"A Dystopic Autistic Future": Protecting Neoliberalism and the Human Race in "I Am Autism" and Children of Men

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In 2009, disabled activists and their allies were infuriated by “I Am Autism” (McGuire, 2011, p. 225), a video directed by Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón for the charity Autism Speaks, for its personification of autism as a horror movie monster which snatches able-bodied children and replaces them with changelings1. Ironically, this outright expression of hatred and fear of a minority group is a far cry from the position he advocated in his 2006 adaptation of Children of Men, P. D. James’ apocalyptic novel about a world in which human beings are facing extinction because they can no longer reproduce, in which he powerfully satirized the alarming rise of violence directed at immigrants in the United States and Europe (Cuarón, 2006).

Cuarón’s simultaneous acceptance of both of these polarities can be attributed to the belief that the claim of science that disability is a biological inferiority comes from a completely neutral point of view (Harding, 1991, p. 37). In this paper, I will propose that these two films find common ground in their depiction of the child as an ultimate symbol of hope which must be protected from harm. Taking inspiration from Anne McGuire’s prospectus, “The War on Autism: On Normative Violence and the Cultural Production of Autism Advocacy”, I will suggest that the absence of a particular, normative type of child is viewed as anxiety-provoking in Children of Men and “I Am Autism” because it signifies the loss of new citizens who will learn to contribute to neoliberal economics in the future by producing and consuming. I will also discuss the argument of the Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek that xenophobia is an incredibly effective force for mobilizing the public in times of financial crisis (Žižek, 2012, p. 35) in relation to these two films. For me, his ideas are a fascinating lens through which to view the vilification of disabled people and immigrants depicted by Cuarón.

In Cuarón’s interpretation of the year 2027, nuclear wars, terrorist strikes, and natural disasters have destroyed ecosystems and degraded living conditions on most of the planet’s surface. The only country whose inhabitants are known to be living in relative safety under the control of a stable government is Britain, which is now a totalitarian state that has closed its borders to immigrants desperately seeking shelter. In the opening scene of Children of Men, dishevelled customers huddle in a coffee shop watching news footage about the death of “Baby” Diego Ricardo, the youngest human on Earth, who was born “18 years, 4 months, 20 days, 16 hours, and 8 minutes” (Cuarón, 2006) ago. For a reason which is never revealed, women have become infertile, making the death of the human race inevitable: in a flourish which establishes that the world of Children of Men is one in which despair reigns, it is mentioned that the British government distributes antidepressants and suicide pills to the public. Illegal immigrants who have been rounded up and herded into cages like animals are a common sight on the streets of London. Cuarón’s unlikely hero is Theo Faron (played by Clive Owen), a listless bureaucrat who has been captured by the Fishes, a terrorist organization led by his ex-wife, Julian (Julianne Moore), which fights for justice for immigrants. The mission she gives him is to safely deliver Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey), a heavily pregnant non-status immigrant from Africa, through security checkpoints to Britain’s coast. Upon arriving there, Kee expects to be rescued by the crew of the Tomorrows, a ship which will bring her to a mysterious group rumoured to be developing a cure for infertility called the Human Project.

In order to reach that destination, Syd (Peter Mullan), a Homeland Security officer who buys marijuana from Theo’s father, Jasper (Michael Caine), arranges to have Theo, Kee, and her nurse, Miriam (Pam Ferris), transported to Bexhill, an Auschwitz-like prison camp for refugees. An unsettling shot of inmates being tortured and gunned down by guards implies that foreigners are exterminated there. Kee gives birth in the camp, and the shock of seeing...
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However, foreboding music, ghostly howling noises, and the booming voice

of an entity that introduces itself as “Autism” tell the audience that there is a

menacing presence haunting these otherwise non-threatening scenes. Autism,

who is never shown on screen, proceeds to make a series of disturbing vows to

ruin cherished norms of the middle-class nuclear family (McGuire, 2011, p.

240-241): Autism will split apart marriages, render families financially destitute,

prevent families from enjoying religious services or birthday parties, and

leave countless children unemployed and unable to live on their own when

they reach adulthood. Autism describes itself as a ghoulish spirit that has no

empathy or compassion, stealing and maiming children and delighting in the

ensuing misery and hopelessness of their parents. Autism intimidates viewers

by emphasizing the ease with which it crosses all racial, socioeconomic, and

religious barriers, invisibly creeping into new environments and laying waste
to them like an airborne poison (McGuire, 2011, p. 203). In the background,
children can be heard shrieking and crying in pain. Unexpectedly, the
atmosphere of the film dramatically shifts as non-autistic adults in white
t-shirts, presumably the family members of the autistic people, rush to the
sides of their children and grandchildren. The words of Autism are silenced
by a crowd of non-autistic parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, doctors, and
scientists, framed as courageous fighters who will rid the world of Autism
through biomedical and technological means. Meanwhile, voices representing
diverse nations make a militaristic agreement to cooperate to keep Autism at
bay. Like Children of Men, this video ends with inspirational, upbeat music and
the laughter of happy children.

Slavoj Žižek found himself inspired by the philosophical meanings which he
saw in Children of Men, and cooperated with Cuarón to create a six-minute-

long commentary track for the DVD version of the film (Cuarón, 2006). One
of the many instances in which he addresses themes explored by Cuarón can
be found in his essay, “The Return of the Evil Ethnic Thing”, from his book,
The Year of Dreaming Dangerously:

Back in the 1930s, Hitler offered anti-Semitism as a narrative explanation for
the troubles experienced by ordinary Germans: unemployment, social unrest – behind all this stood the Jew … Does not today’s hatred of multiculturalism and of the immigrant threat function in a homologous way? Strange things are happening – financial crashes occur that affect our daily lives, but are experienced as totally opaque – and the rejection of multiculturalism introduces a false clarity into the situation: it is the foreign intruders who are disrupting our way of life.
There is thus an interconnection between the rising tide of anti-immigrant feeling in Western countries … and the financial crisis: clinging to ethnic identity serves as a protective shield against the trauma of being caught up in the vortex of non-transparent financial abstraction. (Žižek, 2012, p. 35)

In this paragraph, Žižek explains that it becomes very enticing to blame a problem with a simple solution for their difficulties for people who are alienated from the real causes of financial collapse in a capitalist system. In his Economic and Philosophtic Manuscripts, Karl Marx uses the term “alienation” (Marx, 1994, p. 61) to refer to a feeling of powerlessness and lack of self-direction which workers experience when they come to view the objects they produce as beyond their control because they no longer depend on them (Marx, 1994, p. 59-60). As the connection between the worker and the object that he or she has made becomes increasingly severed, it appears to rise up against the worker as “an alien thing” (Marx, 1994, p. 59); according to Žižek, we see the reasons for stock market crashes which we believe we have no power over and seem incomprehensible to us as similarly “alien things” (Marx, 1994, p. 59). For example, in the 1930s, many Germans feeling overwhelmed by job changes and stock market fluctuations turned to using Jews, Roma, homosexuals, disabled and mad people, and members of other marginalized groups as scapegoats for their hardships, thereby rationalizing eugenics. It is

3For the purposes of this paper, I will not be expanding beyond this definition of alienation. However, recognizing that Žižek is heavily indebted to Marx, I recommend that readers turn to the chapter, “Alienated Labour”, in Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts for a more thorough explanation of his theory of alienation.

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thus fitting that Žižek chooses to open this passage with a reference to the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany.

According to Anne McGuire, striking similarities exist between language used during recessions to slander immigrants and disabled people, who are painted as burdens who must be accommodated for and devour scarce resources more efficiently used by others (A. McGuire, personal communication, 26 March 2013). Investment in supporting these individuals is believed to be greater than the benefits of having them in the nation-state (A. McGuire, personal communication, 26 March 2013). McGuire defines “investment” (McGuire, “Buying time”, 2013, p. 111) as the devotion of precious resources such as money, energy, and time to a particular purpose in the hope that one will eventually be given a reward that outweighs those expenses in the future (McGuire, 2013, p. 111). Thus, the unwanted presence of foreigners and disabled people becomes a clear, compelling, and easily-digested explanation for why markets have collapsed. I believe that the intimate connections between the experiences of those who are considered strangers to the nation-state and disabled people make Žižek’s interpretation of xenophobia particularly useful for disability studies.

In their autobiographies, autistic people often humorously refer to themselves as extraterrestrials stranded on an unfamiliar planet (Sinclair, 2010); for example, the autistic activist Jim Sinclair refers to his history of forced and uncomfortable interactions with non-autistic people as “a life spent among aliens” (Sinclair, 2010). In his essay, “Defectives in the Land: Disability and American Immigration Policy, 1882-1924”, Douglas C. Baynton examines the conflation of disability with foreignness in late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century American immigration laws (Baynton, 2005, p. 41). He explains that the justification for denying disabled and mad people entry into America on the basis that they were burdensome to the nation-state was extensively used by immigration officials for their racist purposes (Baynton, 2005, p. 33). In order to prevent as many foreigners as possible from penetrating America’s borders, the definitions of physical and mental disability written for these laws were intentionally left wide and ambiguous (Baynton, 2005, p. 34). “These laws were usually presented simply as a matter of economics,” (Baynton, 2005, p. 34) Baynton writes. In “I Am Autism”, the disembodied voice of Autism speaks of itself in terms of economic cost: “Your money will fall into my hands, and I will bankrupt you for my own self-gain,” (Cuarón, 2009) Autism taunts, addressing parents of autistic children, and adds that “scientists don’t have the resources [to treat and cure autism], and I relish their desperation” (Cuarón, 2009).

McGuire notes that a strong association between the elimination of disability and the prevention of financial collapse manifested itself in the decision of Autism Speaks supporters and volunteers to observe the first-ever World Autism Awareness Day by ringing the New York Stock Exchange’s opening bell on the morning of April 2, 2008 (McGuire, 2011, p. 170-171). For her, this action symbolizes “the potential economic productivity of autistic people, the desired ‘end-products’ of the latest in biomedical research” (McGuire, 2011, p. 171). The choice of location suggests that “becoming aware of autism in contemporary times is not only an ideological investment, but a monetary one” (McGuire, 2011, p. 175). She also questions President Barack Obama’s decision to dedicate 100 million dollars to research on the causes of autism and potential treatments and cures in 2009, while Americans were suffering from the effects of the worst recession since the Great Depression (McGuire, 2011, p. 186). I believe that this perplexing event can be explained through an application of Žižek’s analysis of the correlation between surges in xenophobia and financial crises to attitudes toward disability: the immigrant and disabled person are both unwanted in the nation-state because they are seen as burdensome to desirable citizens being threatened by a period of crisis (A. McGuire, personal communication, 26 March 2013), and harsh measures must be taken to prevent them from infiltrating its borders.

Investment in the futures of children is the central theme of both Children of Men and “I Am Autism”. I argue that the protection of children and their imaginary, prosperous futures is depicted as so crucial in Cuarón’s work precisely because they represent hope for the perpetuation of neoliberal economics through the maturation of new producers and consumers. In his introduction to Noam Chomsky’s critique of neoliberalism, Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order, Robert W. McChesney calls neoliberalism “the defining political economic paradigm of our time” (McChesney, 1998, p. 7), an ideology descended from the policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher which benefits a highly centralized group of tremendously rich investors and multinational corporations at the expense of the vast majority of humanity (McChesney, 1998, p. 7). Fundamental to neoliberalism are Milton Friedman’s beliefs that maximizing profit is the work of democracy, and that
governments that seek to place any regulations upon the market are anti-democratic by definition, regardless of how favourably they may be viewed by their subjects (McChesney, 1998, p. 9). Neoliberalism devalues human experiences and social endeavours which do not directly contribute to the market, attaching a disproportionate amount of significance to how much individuals produce and consume (McChesney, 1998, p. 11): “Instead of citizens, it produces consumers. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls.” (McChesney, 1998, p. 11) McChesney writes. Autism is framed as a “developmental disorder”, and McGuire proposes that it is difficult to separate notions of child development from larger ones of economic development (McGuire, 2011, p. 180). This, she states, is the result of a seemingly natural assumption that increasing numbers of people who do not develop normatively will stunt the economic development of a country (McGuire, 2011, p. 180).

Within the context of neoliberalism, “normal development” means gaining the ability to keep up with the ever-increasing pace of the market (McGuire, “Buying time”, 2013, p. 102-103): when this pace is stifled, as in the recession of 2008, those who do not develop normatively make the perfect scapegoats. Referencing Lee Edelman, McGuire remarks, “it is, indeed, almost impossible to conceive of future times without the figure of the child, for the child has come to embody the very telos of the social order itself” (McGuire, “The War on Autism”, 2011, p. 179). Obama’s actions are a perfect example of what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2007, p. 14) - the persuasion of the populace to hand over massive amounts of money and resources to corporations and the military-industrial complex in the hope of repairing or preventing catastrophes (Klein, 2007, p. 10-11). To borrow a term used by Naomi Klein, Obama attempted to “shock” (Klein, 2007, p. 307) the economy back into its maximum speed by providing employment for citizens in the research and sale of new therapies, biomedical treatments, and cures for autism (McGuire, 2011, p. 188).

In her paper, “Buying time: the s/pace of advocacy and the cultural production of autism”, McGuire analyzes a quote from Autism Speaks founder Bob Wright which was printed on five million Starbucks coffee cups in 2007 (McGuire, “Buying time”, 2013, p. 99). She interprets Wright’s message to parents of possibly autistic children that “early intervention could make a big difference in your child’s future” (quoted in McGuire, 2013, p. 99) as demonstrating that certain kinds of children must earn their futures in neoliberal societies (McGuire, 2013, p. 114). Not all children represent the dawning of a bright future by default (McGuire, 2013, p. 114): Rather, the birth of an autistic baby is portrayed by Wright as an event surrounded by high anxiety about avoiding a very unpleasant future. Cuarón echoes this depiction of the autistic child in “I Am Autism”. “I will plot to rob you of your children and your dreams,” (Cuarón, 2009) Autism announces. Addressing the small-scale futures of specific individuals, the hideous spectre of Autism adds, “I will make sure that every day you wake up you will cry, wondering who will take care of my child after I die?” (Cuarón, 2009), imploring parents to view a future involving raising an autistic child without the promise of a cure as miserable. Autistic children are not viable children, according to Cuarón.

McGuire playfully refers to this outlook on autism as a fear of “a dystopic autistic future” (McGuire, 2013, p. 115). By framing autism as a destroyer of children in “I Am Autism”, Cuarón describes autism as a sort of plague of infertility not unlike the actual one that informs the events of Children of Men. In the latter film, he reveals his vision of a world without children to be a literal dystopia, a wasteland prowled by fascist bullies where innovation and technological progress have come to a grinding halt. The copy on the back of the DVD cover reinforces his message that such a world is an undeniably hopeless place before the viewer even sits down to watch the film: “No children. No future. No hope” (Cuarón, 2006). I find the similarity between this language and Autism’s threat to “fight to take away your hope” (Cuarón, 2009) in “I Am Autism” to be telling. Cuarón suspects living in a world devoid of children to be a prospect so bleak that most people alive in such a situation would seriously consider taking their own lives. Baby Diego is looked upon as a beacon of hope, adored as a celebrity and trampled in a riot after declining to sign an autograph for a hysterical fan in Buenos Aires.

Although this topic is never explicitly investigated in the film, I cannot help but think that Cuarón’s dystopia would be an extremely dangerous place to live in for homosexuals, who have non-reproductive sex, and disabled people, who are usually considered to be at risk of bearing weak and unhealthy offspring when they are seen as capable of having children at all. In his book, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Lee Edelman posits
that homosexuality is indissolubly linked to the “death drive” (Edelman, 2004, p. 3) of psychoanalytic theory in political discourse, in contrast to what he calls “reproductive futurism” (Edelman, 2004, p. 2). According to him, homosexuals are framed as dangerous to the nation-state because they are believed to have no interest in “fighting for the children” (Edelman, p. 3). Comparing this rhetoric of “fighting for the children” (Edelman, 2004, p. 3) to the parental and scientific “community of warriors” (Cuarón, 2009) who band together out of “love for our children” (Cuarón, 2009) in “I Am Autism” supports the claim that homosexuals and disabled people are very similarly framed as threats to the security and vitality of the nuclear family (McGuire, 2011, p. 240-241).

The assumed uselessness of disabled people in Cuarón’s hypothetical future is conveyed explicitly through his horrifically ableist portrayal of Theo’s mother, Janice, a wheelchair user: she has no lines and is euthanized with suicide pills by Jasper. She is the only important visibly disabled character to appear in Children of Men. As a person who identifies as autistic and lesbian, the automatic assumption made by the film that Kee’s daughter is heterosexual and able-bodied made me feel very uncomfortable and excluded. It is obvious that, for Cuarón, the world will not and should not be repopulated with people like me in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. I am also disturbed by his decision to use a black woman to represent the fertile mother of this new generation of human beings, as I believe that it subtly reinforces the myth of what Patricia Hill Collins calls the “out-of-control hyperheterosexuality” (Collins, 2000, p. 129) of black people, which makes it only acceptable for white people to be openly queer (Collins, 2000, p. 129-130).

I believe that this equation between threats to able-bodied children and the potential loss of future generations is also apparent in the use of statistics to create frightening images of communities swallowed by escalating rates of infertility and autism in Children of Men and promotional materials for Autism Speaks (McGuire, 2011, p. 196-197). Perhaps the figure of 18 years of infertility quoted throughout Children of Men serves as a fictional counterpart to the statistic of “1 in 150 children” (McGuire, 2011, p. 196) constantly repeated by Autism Speaks, which has been cited by Barack Obama (McGuire, 2011, p. 196) and appeared in the Starbucks campaign that I mentioned earlier (McGuire, 2011, p. 158). Reminiscent on her experience of the beginning of the infertility epidemic while working at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Miriam tells Theo,

Three of my patients miscarried in one week... Next week, five more miscarried. Then the miscarriages started happening earlier. I remember booking a woman in for her next appointment and noticing that the page seven months ahead was completely blank. Not a single name. I rang a friend who was working at Queen Charlotte’s and she had no new pregnancies, either. She then rang her sister in Sydney. And it was the same thing there. (Cuarón, 2006)

The narrative of the deadly virus which contaminates everything in its path and cannot be escaped saturates dominant discourse about autism (McGuire, 2011, p. 203): one must only look to the paranoid warning that autism “work[s] faster than pediatric AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined” (Cuarón, 2009) found in “I Am Autism” for evidence of the uncritical embracement of comparisons of births of autistic children to a killer epidemic. McGuire writes that statistics which speak of burgeoning populations of autistic people represent “the risk that [autism’s] growth might not be stoppable; that it might grow beyond available techniques of management, that its growth is out of control” (McGuire, 2011, p. 198). Miriam’s story of infertility reflects a similar worst fear, and Cuarón shows his audience that, in her world, it came true. McGuire’s acknowledgement of the regularity with which autism statistics are encountered in newspaper headlines and TV news coverage (McGuire, 2011, p. 199) is interesting for bringing to mind a similar scene in Children of Men. The camera hovers over a wall in Theo’s parents’ house plastered with newspaper clippings which begin with “25% Infertility Rate” (Cuarón, 2006) and culminate in “90% Infertility” (Cuarón, 2006), and, finally, “Two years since last baby born” (Cuarón, 2006). Eventually, there is nowhere to hide from the epidemic (McGuire, 2011, p. 200).

“After the sound of the playgrounds faded, the despair set in. Very odd what happens in a world without children’s voices.” (Cuarón, 2006) Miriam muses while watching Kee playing on a swing set in an abandoned schoolyard where they are waiting with Theo to be met by Syd. The “sound of the playgrounds” (Cuarón, 2006) is a symbol of normative childhood which is also used to powerful effect in “I Am Autism”: Autism swears to “make it virtually impossible for your family to easily attend a temple, birthday party, or public park without a struggle, without embarrassment, without pain” (Cuarón,
It is interesting to note that, while the surroundings of the autistic children in the video include playgrounds, they are not shown interacting with other children or using the playground equipment in ways that they are expected to: a boy holds a bat in an empty baseball diamond, and another sits alone at the bottom of a slide. However, by the end of the film, it turns out that the legion of “parents and grandparents ... siblings and friends and schoolteachers and therapists and pediatricians and scientists” (Cuarón, 2009) which has amassed to fight autism has brought back the bubbly laughter that was unsettlingly absent throughout its first half. Cuarón appears to believe that a cure for autism will ensure the existence of human children in the future, like the cure for infertility which is implied to be found soon after Kee is brought to safety on the Tomorrow. In both scenarios, the wonders of biomedical science bring salvation: since autistic children are expected to disastrously slow down economic and technological progress when they reach adulthood (McGuire, 2011, p. 180), a cure for autism becomes a necessary precondition for the continuation of the human race.

I view Cuarón’s agreement to direct “I Am Autism” as especially puzzling because the themes of disobedience of authority and resistance of institutionalized discrimination which are central to Children of Men are ones that can certainly be appreciated by disabled and queer people. I think that his unreflective use of traditional stereotypes to portray disability is an example of our unwillingness to critique biological science (Harding, 1991, p. 37), which attributes disability to deficiencies that can be objectively observed within the bodies of specific people (Oliver, 1990, p. 3-4). Refreshing and invigorating representations of disability in film will need to rest upon an understanding that nothing – and especially the assumption that the belief that disability should be eliminated comes from a place of objectivity (Oliver, 1990, p. 3-4) – is exempt from critique.

One example of a more progressive narrative about disability within the genre of Children of Men is Andrew Niccol’s 1997 film, Gattaca, about a futuristic dystopia rigidly divided along a hierarchy of genetic purity, which explores notions that disability may be socially constructed. The exploitation genre of film is especially rich in creative and positive depictions of disabled bodies: a rather humorous example is Robert Rodriguez’s Planet Terror (2007), in which a woman whose leg has been chewed off by zombies uses a machine gun as a prosthesis in order to defeat the monsters who have ravaged the Earth. I hope that portrayals of disability as a terrifying causes of dystopian conditions, whether they are as explicit as “I Am Autism” or slightly more subtle, like in Children of Men, will be phased out by disabled and queer characters who are welcome presences within them and highly motivated to fight for justice.

References


3The tagline used on posters for this film was “The last hope for humanity... rests on a high-powered machine gun!” (Troublemaker Studios, 2007). I see this subversive portrayal of a disabled person as the only hope for the future of the human race as a sort of antithesis to Children of Men.


---. Personal communication, 26 March 2013.


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