chung describes the voiceover as destabilizing the film’s central narrative. Chung points out that the voiceover draws attention to the way that our experience of the film’s reality is mediated by the narrator, who is never identified by the narrative, or by Cuarón (110). While the narrator remains an anonymous, omnipotent, and seemingly neutral presence in the film, contributing to the documentary-like feel of the narrative interjections, the anonymous voiceover, according to Chung, also prompts deeper consideration of the complexity of temporal and spatial layering at work in Cuarón’s film.

The narrator frequently interrupts the film’s diegetic action to reveal information about the characters or the setting not conveyed by the dialogue or images on the screen. For example, on several occasions during the road trip portion of the film, the diegetic sound will be cut, and

the narrator will interrupt to reveal information about places in the landscape. Sometimes the narrator will reveal the thoughts of a particular character, as in the scene where the party passes the town where Tenoch's nanny was born (110). Other times, the narrator will present information that is not known to any of the characters, as in the scene where the protagonists' car passes a roadside memorial, and the narrator describes the wreck of a chicken truck in that spot years earlier. The narrator speaks from a future perspective, beyond not only the summer of the road trip, but also beyond Julio and Tenoch's final meeting. It describes the fate of the southern fisherman and his family, as well as some stray pigs encountered by the protagonists on the beach suggesting that there is no topic beyond its purview. Yet there are things that are never mentioned by the voiceover, most notably Luisa's cancer, and these omissions insinuate that our narratorial framing is being deliberately constructed by forces external to the reality of the central characters.

Chung also offers an extensive analysis of the camera work in *Y Tu Mamá También*; he describes the camera movement as suggestive of another level of mediation, since the camera seems to interact with the story as a "simultaneously embodied and disembodied" presence (111). Chung writes that,

The willfulness of the camera to detach itself from the main narrative suggests an embodied presence, while the floating, seemingly aimless nature of its gaze suggests a disembodied entity... (111).

These digressions of the camera typically follow vignettes that exist beyond the central plot of the film. For example, in the scene depicting the protagonists first evening together, the camera, which has occupied itself with a single long take of their conversation, leaves their table and in

the same take, pans into the kitchen and back rooms of the restaurant, where women are cooking, dancing and watching television. The narrator offers no context for this shot, which appears to gesture overtly to the innocent or intentional ignorance of the main characters to the privileges associated with their economic position. At other moments, as in the car scene discussed earlier, some context will be provided for the camera's movement away from the central narrative, and will convey information that is temporally or spatially removed from the action of the main plot. This technique serves, according to Chung, to create a "subliminal gap through the disjuncture of image and sound" that not only informs our experience of time and space, but also "punctures the ideology of the visible through leakage and excess" that "indicate the presence of subjects who exist beyond the confining frames of narrative and historical discourse" (115).

Like David Harvey, Frederic Jameson, and many others, Chung argues that as a result of improved communication technology, global communication networks, and the attendant advance of multinational capitalism that our experience of temporality has been drastically altered. Chung describes the political implications of Cuarón's representation of multiple "temporal and spatial sheets in the cinematic time-image" (106) by using Deleuzian theorizations of cinema. Ultimately, Chung concludes that Cuarón's film works against the flattening of historical experience, and the omission of particular historical narratives that allow the forgetting of social injustice. According to Chung, Cuarón's technique creates a space of resistance through its invocation of multiple present moments existing simultaneously, and attesting to the plight of the historically under-represented. But the film's temporal multi-dimensionality also provides for the working of melancholy, in the experience of the characters, and the perceptions of the audience, which not only represents the under-represented, but also allows for the contemplation

of the personal and national losses we experience during the process of maturation, and the ways that we cope with them.

If we seriously consider the assertion that the narrator and camera movement in *Y Tu Mamá También* gesture beyond the central narrative to a world of meaning by which the protagonists' actions are contextualized, but to which they are ignorant or deliberately unaware, Timothy Morton's method of reading the juxtaposition of frame and content becomes a valuable analytic tool. Application of Morton's technique to Cuarón's film enables an appreciation of the levels of connection between the plot and the environment it inhabits. Like the ambient art Morton describes, *Y Tu Mamá También* invokes a sense of the environment as more than just surroundings by playing with the relationship between frame and content. The digressive movement of the camera includes subjects within the frame that were previously outside it, and in this way makes the claustrophobic space of the frame itself keenly felt. The play between camera, the film's narratorial presence, plot, and directorial intention also jeopardize any fixed notion of the frame itself.

The affect of melancholy plays heavily in the relationship between frame and content in *Y Tu Mamá También*, much the same way as it does in the works Morton analyzes. The experience of nuanced temporality described by Chung, allows not just for a more nuanced historicism, but also for an understanding of the emotional response to the suggestion of loss felt over time. Cuarón's deliberate invocation of the film's physical and socio-political environment in this melancholic way begs for a reading of what losses, aside from those experienced by the main characters, go disavowed and unacknowledged along Mexico's trajectory towards identity in a globalized world.

The national imaginary depicted in Cuarón's film has been described as existing along a political spectrum bookended at one side by the Zapatista movement and others expressly resistant to global capitalism, and on the other by neoliberal proponents and 'free trade' advocates (Oropesa 97). Maria Josefina Saldana-Portillo has written about the way that *Y Tu Mamá También* responds to NAFTA, and its "fictions of development." Though certain economic indicators speak to the narrow success of the NAFTA treaty in the decade following its inception, Saldana-Portillo argues that the real impact of NAFTA on the Mexican economy has been largely negative. Most economic growth has occurred in export-oriented maquiladora industries, located in the area along the U.S.-Mexican border where regulations are lax (162). Production for the domestic market has decreased, and consequently the nation's trade deficit continues to grow, accompanied by Mexico's increasing dependence of imported goods, including food (163). Since price supports for basic food items were phased out, and constitutional protections against selling and renting communal land-holdings were eliminated as a condition of the NAFTA treaty, many of those living in the nation's rural, agrarian south are no longer able to make a living at their traditional vocations (164), and are forced to travel to urban areas to look for more lucrative work. Saldina-Portillo also observes that NAFTA legislation did not allow the same relaxation of border regulations to labor as to goods and capital (165). According to Saldina-Portillo, there is an increasing population in Mexico, primarily from the south, displaced by globalization's economic restructuring. These individuals are subjected to a loss of traditional property and identity, and must find a new way of life amidst the rapidly growing industrial northern cities, or along the arduous and often dehumanizing path to U.S. immigration (165).

Saldina-Portillo's configuration of the political environment *Y Tu Mamá También* occupies allows for an understanding of the greater sense of melancholy at work in Cuarón's film. The environmental injustice experienced by those living in maquiladora towns has been described by theorists like Lawrence Buell, and documented by films like *Maquilapolis: City of Factories*, which depicts the effects of unplanned infrastructure and industrial pollution resulting from a lack of regulation in these free trade zones which produce many of the material goods used by the developed world. The plight of Mexican citizens seeking immigration to the United States, and the discrimination they face even after gaining entrance, is a well known fact, evidenced politically, and artistically by documentary films like Luis Carlos's *389 Miles: Living the Border*, which documents the director's life and travels in towns along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The direction of Cuarón's protagonists' journey is significant. The characters travel south through the Mexican landscape like tourists, and along the way pass or encounter many of those traveling north in pursuit of a better economic situation. The protagonists' narrative is framed by the backdrop of these national experiences of adjustment to the demands of a global world. By allowing his audiences to notice what his characters, especially Julio and Tenoch, do not, or cannot (for example, the experience of the little girl Luisa, who died while trying to emigrate to the United States with her parents, discussed later in this paper), Cuarón makes the social unavailability of these cultural and personal losses an experiential phenomenon. The melancholy haunting the film suggests the disavowal of loss, and also a space of political reflection and re-evaluation.

A proper reading of the film from an environmental perspective demands analysis of the two primary spaces that frame the film's central action, namely the car and the landscape.

Oropesa describes how the car re-contextualizes journey literature in industrial terms (91). Certainly Cuarón's film is no different. "Betsabe," the 1989 LeBaron station wagon, is the backdrop of many meaningful encounters between the main characters, and is the technological means by which the protagonists traverse and access the national geography. Technology in Cuarón's film is both the agent that enables the protagonists' journey, and the force necessitating the drastic changes to the Mexican social and physical landscape. Significantly, the car is an imported model, and despite the fact that its year of manufacture predates NAFTA, it still gestures at the external influence of international trade on Mexico, and to the privileged positionality of its occupants. Oropesa describes the importance of the fact that the vehicle is a shared possession of Julio (the less affluent of the two boys), and his older sister, as well as the fact that Tenoch and Julio share the driving. He contends that despite the inequitable class experiences of the two boys, they share an access to power that differs from many of the rural poor outside the car, and have a mutual desire to control the experience for the other two protagonists (91). It is perhaps also significant that Julio and Tenoch refer to the vehicle by a female name, and therefore may be trying to express an insecure masculine identity through control of a possession they designate as feminine.

Finnegan's reading of *Y Tu Mamá También* also describes the importance of the car. Using Serge Daney's analysis of the importance of doors and windows in cinema as "pivots that repeatedly raise and frustrate the desire to 'see more' beyond or behind the filmic image" (40), Finnegan examines many scenes shot from inside the cab of the car, where the camera becomes consumed with action external to the vehicle. Examples of this include scenes of the station wagon passing traditional wedding ceremonies, or vehicles being searched at checkpoints, and military personnel harassing rural migrants. In these scenes, the sound of the protagonists'

discussion often continues non-diegetically along with the images, reminiscent of the juxtaposition between frame and content. Cuarón's audience is left to interpret for themselves the relationship between the narrative and the myriad of suggested counter-narratives that make up the film's environment, and especially at moments like those shot from within the car, it becomes a challenge to diagnose which stories are plot and which are setting. Finnegan understands these scenes as intended to provoke a sense both of the protagonists' comfortable superiority, as well as their ultimate powerlessness (41), which suggests but does not make explicit the compensatory relationship that may exist between the two experiences.

The film gestures at multiple layers of framing through its play between the environment inside the car, and the environment external to it. According to Oropesa, the film undertakes its exploration of the landscape through traditional genre tropes like rearview mirror shots and eye-level traveling shots, presenting the perspective of individuals inside the vehicle, and traveling shots parallel to the car, framing the protagonists during moments contrasting the intimacy inside the car with the externality of the environment (95). Oropesa writes that, "high-angle shots and long, panning shots show the immensity of the landscape," and the insignificance of the protagonists in comparison with the vastness of nature and the historic changes affecting the nation (95). The contrast between the claustrophobic images shot from within the vehicle, and the freedom of the camera's movement external to the body of the imported car, speak to something lost to its occupants through the mediation of their touristic experience.

Once the characters are on the road, their experience of the Mexican landscape speaks to the reality of globalization, both as a force shaping the development of the land and as a lived experience for rural poor who inhabit the national countryside. In a scene where the car breaks down, the protagonists must solicit the assistance of local farmers to repair the radiator, and are

forced into prolonged first hand contact with the nation's rural population. After towing the car to a makeshift garage with a borrowed tractor, the boys attempt to help a local man make repairs. While waiting, Luisa converses with an elderly woman, sitting next to a family shrine including a stuffed mouse bearing Luisa's name. The audience discovers later, via voiceover, that Luisa shared a name with the old woman's granddaughter, who died of exposure trying to make the journey across the U.S.-Mexican border. The old woman gives the mouse to Luisa, and as the repaired station wagon once again takes the road, the mouse is shown hanging from the rearview mirror. This image of the mouse is uncanny in the sense that it not only foreshadows Luisa's death, but also gestures to the violent world beyond the privacy and protection of the car. For those familiar with the work of Cuarón's friend and fellow director Alejandro Iñárritu's film *Babel* (2006), the story of the other Luisa may be reminiscent of the section of the film in which Amelia (Adriana Barraza) and the children she cares for are stranded in the desert between the U.S. and Mexico, and nearly perish from exposure.

Numerous images of the car crossing the countryside depict the diversity of the Mexican landscape, and illustrate the insular preoccupation of the protagonists with the complicated objectives of their respective quests. The audience is never provided a perspective from which the story is discrete or distinctive from the environment it occupies. Finnegan describes one scene in which the station wagon passes a picture of liberal president Benito Juárez (1806-1872) painted on the side of a building, along with the phrase "El Respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz" ("respect for the rights of others is peace") (42), implying the availability of the past wisdom to today's issues of global injustice. This image and others like it, speak directly to the necessity of a more meaningful historical experience of the environment.

The destination of the protagonists' journey, the shores of Oaxaca, is a plot point of particular interest since it not only illustrates the multiple layers of knowing and unknowing that exist simultaneously within the film, due to ignorance, deception, or denial, but also brings the protagonists into contact with the elements of pre-global Mexico's national culture that are frequently lost to national development. Having attempted to entice Luisa to the beach during their initial interaction with descriptions of a fictitious and wonderful place, "Boca del Cielo" (Mouth of Heaven), Julio and Tenoch must quickly improvise a destination when she later accepts their offer. Luisa does not know that they are not seeking a real place, and when the boys fear she may become suspicious, they turn onto a dirt road that miraculously leads them to a beach.

On their first day at the beach, the group encounters local fisherman Jesus (Chuy) Carranza and his family, who offer to take them on a guided tour of the area. Chuy takes them to a beach he refers to as "Boca del Cielo," much to the amazement of the two boys, and it is here that the film's most idyllic moments transpire. Tenoch, Julio and Luisa are outside of the car, and the isolation of their privilege. They directly interact with individuals far below their economic means, and seem at peace with each other and the world around them. As the party makes its way back to the mainland, their smiling faces shine against a mythically beautiful landscape, the diegetic voiceover cuts in, and contextualizes the moment with future information the characters cannot possess. The voiceover relates that,

By the end of the year, Chuy and his family would have to abandon their home to make way for an exclusive hotel built on the edge lands of San Bernabe. They will move to the outskirts of Santa Maria Colotepec. Chuy will attempt to give boat tours for tourists, but he will be blocked by licensed collective of boatmen recently arrived from Acapulco and

avored by the local tourism board. Two years later, he will end up as a janitor at the hotel. He will never fish again.

This intrusion is effective in creating a melancholy sensation because it suggests a temporal perspective that exceeds the present moment of happiness, and preserves it as an increment by which to evaluate the loss that is to follow. This heavily editorializing statement also presents the inevitability of change to the national land and way of life, and the often bleak socio-economic consequences it entails.

Yet, the film's sustained investigation of perspective makes it difficult to accept the "inevitability" of this moment at face value, as speaking to the unstoppable violence of globalization. Cuarón's project appears to interrogate, in ways similar to those suggested by J.K. Gibson-Graham, how certain narratives of globalization derive power, not from some immutable force, but from the cultural scripts that present them as the only conceivable possibility (39). Cuarón's previously stated concern with democratizing the experience of globalization betrays a suspicion of definitions of development that do not, as Vandana Shiva has said, "register environmental costs or poverty created by the development process" (179). While many theorists have offered readings of the environment represented in Cuarón's film as gendered female, an application of Morton's eco-critique would discourage trying to understand the film's setting through purely allegorical devices, and would encourage readers instead to entertain the possibility that the melancholy provoked by descriptions like the one cited above, provide a space of critical contemplation for audience members to consider environmental and human costs that often go unacknowledged.

It is easy to wonder why Cuarón chooses the story of a young woman facing premature death and the frustrated friendship of two bisexual teenagers as the anamorphic lens through which we are to view a nation coming to terms with global identity. An understanding of melancholy's function in the central narrative and formal construction of the film makes this directorial choice more understandable. The various elements of class tension at work in the film's central narrative illustrate the myriad of social losses that are exacerbated by the phenomenon of globalization, and have permeated Mexico's national consciousness. This is not to say that the opening and closing down of homoeroticism in the film, or Luisa's death function analogously to the destructive impacts of the NAFTA treaty, and other diplomatic implementations of globalism, but rather to suggest that both narratives encourage a questioning of the ideological process that includes suffering and loss as part of any definition of progress. The story of Luisa, Julio and Tenoch acts as a direct analogy to the film's greater concerns about development only in the sense that both narratives portray a sense pre-determination. On the individual level, when the boys cannot accommodate their conceptions of class and gender identity to the reality of their physical attraction to one another, they sacrifice their friendship and disavow its loss in the name of moving to a more "advanced," or heterosexual, stage of development. On the national level, the narrowly conceived path to development that entails subjecting land and people to the economic and environmental injustice must continuously disavow their sacrifice to produce a cohesive vision of progress.

These two narratives illustrate that our experiences of economic and social development are closely tied to our conceptions of identity, personal and national, and to the possibilities those identities make ideologically available to us. The ideology associated with international capitalism, despite its association with the distribution of personal liberties, requires the

subordination of certain desires to others, the acknowledgement of certain losses and the disavowal of others. Luisa's conclusion is determined by the disease that prematurely takes her life, but unlike the plot elements discussed above, her story offers at least the prospect of hope in the sense that she ultimately finds a way to move beyond ideological preoccupation, and to authentically experience her loss. The quest for personal and national identity is depicted by the film as not always successful, and even when successful as only providing minimal empowerment. However, Cuarón's film encourages its audience to understand the way that ideology is deeply implicated in the political and physical environments it inhabits, to feel the losses that we are ideologically discouraged from acknowledging, and use our grief to devise a more just future.

## Chapter 2: Melancholy and the Politics of Futurity in *Children of Men*

Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), adapted from the 1992 P.D. James's novel by the same name, is the second of the director's films to attract significant critical attention and in many ways continues the project Cuarón began with *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001). Both film and novel depict an adventure story set in a dystopic near-future world where the human ability to reproduce has been critically compromised. The book's publication (1992) and the film's release (2006) are separated by thirteen years, and while the parameters of their respective genres obviously make each a unique work, many of the themes present in James's novel are present in Cuarón's film as well. The novel, published in post-Thatcher era Britain is characterized by commentary on privatization and restrictive immigration policies (Nelson 52-13). Cuarón's film uses James's suggestions, and extrapolates them to their most extreme logical conclusions, in a manner clearly informed by contemporary global changes. However, the screenplay for *Children of Men*, which is credited to Cuarón and Timothy Sexton<sup>1</sup>, also makes drastic diversions from the themes and content of the novel. Through its depiction of the treatment of diasporic persons, Cuarón's film alludes to the social consequences of the solidification of national borders by developed nations following events like the attack on the American World Trade Center, and the formation of facilities like Guantanamo Bay, where human rights violations are perpetrated in the name of national security. As with *Y Tu Mamá También*, Cuarón continues to employ the technique of anamorphosis to construct a vantage point from which distinctive juxtapositions about our global social reality are made apparent (Žižek Interview, *Children of Men*). Cuarón uses these formal and narrative juxtapositions to present a poignant commentary on the crises of

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<sup>1</sup> David Arata, Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby are also credited with authorship of the script, though there is some debate about the significance of their contribution.

immigration, unjust detention and environmental destruction, by provoking a melancholic consideration of losses we both experience and disavow.

Set in London 2027, the film's central plot revolves around the antihero Theo, and his quest to transport Kee, an illegal immigrant and the first woman to conceive a child in eighteen years, through the hostile landscape of a violently isolationist Britain, to the care of a group of scientists called "The Human Project," who are trying to solve the mystery of human infertility. Theo and Kee are able to escape capture by the rebel group, "the Fishes," that betrays them and tries to kidnap Kee for political reasons. Kee delivers her daughter Dillon, and with Theo's help, mother and child ultimately reach the rendezvous site, where Kee and Dillon will be picked up by a ship aptly called the "Tomorrow." Unfortunately, Theo is wounded by a rebel bullet, and slumps over in the lifeboat where the three wait, presumably dead, as the ship breaks the horizon and the film ends.

Scholars have previously identified some of the significant differences that exist between the plot of Cuarón's film and that of James's novel. One critical adaptation to James's plot is the fact that Cuarón shifts responsibility for the human infertility epidemic from men, who in James's novel suffer an inexplicable drop in sperm count (8), to women, who are characterized by the film as mysteriously unable to conceive. In her analysis of the film adaptation of *Children of Men*, Patricia Nelson also observes changes in the class and ethnicity of the pregnant woman, from a middle class white British citizen, to a black African immigrant, a narrative point she describes as designed to serve the filmmakers' message about the rights of diasporic peoples (47). Nelson explains that in Cuarón's *Children of Men*, the child and the mother are not only racially designated, but also without the protection of nationality, thereby indicating a vision of futurity that is "necessarily entwined with identity politics" (32). Nelson also mentions that in the

novel, the child is born to a newly formed, heterosexual romantic couple, Theo and Julian, and this preservation of the nuclear family functions as a source of hope for the future (47). In the film, Julian (Theo's ex-wife) is killed after coercing him to help transport Kee, and Theo himself presumably dies from a mortal gunshot at the film's end. All hope for humanity is derived from Theo and Kee's ability to work together as a kind of non-traditional family unit (not based on blood ties or a sexual relationship) for the protection of Dillon, and from Kee and Dillon's rescue by the benevolent "Tomorrow."

Cuarón's film's narrative does not make explicit causes for the increase in illegal immigration, the violent reinforcement of national borders, and the widespread human infertility that not only threatens political devastation but also the demise of the species. In order to decipher this information, viewers must negotiate the anamorphic positionality Cuarón constructs, and decipher a host of clues offered by the environment the film occupies. This environment is rendered through many of the same filmmaking techniques perfected in *Y Tu Mamá También*, particularly the wide-shot, long-take combination, and the use of the camera as both an embodied and disembodied presence. Though *Children of Men* does not utilize the prominent narratorial presence exhibited in *Y Tu Mamá También*, there exists the same juxtaposition of central plot and frame narratives, typically explored in seemingly peripheral shots that not only contextualize the storyline, but crowd the central action, and create a perspective of pervasive melancholy that allows the audience to consider what possibility of hope can emerge from a climate of violence and injustice.

The perception of reality conveyed by the film, however, is less the experience of a documentary, or a view of reality mediated by authorial intent and more an attempt to emulate the experience of reality as carefully as possible. Shorts about the making of the film, included

with the DVD release, describe the intricate timing and intensive technological apparatus required to create the illusion of one continuous shot in a complicated action sequence. Cuarón describes his process of building one “long shot” as a composite of meticulously edited short takes. This technique has been called “mega-realism,” by Terrel Bacon Govinda Dickman, who articulate its usefulness in creating a sense of reality interior to the film (158). Though Bacon and Dickman ultimately conclude that Cuarón does not make good political use of this device, other scholars like James Udden have argued that Cuarón’s use of the long shot in *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men* speaks to the political potential of global cinema.

*Children of Men* begins with a black screen and the diegetic sound of male and female news anchors reading morning headlines. They announce Day 1000 of the “Siege of Seattle,” terrorist activity at a mosque, and ratification of Britain’s Homeland Security Bill, which closes the national borders to all immigrants. The morning’s top story is the death of “Baby Diego,” at 18 the world’s youngest person, in a brawl initiated when Diego spit in the face of a fan asking for an autograph. As this story is announced, we are shown a not-unfamiliar looking coffee shop, and a captivated audience crowded around a television from which the news broadcast is emanating. Their grief for Diego’s death is evident. Theo (Clive Owen), the film’s male protagonist, emerges from the crowd and buys a cup of coffee, then departs. In a well-analyzed long take, the camera follows Theo out the door of the coffee shop and up a shabby and bustling city street, panning around him, as he stops to add alcohol to his drink from a pocket flask, to look back down the street and catch the explosion of a terrorist bomb in the shop Theo has just exited.

The wealth of information subtly conveyed by this scene is impressive. The audience is made aware of a general state of global unrest, indicated by protests and terrorist activity, as well

as the mass displacement of populations and the legislative backlash against immigration by the British nation. We are also made aware of the how commonplace these occurrences seem in comparison to Diego's death, which acts metonymically for the collapse of birthrates that has lead to the scarcity of young people. This one loss is an internationally mournable event, despite the fact that the ubiquity of violence means any trip to the coffee shop could end in death. The many interacting levels of framing are also felt in this scene, where the broadcast is framed by its reception in the coffee house, then further contextualized by the political unrest in the street.

Scenes of Theo's daily commute convey similar kinds of information about the environment that houses and informs the plot, which is characterized by general melancholy and despondency. The neglect of infrastructure because of its perceived lack of future utility is evident in the pervasive deterioration of urban areas, which also bear the scars of violent political actions. In a segment about the making of the film included with the DVD, Cuarón describes his choice to model technology in the film on contemporary manifestations his audience would recognize, in order to convey the sense that technological development has stalled due to a lack of innovation in the face of an uncertain future. Crowds of various religious sects demonstrate in the streets, and public shrines for the lost Diego clutter the sidewalks. Piles of uncollected trash are ubiquitous, and most disturbingly, cages filled with detained immigrants awaiting deportation line train platforms and other public thoroughfares. A television playing on the train while Theo commutes informs us that, while "the world has collapsed, only Britain soldiers on."

In a scene where Theo is held in a newspaper covered rebel interrogation room, the camera detaches itself from the central plot to examine the headlines, including "Hormone attacks: Violent reactions...", "Massive Crisis: Russian Migration," "Bombing of Saudi Pipeline disrupts world's oil supply," and "South coast towns turned into refugee camps." These

headlines illustrate by turns various tragic events, including the inability of science to solve the infertility crisis, the mass migration of certain ethnic groups, civil unrest and situations of scarcity, and the segregation of diasporic persons. The last headline also foreshadows Theo and Kee's intentional apprehension by border guards in order to make their way through the Bexhill Refugee Camp to the site of their rendezvous with the "Tomorrow."

Refugee, or "Fugee" as it is abbreviated in the film, becomes a term standing in for any person in Britain illegally. This term replaces the designation "sojourner" from James's novel, and the distinction makes apparent the differing treatment of these individuals by film and book. In James's novel, sojourners are brought to developed nations from the developing world to perform sanitation tasks, and other work not desirable to citizens, or able to be conducted by an increasingly aged population. Sojourners are only permitted to remain in Britain until they reach middle age, when they are returned to their country of origin; as the term implies, their stay is temporary. In the film, the term refugee is more appropriate since the duration of the intended stay is indefinite due to the fact that the source of increased migration is insinuated to be an environmental disruption that would prohibit them from returning home. This assumption is corroborated by the aforementioned headlines, and by Cuarón *The Possibility of Hope* which accompanied *Children of Men* on its DVD release.

In both its manifestations, *Children of Men* is a story about bio-politics and the authority of the state. The exceptional circumstance of human infertility warrants the intrusion of state agents into the most intimate realms of human existence, and as Agamben has said, "bare life and judicial rule enter into a threshold of indistinction" (174). However, these state intrusions take different forms in James's and Cuarón's respective works. In the novel, the state comes to regulate the domain of bare life through compulsory fertility testing, the importation and

exploitation of sojourners, the containment of convicted felons in a national penal colony, and a kind of ritualistic, state-endorsed suicide known as “the Quietus.” The novel demonstrates a concern for the sojourners, who are deprived of citizenship rights, but not subjected to detainment until time comes for their deportation, and their grievances do not receive significant attention in comparison to grievances perpetrated against citizens of Britain (like the penal colony, and abuse of the Quietus practice). By inserting the character of Kee, Cuarón’s film elevates the plight of refugees to a central place in the narrative, and in doing so illustrates Agamben’s point that,

In the system of the nation-state, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man show themselves to lack every protection and reality at the moment in which they can no longer take the form of rights belonging to citizens of a state (126).

Agamben has written that the refugee must be considered a limit concept that calls into question the fundamental idea of the nation-state by “breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality” (131). The phenomenon of refugee asylum calls into question the point at which the civil liberties of individuals coincide with the authority of the sovereign state to regulate bio-politics.

In Cuarón’s film, the acts of terrorism perpetrated by the British government against these refugees are evident in the scenes depicting deportation busses and facilities. Many scholars have identified a correlation between Cuarón’s images and the human rights violations committed in detention centers like Guantanamo Bay. Scenes of our protagonists on a deportation bus, much like the one that passes Theo and Jasper in the “pull my finger” scene described in this paper’s introduction, document through the filthy bus windows innumerable

acts of cruelty. Caged and miserable detainees are threatened by guards, arbitrarily humiliated, tortured and executed; rows of corpses line the train terminals.

Tensions about immigration are portrayed as exacerbated by the significant class disparity that plagues the British nation of the future. In a scene where Theo visits his cousin at the national “Ark of the Arts,” an institution entrusted with the preservation of such priceless works as Michelangelo’s “David” (now with one prosthetic leg), and Picasso’s “Guernica” imply the intense privatization of culture. The irony of this scene is obviously that the human species being unable to reproduce and the pervasive violence mean that after a certain point no one human will be around to appreciate these pieces of art, yet they are meticulously preserved, as human life continues to be threatened. The presence of “Guernica” as a backdrop speaks directly to the ironic human inability to contextualize its own senseless cruelty, which perpetuates cycles of violence.

The mounting suspicion of developed nations towards their immigrant communities, the increasing denial of rights to those deemed dangerous to national security, and the deepening global class disparity of Cuarón’s film find easy analogs in the contemporary psyche. Cuarón has described his intentions in directing the film as an attempt to “make an observation about the state of things.” He says, “We experience for an hour and a half the state of things, and then try to make our own conclusions about the possibility of hope” (Director Alfonso Cuarón discusses ‘*Children of Men*’ 2). *Children of Men* functions as a reminder of the inherent value assigned to the lives of citizens, and the violence perpetrated against those not protected by nation-states.

Judith Butler’s work *Precarious Life* is a useful tool for analyzing many of the peripheral narratives in Cuarón’s film, especially their emphasis on the rights of diasporic persons. Butler

theorizes ways that the visibility of public grieving is structured by hegemonic power systems and the media, which allow certain losses to be appreciated while others, especially the loss of individuals described as threatening to the nation, are denied and forgotten (as is the case with many of those represented in Cuarón's film). Butler diagnoses how various "terror alerts," disseminated through the media, authorize

...Radical hysteria...in which fear is directed anywhere and nowhere...so everyone is free to imagine and identify the source of terror. The result is that an amorphous racism abounds, rationalized by the claim of 'self-defense'. A generalized panic works in tandem with the shoring up of the sovereign state and the suspension of civil liberties (39).

This phenomenon is evident in Cuarón's film at moments like the one in which Theo passes a digital kiosk in the train station which encourages British citizens to inform on friends or family members who may be harboring refugees, or otherwise acting against the interests of the nation. Clues like this one set a tone of both imminent danger and ultimate surveillance, and establish 2027 Britain as a totalitarian state that ignores the liberties of certain groups and individuals for its own purposes.

Utilizing Agamben's assertions about "camps" as the institutionalization of permanent exceptions to the rule of law, Butler characterizes the indefinite detention of individuals, like that practiced in U.S. facilities in Guantanamo Bay (analogous to the detainment and extradition of apprehended immigrants in Cuarón's film), as both "an illegitimate exercise of power," and a tactic to "neutralize the rule of law in the name of security." Butler writes,

'Indefinite detention' does not signify an exceptional circumstance, but rather, the means by which the exceptional becomes established as a naturalized norm. It becomes the

means by which the extra-legal exercise of state power justifies itself indefinitely, installing itself as a potentially permanent feature of political life... (67).

This analysis allows for a more insightful appreciation of Cuarón's *Children of Men*, which frames a narrative about the miracle of human reproduction against an ironic backdrop defined by a lack of appreciation for the value of human life.

Butler argues that we must struggle against representations that privilege some lives over others, if we are ever going to acknowledge the extent to which globalization has made us all dependent upon one another, and to develop a sense of true human community (20). Only through the articulation of questions such as, "Whose lives count as lives? And ... What makes for a grievable life?" (20), can a sense of relationality be established that directly challenges the rhetorical impulse to excuse violence against certain peoples through a public prohibition on their grievability (36). Butler asks,

How does the prohibition on grieving emerge as a circumscription of representability, so that our national melancholia becomes tightly fitted into the frame for what can be said, what can be shown? ...melancholia becomes inscribed as the limits of what can be thought...The de-realization of loss ...becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished. This de-realization takes place neither inside nor outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained (148).

If the frames by which the "recognizably human is currently constituted" are acknowledged to be racially and ethnically constructed, democratic culture must work to contest these frames, and allow for a more accurate conception of the ways that identity politics and international rights discourse intersect, overlap, and diverge (90). Cuarón's technique of melancholic anamorphosis

arguably works along the same lines Butler suggests, constructing a vantage point from which the ‘de-realization’ of losses itself becomes visible, and the audience must grapple with the continuously transitioning relationship between frame and content. Butler’s discussion of ideological framing finds a critical overlap with Morton’s work also. Morton has asserted the desperate need for the recognition of “the reality of human and non-human interdependence, in a manner that threatens the comfortable way in which humans appear in the foreground and everything else in the background” (257). Serious engagement of Morton’s radical deconstructionism means that we must not only consider how the “recognizably human” is constituted, but also acknowledge that legal protection is often meted out along species lines, and that these protections are insufficient in the face of extreme interconnection.

Butler understands the shared experience of grief as not only constructing the ideological parameters of our experience, but also as providing the potential for the recognition of a-political commonality, and the foundation for a “political community of a complex order” (22). “If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours,” Butler writes, “then the ‘we’ is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against...” (22-23). Cuarón’s *Children of Men* can be read as offering similar insight into global ethical responsibility through its formal interrogation of the ideological frame that allows for a disavowal of the loss of immigrants’ lives, the lives of those deemed dangerous to the state, and the environmental destruction that threatens human extinction. The pervasive sense of melancholy in the film is attributable in part to the social sense of loss that goes unacknowledged by society at large. By framing his central narrative with these socio-political factors, Cuarón questions the politics of representation in the same way Butler suggests, and simultaneously presents a mode of appreciating the prohibition on their representation.

This concept is poignantly exemplified in a scene following the long take sequence depicting Julian's assassination at the hands of her rebel cohorts. In the assassination scene, the audience is coerced into a sense of false security within the confines of the vehicle, witnessing the nostalgic interaction between Theo and Julian, and the pampering of Kee by her nurse Miriam. Then the car is ambushed, and the sense of security is ripped away as a bullet hits Julian in the throat, and the occupants of the car scramble to staunch her bleeding and escape. A number of scholars have mentioned that the effect of this long take is to give the audience an experience of suspense and anguish at being trapped in a car with a dying person. In a subsequent scene, Kee and Miriam bury Julian's body in a remote wooded area under piles of leaves, fearful of its confiscation by authorities due to Julian's status as a political rebel. Theo watches in visible shock, then the camera follows him as he turns from the make-shift ceremony, and collapses under the burden of his grief. Julian stands in for all the lives claimed by political upheaval and corruption, and the remorse of her mourners registers as similar to what any family member or friend would feel in light of a lost loved one. This scene is also shot in a single long take, which allows the audience to experience a sense loss in a more realistic way, and to make associations with other experiences of loss.

The concept for the funeral scene was adapted from a similar instance in James's novel, from which the story takes its name. In James's *The Children of Men*, the character Luke, a priest and part of the rebel enclave trying to undermine the authority of the state, gives his life to save the pregnant Julian when their group is beset by a violent faction of Omegas (the name James gives to the last generation born prior to the infertility crisis). After Luke's death, it is revealed that he was actually the father of Julian's child, and that the two had found a connection in their mutual religious fervor. The rebel group buries Luke in a secluded area, and Julian asks Theo to

say the burial service over Luke's body, the text of which speaks to both the novel's present situation of violence and infertility, as well as positing divinity as a solution.

Lord, thou hast been our refuge: from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made: thou art God from everlasting, and world without end. Thou turnest man to destruction: again thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that is past as a watch in the night (194).

Though Cuarón preserves the melancholy tenor of this scene and of the work generally by employing a line from a burial service as his title, the overt Christian overtones of the funeral service are not present in the film's version of the funeral. The service itself is performed by Kee's nurse Miriam, who is a Hare Krishna, and the proceedings are depicted as providing the same minimal consolation as Theo's pocket bottle of whiskey. The loss of Luke in the novel, and of Julian in the film, respectively function metonymically as the temporary death of an ideal: in the former instance, it is virility and Christian salvation, in the latter it is a more abstract notion of justice and a recognition of the sanctity of all life.

In the same way that Cuarón's *Children of Men* testifies to the social disavowals associated with immigration and nationalist suspicion, the film also attests to the disavowals associated with contemporary environmental dilemmas. The film portrays other species as not affected by infertility in the same way that humans have been, a fact evidenced in a scene where Theo argues with members of "the Fishes" about Kee's best course of action, while a kitten climbs his leg. The declining human population, not sustained by diminished birth rates, does not experience lack of space as a significant social issue. Scenes of an abandoned elementary school signify the abandonment and deterioration of unused facilities. Yet there is a national push to

expel “fugees” from the country, which indicates a national anxiety about resources to some extent. The term “fugee” is telling in that it indicates these individuals are seeking refuge from a force that is unexplained by the film itself, though Cuarón’s utilization of media coverage (e.g. “Massive Crisis: Russian Migration”) seems to provide some clarification that the causes of population displacement are environmental, and subsequently political. Shots of the detainment cages where “fugees” are kept depict an extraordinary ethnic and linguistic diversity, which indicates that the causes of their displacement are widespread. One anticipated effects of global warming is the shrinking of earth’s inhabitable land mass, due to rising water levels, changing temperatures, and increasingly violent weather patterns. It is thought that these phenomena will exacerbate an already troubled and troubling disparity between developed and developing nations, as human migration increases and forces different cultures into close proximity with one another, and are forced to compete for jobs and resources. One can infer that the “fugees” depicted in Cuarón’s film are the result of a similar, drastic environmental change and its concomitant social anxieties.

Timothy Morton’s theorization about the role of melancholy in “dark ecology” or the deconstructionist mode of eco-criticism he champions, is useful to understanding the role that loss and grieving play in Cuarón’s consideration of environmental issues. Morton’s particular method of eco-critique does not admit to a nature that exists prior to human theorization and interference (17), and thus champions notions of place that are “contingent,” in the sense that it relies heavily on theorizations of interconnectedness, and “queer,” in the sense that it also depends on rhetorical interrogation of ideological boundaries (143). “Dark ecology undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature,” Morton writes. “It preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe” (187).

Like Butler, Morton maintains the usefulness of grief, particularly contemplation of the “trauma of the current ecological crisis.” He describes “dark ecology” as a “melancholy ethics,” which grapples with the impossibility of mourning the absolute loss signified by environmental destruction, partly because it so far exceeds our representational ability, and partly because we are so deeply attached to it (*Dark Ecology* 253). In order to do good political work “reading” the environment, Morton contends that ecocriticism must not revert to dialectical inside/outside narratives that acknowledge the world in which we live as distinctive from human society, and instead must look for the juxtaposition between contents and frame, plot and setting, that allow consideration of the construction of ideological space between them (*Ecology Without Nature* 144).

Art that Morton views as accomplishing a useful practice of eco-criticism, or “ambient art,” “plays with what ‘counts’ as either frame or contents” (*Ecology Without Nature* 144) in such a way as to challenge “both dualism (their absolute difference) and monism (their absolute identity)” (145). Morton writes that, “Ambience is what Jacques Lacan would have called a *sinthome*,” a symptom, a material embodiment of some ideological construction, that is used by the subject to negotiate its own identity through a positioning of the self in relation to this symptomatic object within a given power matrix. Morton argues that by collapsing the perceived distance between the respective subject positions occupied by a work’s audience, and the object of its contemplation, ambient art has the potential to undermine the potency of the ideological field that frames our experience of the world around us (67). Morton contends that only by appreciating the character and ubiquity of ideological construction, and how our own indentificatory impulses are deeply implicated within it, can humanity come to understand our ecological responsibilities and make informed critical choices (185).

One challenge posed to any eco-critical reading of *Children of Men* is that Cuarón has insisted he intends infertility to serve an entirely metaphorical function. He states that,

... In a science fiction movie, you would have gone into the whys and the mystery of infertility. We decided to not even care about it and just take it as a point of departure....

(Director Alfonso Cuarón discusses his accomplishments).

His assertions are corroborated by interview segments with Slavoj Žižek, included with the film's DVD release. Žižek describes the film as chronicling the "ideological despair of late capitalism" (Žižek interview, *Children of Men*), and explains that the "true infertility" depicted in Cuarón's film is the lack of a meaningful experience of history, and subsequent semiotic disassociation and confusion which have real material effects on people and environments. The film's setting in Britain is apt, he explains, since that nation relies heavily on its sense of traditions, and loss of the ability to historicize would be experienced as especially debilitating. Violations of human rights perpetrated by the nation state, he implies, result from "spiritual infertility," or the inability to adequately historicize one's actions.

Cuarón's insistence that infertility's function in his film is entirely metaphorical seems largely due to a desire to shift the focus of the film from the cause of infertility, to contemporary responses to environmental problems and the problematic treatment of diasporic persons. Cuarón seems anxious not to have *Children of Men* dismissed as just science fiction, emphasizing that the film is set in the future only as a plot convention (Director Alfonso Cuarón discusses *Children of Men*). However, an acceptance of *Children of Men* as rooted in a science fiction paradigm does not negate the political productivity of the narrative.

Frederic Jameson's recent theorizations about science fiction and utopia in *Archaeologies of the Future* lend insight to the usefulness of the science fiction genre to exploring political themes. Jameson describes how "works that posit the end of history," like the gradual demise of the human race depicted in Cuarón's film, can "offer...usable historical impulses" and "can energize and compel us to action" (*Archaeologies* xiv). Jameson writes that science fiction does not

...Seriously attempt to imagine the 'real' future of our social system. Rather its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. It is this present moment...that upon our return from the imaginary constructs of [science fiction] is offered to us in the form of some future world's ...past...(288).

This is not just "an exercise in historical melancholy," according to Jameson because it offers a "structurally unique 'method for apprehending the present as history...irrespective of the 'pessimism' or 'optimism' of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that de-familiarization (288). Jameson argues that longevity plots are always a means of veiling stories about radical historical change and changes to the social framework (335). Jameson's theorizations, when applied to Cuarón's *Children of Men*, make it possible to understand the dystopian future as a product of "radical historical change" and disorientation resulting from environmental evolutions that humanity is currently experiencing.

There are significant issues with thinking about infertility as only metaphorical. Reducing infertility to a metaphorical device deprives the film of any useful political impetus, and also obscures any potential association between the continuation of the human species and protection

of the environment. Scholars like Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann, who have read infertility as directly representational of contemporary environmental concerns, have described *Children of Men* as “exemplary of the environmental movement’s impact on popular culture” (107). These readings depend on interpretations of the population displacement and human infertility as directly related to environmental issues. In the face of these issues, Cuarón’s *Children of Men* offers a uniquely ironic contemplation of the value of human life: the population is presumably shrinking due to declining birth rates, and increasing numbers of deaths (from environmental collapse and violence), so the justification of state totalitarianism is obviously not an immediate concern about resource competition due to overpopulation. In fact, the totalitarian policies appear in some ways to be a hold-over from a pre-apocalyptic world, where contemporary issues of overpopulation and resource depletion still informed decision-making. This idea forms the ironic basis of James’s novel: what if the problem of human survival was not overpopulation, but under-population? Cuarón’s film allows us to view how these policies play out in the post-collapse world that follows our own time, and poses a different question: what happens when the influx of politically and environmentally displaced populations so far exceeds the national infrastructure’s ability or willingness to absorb them that human rights catastrophes result? The particular irony of his concept emerges from considering the mutual ecological occurrences of a shrinking livable land mass, and environmentally provoked human infertility.

Like the ambient symptoms Timothy Morton describes, human infertility functions in Cuarón’s film as a symptom of some greater ecological disturbance, a trope that begs the ideological question: how might the way humanity is maintaining its environment lead to circumstances inhospitable to human life? Ambient clues (in Morton’s sense) to human infertility are offered in long wide-angle shots of the protagonists’ vehicle traveling along a road, that also

show sludge leaking through unconnected pipes into rivers. These scenes speak clearly to the ecological irresponsibility of industrial culture. Other shots of the national countryside indicate the mass extermination and disposal of cattle, which invokes contemporary concerns about diseases associated with industrial farming practices and environmental contamination. These scenes illustrate how Cuarón frames his central narrative with a world of decay and contamination, elevating the environment from setting to plot element, and provides insight about the larger issues informing the story.

Ursula Heise has diagnosed an increase, over the course of the last fifty years, in the social preoccupation with environmental risk, due to the fact that “quantitatively different kinds of risks...arise as a consequence of economic and technological modernization processes” (144). Expanding Ulrich Beck’s risk theory, Heise suggests that our global environmental community is connected by a complex network of risks, and our growing awareness of these environmental threats manifests in cultural representations of “toxic discourse” (a notion proposed by Lawrence Buell), or cultural expressions of the fear of a poisoned world.

Cynthia Deitering has also theorized a growing concern, beginning in the 1980s, with “the pervasive problem of toxic waste” (196). Deitering describes a “toxic consciousness,” or a sense that our cultural relationship to nature has been fundamentally altered through our interaction with the wastes of capitalist production (196). According to Deitering, waste functions metonymically as a representation of society’s most general fears about its collective future,” since it indicates “an ontological rupture in its perception of the Real” or rather the natural world, which can no longer be defined as a Heideggerian “standing reserve,” but now must be conceptualized as the “already-used-up” (199). Deitering’s “toxic consciousness” shares with Morton’s “dark ecology” a melancholic preoccupation with a world growing increasingly

inhospitable to human life. The concept of toxic consciousness is embodied by Cuarón's film by both the visibility of uncollected trash, and by the implication that human infertility is somehow attributable to some toxic environmental element.

Toxic consciousness haunts the framing of Cuarón's *Children of Men*, acting as an unspoken element of the central plot insofar as audiences must assume that the cause of human infertility results from something environmental. Patricia Nelson observes that *Children of Men* shares with popular zombie films like *Twenty Eight Weeks Later*, a tendency to portray a "post-Risk" environment, or rather an environment where risk has become a permanent and ubiquitous, therefore sublimely incalculable element of everyday existence (48). Nelson cites Jyotsna Kapur's diagnosis of the trend in American thrillers towards focusing on the exposure of children to risk, and cites Cuarón's film as symptomatic of the same social preoccupation with depictions of a world inhospitable to children. The spiritual infertility of the human race is demonstrated by the irony that due to scarcity, children have become not only a valuable commodity (exemplified by the celebrity of Baby Diego), but also valuable as political leverage (exemplified by the rebel group's attempt to utilize Kee and Dillon as pawns in their political struggle). Yet there is a pervasive social disregard for the value of human life, and especially the lives of those without national protection.

Though Cuarón may not encourage readings of fertility and infertility that venture beyond the abstract, any reading of *Children of Men* that attempts interpretation through the application of Morton's "eco-critique" must consider how these themes function rhetorically to refute conceptions of the "natural" order that would define nature as something external to human definition. Perhaps Cuarón's hesitancy to engage infertility too literally stems also from the fact that his depictions of a childless world redeemed through childbirth are easily

misunderstood as having socially conservative motivations. A particular strain of scholarship, like Brett Fawcett's "*Children of Men as a Moral Fable*" asserts that Cuarón's *Children of Men* functions as a reaffirmation of Christian doctrine about the sanctity of the family and the ultimate importance of heterosexual reproductive coupling.

Fawcett fails to appreciate the apparent ideological differences between James's novel and Cuarón's adaptation. He accurately identifies the novel as rooted in the author's conservative Anglican beliefs, and grounds his argument about the respective works' thematic similarities in a number of biblical allusions shared by the film and novel, including an obvious allegorical reading of Kee as the holy mother, and Dillon as a Christ child figure bringing redemption to humanity. Fawcett also cites scenes like the one in which Theo (Theo means God), Kee and Dillon are fleeing the Bexhill Refuge Camp amidst violent political revolution, and pass a woman on the street holding her dead son in her arms. Cuarón allegedly based the scene on a photo he had seen taken in a recent war zone that reminded him of "The Pieta." Fawcett's reading of the film is flawed because it does not appreciate the intense irony manifest in all of these invocations, which is signaled by the accentuated juxtaposition between 'miraculous' birth and a world that cannot help itself. Fawcett fails to appreciate that Cuarón may actually be satirizing eschatological religious notions of salvation with such references. The most telling example of Fawcett's misreading is his interpretation of the several scenes where the phrase "Jesus Christ" is used in reaction to the revelation of Kee's pregnancy, or Dillon's birth. Fawcett argues that this solidifies the allegorical association between the character Dillon and the Christ-child, but when these usages are always epithetical, their inclusion seems to undermine rather than strengthen Fawcett's assertions.

Also complicating Fawcett's reading of Cuarón's film is the inclusion of scenes like the one in which Theo asks Kee who the father of her child is. Initially, she feigns insult and tells him she is a virgin (i.e. that it is an 'immaculate conception'), and then admits she is teasing him before saying: "Fuck knows. I don't know most of the bastards' names." Whether Kee has been formerly employed as a prostitute or has just had multiple sexual partners, but this detail is not particularly important. Dillon, our symbol of hope for the future, has clearly not conceived miraculously in the traditional sense, nor is she born of a matrimonial union. James's Julian does not conceive her miracle child within her matrimonial arrangement either, though she is married, and Julian's devout religiosity and the fact that the child's mysteriously fertile father is a priest, and sacrifices his life to atone for his transgressions, are implied to absolve them of the sinfulness of their actions.

A number of additional plot points argue for an interpretation of Cuarón's film that diverges from James's Christian social conservatism. In a scene from the film in which Theo and his friend Jasper discuss a girl Theo used to date, who belonged to one of the proliferation of religious sects responding to the impending demise of humanity, the men poke fun at religiosity as an answer to contemporary social problems. The irony of this religious response is offered in ambient scenes of the public streets in which sectarians concern themselves with demonstrations about repentance, while feet away the catastrophe of human rights signaled by full detention cages goes unacknowledged. Most critically, in James's novel, the child's birth acts as a symbol of renewed religious devotion, but does not challenge the authority of the state (and if anything re-legitimizes it, since Theo effectively leverages his association with Julian and Dillon into autocratic power). In the film, however, Dillon's birth calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship between the state and bare life.

James's *Children of Men* has also been critiqued by scholars like Lee Edelman as deeply complicit with heterosexist depictions of the future as represented exclusively by the child and the reproductive heterosexual partnership of Theo and Julian (13-4). Edelman describes futurity in James's novel as guaranteed exclusively through hetero-normative sexual coupling, and cites examples from the text which discuss the futility of sexual contact without procreation, and in which "non-generative sexual enjoyment" is attributed to perverse pathology (12). Edelman argues that these representations are typical of the way hetero-normative society exonerates sexual relations between straight married people, and castigates alternative expressions of sexuality. He writes,

...the fantasy subtending the image of the child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought...(R)eproductive futurism...impose(s) an ideological limit on political discourse...preserving in the process the absolute privilege of hetero-normativity by rendering unthinkable...the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations (2).

Scholars before Edelman have theorized about the ideology of "reproductive futurism." Michael Warner was one of the first to diagnose the normalizing of "repro-sexuality," or the "interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity" (9). "Repro-sexuality," according to Warner, manifests largely through the ubiquitous rhetorical separation of alternative sexualities from social reproduction, and directly correlates to the governing of the sexual order by the ideology of the growth economy (9). Warner explains that "repro-sexuality...involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality; it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission" (9) and shapes "everything from gender norms to understandings of

history and fantasies of self-transcendence.” The homophobic rationale of “repro-sexuality” asserts that “if everyone were queer, the race would die out (...so don’t be queer)” (9). Warner points out that this “illogic...presupposes that there are no lesbian or gay parents, that people who have gay sex do not have other kinds, that heterosexuals only have sex when they want to reproduce, that sex always means coupling...” (9). The reason for this ideological construction is to “render the tacit value on reproduction itself unquestionable” (10).

Edelman explains that the figure of the homosexual is often diametrically opposed to that of the child (and to the human reproduction it signifies). Queerness is rhetorically constructed as the antithesis of futurity, or rather as death and abjection. Edelman argues that queer theory must embrace this rhetorical association with death, and reject hetero-normativity’s ideological insistence on the privileging of the future over the present moment, and on the political objectives concealed by this privileging (29). He would thus reject any reading of *Children of Men* as expressive of social justice concerns, to say nothing of radical potentiality. The applicability of Edelman’s reading to Cuarón’s *Children of Men* is complicated, however, by the director’s choice to forgo Theo’s romantic coupling with the mother of the future. Theo’s death and Kee’s single parenthood are not the icons of hetero-normative futurity Edelman describes from James’s novel. Though it is possible to read Theo’s dedication to Kee and Dillon as an effort to relive his former frustrated co-parenting experience with Julian, as Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann do, this reading fails to consider the way that Theo’s relationship to Kee is never a romantic one. While Julian is alive, Theo appears to still be attracted to his former wife, and agrees to help transport Kee presumably to impress Julian. Once Julian is killed by her treacherous rebel co-conspirators, and Kee’s pregnancy has been revealed to him, Theo appears to cope with his grief through a psychic process of identification with Julian, and her ideological

commitment to Kee, and to the betterment of the human situation. In the scene where Theo helps to deliver Dillon, he does not act as a surrogate father, but rather as a replacement midwife.

Theo's willingness to face his own death to guarantee a future for a child that is not biologically associated with him, and for a human species that will not include him, is certainly a plot point complicating a direct transference of Edelman's critique.

Edelman might argue that the film still reinforces the social necessity of heterosexual coupling to save the species, and propagates the assumption that if individuals engage in queer expressions of gender and sexuality they are not contributing to species preservation. Dillon's survival also rests in Theo's hands however, and his selfless actions are as critical to the preservation of the human race as the procreative act that created their necessity. This is non-hetero-normative in the sense that it invokes a stake in futurity not derived from direct heterosexual procreation. This scenario reminds the audience that it is not a person's ability to reproduce, but rather their ability to care for other human beings that is truly important.

Further complicating the transference of Edelman's critique to Cuarón's film is the ambient presence of the environment as a causal factor in human sterility, which casts the entire human race (except of course for Kee) to non-reproductive sexual actors. Warner theorizes that if it were not for what he calls the "growth economy of population" (10), it would not be necessary for homosexuality to be "meaningfully opposed to something else," or rather to occupy a rhetorically contrasting position to concepts like 'productive sexuality' and 'futurity' (as described by Edelman). The privileging of hetero-normative sexual actors serves the capitalist ideological purpose of ensuring that there are an ever increasing number of producers and consumers. However, the logic of global capitalism has also produced the ecological crisis that finds its ultimate expression in Cuarón's dystopian vision of the futurity. Cuarón's film still

posits ‘the child’ as the rhetorical symbol of the future; but the rhetorical opposite of the child (and therefore futurity and hope) is not figured by non-reproductive sexual activity, since heterosexuals in *Children*’s dystopia are not able to conceive children any more than homosexual couples. Instead, the rhetorical opposite of the child is the environmental melancholy that frames the film and attests to social and ecological irresponsibility that has inhibited human fertility, as well as the cruelty of a global culture that does not appreciate the value of human life. Like Edelman, Warner argues for a rhetorical embrace of the space of abjection socially allocated to non-conformative expressions of sexuality. He writes that, “The task of queer social theory ... must be to confront the default hetero-normativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet” (16). In this sense, Cuarón’s *Children of Men* practices a kind of queer theory, by forcing a slippage in the signification between heterosexual sex and “productive” sex through its depiction of a global situation in which heterosexual coupling not only cannot guarantee a future, but in fact may have been a component of the ideological frame that rendered the planet uninhabitable in the first place. Of course, the film’s sense of hopefulness is critically linked to the birth of a child, and therefore it would be absurd to argue that the work takes issue with reproduction per se. Rather, the film presents a vision of futurity that exists outside the parameters of the reproductive normativity prescribed by hetero-global capitalism, which is implicated in the destruction of the physical environment and in humanity’s inability to reproduce. Cuarón reminds us that the value of humanity does not derive from its ability to produce or reproduce, but from its ability to nurture all life, and to ensure the promise of a livable tomorrow.

While Cuarón’s film may not intentionally practice relational queer theory, this theory is a valuable tool for investigating the film’s representations of the ‘natural’, the ‘real’ and the

‘good’. Warner has argued that the fetishization of the child represents a “displaced identification with future generations” and their needs over the needs of individuals in the present; it also denies the fact that the global growth economy, which informs the ideological privileging of reproductive sexuality, paradoxically threatens devastation of the planet which future generations must inhabit (10). Warner claims that Modern Western culture indulges fantasies in which a “world destroyed for future generations can be redeemed by reproducing” (10), but that non-hetero-normative sexual behaviors and identities may be ultimately less threatening to futurity than are ideologies of “productivity” that require an unending supply of human and natural resources. Population concerns and consumption patterns are intimately connected, Warner reminds us, and must be taken into tandem consideration.

One issue with Edelman’s privileging of the present over the future is that it is reminiscent of capitalism’s short-term logic, essentially its willingness to sacrifice the future for profits in the present, and thus is unable to escape the economic ideologies that instigate “reprosexuality” in the first place. Edelman unintentionally aligns himself with the very social order of production and reproduction that he seeks to resist, and therefore his rhetorical rejection of futurity is all for naught. If we consider Michael Warner’s assertions that queer theory is not just about refuting reproduction and production, but about assessing issues of agency, and the ability of any given body to determine its own future, we see a different kind of vision for queer theory that moves beyond a perverse acceptance of abjection, as Edelman describes, and towards a democratic re-appropriation of representations of futurity (Munoz). This kind of theory allows for the appreciation of both human and ecological loss of a fundamentally different scope, and for the appreciation of the relationality between different narratives of loss.

Because these human and environmental losses are demonstrated by Cuarón's *Children of Men* to be so intimately linked, it is important to rhetorically interrogate associations between the film's representations of infertility and its engagement with toxicity discourse. Scholars like Giovanna Di Chiro have cautioned against uncritical receptions of anti-toxic discourses that rhetorically capitalize on fears that exposure to endocrine disrupting toxins will destabilize the "normal/natural gendered bodies of humans and other animal species" (201). Di Chiro describes how this rhetoric can be adopted and deployed even by progressive circles that "mobilize socially sanctioned heterosexism and queer-fear in order to generate public interest and a sense of urgency to act..." (209-10). If Cuarón's representation of toxicity as impacting human reproductive capacities existed in isolation, perhaps a critique could be made of the film for engaging in the kind of homophobic anti-toxic discourse Di Chiro describes; however, the human reproductive conundrum in the film is juxtaposed by the equally pressing human rights catastrophe that frames the central narrative, and this juxtaposition is intended to illustrate the irony of a world so desperate for human life, and simultaneously so unwilling to protect it.

The film problematizes any reading that would assert the direct analogy between women's inability to conceive children, and the planet's inability to provide conditions for the continuation of the human species. This rhetorical linkage between the "feminine" and the "natural" is a dangerous one, and has been demonstrated to solidify historical ethnic and gender hierarchies, establish a basis for hetero-normative arguments (Merchant), and according to Morton, prevents the kind environmental consideration that is not mired in metaphor. Though scholars like Korte, and Bacon and Dickman, critique Cuarón's treatment of Kee as reinforcing stereotypes of race, gender and class, particularly through the recasting of infertility as attributable to women, these readings fail to adequately appreciate the function of melancholic

irony at work in Cuarón's *Children of Men*. By shifting the cause of infertility from men's low sperm count, as it is in James's *Children of Men*, to women's inability to conceive and children's inability to stay alive, Cuarón makes apparent the often unacknowledged effects of development and ecological degradation on the bodies of women and children. The irony that Kee is not a citizen, and therefore her life enjoys no legal protection, while her value to the survival of the species is potentially inestimable, draws attention to how women and children from the developing world (many of whom live in diasporic situations) disproportionately pay the price of environmental and social injustice though they are immensely important to the overall health and maintenance of the human community.

Vandana Shiva has characterized the effects of capitalist multinational development on women and children of the developing world, including experiences of environmental degradation and poverty. She argues that development focused exclusively on financial indicators like the GNP do not register the "environmental costs or poverty created by the development process" (179). Because multinational capitalist definitions of development are ideologically based on bringing natural resources into the market economy for commodity production, developing nations divert these resources away from subsistence-based modes of life, creating conditions of scarcity most directly experienced by women and children of developing nations (179). The erosion of the resource base exacerbates political and economic inequalities, which in turn impact access to resources for the disenfranchised (180).

Shiva points out that the status of women, children and the environment have never "functioned as 'indicators' of development" (182). This exclusion is achieved by rendering invisible both the contribution of these respective categories to the growth of the market economy, and economic development sometimes negative impacts on these groups (182). These

negative impacts include complications during pregnancy, premature births and low birth weights, low survival rates in infants, children, and postpartum women due to lack of adequate nutrition (184). Shiva also notes the impact of “toxic hazards” on the health of particularly women and children: children are highly sensitive to chemical contamination, and environmental pollution often manifests children’s health issues (187), while spontaneous abortions, still-births and infant mortality rates are often observed in women exposed to intense or protracted environmental toxicity (188). Shiva argues that because environmental injustice impacts the health of women and children, it impacts the life of future generations. She writes that “the issue of justice between generations can only be realized through justice between sexes. Children cannot be put at the center of concern, if their mothers are...pushed beyond the margins of care and concern” (189).

Shiva’s statistics about the impact of multinational capitalist development on women and children, and particularly the last lines cited above seem directly applicable to the situation depicted in Cuarón’s film, where the impact of development on human reproduction and on the environment sustaining human life goes unacknowledged for too long and incurs disastrous consequences. Kee’s life only attains political significance through her status as the mother of the first child born in eighteen years; this scenario begs the question, how do we as a culture claim an interest in the future and the lives of children, when we do not protect the rights of their prospective parents to social and environmental justice?

The film *Children of Men* was released as a joint production of Universal Pictures, Strike Entertainment, and Hit and Run Productions (Nelson 57). As a big budget, big studio film, it cannot be seen as an uncomplicatedly subversive endeavor, due to a heavy reliance on global capitalism for its inception and dissemination. However, this paper argues that the film’s

thematic emphasis on melancholy begs for the consideration of loss and its disavowal, and when combined with the film's juxtaposition of frame narratives and central plot, this melancholy emphasizes the ironic contrasts between a dystopian future world and contemporary social, political, and environmental practices. Cuarón's film is an ambassador (albeit a popularized one) for environmental and social justice. Like *Y Tu Mamá También*, *Children of Men* undertakes a narrative and formal contemplation of the way that capitalist globalization has instituted an international model of progress that must forget certain kinds of ideological compromises in order to sustain the fiction of its benevolence and inevitability. *Children of Men* dares to predict the outcome of an ideological system that continues to idealistically impose itself upon a world that already shows the social and ecological consequences of its short-sightedness. Through this fictional journey from grief for the loss of humanity, to hope for its potential survival, the audience is presented with the opportunity to imagine what disavowals obscure our perception of our potential options, and what unexplored alternatives might signal the hope we need.

### **Conclusion: Reading Alfonso Cuarón's *The Possibility of Hope***

Alfonso Cuarón makes the political implications of his works *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men* explicit through cinematic technique, specifically the intricate construction of many levels of framing within the script, and through the provision of critical commentary that accompanies the feature films in their release. His preference for long takes, wide angle shots, and the use of 35 mm film, allow for an experience of realism that does not privilege characters over the environment they inhabit, but rather implicates their deep inter-relation. Cuarón deliberately constructs his images in a way that imposes on the viewer an appreciation of perspective, and encourages deeper consideration of how we understand the context of the ecological and social world we encounter.

The two films discussed in this paper are independent works, but also corollaries of one another, made more meaningful through juxtaposition. One film is the story of a nation coming of age in a time of globalization, and the compromises of identity and community that are made in the name of “progress.” The other is the story of globalization’s negative consequences taken to their logical extreme: the arbitrary and indefinite denial of rights to those understood as dangerous to the besieged nation state, and an inhospitable environment staggering under the burden of global capitalism’s incessant demand. Both films are melancholic, intending to provoke contemplation of losses we disavow as part of personal and collective identity. They are parables about how ideologies of freedom influence our perceptions of personal, communal, political, and environmental realities. This melancholy ambience also allows Cuarón’s audience to experience the effects of anticipated losses in order to provoke a realization that if we are to have hope, we must forge a new path from our current desperation. By beginning with

melancholia, these films utilize the viewer's sense of despair to provoke a re-awakening of the possibility of a new beginning.

Both films also propose the different kinds of possibilities ideologically available to the host of subject positions they encompass. Queer theory and modes of deconstructive eco-criticism contribute significantly to an understanding of the interaction between bodies, and their changing environments represented in Cuarón's work. These theoretical disciplines provide a means of grasping the sincere deconstructive efforts at work in these films, which enact their political message through a critique of the assumptions that attend our impressions of 'body', 'nature', 'freedom', and 'justice'. These thematic concerns are further explored in a short feature, *The Possibility of Hope*, which (as previously mentioned) accompanied Cuarón's *Children of Men* in its release. This short film is an intriguing critical lens provided by the director, and lends enormous insight into the two feature length films discussed above.

*The Possibility of Hope* does not seem intended as a stand-alone piece, though it is available independently on YouTube, but rather as supplemental material for the feature length film. Part documentary and part promotional material, the film explores some of *Children of Men*'s thematic concepts through critical commentary provided by some of today's most popular intellectuals, including: "philosopher and cultural critic" Slavoj Žižek, "sociologist of human migrations" Saskia Sassen, "philosopher and historian" Tvetan Todorov, "anti-globalization activist" Naomi Klein, "human geographer" Fabrizo Eva, "philosopher and economist" John Gray and "scientist and futurologist" James Lovelock. The speakers are identified by subtitles as experts in their respective fields, and sections of their separate interviews are edited together by the director to form a conversation about issues of climate change and global human rights

discourse, and indirectly about the relevance of *Children of Men* to the most pressing political concerns of this historical era.

The documentary is segmented into five parts: Reality, Fear, Walls, Fever and Hope, which appear in that order. These sub-sections represent themes from Cuarón's *Children of Men* identified by the scholastic panel, and each scholar explores the associated issues in the method of their respective disciplines. The trajectory of the conversation moves from perceptions of reality, to risk and contingency, then to the challenges to and desperate need for hope in the era of multinational capitalism and its deleterious effects. The theorists interviewed draw attention to a myriad of contemporary concerns about capitalism and global warming that are presented as speaking directly to Cuarón's work. *The Possibility of Hope* concludes that if there is to be any kind of positive expectation of the future, human society must address issues inherent in the conflation of international human rights discourse with neo-liberal definitions of property ownership and citizenship as guarantors of liberty. In the face of the inevitability of climate change, and its foreseeable impact on inhabitable land mass and resource scarcity, these already pronounced issues will be exacerbated, and will threaten the very definition of civilized society, according to the film, if they continue to go unacknowledged.

*The Possibility of Hope* functions as an interpretive guided script for the audience of *Children of Men*, analyzing its major themes and implications. Cuarón's craftsmanship is as much at work in the documentary as in the feature film, and *Hope* allows Cuarón to situate his *Children of Men* as a piece of speculative fiction drafted within the paradigm of environmental awareness and social justice concerns. These issues, which provide the amorphous and interactive frame for the canvas of *Children of Men*, are deliberately brought to the foreground in *The Possibility of Hope*. While the scholars interviewed may come to differing conclusions

about the various issues the film examines, particularly whether the root of our current predicament lies in capitalism generally, or a specific contemporary variety of deregulated global capitalism, they appear to be more or less in agreement about the inevitability of certain future occurrences, especially climate change and the social upheaval that will be attendant upon it. Clips of the various interviews play interspersed with clips from Cuarón's film, and actual footage which may have inspired the film's environment, including images of the environmental change and population displacement insinuated by *Children of Men*'s representations of the plight of diasporic persons.

While *The Possibility of Hope* presents a world over-burdened by its human population rather than one beset by human infertility, the documentary still utilizes the trope of melancholy as a route to comprehension and reimagining. As in *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men* this melancholy works to remind the audience that the losses we experience as part of "development" under global capitalism are obscured by a social disavowal that prohibit critical thought and jeopardizes our hope for the future. Our sense of these losses has political potential, Cuarón implies, if we are capable of conceptualizing how human and environmental tragedies are always communal events, and to see our own vulnerability in that of others. While Cuarón is careful not to align himself overtly with a wholesale rejection of capitalism, he offers a critique of the global status quo that illustrates a commonality derived from experiences of loss, and elevates the melancholic contemplation to a place of political engagement.

*The Possibility of Hope* opens with scenes taken from *Children of Men*, of a landscape shot through the window of a detention vehicle, a fact indicated by the window's wire covering. The vehicle passes a rural field, and a fire in the field catches the viewer's eye; the camera follows the flames as they recede from the frame. The screen goes black, and the word "Reality"

appears in white lettering; then we cut to a scene from *Children of Men* where Theo is filmed from behind walking by cages of detained “fugees.” The non-diegetic sound of Žižek’s interview begins to play. Žižek quotes Hegel’s assertion that a good portrait looks more like the subject than the subject itself, which he claims is what Cuarón does with our reality, helps us to perceive it as “ultimate reality.” Žižek’s characterization is useful because it provides a kind of explanation for *Hope*’s interspersing of documentation, representation, and deliberately disorienting filler shots, that make the audience struggle continuously to reconstruct associations, and differentiate the actual from its simulation. Cuarón effectively conflates the distance between the real ‘frame’ and its representational ‘content’, or rather collapses the distance between reality and its filmic signifier.

“Reality” typifies the global experience in our time as deeply disjunctive and fraught by differences of perception. In a world of globalized multinational capitalism, the theorists collectively argue, we are increasingly exposed to and reliant upon other people, yet we are simultaneously plagued by an inability to experience the totality of globalization in a meaningful way. Though humans have always moved around, human mobility has become uncontrollable in the last thirty years, Eva explains, due to the global inequality of opportunity. Unless this inequality of opportunity is addressed, we cannot stop the impending issues associated with human mobility. Eva’s statement is relevant to both Cuarón’s *Children of Men* and *Y Tu Mamá También* , which gesture to the global inequality of opportunity through their respective depictions of diasporic workers in North America, and refugees in the fictitious near-future Britain.

This section also establishes the fact that as the already irreversible phenomenon of climate change progresses, and the carrying capacity of the Earth is exceeded, “environmental

migration” will inevitably increase due to changes in Earth’s habitable landmass (including rising sea levels, drought, etc.), and the increasing privatization of land in poor countries, which leaves large populations vulnerable to food shortages and natural disasters. Lovelock, the pioneer of biospheric self-regulation theory, makes analogous comparisons between earth and a human individual, describing the planet as three quarters of the way through its natural life span, and therefore less resilient to the stress caused by human actions. While this paper’s commitment to deconstructive modes of reading demands caution towards this kind of anthropomorphism, Lovelock’s simile sets the stage for a melancholic connection between the aged planet struggling for survival, and the struggling segments of its population who are subjected to inequitable access to opportunities, both in the sense of bare life (access to fundamental resources), and the explicitly political (access to international rights discourse).

The second subtitled section, “Fear,” discusses what the theorists (and presumably Cuarón) perceive as the predominant ideological mode of our globalized age. It begins with Žižek’s comment that because our ability to construct a meaningful worldview rooted in our daily experiences has been compromised, it is easy to rhetorically capitalize on our anxieties and to mobilize the politics of fear, which he characterizes as the “true definition of infertility.” Žižek’s non-diegetic comment is contrasted with shots of graffiti on a wall, “Freedom isn’t Free,” and images of bombings during the second Iraq war, both suggesting contemporary instances of this rhetorical tactic. Eva explains that economic inequality is traditionally theorized by capitalist ideology as contributing to the production of wealth, and thus the system does not combat inequality, but guarantees it as a means of generating profit. Because capitalism both increases contact between populations and exacerbates inequality, it can contribute to feelings of xenophobia and a paranoid sense of vulnerability experienced by the powerful, and

simultaneously to a sense of helplessness and humiliation experienced by the dispossessed and disenfranchised. For Todorov the politics of fear have historically resulted in the social acceptance of exceptions to the rule of law, similar to the extension of sovereignty into the realm of bare life described by Agamben that informs Butler's characterization of 'indefinite detention' and other methods by which human individuals are deprived of their most basic liberties. Intersecting the interview segments discussing these ideas are clips from *Children of Men* depicting deportation facilities, experienced from the inside of a train heading to the Bexhill Refugee Camp. These scenes witness instances of cruelty and murder perpetrated by the British nation in the name of its own security, and the persecution of those not protected by the privileged status of citizen and owner of property.

Klein comments that we must fear people who love systems more than people, because they are often intolerant of those who interfere with the perfect realization of those systems. Utopias do not very often co-exist, she points out, and dangerous utopias require the whole stage. The dangerous utopian idea she is describing is clearly the current mode of globalized capitalism. Though the correlation between the suspension of law associated with the politics of fear and this capitalist model is left vague, audiences can infer from contemporary instances of environmental regulations eschewed in the name of profit, and human rights violations committed for the sake of preserving oil interests how global 'free trade' can easily associate itself with the violent extension of sovereignty. Images of the Berlin Wall crumbling, and the toppling of a statue of Lenin accompany Žižek's subsequent assertion that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was thought to signal the end of utopianism, but the truly utopic idea (or ideology rather, in the sense of false consciousness) is that liberal capitalism is the universal solution to international problems. Sassen makes the point that in order to appreciate and control the

brutality of global capitalism, it is necessary to notice the interrelation between what we identify as success in one place and poverty in another. Klein echoes Karl Marx's assertion that the capitalist system is inherently irrational, and has an impressive ability for self-generation. In order for the system to function properly, it must constantly be evolving and expanding, and must disavow the unfortunate consequences of this expansion. This statement typifies our global identity as defined in relation to the continuous sacrifices necessitated by the advance of capitalism, which form a part of our subjectivity that we subconsciously deny.

The next segment, "Walls," deals directly with responses to fears both real and imagined, including increased suspicion and surveillance, and the weaponizing and segregating of urban space. Early in this segment, Žižek asserts that democracy is really about segregation enforced by walls, for example, the U.S.-Mexico border which is shown from an aerial view, and from the perspective of a car window traversing the Mexican side, in a way that seems deliberately to invoke images from *Y Tu Mamá También*. The maquiladora system and egregious immigration atrocities associated with Mexico's experience of globalization that form the unspoken background of *Y Tu Mamá También*, are explicitly invoked in *The Possibility of Hope*, which makes the subconscious connections tangible in a provocative way.

Žižek's statement implies that the utopic notion of democratic capitalism ignores democracy's decreasing interest in equality and justice, in favor of rights guaranteed through privatization. Eva corroborates this point, stating that global capitalism sought the elimination of frontiers, which it saw as obstacles to economic progress. However, the same rights granted to goods are very infrequently extended to people, who are not allowed similar liberty of movement which, it is implied, negatively impacts those who perceive relocation as their only alternative. Compounding this inequality of opportunity, Klein explains, is a global development model

currently in implementation which de-prioritizes steady progress through the creation of infrastructure (physical and political), but rather accomplishes brief success through the establishment of what she calls “global green zones,” where internationals are segregated in areas of privatized infrastructure. Persons in these areas enjoy a quality of life not consistent with the average occupants of areas outside the “green zone,” the laborers in these industrialized areas. Lawrence Buell cites Ulrich Beck as saying that while “poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 40), and this is true in the sense that coal smog from Beijing, or radioactivity from Fukushima’s reactor disaster will inevitably impact geographically distant life across the Pacific. However, like Klein, Buell acknowledges that some populations suffer disproportionately because they do not have access to the protection afforded by capital. Particularly during disasters, Klein points out, command of capital can be critical to survival.

The contrast Klein describes is evident in aerial shots of one such area, where factories, roads and airport runways are surrounded by thick vegetation and un-developed land. As Sassen asserts, walls ideologically and physically constructed to protect the sphere of privatized security do not effectively combat the pervasive sense of fear that we as a global society experience in, and subsequently we see the increased weaponizing of urban space, and the rise of institutions like the gated community. Eco-critic Lawrence Buell has written about “the ethnocentrism of territory-based myths of ‘homeland’ insofar as they presume a nationalist vision of the globe and of interstate relations, in which specific communities ‘belong’ to particular territories and states by a sort of natural right” (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 82). This section of *The Possibility of Hope* serves a similar theoretical function in that it articulates a vision of how our

understanding of space and its relation to a sense of social belonging must be rethought as a fundamental component of environmental justice.

The next segment, “Fever,” begins with thermo-imaging of planet earth, as though to force a re-evaluation of assumptions about where the most immanent threats to our future may lie. Lovelock explains that in 2001, the global panel convened to assess climate change predicted that the catastrophic effects of this phenomenon, including drought, food shortages, and mass migrations, will be felt within the next century. Klein notes that the short-sightedness of our economic model is increasingly seen through disasters, both economic and environmental. Both Klein and Sassen speak to the genocidal potential associated with the logic of private privilege as the purveyor of protection against the inevitable increase in the volatility of our global situation. These assertions are accompanied by real images of population displacement, interspersed with shots of glaciers melting and other severe weather phenomena.

*The Possibility of Hope* shares some similarities with another brief production of Cuarón’s Esperanto Films, called *The Shock Doctrine*, which was also produced in 2007 for use in promotion of Naomi Klein’s book by the same name<sup>2</sup>. Some of *The Shock Doctrine*’s imagery is eerily similar to that of *The Possibility of Hope*, including shots of armed political resistance, and social turmoil following natural disasters. The thrust of the films’ political message is also similar: the kind of de-regulated capitalism that has produced globalization poses a threat to the future of humanity that cannot be overstated. This kind of capitalism is predicated on notions of

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<sup>2</sup> Directorial credit for the film is given to Alfonso’s son Jonas Cuarón, while credit for the film’s authorship is given to Klein for the original concept, and to Alfonso for its adaptation. *The Shock Doctrine* was later adapted into a full length film in 2010; Cuarón was not associated with that production.

freedom that it cannot realize, and thus it must disavow the unethical consequences of its actions, both social and ecological, in order to continue perceptions of its progressive or benevolent effects.

*The Shock Doctrine* runs less than seven minutes, and briefly explores how the model of “free-market” capitalist expansion associated with Milton Friedman and the Chicago School (the model currently informing the global economy) historically relies on a politics of disaster and shock for its implementation. Despite the supposed philosophical alignment between free markets and democratic nations, this kind of “disaster capitalism,” or the “rapid-fire corporate reengineering of societies still reeling from shock” ([shockdoctrine.com](http://shockdoctrine.com)) is particularly insidious according to Klein, because its adoption often coincides with violent political turmoil, or crisis following a disaster, and the interruption of democratic processes. Klein quotes Friedman as saying “only a crisis, real or perceived, produces real change,” and explains how this particular economic model capitalizes on naturally occurring or created disasters to take hold. Klein theorizes that because the drastic reduction in market regulations violently compounds disparities of wealth, it is difficult for this model of capitalism to be installed as the product of free elections without the coincidence of some emotional state that prohibits clear thought about the future.

The phenomenon Klein describes is the de facto realization of the politics of fear described in Cuarón’s *The Possibility of Hope*. Klein’s work cites the political overthrow of the Allende government in 1970s Chile, the retooling of the Russian economy following the demise of the Soviet Union, and U.S. foreign policy following the 2001 World Trade Center attack, among others, as examples of “disaster capitalism.” Klein has always been careful not to position herself explicitly as an anti-capitalist, but rather as a critic of the effects of deregulated capitalism’s global expansion. This is an important distinction in terms of appealing to a broader

readership. *The Shock Doctrine* seems to lend insight that also locates Alfonso Cuarón in a similar position along the political continuum, and his works might be seen as trying to strike the same delicate balance between compromise and complicity.

Like *The Shock Doctrine*, *The Possibility of Hope* makes apparent the fact that as climate change increases instances of natural disaster, and human populations are forced to move to accommodate these changes, strong states may try to control the impact of human migration, which as evidenced by *Children of Men* can result in egregious human rights violations. Ultimately, *The Possibility of Hope* concludes, humanity must redefine its conception of political community. Images from the documentary of individuals combing posters hung on public walls for news of missing or disappeared relatives echo scenes from Cuarón's Bexhill Refugee Camp. While global warming may not ultimately threaten human extinction, Lovelock asserts, it will pose a significant challenge to human civilization, to our present ways of living together. Shots of bodies burning atop funeral piers both invoke centuries of tradition at stake, as well as a general sense of melancholy for the loss of something great in humanity itself. Unless our global society can appropriately confront its denial of climate change and its consequences, this section re-iterates, there is little hope that the melancholy we feel for the losses we currently experience will lead us to a more positive future.

The challenge posed by Cuarón in his documentary, and in the fictional film that inspired it is this: in light of human injustice, and the inevitability of drastic environmental change, how can we find the sense of hope we need to continue to value the world and its inhabitants? "Hope," the documentary's final sub-section, begins with images of a train junction and Žižek's voice-over describing how hope can come only from despair: the perception of having no way out leads to innovation, and from this desperation comes a new beginning, he explains. The

sentiment Žižek describes is critical to an appreciation of Cuarón's project in the films discussed by this paper; somehow the general sense of melancholy that defines our age must give way (and perhaps already is) to a re-imagining of self and society. This sentiment is evident in the last scene of *Children of Men*, where political alienation, physical isolation, and death form the threshold beyond which the hope of "Tomorrow" becomes visible. One could argue that the same sentiment informs Luisa's choice to embrace life and the world around her following her terminal diagnosis in *Y Tu Mamá También*. In interviews, Cuarón has said that he is pessimistic about the solutions to our problems offered by contemporary ideological models, but believes that art has the ability to inspire the imagination necessary to create more useful models, and is thus hopeful about the potential of the next generation ("Searching for truth"). Cuarón has also explained his belief that it is the responsibility of filmmakers to provide glimpses of hope and possibility; films cannot change things, he claims, but they can inspire the hope that makes change possible ("Alfonso Cuarón on films and war"). In light of the filmmaker's own assertions about the role of art in the creation of a more just world, it is clear that Cuarón intends his work to be seen as speaking directly to the possibility that lies beyond the conditions of social and environmental injustice his films portray.

"Hope" is perhaps the most disjointed segment, since aside from cautioning against hope not informed by reality the theorists' responses to questions about the "possibility of hope" vary widely. Todorov describes his hope for humanity as derived from the fact that as children we are all reliant on the care of others, and if we can conceptualize our fundamental interdependence and the necessity of caring for the young and old, the weak and the helpless, we will be able to theorize the basis of a new global community. This assertion is similar to Butler's ideas about how our shared vulnerability may form the root of a new definition of human community

*Precarious Life*), and utilizes Cuarón's child imagery from *Children of Men* to insinuate the analogue between care for a single child and for humanity collectively. What we might call the "non-nuclear" family represented in Cuarón's *Children of Men* might be read as an indication that our conception of where the care and compassion Todorov describes might be found will need to be flexible and to accommodate all of its manifestations. Todorov's comments do not explicitly extend to the environment, but it would stand to reason that the interdependence and mutual condition of vulnerability he discusses would extend to a more nurturing relationship towards global ecology.

Eva explains that his conception of utopia would be a world of a-spatiality, where border lines lose relevance as guarantors of rights. The value of this kind of a-spatial vision is echoed by *Children of Men* and *Y Tu Mamá También*, which both depict diasporic persons' lack of rights, and the un-livability of certain environments created by globalization. Cuarón's most recent endeavor, *Gravity*<sup>3</sup>, is in certain ways the most extreme realization of the concept of drastic isolation and alienation at work in the director's representations of diaspora ("Dynamic Duo: Alfonso and Jonas Cuarón"). Žižek describes his admiration of the symbolism of the boat at the end of *Children of Men*; he characterizes the boat as a metaphor for "rootlessness," or the severing of ties that he understands as the pre-condition for hope. This reading of hope is problematic in that it seems contradictory of Žižek's previously cited assertion that our inability to adequately historicize our existence is a significant factor contributing to our limited worldview. However, Žižek's assertions are valuable in that they gesture towards the need to forsake our old "grounded" paradigms in pursuit of new ones, where love is not bonded to self-

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<sup>3</sup> Released in 2013, *Gravity* is the story of an astronaut and engineer who must work together to survive after an accident leaves them adrift in space (IMDb). A 'scattering of the people' and isolation from a point of origin are two ways that diaspora is frequently described, both of which are conceptually exemplified by the experience of those whose work takes them away from their home planet, perhaps never to return.

preservation, where sex does not serve the interest of capitalism and nationalist reproduction, where the environment we inhabit is not just a frame for human action, but a critical part of existence.

Shots of children at a petting zoo attend the film's final statement: instead of contemplating the futility of having children in a dying world, Lovelock says, he tries to instill in his own children a sense of the adventure and opportunity inherent in crafting a different tomorrow. Without people choosing to carry on, choosing to undertake the difficult process of re-imagining, there really would be no possibility of hope, Lovelock points out. His statement reiterates the necessity of not allowing melancholy to stymie our investment in the world around us, but rather allowing it to inform our commitment to devising a more just and sustainable future.

There are of course risks associated with utilizing melancholy as a path to political, social, and ecological engagement, and limits to a melancholic discourse that this paper would be remiss not to acknowledge. Any invocation of melancholy has the potential of provoking exactly the opposite of engagement and empowerment, and may result in a sense of solipsism, a tendency of the self toward violent feelings against the self, or the lost other (Clewell), or a nostalgic attachment to the past that prohibits progressive thinking (Morton). Effective melancholy must therefore work against the impulse to solipsism by radically challenging conceptions of "the self" or of subjective autonomy. It must refute essentializing notions of stable, idealized forms, such as 'nature' or 'the autonomous individual', to which it may be possible to return, and therefore must project innovation as the only way forward. Finally, it must recognize ambivalence as an inherent part of the experience of loss, and work towards an

acceptance of loss as a part of self-formation, in order to resist the potentially violent impulses that can accompany melancholy.

Cuarón's films effectively negotiate these risks through their nuanced deconstructive efforts. Cuarón's technical rendering of his subject matter, specifically his ability to construct an audience perspective that draws attention to the inherent construction of subjectivity itself performs a kind of deconstructive work akin to Morton's unflinching investigation of how conceptions of the "self" and its "surroundings" are reified, and the inherent injustices at work in this reification. This technique forecloses the possibility of an easy return to some idyllic former harmony, and therefore pushes forward politically instead of looking nostalgically to the past.

This same commitment to deconstruction, and to troubling the insecure boundaries of the subject, is prohibitive of the impulse to solipsism or ambivalent violence. *Y Tu Mamá También*, *Children of Men* and *The Possibility of Hope* all implicitly or explicitly involve a serious contemplation of the simultaneity of many realities, and their profound, and 'disjunctive' interconnection. Tammy Clewell describes how towards the end of his career, Freud adapted his theorization of melancholy to posit a model that not only played a primary and continuous role in the formation of the self, but that did not exercise its ambivalence through hostility towards the self or the lost other (*Mourning Beyond Melancholia*). Feelings of ambivalence towards the lost other may not precede the loss itself, but may arise as a consequence of it, Clewell understands Freud to say. Freud's reformulation of his Oedipal theory, to include a stage of bisexual attachment during which the child inherently desires and identifies with both its parents, is evidence, Clewell claims, that ambivalence is not always a fraught experience, but rather forms the basis of a benign process of subject formation (*Mourning Beyond Melancholia* 65). This sense of ambivalence to loss is critical to the ethical development of the subject, since it

demonstrates the subject's dependence on others, even for self-formation. Clewell writes that ambivalence names the human predicament of "being inhabited by otherness as a condition of one's own subjectivity" (65); there is no severing attachment without dissolving the ego. Like Butler, Clewell understands there to exist a potential for ethical relationships between individuals, and between generations, through the acknowledgement of our selfish need for others.

Cuarón's depictions of fractured subjectivities struggling to understand their relationship to the world they inhabit deeply complicates the boundaries of the self, and therefore also renders solipsism impossible. The pervasiveness of the melancholic overtones in these films insinuates that there is no subjective space the individual psyche can occupy that is not constructed by the loss of some other, and that these losses are a reminder of our absolute interconnection. Butler invokes Levinas's notion that the "human" (or for our purposes perhaps Agamben's "bare life") is represented by the "very disjunction that makes representation impossible" (*Precarious Life* 144). She explains that our common vulnerability exists as a limit concept to our capacity of representation, not exactly what is represented, nor the unrepresentable, but some kind of demarcation between the two. For representation to adequately convey this common vulnerability, to somehow represent what exists as the perennial frustration of representation itself, it must "...not only fail, but it must show its failure" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 144). "There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent," Butler writes, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give."

Cuarón's works speak directly to this idea of trying to represent the limits of representation, or trying to document the limits of subjectivity itself. His technique of anamorphosis allows his audience to inhabit a subject position that is beyond the purview of any

single character, and to consider the limits of the protagonists' perspectives, while also considering how their own experiences of similar events may be implicated in a similar short-sightedness. The director's inversion of frame and content, or rather his use of a foregrounded narrative to explore the nuances of an environment and period of historical development, suggests a level of sympathy with an 'other' that exists beyond easy representation, consisting of the physical and political environment that informs the protagonists' experiences of possibility in both *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men*. Exemplary of this technique are scenes from both films in which the perspective of the camera shifts from interior shots of a vehicle containing the protagonists, to a wide angle shot external to the vehicle, and while the sound of the protagonists' discussions still be heard, the audience witnesses the vehicle traversing a landscape laden with environmental transformation, to which the protagonists are relatively oblivious. Cuarón's particular employment of this trope, specifically the way he allows the camera to linger on the landscape after the vehicles have passed by, disorients the audience in such a way as to trouble any simple understanding of frame and content, and suggests that our sympathies must lie beyond the scope of our central narrative.

Both Žižek and Butler have described melancholy as symptomatic of repressed sentiments about the social status quo: Žižek because our collective disavowal of the realization that our way of life is fundamentally unsustainable which results in that melancholy, Butler because social prohibitions on grieving have emerged as "a circumscription of represent-ability" and therefore melancholy "becomes inscribed as the limits of what can be thought" (148). Both theorists also prescribe melancholy as a basis for ethical action, Žižek in the classical sense of working through melancholy to mourning and then acceptance, Butler in the sense that Clewell also describes where melancholy is recognized as both an ongoing component of subjectivity,

and a cause for realization of a commonality with what we may not know or understand. Though Butler recommends lingering with our sense of loss, she seems to suggest that melancholy, or the limit concept for what losses the psyche permits itself to acknowledge, can be made representable to and contemplate-able by the psyche in a way that does not necessarily result in mourning proper. Through the very effort of trying to think about what we subconsciously disavow, or to represent the limits of our own representational ability, which Cuarón's films provoke us to do, we are able to grasp the injustice of our own ideological commitments. These films challenge their audiences to make the connections between their pervasive sense of melancholy and the manifestations of contemporary and near-future globalization they represent. In so doing, they encourage contemplation of the association between the discourse of rights and the various bodies and landscapes in which they manifest.

Both *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men* end with a fairly wide shot of one protagonist, having recently experienced the loss of a companion, coping with the new reality of his or her situation. In *Y Tu Mamá También*, Julio stares briefly at the space in the booth across from him recently vacated by Tenoch, whose feet we see passing on the street outside through an overhead window. This is the last meeting between the two former friends. In *Children of Men*, Kee, holding the wailing Dillon, pleads with Theo's lifeless body to regain consciousness as the prow of the "Tomorrow" looms in the distance. The respective loss each has suffered is still palpable, as is the impact of the other on their private experience of subjectivity; the course of their futures is uncertain. Julio and Kee respectively sit poised at a moment of realization, which precedes the initiation of critical choice. Cuarón's technique seeks to create for this moment the viewer, an opportunity to apprehend the choice that follows on the heels of traumatic experience and to make the most of it. These two films demonstrate that we are as much constituted by the

losses we experience as those that we disavow, and the experience of loss can be as much the catalyst of political engagement as of solipsistic withdrawal. Cuarón reminds us that our hope for a better tomorrow depends upon our ability to understand how ideological contexts influence our perspective of possibility, and upon our approaching melancholy in a way that is both informed and compassionate.

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