

Children of Men



Synopsis

In 2027, as humankind faces the likelihood of its own extinction, a disillusioned government agent agrees to help transport and protect a miraculously pregnant woman to a sanctuary at sea where her child's birth may help scientists to save the future of mankind.

Introduction

This resource is aimed at students of Film and Media Studies and may be also of interest to English students in the consideration of genre.

Studying Science Fiction

Science fiction has, as one of its central conventional elements, the ‘What if...?’ question. For example, ‘What if aliens took over the world?’ This question is then played out during the narrative. Look at the list of sci-fi titles in the table below and think about the ‘What if...?’ questions that they deal with.

| Science fiction film | ‘What if...?’ question |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Alien | |
| Bladerunner | |
| Transformers | |
| The Matrix | |
| War of the Worlds | |
| Brazil | |

Fact and Fiction

Science fiction as a genre has its origins in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (written in 1831). The social context in which she wrote the novel are very significant as society was changing rapidly and science was making possible things that belonged in the realms of imagination. The relationship between scientific possibility and fiction formed the basis of a new kind of genre, which made the exploration of these potentially scary 'What If...?' questions possible.

The future can be imagined in different ways, science fiction often presents the future in one of two ways. Firstly a dystopia, this can be most easily explained as a pessimistic future, depending on the 'What If...?' question, it might be that human society has broken down all together, or perhaps humankind has been enslaved by an alien race. The opposite is a utopian vision. Typically the world imagined here could, for example, be free of disease and technology has been harnessed to deliver a quality of life unparalleled, a lifestyle enjoyed by all citizens of the earth.

Further to these common visions of the future, science fiction films are also often said to represent a means of looking at the hopes and fears of a society. You may be familiar with classifying a film as a particular genre by looking for certain characteristics such as costume, setting and actions and behaviour. This checklist approach can still be used to identify science fiction, but the genre can also be understood another way, through the Functional Approach to genre. This approach suggests that these films can be understood as an expression of social concerns. Films that are discussed in this way may deal with broad hopes and fears; examples of this include US fear of Communism during the 1950s. Films that expressed this fear include *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (directed by Don Siegel, 1956). Although the invasion in this case came from space rather than the USSR, it was hard to tell who was human and who was alien, just as it was hard to tell who was Communist and who wasn't.

Connecting these approaches to *Children of Men*

- What kind of vision of the future is presented here?
- Are there any elements of mise-en-scène or camerawork that contribute to this feeling?
- What is the 'What if...?' question?
- Do you think that there are any current social concerns expressed in the film?
- Is Theo (Clive Owen) a typical hero character? Have you seen characters like him in other examples from the genre?