**Director Alfonso Cuaron Discusses "Children of Men"**

By [Rebecca Murray](http://movies.about.com/bio/Rebecca-Murray-8805.htm)



Clive Owen, director of photography Emmanuel Lubezki, and director Alfonso Cuaron on the set of "Children of Men."

*© Universal Pictures*

It's 2027 and the world is on the verge of collapse. The last child born on the planet has just died at the age of 18. The future's bleak and mankind's reign on earth is near an end. That's the set-up for [*Children of Men*](http://movies.about.com/od/childrenofmen/), an action-packed thriller starring [Clive Owen](http://movies.about.com/od/owenclive/) and Claire-Hope Ashitey, and directed by Alfonso Cuaron (*Y Tu Mama Tambien*, [*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*](http://movies.about.com/od/harrypotter3/)).

**The Premise of *Children of Men*:** “It’s obviously a futuristic movie because it takes place in the near future, but the reason it takes place in the near future is only because of a convention of story in which we’re talking about infertility and 18 years of infertility," said writer/director Alfonso Cuaron. "That infertility we use just as a metaphor. 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. So based upon that, taking that as a point of departure, to try to make an observation about the state of things. [Someone mentioned the story in terms of its connection to] Homeland Security and stuff, but the movie is not about that. That is part of the observation of the reality that we are living. The whole idea with that is to try to bring the state of things, what is happening outside the green zones that we happily live in and what happens if we bring the world into the green zones. 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.”

**Casting *Children of Men*:** “There were people that [screenwriter] Tim Sexton and I used to mention. We used to refer to Jasper as the Michael Caine character. And Clive… From the beginning, when we were writing, I remember that we had just seen *Croupier* because I wrote this script with Tim right after *Y Tu Mama Tambien*. We kept on saying, ‘Yeah, it’s like the guy in *Croupier*,’ knowing that at that point maybe that wouldn’t have been like the biggest choice for the studio.

What is so great is that I didn’t do the film right away. I did [*Harry Potter*](http://movies.about.com/od/harrypotter3/). When I finished *Harry Potter*, suddenly the studio wanted Clive. That was such a fantastic coincidence in the whole thing. Suddenly it was like I had the dream cast and I had a cast that protected me. I consider my cast as other co-writers. They really took care of their characters, but they took care of the truthfulness of what their characters were going to do in the context of the story. I have nothing but thankfulness for these guys. They were absolutely amazing.

You’ve never seen Michael Caine farting before. He is still Michael Caine but only he is farting and smoking joints and stuff. That is so alien to what he is. It’s just that he is such an amazing actor. We did make-up tests and costume tests. We were in his place and he mentioned from the get go, he says, ‘I want to play this like John Lennon,’ because he was friends with Lennon. Then he started to tell me how Lennon used to talk like very nasal. If you see the way he performed the whole thing, he speaks in a very nasal kind of way. So we’re doing all these make-up and fittings… He looks at himself, and that’s the beauty of witnessing the process of actors. You have Sir Michael Caine who is doing his fittings. He goes and looks at himself in the mirror, and his whole body language changed. He stopped being Michael Caine. He was this other character. In that moment, his wife walks into the room and goes next to him and says, ‘Have you seen my husband.’ The wife didn’t recognize Michael, so there was a sweet story with Michael. But I think the reason this film works is because of Clive Owen. Because Clive is the vessel for our emotional journey in this film, otherwise it would almost be like a documentary.”

**Finding the Right Actress to Play the World’s Only Pregnant Woman:** “To get to who was going to play Kee, the thing is the options were so open in the sense that we knew that she needs to speak enough English so we can go any nationality. We did casting in, I don’t know, like 20 different countries. Actually, because I wanted to, even though in the script she was described as an African girl, we said we don’t just because of some conceptual thing to maybe miss the great actress who could be playing this role. We opened up our scope and [claps hands] we end up with Claire.

I think that she represented the vulnerability. And something that I admire about Claire, she stripped the whole thing of sentimentality. She made it a very rough character. She didn’t do the precious [bit]. There was always the temptation to do the ‘cute’ relationship between Theo and Kee. You know, almost like the central father-daughter relationship. Part of our premise is they cannot have that amazing chemistry because you don’t choose who you survive with. We need to keep a certain tension there, not a comfortable thing of the father-daughter relationship, or even the suggestion of maybe a sensual relationship between the two of them. We wanted to keep it dry, very dry. And that’s another thing of Claire and with Clive is that they keep that dryness. But they play those things with a lot of compassion, so more than chemistry they had empathy. That is different.”

**Designing the Future in *Children of Men*:** “That was the most difficult thing in terms of the design," explained Alfonso Cuaron. "On the one hand, how to create a reality that if you are watching and you know that the convention is that the film takes place in the future, how you accept that that is the future without alienating the sense of today? That was the biggest challenge. How not to create supersonic cars that will transport you emotionally and in terms of your imagination, but to make cars that if you look closely that they feel like today. But if you look closely, you say, ‘Oh, I’ve never seen that car.’ That was the toughest balance. But it’s not only about the cars, it’s about how far you push the billboards. You know, I wanted the billboards to look like today but at the same time they have to honor the fact that the story is taking place 20 years from now.

The other thing was the constant referential thing. When I started working on the film, the first meeting with the art department, they came up with the most amazing… I think that they heard that it was a movie of the future and they undusted all these concept designs – beautiful supersonic cars, buildings, the whole thing. They were really beautiful but I said, ‘This is not the movie we’re doing. The movie we’re doing is this.’ And inside I had my own file of photographs from Iraq, from Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Somalia, Chernobyl, and I mean this is the movie we’re doing. And the rule #1 in this film is that whatever we see has to have a visual reference of stuff that now has become part of human consciousness. It’s an iconography that mostly came out of the media. So that was the balance, how to make it the future but feel today. As Emmanuel Lubezki, my cinematographer, kept saying, ‘We cannot afford to have one single film frame,’ meaning 24 frames per second, so one single photogram, ‘that is not commenting about the state of things.’ That was the big challenge.”

**Alfonso Cuaron on P.D. James’ Novel:** “The truth of the matter is I didn’t respond to the material. I was not interested in doing a science fiction film and also the book takes place in a very posh universe. I respect, I love P.D. James. I enjoy the book, but I couldn’t see myself making that movie. And, nevertheless, the premise of infertility kept on haunting me for weeks and weeks and weeks. Maybe three weeks I was in Santa Barbara, on one beach in Santa Barbara, when I questioned myself, ‘Why [does] this premise haunt me so much?’ It’s when I realized that the premise could serve as a metaphor for the fading sense of hope that humanity has today, that’s when I said, ‘Okay, this can be the point of departure for talking about the state of things today.’

The next stage was to try to explore what the state of things are. You don’t have to go very far to learn that environment and immigration are two of the main factors that are shaping this world, and that are actually very connected. If the environment keeps on going the way that we’re going, it’s actually going to make the immigration phenomenon even more acute. So that was the point of departure.

I’m very thankful of P.D. James because she inspired me so much with her premise. Now from the moment in which we started exploring this, then we have to craft a parallel story. Not necessarily the story that was in the book, because we need to honor the story that had to do with the immigration phenomena. We created the whole thing of the refugees, and we created the whole thing of Kee as a refugee, the whole thing of the refugee camp. Let me put it this way, in the book, Kee doesn’t exist. In the book who’s pregnant is [Julianne Moore](http://movies.about.com/od/moorejulianne/). We just took a big departure there.”

According to Cuaron, P.D. James is happy with Cuaron’s big screen adaptation of her novel. “She’s a big endorser of the movie. She made a statement in which she says, ‘It’s obvious that this film departed from the book, but I’m so proud to be associated with this film.’ She really understood that in a way we took an elaboration of her own premise. So the core of everything is her book.”

**Plans for the *Children of Men* DVD:** “When you do films with this approach, in a way there’s a certain amount of precision that is required. It’s not that you do coverage and you have a lot of other material that you might or might not use. You know, it’s just a very precise choreography. The exciting part of it is that as a director I try to create the perfect choreography, but then it’s about the accidents that make the scene happen. You know, whatever you choreographed but didn’t happen or there was an accident. You rely on people like Clive Owen who would take the accidents and elevate the accidents into something better. So we have some in the DVD, definitely we have.

The DVD is very interesting because we have a couple of scenes that didn’t make it into the film. Not longer versions of the scenes that you saw, because that was the length of those scenes. But the most interesting thing is that we are doing in the DVD a documentary about the things that put together the film. We’re doing interviews with people…and pretty much they’re not talking to us about the film, but they are commenting about the state of things. In other words, it’s like a documentary approach to what the film is about.”

**Random Thoughts on Other Projects:** Asked if he’d ever want to return to the [*Harry Potter*](http://movies.about.com/od/harrypotter3/) film franchise Alfonso Cuaron responded, “I would love to have the opportunity of revisiting the *Harry Potter* universe. It’s an amazing experience to do those films because while you’re doing those films, you’re surrounded by this amazing beneficial energy. Everything that surrounds the J.K. Rowling’s creation – I’m not talking about the film franchise, but the creation of J.K. Rowling - is impregnated with this amazing beneficial energy. So, for me, it was two amazing years of my life. I wouldn’t mind at all revisiting that.”

Commenting on the critical success of his friend Guillermo del Toro’s film, *Pan’s Labyrinth*, Cuaron said, “With [*Pan’s Labyrinth*](http://movies.about.com/od/panslabyrinth/), I find that there are three films that are sister films, that I consider sister films this year. It’s *Pan’s Labyrinth*, *Children of Men*, and [*Babel*](http://movies.about.com/od/babel/). I think that has to do with [the fact] that we collaborate all the time. We love to stick our forks in each other’s salads. I consult Alejandro (Inarritu) and Guillermo (del Toro) all the time.

I love *Pan’s Labyrinth*. Probably one of the most gratifying moments in my life making films is to be in the premiere of *Pan’s Labyrinth* in Cannes in which they had the longest standing ovation since 1968. It was so beautiful to see Guillermo during the first two minutes really touched by the applause. By minute 5 he was crying, minute 7 he was dancing, and by minute 12 he was stripping. (Laughing) He was taking his clothes off because suddenly he didn’t know what else to do. It was so beautiful to witness that. But the power of that applause… It was not only about the hypnotic thing of the applause, it was that I find that the ending of *Pan’s Labyrinth* has an amazing profundity. It is this ending which the liberation by death of one of the characters is the grief of the character that stays behind. I think it’s an amazing [idea]. It has a lot of different connotations. I find that it is a very brave and a very beautiful film. I love it. I love it.”