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Movies depicting Doomsday or Apocalyptic events have been around for many years. In most cases, they either show people trying to avoid catastrophe, or a post-apocalyptic society trying to deal with the aftermath. In director Alfonso Cuarón's haunting and spectacular "Children of Men", we may be seeing the most terrifying Doomsday scenario yet; the slow extinction of the human race due to infertility.

What would happen to the social order once mankind knew it would cease to exist in the next 100 years? Not surprisingly, it is shown it falling apart at the seems. The entire world is in a state of chaos and anarchy in the year 2027, over eighteen years after the last birth of a human being. According to newscasts, only Great Britain continues with a functional government due to it's status as a small island nation, the determination of its people and the "minor" detail that Britain is also now a complete Police State, with armed troops seemingly on every corner.

Given the circumstances, that level of government control may be somewhat understandable, especially considering the breakdowns everywhere else in the world. As the movie opens, it appears as if these bleak conditions have existed for several years, and most of the Brits have become somewhat accustomed to them. The scariest part of the infertility situation is that no one seems to know what caused it, and the film does a good job in not pointing fingers towards Global Warming, pollution, biological experiments gone awry, or God's Wrath. Lacking a solid blame for a problem, people tend to want a scapegoat, and in Britain, it becomes Illegal Aliens, or "refugees" (fugees, as they are called in the film), and they are hunted down and imprisoned,

deported, or executed in scenes that are eerily reminiscent of the Holocaust.

This is the world where Theo Faron (Clive Owen) tries to get by one day at a time. Twenty years ago, he was an activist with his radical lover Julian (Julianne Moore). But their son Dylan died from a flu pandemic when he was two, and Theo withdrew from life at that point. He is now a mid level bureaucrat who only steps out of the norm to visit his aging hippie friend Jasper (a magnificent Michael Caine in long grey hair) who is a former political cartoonist now living in an isolated area outside of London, growing pot, listening to rap, and caring for his wife, a former journalist rendered catatonic due to government torture.

Theo's monotonous routine is suddenly upended when he is thrown into a van, blindfolded, and taken to a secret hideout of a terrorist group fighting in support of human rights for the fugees. The Fishes, as they are called, are under the command of Julian, who needs Theo's connections for transport papers. They are for a young black girl named Kee (newcomer Clare-Hope Ashitey), who may be African or from the Caribbean…it's not really important the exact homeland, only that she is a fugee…and that through some unexplained miracle, she is eight months pregnant. Julian is trying to get Kee to the coast, where she will be picked up by a boat ran by the mysterious (and possibly mythical) "Human Project", a group of scientists and free thinkers trying to re-establish a legitimate society.

To write any more detailed information concerning the plot ramifications would be impossible without giving away key information. Suffice to say, there are many surprises to be encountered as Theo awakens from his long self-imposed slumber and re-discovers the passion that once drove him. All is not as it would appear to be, and like any good adventure/voyage story, Theo and Kee find both unexpected betrayal and unforeseen friendships along the way.

The brilliance of the film is in Cuarón's imaging of a country and its people hanging on by their collective fingernails to the last vestiges of civilization. This is not a bleak but foreign future as seen in "Blade Runner" nor the antiseptic coldness of "Gattaca", but a world that could as well be 2008 instead of 2027. There are no invaders from outer space to battle, no approaching asteroid, no advancing armies or nuclear war threatening to wipe out most of the world…just the slow decline into oblivion for humanity, and Cuarón captures it well in the sullen, beaten looks of the average "man on the street". Indeed, it is in these moments where the true shocks come.

Nothing looks out of the ordinary in the small shop where customers crowd around a television mourning the death of “Baby Diego”, the youngest person on the planet at eighteen years and four months...that is until a bomb goes off. Similarly, a scene with Theo commuting to work on a train looks like hundreds of others we’ve seen before…and then we see the train pass by people so angry and desperate that they are throwing debris at it. The fact that Theo seems to show no reaction to this at all lets us know that while this world is analogous to the one we live in, it is out of kilter.

Even the two sides of the “battle”; the government forces and the Fishes, seem to be skewered from our normal perceptions in movies. Neither are really shown as virtuous or “right”…just people that have chosen one side or the other possibly just as something to do to occupy their time and take their minds off from of the inevitable, and both are quite capable of senseless violence. This is not the typical preachiness of Hollywood showing the Evil Government and the Righteous Rebellion. The Fishes are just as murderous and power hungry as the soldiers they fight against. A remarkable ambush scene lasting nearly five minutes is shot entirely from the viewpoint of inside a crowded car, ending with the camera panning back to two policemen laying on the side of the road, mercilessly murdered by the rebel group in order to protect their “higher cause”.

Clive Owen continues to show why he is such an incredible actor. He is totally believable throughout the film, completely inhabiting the role a heroic but flawed man and all of his complexities. This could easily have been just a futuristic version of the typical action adventure movie where a cynical tough guy changes while taking an innocent on a voyage to safety, but Owen never falls into that cliché, emphasizing Theo’s melancholy and quiet desperation/determination rather than action hero theatrics. His performance is aided by Cuarón choosing to blow up the normal conventions of those types of movies at every opportunity. Just when you think you are sure what the next step will be, another surprising but ultimately logical twist is applied. There is one scene towards the end that will simply stun you with its wrenching emotion…an event during a protracted battle sequence in a refugee camp that on first glance would seem totally out of place. But upon further contemplation it makes complete sense given the circumstances. I dare not reveal any more as to not ruin it, but you will know it when you see it.

Ashitey does an excellent job in only her second appearance in a movie and her first major role as the confused young woman with her innocence, guile, humor, determination and fear at various points all coming through nicely. Pam Ferris is also affecting as the older, dreadlocked, yoga practicing radical midwife looking after the young woman. But it is Michael Caine that

almost steals the movie as the mentor/sage/rascal Jasper. Caine has seemed to relish his late career in these types of roles, and has never been better. His give and take with Owen will bring a smile to your face, and then his interactions with his ailing wife will break your heart.

The “trick” with these types of movies is to find the right balance. If the plot is too outlandish the drama and conflict of the actors will seem forced and almost campy. If the action is too intense or the story too gloomy, it can turn off the audience. But on the flip side of that, if the ending is too pat or too much on the side of “everything works out great”, the audience can feel cheated. Cuarón and his entire crew hit all of the right notes, leaving us with a movie that is depressing, thought-provoking, down right frightening in concept, but ultimately leaving us with some signs of hope. I don’t think it is meant to be an allegory of our times, but rather a fascinating look into the possible social ramifications of an unthinkable event.

My Rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs).

Review Key:

Otto Graham: Over 4 Footballs. HOF quality movie

Bernie Kosar: 4 Footballs. Excellent

Brian Sipe: 3 ½ Footballs. Very Good

Frank Ryan: 3 Footballs. Good, solid film.

Bill Nelsen: 2 ½ Footballs. OK. Worth seeing at the theater.

Kelly Holcomb: 2 Footballs. Disappointingly inconsistent but some bright spots. Rent it on DVD.

Tim Couch: 1 ½ Footballs. Poor. Had potential, but lack of support led to an overall stinker.

Jeff Garcia: 1 Football. Horrible. All hype; no performance.

Mike Phipps: ½ Football. “We gave away Paul Warfield for THIS?” level of suck

Spergon Wynn: No Footballs. UberSuckitude personified.

Charlie Frye: Incomplete.