



Figure 1. Cast adrift, *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, Japan/UK/US, 2006)

Humanity Adrift: Race, Materiality, and Allegory in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*

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From the start the “spirit” is afflicted with the curse of being “burdened” with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language.
—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunt,” “Granny,” God's “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.

—Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe:
An American Grammar Book”

It is the year 2027 in Alfonso Cuarón's film, *Children of Men* (Japan/UK/US, 2006), and the camera pans over a collage of

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pictures from the 2003 London protests against the war in Iraq, of protestors carrying placards that read “Out of Iraq” and “Not in My Name.” Nestled among these images of global conflict and contestation is a single photograph of our protagonist Theo (Clive Owen), his partner Julian (Julianne Moore), and their baby Dillon, and the camera slowly closes in on the photograph, accentuating the vulnerability of the white, heterosexual nuclear family cast adrift in a sea of global atrocities and futile public displays of protest. When the camera reveals this photograph, we already know that Dillon has died and that Julian and Theo have broken up and not seen each other for twenty years. From the very opening of the film the triad of man-woman-child is broken and a thing of the past, reduced to a photograph that has become a cipher for Theo’s melancholic rumination.

The film’s basic premise is that women across the globe have become infertile, for reasons that science cannot explain.¹ The government is increasingly totalitarian and immigrants are rounded up regularly and dumped into refugee camps. In this dystopic world, our hero, Theo, reluctantly becomes involved in a scheme to protect an illegal African immigrant, a woman named Kee (Clare Hope-Ashitey), who is miraculously pregnant (father unknown). Much of the film focuses on chase sequences that become more extended as the film draws to a close. The pregnant woman is to be escorted safely to the sea, in hopes that a mythical organization called the Human Project may find her and accomplish their own mission, to create a new society. The journey—a dangerous chase sequence—is a kind of rebirth for Theo, a process of regaining faith in a hopeless world. On the boat, Kee tells Theo that she will name the baby “Dillon,” so even as he takes his last breath, we know that he will live on. A large ship named *Tomorrow* arrives out of the mist to escort Kee to a better future (figure 1). At the level of narrative, this is a story of faith regained, of redemption, and of the unification of family.

However, the dangerous journey from the earlier triad of white man–white woman–white child to white man–black woman–black child highlights racial difference as one of the film’s primary objects of focus. What is reconstituted here is not a domestic nuclear

family but a vision of a future as the end of white maleness. Theo dies before *Tomorrow* arrives, and Kee, the new African Eve, is the last hope for humanity. The supposedly universal subject of history in the West—the generic concept of “man” that always concealed a particular white male subject—dies, but humanity lives on. The supreme sign of racial alterity in the film is figured as racialized gender, in the marked body of Kee.

Kee’s baby, moreover, is a girl, another shift from the original triad that included a baby boy. Theo “lives on” in the black female baby whom he has not fathered, but whose name derives from his own dead son. Paternal futurity comes to an end in a future in which women will have to forge ahead and remake the world. Given this feminist trope, it is all the more jarring when, once the final sequence is over, the words “Children of Men” appear on the screen. The feminist troping takes a turn in that instant and evaporates as quickly as the final image of Kee on the rowboat.

As we see the words “Children of Men,” we hear the sound of children’s laughter and playing, a sound that contains no recognizable words but the prattle of child sounds: giggles, screams, exclamations, happily agitated involuntary noises, and shouts. Simultaneously representing loss and futurity, these echolalias mark the stage of development when one has just begun training in reading difference itself, and yet these sounds are the substrate of an otherness that remains as yet unchecked by the mastery of language. Since the camera does not show us any images of these children, the film avoids here the visual economies of difference on which it has relied thus far. Given the optimistic thrust of the film’s final sequence, these inarticulate sounds are coming from Utopia, a world in which alterity no longer signifies because the acquisition of language has not yet constituted otherness—or burdened the spirit with language, to use Karl Marx’s figuration from the first epigraph.²

My argument is that such a burdening of the spirit, such a production of meaning from inarticulate prattle, is a figure for rethinking the production of racialized subjects in *Children of Men* in particular, and for recasting the problematic of racial alterity as a materialist concern in general. The film’s cinematic

strategies situate race as the horizon of its myriad concerns about biopolitics, immigration, and reproduction. Certainly the “race/reproduction bind”—the fact that discourses on race have historically been entangled with discourses on reproduction—which Alys Weinbaum has diagnosed as the “ideological constellation” that “organizes the modern episteme,” also organizes this film’s optical unconscious; in the film, reproduction figures as a discourse about race.³ This discourse sheds light on how we may theorize race as a materialist category.

Materiality and Race

What account of materiality would help to understand race as a material reality? Is race simply a by-product of the international division of labor, and is it in the accounts of that division that we find the truth of race? By what processes do incidental biological differences (visible or not) become shorthand for cultural inscription, fantasy, or grounds for subjugation? From acts as simple as hailing a cab to phenomena as closely managed as a presidential debate or the camps at Guantánamo—to pick examples from the US alone—race easily becomes the lightning rod around which culture reveals its fissures. Famously difficult to locate with any scientific certitude, its truth never quite pinned down through any regime of knowledge, race is a MacGuffin in cultural politics, and no less powerful for that. How can a materialist understanding of race attend to its semiotic, aesthetic, and cultural signification, as well as to its cultural and historical discontinuities and differences?

The first epigraph of this essay represents an early (1845) and most explicit statement by Marx and Engels on what precisely constitutes materiality. Although *The German Ideology* persistently returns to the division of labor as the source of ideational misrecognitions, language—the very stuff of abstractions, ideas, and inscription—figures as a precondition for understanding such a split. To describe consciousness as a material phenomenon, Marx and Engels locate the corporeal agitation of “layers of air [and] sounds,” that which burdens the spirit, as the basis of materiality. As Etienne Balibar observes, “Marx’s materialism has nothing to do

with a reference to *matter*.”⁴ Marx and Engels elaborate, “Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical consciousness [and] arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men [*sic*]. . . . Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product.”⁵ This genesis of Marx’s conception of the social relation—the basis of materiality—is founded on the mastery of echolalia that never quite disappears from language. This mastery is both corporeal (the burden that “afflicts” the spirit, the agitation of “layers of air”) and ideational, insofar as language generates meaning and concepts out of the inchoate stream of thought, babble, and the facticity of marks on a page.

Such an understanding of materiality seems far removed from the language of political economy that Marx will elaborate later, far from the contradictions between wage labor and capital, and far from the interplay among relations of production, productive forces, and the labor theory of value—far, in other words, from the categories that classical Marxism takes to be the foundations of materiality. But if the circulation of race as a marker of meaning as well as material reality is to be understood, the linkages between these categories and their ideational aspects need to be drawn out.

Which brings me to the second epigraph, the opening of Hortense Spillers’s classic essay on the figuration of black women. Here, the body itself is the space of an alterity that language seeks to name and contain. In the myriad of discourses about the black female, according to Spillers, she is a signifier that “has no movement in the field of signification” and constitutes the site of cultural and political investments that would require her invention should she not exist.⁶ The stasis surrounding this marked signifier in discourse is only comprehensible in a context in which whiteness and masculinity form the template of the universal subject. In Euro-American contexts, nonwhite subjects are often relegated to the “particular,” the contextual, the specific, and the marked instances of a template that remains “unmarked” and white.⁷ *Children of Men* certainly positions Theo as the primary figure of (unmarked) identification, whose moral and psychic journey the camera tracks during the course of the film. The final sequence signals a future with-

out white maleness because Theo's death anticipates a postwhite future in which whiteness will transcend its cultural and political binds that are the result of its epistemic privilege. It is the end of whiteness that inaugurates the utopia whose babble we hear once the final image vanishes from the screen. Kee and her baby do not herald a reign of blackness as a new universality, but rather a mythic future in which all alterity is sublated. Such a future must necessarily remain beyond the bounds of the visible because, as we will see, visibility is the language, if you will, for the production of alterity and its myriad meanings in the film.

Although language (and meaning) is the precondition for all social relations, its actual uses, according to Marx, are dialectically the end result of actually existing social relations of exploitation that it can serve to consolidate. Language is the ground of materiality and can also be symptomatic of the foundational elision of social relations from the realm of representation. Similarly, whiteness must include itself as blankness within its racial outlook to construct race as a discourse about marked difference. What Spillers calls "the politics of melanin," which render the body "obviously" marked, present us with similar strategies of disavowal.⁸ Alterity, then, also straddles the boundary between the corporeal and the ideational, like Marx's agitated "layers of air [and] sound."

This is hardly news, but the linkage between materiality and alterity are worth exploring in a time when the slippages that occur under the sign of racial difference are increasingly bound up with alterity of every kind. Islam, for example, serves as a sign of *racial* difference within the same culture that situates race as a matter of basic physical differences among bodies rather than differences among religions. The processes of racialization have become isomorphic with the processes of global biopolitics.⁹ I would like to take up the question of race-as-materiality through what may seem at first to be a category devoid of materialist pretensions, but it is a category that allows one to think the corporeal along with its inscription, the specific body before the law (the biopolitical subject) with respect to the abstracting categories of law, and last but not least, the material agitation of air and sound—the primal

babble—alongside its diminution in language. This is the category of allegory. Walter Benjamin, in 1928, laid to rest any doubts about allegory being simply a narrative mode divorced from concerns about history and materialism with the publication of his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*.¹⁰ In this work, allegory's subject is history first and foremost, and in what follows I explore the concern with history in Cuarón's film, in which race itself figures as an allegorical sign. The implications of reading race as allegory come into sharp relief through an analysis of the film's cinematic strategies, to which I will turn next to return to allegory and materiality in a new light.

Structuring Visibility

Science fiction, with all its claims to representing future worlds, deep space, or advanced technology, often reaches back to allegory, which ranges among the most ancient of narrative modes.¹¹ In *Children of Men*, this turn to the past is obviously a melancholic glance at our present material reality. Even before we see the first opening credit, we hear a news bulletin listing its headlines for the day as we look at a dark void in which the opening credits eventually begin. The headlines consist of the following: "Day 1000 of the siege of Seattle; The Muslim community demands an end to the army's occupation of mosques; The Homeland Security bill is ratified; After eight years British borders will remain closed; The deportation of illegal immigrants will continue." Immediately the film signals recognition rather than disorientation; even before the camera has revealed the *mise-en-scène*, we are prepared for this future world to look familiar. Still, in the first few minutes of the film, we see an establishing shot of the street that is uncanny because of its familiarity (figure 2). Advertising has become more sophisticated, but otherwise the world in 2027 resembles our present: a cycle of cannibalizing the past, of repeating the same with a difference, not only in fashion (which has always repeated the same with a difference) but also in the production of fear. Theo's listless, melancholic wanderings in this world, tracked by the camera, become our own. In the first few minutes of the film, we can

identify immediately what Siegfried Kracauer has called “the flow of life,” for which the street is the exemplary cinematic subject, as our own dwelling. This “flow of life,” according to Kracauer, “is predominantly a material rather than a mental continuum, even though, by definition, it extends into the mental dimension.”¹² The invisible structures in our own present that place the elements of our street life into play, in other words, have remained the same.

The film’s optical unconscious challenges us as spectators to link the diegetic concerns surrounding race and deportation (the stuff of biopolitics) to a very specific structure of visibility that the film sets up in its first half, in which a familiar repertoire of news items and aesthetic artifacts flits across the scene. The function of race is linked to this structure of visibility in which the background of the frame, rather than the putative object of cinematic focus, carries the weight of signification. Considering that the film itself is an allegory, I will explore the connections between allegorical ways of seeing and narrating, as well as the implications of reading race as an allegorical sign. While at the level of narrative *Children of Men* is a failed allegory insofar as it sutures the train of questioning it opens up by means of a *deus ex machina*, its cinematic language opens up a related but unresolved set of questions around race. In the film race is inseparable from the larger biopolitical structure in which it becomes visible as a category. The foundational premise of the film, infertility, invokes the foundations of the contemporary political order as ones rooted in biopolitics. This kind of visibility is analogous, as we will see, to the (in)visibility of the *socius* within the commodity form, whose material facticity asserts itself over and against the “secret” it conceals.

In the first half of the film, the camera foregrounds visibility itself, placing key objects and scenes in the background of the frame and then lingering on them as the foreground. The visual language of the film consistently invokes bygone images and places them firmly within the frame. As it progresses, these citations come fast and furious, piled atop one another. They encompass the realms of commodities, news reportage, and art. These visual markers form the background, but they very quickly become the

foreground. For example, in one image, the cover for Pink Floyd's 1977 album, *Animals*, showing the Battersea power station with an imagined pig-shaped balloon has become, in the future, an actually existing simulacrum. When the camera reveals this background, and Theo's cousin turns to gaze at it, we are invited to gaze along with him, letting our eyes linger on the representation-turned-reality (figure 3). Earlier in the film, we see a car approach the Battersea power station (the residence of Theo's cousin who works for the government), and once the camera moves inside, it appears that we are in the turbine hall of the Tate Modern, with graffiti artist Banksy's piece *Kissing Policemen* on display. Pink Floyd's aim in using the Battersea power station as album cover art was, of course, to protect the building from demolition, to preserve this landmark for history. Here, the spaces of historical preservation and cultural patrimony of the recent past (the museum and the power station) have become a loft apartment decorated in the minimalist and urban bourgeois style, in which Theo's relative and his lover live among the treasures of Western art, including Michelangelo's *David* (figure 4). At this juncture Picasso's *Guernica* turns up on the screen as another familiar aesthetic artifact, with all the distancing and auratic qualities of artistic masterpieces that the camera underscores and also undermines by showing it as yet another piece of decoration against which one may enjoy a meal (figures 5 and 6). Later in the film, Theo experiences the horrors and destruction of war as all-consuming; what appeared as a background earlier in the film eventually becomes the very subject of the frame (figure 7).

Visually, these images of Pink Floyd's album cover, *David*, and *Guernica* are as citational as the Niagara advertisement we see earlier in the film (figure 2). *David* is slightly damaged, the Pink Floyd cover is now a reality rather than a two-dimensional artwork, *Guernica* is simply a feature of interior decoration, and a drug like Viagra is now called Niagara. These references are part and parcel of the world we recognize easily, even if each reference has changed slightly. If these references, in which aesthetic practice and capitalist consumption are indissociable, are so familiar to us as icons, then it seems that history can also be converted into iconic signifiers, in the form of the headline and the news image. In the

first half of the film the background consistently keeps becoming the foreground. For example, the iconic news image of foot-and-mouth disease appears simply as the background for the characters who drive past the burning animals (figure 8). The camera initially shows something unidentifiable burning on the left of the screen and then pans across the field, with a heap of burning animals in clear focus in the foreground as we hear a conversation entirely disconnected from this scene taking place in the car as it drives past. The disjuncture between the image on the screen and the unconcern with which the characters drive past the scene of the burning animals, continuing their conversation uninterrupted, is startling. The sequence in which Theo walks past a cage filled with people who have been rounded up and during which the camera lingers on a German-speaking old woman invokes the Jewish Holocaust. Once again, our protagonist, Theo, walks past this scene unmoved. The camera initially follows Theo from behind as he saunters down the platform, but then closes in on the figure of the old woman in the cage who is anxiously muttering in German. The cinematic strategy here depends on a disjuncture, once again, between the image on the screen and the protagonist's unconcern for the scene that obsesses the camera. This disjuncture, like the one that occurred earlier in the scene of foot-and-mouth conflagration, highlights a structuring of visibility that disturbs the narrative movement of film; what the camera reveals has no immediate relation to the narrative moment in the frame.

Narrative logic, however, begins to merge with the camera's focus when Theo, Miriam (Kee's friend, played by Pam Ferris), and Kee are being taken to the Bexhill refugee camp by bus. Kee begins to have contractions, and while Miriam tends to her, the camera makes them marginal to the frame as it gazes out through the bus windows at the scene of a detention camp. The lights in the bus are switched off so the camera can focus maximally on the scenes of subjection outside the bus. Just as the iconic image from Abu Ghraib comes into view on the far right-hand side of the frame, startling once again due to its familiarity (figure 9), the lights in the bus are switched on, and the camera focuses on a



Figure 2. Streets of London, *Children of Men* (2006)



Figure 3. Simulacrum of Pink Floyd's album cover *Animals*, *Children of Men* (2006)

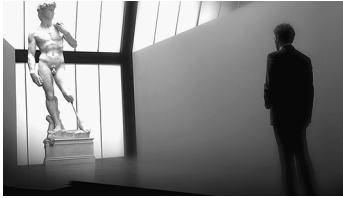


Figure 4. Michelangelo's *David*, *Children of Men* (2006)



Figure 5. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, *Children of Men* (2006)

guard entering the vehicle and, at his whim, ordering people to leave the bus, presumably to be beaten and tortured by his cohorts. Miriam is asked to leave and, as the guard drags her out, the lights in the bus go out again, and the camera gazes out the bus window, lingering on the image of Miriam as the guards put a bag over her head (figure 10). The background emphatically becomes the foreground, and the logic of visibility with which the camera has been flirting has merged with the film's narrative itself. The bus then moves forward, and the camera reveals a series of Abu Ghraib atrocities sequentially arranged for its gaze.

In his reading of this film, Slavoj Žižek argues that “the true focus . . . is there in the background and it's crucial to leave it as a background. It's the paradox of anamorphosis—if you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you don't see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background.”¹³ But we have seen that the background keeps becoming the foreground, the object of visual attention, not only in the formal sense of the image in the frame but in a metaphorical sense



Figure 6. *Guernica* as background, *Children of Men* (2006)



Figure 7. *Guernica*, foregrounded, *Children of Men* (2006)



Figure 8. Conflagration, foot-and-mouth disease, *Children of Men* (2006)

(*Guernica* as a background signals the war-torn world outside the museum) as well. Given this visual logic, to notice the “background” is to notice the obvious focus of the frame. And we recognize it because of its shocking familiarity. But familiarity, as G. W. F. Hegel reminds us, is not knowledge. Familiarity is represented in the film through scopophilic techniques: the lingering, fetishistic gaze, the obsessive look at a detail that is both incidental and yet seems to hold the key to the whole diegesis. Yet scopophilia and epistemophilia, what Miriam Hansen in another context dubs the “twin drives” of cinematic pleasure,¹⁴ do not merge in this obsessive and repetitive camerawork. The mere fact of looking once again does not seem to add to our knowledge of Abu Ghraib, foot-and-mouth disease, the Holocaust, Pink Floyd, *David*, or *Guernica*. Rather, the lingering camera converts these images into hieroglyphs; it is the material sur-

face of the signifier itself that the camera brings to our attention, while the signified seems to escape such scrutiny altogether. As we will see, this is the case not because the citations are insufficiently meaningful, but because they signal a surplus of meaning.

While the background is hardly a background, the accumulation of the artwork and visual citations in the course of the film signals, as Žižek notes, the evacuation of meaning from history. Each of these im-

ages references a certain history. But taken together, the barrage of images signals a reality in which the historical referent seems to have disappeared. Žižek comments that in this film “the true infertility is the very lack of meaningful historical experience. It’s a society of pure meaningless historical experience.”¹⁵ According to him, the film is a critique of this present state of affairs; a part of my argument is that the film is also a product of this state. Listen to Cuarón’s comments on the visual language of the film:

[Theo and Kee] exit the Russian apartments, and the next shot you see is this woman wailing, holding the body of her son in her arms [figure 11]. This was a reference to a real photograph of a woman holding the body of her son in the Balkans, crying with the corpse of her son. It’s very obvious that when the photographer captured that photograph, he was referencing *La Pietà*, the Michelangelo sculpture of Mary holding the corpse of Jesus. So, we have a reference to something that really happened, in the Balkans, which is itself a reference to the Michelangelo



Figure 9. “Abu Ghraib” (background), *Children of Men* (2006)



Figure 10. “Abu Ghraib” (foregrounded), *Children of Men* (2006)



Figure 11. Mother and son, *Children of Men* (2006)



Figure 12. "Intifada," *Children of Men* (2006)

sculpture. At the same time, we use the sculpture of *David* early on, which is also by Michelangelo, and we have of course the whole reference to the Nativity. And so everything was referencing and cross-referencing, as much as we could.¹⁶

This whirlwind of references and cross-references that take up actual history, its artful representation, news reportage, and contemporary forms of subjection to depict a future world is the product of allegorical

slippage. Allegory's polysemic nature risks a certain interpretive stupor, a descent into a netherworld of signs in which everything refers to everything else.¹⁷ My argument is that the place of race in this film cannot be understood without examining how allegory produces meaning, and that what saves allegory from a nihilistic surplus of meaning here *is* the figure of alterity. The cinematic logic of the film, which stages racial and biopolitical issues as ones about visibility, suggests that alterity itself is what grounds the circulation of all the other signs, and it is the occasion for a train of (allegorical) questioning that remains resistant to the neat closure provided by the arrival of the ship named *Tomorrow*.

Allegory and Alterity

Allegory is often didactic because it seeks to explain the inexplicable, to express a truth that may otherwise be inexpressible. This is its philosophical claim—it speaks the truth, and in the film absolute alterity is what requires assimilation to a certain signify-

ing cinematic logic. It is the truth of race that remains inexplicable and that the allegorical techniques in the film seek to bring into visibility. Allegory is a paradoxical mode of figuration: while it strives for a higher truth, it simultaneously risks an abundance of meaning that reveals the actual arbitrariness of the signs that allegory presses into its service. The impetus behind the Baroque allegorist's valuation of the hieroglyph and the emblem derived from a faith in their capacity to allow divine meaning to shine through, yet the signifier proves, according to Benjamin, to be "quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own," and the only thing that comes into view is the recalcitrant materiality of the signifier itself, its opaque and cryptic form.¹⁸ Thus in allegory the signifier refers to its own facticity, materiality and meaning are sundered, and the allegorist seeks to bridge this gap by casting one net of meaning after another over the allegorical signifier. As Terry Eagleton explains of the allegorical sign, "Its denotative force is inseparable from its complex carnality."¹⁹ As I will argue below, racialized gender as a sign shares this structure of meaning, and the carnality of race requires a gendering of the body.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin explains that the Baroque allegorist's solution to this descent into meaninglessness, to the endless casting of meanings on the allegorical sign, was to focus on resurrection, by placing wings on the skull, in the language of their emblematics. Natural death, in other words, is temporary since it is simply a passing over into eternal life. The signs of material nature are destined to pass, along with the materiality of the allegorical sign, and, in fact, only signal redemption in the hereafter. Evil disappears, eternal peace reigns, and allegory becomes symbol (more on this below). After a grueling and long chase sequence, Cuarón's film ends with a similar theological solution to material conflicts, as the ship named *Tomorrow* comes to save the day and to whisk Kee into a promising future.

To contextualize the import of the film's ending, it is important to analyze the extended chase sequence, which forms the narrative backbone of most of the film. The chase, it turns out, has everything to do with the film's engagement with absolute

alterity. If allegory is among the most ancient of narrative modes deployed by *Children of Men*, the chase sequence is as old as cinema itself.²⁰ The film is composed of many small chases lasting from two to three minutes, interrupted by narrative scenes, and then eventually followed by one very long chase sequence that leads to the end. I would like to analyze here this longest, most sustained chase sequence, which also contains the longest single shot in the film (seven minutes and five seconds). Theo and Kee have made their way to the seaside Bexhill refugee camp, hoping to find a rowboat that will take them to the buoy where *Tomorrow* will be making a stop. Bexhill is a shantytown of overcrowded, labyrinthine streets, poor sanitation, piles of rubbish, fires in trash barrels, public funeral pyres, and immigrants of every color, accent, and variety. It is clearly a “zone of indistinction” in which bare life comes under the purview of the law’s violence through its very exclusion from law,²¹ but at the same time the camp represents a zone of absolute difference. It is a melting pot of containment and is populated with figures of uncertain origins, and difference here registers every level of alterity: racial, gender, class, nation, and so on. The first person we are introduced to in the camp is Marichka (Oana Pellea), a native informant who is referred to earlier as “Arab, gypsy, something” and who speaks an unidentifiable language. As an informant she seems only native to the Bexhill camp itself, knowing the ins and outs of its social and geographic map, and in the end she chooses to stay there rather than join Theo and Kee on the rowboat. Kee gives birth in the camp, and, almost immediately, she and Theo have to go on the run and the chase begins. They are attempting to reach the Human Project before “the Fishes,” or the antigovernmental resistance, reach Kee and use the baby for their own political ends; the Fishes have fomented an uprising within the refugee camp and believe the baby will help galvanize people. Kee, Theo, and the baby are also fleeing from the corrupt guard, Syd (Peter Mullan), for whom Kee and Theo are “first-class commodities” since he has discovered that they are wanted both by the government and by the Fishes. The chase sequence starts just as the uprising itself begins. The

dull landscape of Bexhill has the word *Uprising* written in English and misspelled in Arabic (*Intifada*) on every available window and wall (figure 12). This misspelling, which at first seems perplexing, begins to make sense as the chase sequence unfolds. While the camera tracks Marichka, Kee, and Theo from the back, they run directly into a scene lifted from news imagery of a Palestinian or possibly Iranian march, complete with a dead body being carried. The loss of the referent here is precisely the point, since what the image represents is Islam, alterity, and threat in a single constellation. The marchers are inexplicably chanting “Allah akbar!” (“God is great!”), wearing identical headbands that repeat this exhortation. Most inexplicably, in the dead center of the march, two marchers hold up a banner that reads *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim* (“In the name of God, the Gracious, the Compassionate”), the blessing from the beginning of all Muslim prayers and also a phrase spoken at the beginning of an important endeavor. As a banner for a political-religious march it is nonsensical, and even more so if placed in the middle, rather than at the beginning, of the march. But like the misspelling of *intifada*, this signifier only communicates the materiality of its script, and more than this, it signals Islamic alterity and the panoply of associations the audience may bring to such racial and “civilizational” difference. The Arabic script simply calls out to itself as an ethnic difference. This is why the misspelling is immaterial to the signification of the script itself, and the odd use of the *Bismillah* banner beside the point. The representational challenge for the film’s cinematic strategies during the whole episode in the Bexhill refugee camp is to represent absolute difference. In the case of the vaguely Arab march and the Arabic script, the visible sign takes on allegorical significance: opaque and rife with association at the same time, it insists on its status as a cipher.

In the longest shot of the film, we follow Theo as he runs here and there, avoiding the explosions and bullets of the state that has begun its response to the uprising, searching for Kee and the baby, and eventually finding them in a building. The cinematic technique in this shot is a cross between documentary footage and

a newscast, complete with splattered blood on the camera lens that is digitally removed when it threatens to become distracting. Along the way we encounter more instances of illegibility: people yelling in unidentifiable languages, a woman singing a lullaby in a “foreign” tongue. The topography of alterity here matches the radically unknown topography of Bexhill that Theo must navigate: with threats around every corner, through each window, and the fear of an explosion every second. My argument is that the representational challenge of revealing absolute alterity “hails” the chase sequence. Absolute alterity would, of course, have to remain inassimilable to signification, and the chase sequence has proven to be an excellent device for such representational conundrums in cinema. In Kracauer’s reading of D. W. Griffith, he notes that Griffith’s “chases seem to transform ideological suspense into physical suspense without any friction.”²² Moreover, chase sequences are “immensely serviceable for establishing a continuity of suspenseful physical action” (42), and in this they exploit the strengths of cinematic representation, which is the depiction of “objective physical movement” (228). Ultimately, however, Kracauer concludes that the Griffith chase “drowns ideological suspense in physical excitement” (228). As a cinematic strategy, then, the chase allows the diegesis to shift representational registers, and the materiality of buildings, cars, explosions comes to the fore as challenges to be mastered, and the audience is taken up in a kinetic excitement.

It is unclear, however, if in *Children of Men* ideological suspense recedes as a result of the chase. This particular chase converts biopolitics and alterity into purely citational phenomena—nothing more need be said about the “Arab” march, the black woman who sings a lullaby in another language, the potpourri of multilingual exclamations that we hear in between explosions and gunfire, because our protagonist needs urgently to be elsewhere and the camera tracks away from these citations as quickly as it brings them into focus to take up the chase itself. Alterity is absolutely inassimilable here, and we may read this aspect of alterity as the film’s shortcoming or its strength, since it may either signal a refusal to explain away difference, a refusal to anthropologize and reterritorialize it within a new economy of signification, or it may signal a pernicious

repetition of the stock images of otherness. Such ambivalence surrounding alterity stems from the nature of the allegorical sign that insists on its own materiality, like the Arabic script in the film, even as it leads to a chain of contradictory and open-ended questioning. The chase sequence, by switching representational registers, foregrounds alterity as a question: Can a discourse on race help reinforce the production of racial difference? What is at stake in not assimilating alterity to any discourse? Would such a move merely fetishize difference? There are no easy answers to these questions, of course, in spite of allegory's claims to truth.

The lullaby sung by an African/Caribbean (it is, of course, unclear) woman marks the end of the chase sequence. The representational register has shifted once again, and we are soon on a rowboat without meeting challenges along the way, and in the midst of the final sequence of the film. If the preceding chase sequence did not drown "ideological suspense in physical excitement" because the allegorical nature of the signs of alterity survived the inundation, the final sequence abandons allegory altogether and embraces organic unity and immediacy. Gone are the disjunctures between image and sound (e.g., the shots of foot-and-mouth disease) and between image and narrative (e.g., the Arabic script) that lent allegorical significance to the object through sheer cinematic technique. A wounded Theo is dying and Kee tells him that the baby will be named "Dillon," after Theo's dead child. The sound of the sea stands in stark contrast to the sounds of war we had been listening to for a while before this scene. As John Tavener's choral piece, titled "Fragments of a Prayer," plays in the background, *Tomorrow* arrives to save the day, bringing a smile to Kee's face and closing the film with a redemptive *deus ex machina* that promises that wrongs will be corrected, human ills set aright. Cast adrift by violence of its own making, humanity is rescued at the last minute by the saving hand of (divine) grace, by the promise of a new tomorrow. The background—visual as well as aural—has merged with the foreground, with no intervening moment of disjuncture. Seamlessly, Tavener's music swells and *Tomorrow* nears the rowboat, the score receding to a lullaby as we watch the rowboat rocking back and forth (figure 1). This lullaby is for all of humanity. The triad of

man-woman-child, the lost object of this melancholic film, reunifies on the boat. Even if Theo is dead, the child bears his name, and the approaching *Tomorrow* suggests many willing surrogate fathers in the image of the man on the ship's deck who points at Kee. Having left the disjunctive and polysemic signification of allegory, we are swept up in the immediacy of the symbol. As Eagleton explains of the symbol, "In a transfigurative flash, meaning and materiality are reconciled into one; for a fragile, irrationalist instant, being and signification become harmoniously totalized."²³

This final sequence is a culmination of the rather heavy-handed references to the Nativity scattered throughout the film: the revelation of pregnancy in the barn, the miraculous birth, the figure of Joseph/Theo who has not had sex with Mary/Kee, the redemptive ending in which the Jesus figure is split three ways, between the baby, Theo-as-sacrificial-lamb, and the ship *Tomorrow* that beckons to the hereafter. When Kee dramatically reveals her pregnancy to Theo in the barn, he exclaims, "Jesus Christ!" and, when asked who the father is, Kee jokes that she is a virgin. As Tavener's score swells and *Tomorrow* approaches to "complete" (in a theological sense) this foretold narrative with a Wagnerian melding of the visual and the aural, these references to the Nativity reveal themselves to be of a symbolic rather than an allegorical nature. In other words, they lack the polysemic significations of the allegorical sign but provide a direct link to a familiar narrative of redemption that will close the film. If, according to Benjamin, in allegory "the false appearance of totality is extinguished," in the symbol the object is freed from facticity; the sign no longer "burdens" the spirit but is rather its direct emanation.²⁴ In a flash, materiality and alterity disappear *as questions* from the film's final sequence.

"What the Fk Are You Staring At?"**

The reunification of the man-woman-child triad in the final sequence, which replaces white Julian with black Kee, preserves the place of gender in the triad, rendering gender deracialized and highlighting the representational focus to racial alterity. Race seems to carry the weight of signification in much of the

film; one only has to imagine Kee as a white woman to sense the enormous cultural work race performs in the film, the wager that its cinematic strategies stake on race. But gender is not so easily subordinated to racial alterity. If the final sequence promises an oceanic plenitude, and a theological solution to a fallen world, it also recalls an earlier image of plenitude, complete with the identical segment of Tavener's "Fragments of a Prayer" playing in the background. This is the sequence in which Kee reveals her pregnancy to Theo and the camera makes, quite literally, a spectacle of her body for Theo and for us. This is ironic since the first words Kee ever said to Theo were, "What the fuck are you staring at?" In the sequence in which she bares her pregnant body, she insists on being stared at. The rift between materiality and meaning in this sequence, however, is not healed because the image of alterity intervenes. The sequence raises unresolved questions and remains within the polysemic, ambivalent, even prolix domain of allegory, rather than providing the harmonious instant comforts of the symbol.

The sequence begins when Theo enters the barn (he has been summoned by Kee) and sees Kee standing among the cows. Kee says, "You know what they do to these cows? They cut off their tits. They do. [mimics electronic cutting sound] Gone. Bye. Only four . . . four tits fit the machine. It's wacko. Why not make machines that suck eight titties?" Kee then asks Theo to help her, and just as he refuses and is about to leave, she undresses herself. The camera focuses on Kee as she unbuttons, cuts quickly to Theo saying "Don't do that," cuts immediately to Kee who takes off her dress, and just as we glimpse her breasts, there is a cut, and the camera moves behind Kee as she drops her dress. Tavener's score pipes in, and we see Theo looking at her perplexed and captivated. The camera has not yet revealed her pregnancy to us but cuts instead to Theo's face and closes in on his stunned expression. Just as the camera cuts again, we hear a cow's cry along with "Fragments of a Prayer," and the camera focuses on the cows' faces before it pans up to show Kee's pregnant body (figure 13). She says, "I'm scared," a cow responds with another cry, and Kee beseeches Theo, "please help me." After a few more cuts between Theo's captivated expres-

sion and Kee's spectacular body, the revelation sequence ends and Tavener's music fades as other characters enter the barn.

The image of Kee among the cows is not only a reference to the Nativity but also signals a marked woman in danger. As Kee says, cows get their "titties" cut because the machines only have room for four "titties"; the administered capitalist order uses violence to make the world fit into its concepts. Such signification, which always takes on material forms (the machines that only hold four udders), produces difference that it then seeks to eradicate. As soon as the camera shows a glimpse of Kee's breasts, it "cuts" them as well, to show an image of Theo looking on with wonderment, concern, and fascination at the naked black female form, apparently not so far removed from the animals from which she appears to have risen. Her association with animals happens at several registers at once: the sound of the cows' cries punctuate her lines (and not Theo's), the cut that links the subject of cows with Kee herself, the camera that incessantly pans from the cows to Kee and back again, the biopolitical order that regulates the lives of the cows and the lives of illegal immigrants like Kee. Earlier in the film Theo rides past an official billboard that reads "AVOIDING FERTILITY TESTS IS A CRIME." Since the film situates women's bodies as the site of infertility, these billboards are presumably targeting women, whose bodies have come under closer regulation under the modern biopolitical order. Soon after the revelation sequence Kee will be associated with the conflagration of animals afflicted with foot-and-mouth disease, as Kee and Theo drive past such a conflagration and the camera cuts from Kee's face to the burning animals. On the one hand, the threats to Kee are articulated through her association with animals; on the other hand, the sphere of the biopolitical is expanded through these associations to include animals within the structures of subjugation. The conversion of alterity into an allegorical sign gives rise to such ambivalence, as we will see.

The plenitude signaled by the revelation sequence is gendered feminine: the mezzo-soprano voice of Sarah Connelly in Tavener's score swells as the camera first focuses on the lactating cows and then lingers obsessively on Kee and her swollen body.²⁵

Though Kee strategically hides her nipples with her left arm, the pornotroping of her body is complete as we share Theo's scopophilia and gaze and gaze again. Yet this sequence differs from the image of plenitude that will be offered to us at the end of the film; its focus remains—however ambivalently—on alterity itself and how it troubles any signifying order that seeks to efface or ignore it.

In the P. D. James novel on which the film is based, the pregnant character is a white woman, and she stands in for the possibility of hope for all of humanity. By casting a black woman in that role, the film makes an ambivalent gesture with respect to race as well as gender. For a start, it participates in the same cultural politics that legitimates political intervention in the name of the racially marked woman, arguably the fetish object par excellence for the liberal discourse on freedom, in which all subjects are presumed to be autonomous agents at heart. In the words of Saba Mahmood, according to liberal understandings of freedom, "the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression constitutes the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit."²⁶ The making of such "conditions" for racialized women—through a combination of ideology and bombs—has been the preoccupation of imperialist politics since the heyday of colonialism.²⁷ Historically, this mission has legitimized British meddling in India, French in Algeria, and US in Afghanistan. European feminism, moreover, has its own history of complicity with such imperialist endeavors, given the complicated role it has often played in legitimizing such colonial rule.²⁸ The role of a certain feminism as handmaiden to empire continues in the contemporary US war on terror, in which the Muslim woman figures, once again, as the fetish object whose "emancipation" has become an urgent political imperative in the racist and civilizational discourse on Islam.²⁹ The debates surrounding this role of feminism are subtle and extensive;³⁰ I would like to note here that what these two extremes (of the neoconservative deployment of liberal rhetoric and progressive projects) have in common is a belief in the entelechy of liberatory politics that assume a subject whose desire and interest coincide and who would naturally take action to secure her interests.

Children of Men follows an identical logic in its narrative aspect, in its concern with rescuing the marked woman from an oppressive system. In this specific way, then, the narrative focus of the film mirrors the tropes of an age-old imperialist plot, fueled by liberal assumptions, that has become increasingly reinvigorated and very familiar in the current war on terror. In my analysis of the marked woman's body in *Children of Men*, I am less interested in locating moments of resistance/disruption or even domination/hegemony, and more interested in analyzing how alterity figures as a problematic about materiality. Whether the film's explicitly liberatory narrative places it on the left or the right is a question that remains unclear, and one that is beside the point. The camera situates Kee's pregnant body as the fetish object of the film's liberatory narrative, and it is her vulnerability to the "cut," and the violence of the biopolitical order it stands in for, that underlies all of the chasing and racing that begins soon after the revelation sequence. In an interview, Cuarón has remarked, "The fact that this child will be the child of an African woman has to do with the fact that humanity started in Africa."³¹ Simultaneously origin and destination for the entire human race, Kee's body is endowed with a mytho-scientific significance. She is not only the "Earth Mother" but also the new Eve. The revelation sequence involves the camera focusing on her body from the front and from the back, panning from bottom up and from top to bottom, as if to get at the truth of a fetish through its sheer materiality. Cryptic, her body remains resolutely opaque and untranslatable into a stable set of meanings.³² It is not that she does not signify, but rather that her body signifies too much: Eve, Madonna, Earth Mother, figure of subjection, animal-like black woman, humanity's last and only hope, excessively fertile black woman, damsel in distress. Given the cultural labor her image performs, it is no wonder that (to echo Spillers) the film needs to invent her. And race is as central to a reading of her hieroglyphic image as gender.

Race, as I mentioned earlier, is a function of biopolitics: as a sign it works allegorically in the film and points to realities less visible than differences of hair, skin, and bone. If we do attend to the visual logic of the film I discussed in the first section, where

the background is simultaneously the foreground, we see that the images of detainees and refugees are explicitly multiracial. So the film assures us that race is not simply the sum of hair, skin, and bone; it seems to work from the premise, generally accepted, that race as a biological category is a fiction and that to truly understand race we must rethink it as a relational category. Race obviously exists, but as a matter of meaning making and political contestation, rather than as an objective fact.³³ The unexplained, unsigned ban pertains to illegal immigrants of all stripes, regardless of the “grosser physical differences of color, hair, and bone.”³⁴ Theoretically, subjects of any color may occupy the position of bare life; the ban forces us to read signs of alterity other than on the body.³⁵

But, as Stuart Hall reminds us, no amount of theoretical sophistication escapes the fact that as a sign race *seems* not to be arbitrary. The differences are visible and obvious. But like the obviousness of the backgrounds in this film, the obviousness of physical differences does not lead to knowledge, only familiarity. The illusory obviousness with which race continues to be figured as a difference of skin, hair, and bone haunts the discourse on race, on both the left and the right.³⁶ And certainly if the film constructed race as a relational category, then Kee could have been represented as she is in the book, as a white woman who is not a refugee but a member of the resistance. In its central concern with visibility, playing out a striptease of revelation, the camera reveals the universal subject—humanity—to be an obviously “marked” (and “particular”) body.

On the one hand, a black woman stands in for the entire human race; on the other hand, the plot of *Children of Men* remains focused on the white protagonist and his formation. At the level of the image, Kee’s fertile body is a fetish in the classic sense: it stands in for the political and libidinal investments discussed above, which the film only represents obliquely, displaced onto the pregnant black body.³⁷ As the bearer of the future of the human race, Kee is simultaneously the excessively fertile black woman. After all, a racist logic would have us believe that animal-like hyperfertility is a feature of whatever group of people racism targets. In other words,

Kee's representation does not escape the gendered and racial inscriptions that haunt the discourse on immigration and race, a discourse the film engages with directly by showing immigrants being rounded up in public places and put into holding cells.

"The Allegorical Way of Seeing"

If Kee's body itself functions as a fetish, we need to draw out briefly the affinity between fetishism and allegory to understand the larger concern with visibility in this film. For Benjamin, the otherness that is the basis of allegory (it speaks "otherwise") is the ground from which contemporary everyday life may be seen anew, defamiliarized, making it possible to read into objects their significance for the present historical juncture. Benjamin noted that allegory's open-endedness, its refusal to shut down the train of associative meanings was, in part, its strength. He praised allegory for its privileged relationship to historical time; allegory is the device par excellence for plumbing the depths of historical truth because its lesson, or its truth, is not confined to a single context; rather, it renews and transforms in relation to the new material circumstances in which the allegory finds itself. The dialectical image is one that is simultaneously allegorical, a kind of time bomb of insight whose truth only becomes visible when exposed to certain historical and material conditions.

Elements of allegory and the fetish share a certain intimacy: what they have in common is that they take an innocuous everyday object or sign and endow it with a chain of meanings. However, they have opposite aims: the allegorical sign may serve to foster historical insight, while the fetish serves as a kind of prosthetic mystifying the investments that have produced it. Marx's elaboration of the commodity fetish depends on a logic of visibility: the social character of labor becomes visible only as the objective, thinglike (Marx uses the word *dinglich*) character of the material object. So an oblique and anamorphic looking is required to see the social basis of objects.

For materialists such as Marx, the fetish mystifies the *socius* itself, and for psychoanalytically derived theories, the fetish stands

in the way of showing the deep psychic investments that necessitate it. For both theories, the fetish retains a paradoxical character: the subject can see that the fetish is not the actual thing it stands in for (the shoe is just a shoe), that it is visible as an everyday object, yet it serves its function as a fetish nevertheless. In other words, for all of its naked visibility, the fetish retains an aspect that escapes visibility.

According to Benjamin, the fluctuation of commodity prices is akin to the fluctuation of allegorical meanings—neither can be foreseen: “The allegorist is in his element with commercial wares.”³⁸ While the social value of the commodity may be its price, nothing prevents the fetish from being appropriated by consumers as an instantiation of their wishes and dreams. Like the allegorical sign, once meaning has been hollowed out, another signification may be arbitrarily inserted into it.³⁹ The fetish and the allegorical sign, in other words, have a dialectical relationship to each other. In modernity, if “the commodity has taken the place of the allegorical way of seeing,”⁴⁰ then this implies that allegory, as a way of seeing, lies at the heart of capitalist modernity.⁴¹ So rather than striving to step outside the spell of capitalism and its organization, in his work Benjamin strived to “outfetish the fetish,” to use Michael Taussig’s language.⁴² The recently outdated artifact is an emblem for reading historical insight; such an emblem is both fetish and allegorical sign in one.

If modernity produces the biopolitical order, it also reinvents, as part and parcel of its own materiality, aesthetic forms—ways of reading and seeing—that may be deployed toward a historical materialist understanding of modernity itself. Returning to *Children of Men*, if we read Kee’s marked body as an allegorical emblem, her body as fetish conceals as much as it reveals. Certainly at the moment at which her pregnancy is revealed, the camera lingers on her body as fetish and spectacle, yet the visual marks of her race, as well as the cinematic cut, stand in for the biopolitical order in which she is situated as a refugee, as bare life. However, the sequence revealing her pregnancy has to be read alongside the references to Abu Ghraib, the citations of artwork, and the images of foot-and-mouth disease. These latter references form the background/foreground and strive for a meaning that history has

lost. However, the seesawing between visibility and invisibility that the film sets up through this interplay between the background and the foreground is nothing other than the logic of the allegorical sign, which shares its structure of meaning with the fetish.

Allegory's claims are transhistorical insofar as its insights depend on the particular material and historical condition in which it is read. Since all the references and cross-references made visible in the film individually allude to certain historical specificities, if we read alterity—both as fetish and as allegorical sign—as being on a par with these other references, two key insights become visible through the representation of race. First, race and gender are as deeply historical materialist categories as art and biopolitics. Not only do they refer to specific historical places and specific material realities but they simultaneously refer to all bodies everywhere, if one refuses the particularization that discourses of race and gender effect on bodies. The particularization and its refusal need to be thought about simultaneously, such is the paradox of reading race allegorically. Second, since the mass of references actually negates a specific historical reality (they risk allegory's descent into meaninglessness), alterity is the historical materialist reality par excellence in the film as it provides a cohesive center around which the other signs circulate. The film constructs difference through a discourse about immigration and about biopolitics, so the juxtaposition of Abu Ghraib, animal cruelty, Michelangelo, and the *Pietà* challenges us to read race and biopolitics more broadly: to think through, for example, the relationship between valorizing the human body and subjecting it to torture, burning animals who have become unprofitable and human bodies whose production is seen to be aberrant.⁴³ Allegory's claims are transhistorical, and when alterity is caught within its system of signs, it marks the transience of our own historical embeddedness, a double recognition that categories of difference regulating human organization and politics are as temporary and as transient as all historical artifacts. But also, alterity-as-biopolitics is a kind of traumatic sign that persists across history, and its meaning is often concealed, hidden from view. If it is true that, as Benjamin said, “allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” then in

this film alterity, as an allegorical sign, stands in for historical time and for materiality itself.⁴⁴

Coda: “A World of Secret Affinities”

I would like to close by commenting on my own reading practice in this essay and by clarifying certain conclusions that had to be taken as assumptions to demonstrate them. Regarding *materiality*, I hope the essay serves as a reminder that multiple senses of this term need to be considered simultaneously: not only matter (corporeal and other matter) but also the terms of its signification; not only relations of production (labor) but also the structures of their institutional realities (law). Material relations cannot be disassociated from their seemingly dematerialized significations, as Marx’s and Engels’s epigraph to this essay makes clear.⁴⁵ Marx suggests in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that if capitalism has perverted the process by which humanity makes its world, such that the apparatuses of production stand over and against the producers, then it is precisely this condition that makes possible our recognition of our alienated existence.⁴⁶

For his part, Benjamin sought to isolate the forms of such recognitions in the detritus of history—both its material fragments as well as the theories of meaning making that form and are formed by them. In one of the earliest iterations of *The Arcades Project*, “The Arcades of Paris” (1929), Benjamin writes of the arcades: “A world of secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hair dryer and Venus de Milo. . . . These items on display are a rebus; and [how] one ought to read here the birdseed kept in the fixative-pan from a darkroom, the flower seeds beside the binoculars, the broken screws atop the musical score, and the revolver above the goldfish bowl—is right on the tip of one’s tongue.”⁴⁷ *The Arcades Project*, at its very outset, was concerned with formulating a reading practice that would emerge out of the material fragments of modernity itself. In the process, Benjamin consistently returned to his ideas from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in his reading of the secret affinities between material objects. If there is something we can learn from Benjamin’s reading of the arcades and allegory and the cinematic

strategies of *Children of Men* for our own readings of alterity, it is a recognition that we have always been reading alterity through allegorical procedures. Racial difference, for example, can be rendered an allegorical sign because the rebus that is alterity always comes overdetermined with significance. So while there is something inevitably allegorical in the way we read signs of difference, allegory is simultaneously the narrative and cinematic mode that can provide us with historical materialist insight into alterity.

Such insight does not come free of risks. The film risks fetishizing difference and repeating the worst set of racist meanings through the constellations it brings together (e.g., the black body linked to animals, Arabs persistently linked to militancy). Yet such gambles are unavoidable and intrinsic to the allegorical mode, whose very nature resists delimiting the chain of correspondence in advance. In Theodor Adorno's 1931 inaugural lecture at Frankfurt University, "The Actuality of Philosophy," which relied on Benjamin's study of allegory, he writes, "The task of [philosophy] [*Wissenschaft*] is not to explore the concealed or manifest intentional structures of reality, but to interpret the intentionless character of reality, insofar as, by constructing figures and images [*Bilder*] out of the isolated elements of reality, it extracts [*aufhebt*] the questions which it is the further task of inquiry to formulate in the most pregnant fashion possible."⁴⁸ This is not a call for a new objectivity, in the sense of a disinterested positivism, but the philosophical result of Adorno's commitment to the nonidentity of the object, to its difference with respect to the concept that seeks to exhaust it. Figures and images, or constellations, within reality allow us real insight into our material world, because intention has not fixed in advance the meanings of the figure or constellation. Such an assemblage is not reducible to a concept but gives rein to a line of questioning. Adorno distributed typescript copies of his lecture to Benjamin, Kracauer, and Ernst Bloch.⁴⁹ In Kracauer's film theory and reflections on photography, his emphasis on the contingency, unpredictability, and indeterminacy of the material (and, for him, photographic) aspects of the cinematic apparatus correlates with ideas in Adorno's lecture. After all, as Hansen makes clear in her brilliant introduction to Kracauer's *Theory of*

Film, “What is at stake is the possibility of a ‘split-second meaninglessness,’ as the placeholder of an otherness that resists unequivocal understandings and total subsumption. What is also at stake is the ability of the particular, the detail, the incident, to take on a life of its own, to precipitate processes in the viewer that may not be entirely controlled by the film.”⁵⁰ Cinema, in other words, may be one technology that presents to us the “intentionless character of reality” in spite of the techniques of control (editing, narrative movement, and, in our times, digital intervention) the medium must deploy. In *Children of Men* this fundamental “otherness that resists unequivocal understandings and total subsumption” takes the form of racial and gender alterity, where a confrontation with the otherness of the signified calls forth cinematic strategies as diverse as the chase or fetishistic scopophilia. But such otherness may just as easily take other forms; race, gender, and the biopolitical order that links them do not exhaust the question of alterity or materiality. The line of questioning the film opens up about race, biopolitics, and gender remains a tangent to the narrative closure its ending provides, and this tangent is precisely the sort of phenomenon that Kracauer in his reading of film, Benjamin in his reading of allegory and the arcades, and Adorno in his critique of philosophy required of a materialist aesthetic or a historical materialist reading practice.

Notes

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1. Infertility is located here in women’s bodies specifically, rather than in men’s bodies. In the film, a character, Jasper (Michael Caine), notes how melancholy the world has become since women have stopped giving birth. He asks, “Why are women infertile? Why can’t we make babies anymore?”

2. For a historical-philosophical account of echolalias and their afterlife in language, see Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (New York: Zone, 2005).
3. Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.
4. Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2007), 23; emphasis original.
5. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 158; emphasis original.
6. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 66.
7. For an elaboration of this dynamic in Hollywood cinema, see Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
8. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 71.
9. See Rey Chow, "From Biopower to Ethnic Difference," in *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1–18.
10. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998). In yet another understanding of "material," one that remains within the orbit of the textual, Paul de Man writes of allegory that it "is material or materialistic because its dependence on the letter, on the literalism of the letter, cuts it off sharply from symbolic and aesthetic syntheses." See de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, ed. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 68.
11. See Laurel Braswell, "The Visionary Voyage in Science Fiction and Medieval Allegory," *Mosaic* 14 (1981): 125–42.
12. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 72.
13. Slavoj Žižek, commentary, *Children of Men*, DVD (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2007). Also see Slavoj Žižek, "The Clash of Civilizations at the End of History," *Children of Men*, DVD, www.childrenofmen.net/slavoj.html (accessed 21 May 2009).

14. Miriam Bratu Hansen, introduction to Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, xxviii.
15. Žižek, DVD commentary, *Children of Men*. For a transcription of Žižek's remarks, see Jodi Dean, "Žižek and Children of Men," I Cite, jdeanicate.typepad.com/i_cite/2006/12/zizek_and_child.html (accessed 21 May 2009).
16. Kim Voynar, "Interview: Children of Men Director Alfonso Cuarón," Cinematical, 25 December 2006, www.cinematical.com/2006/12/25/interview-children-ofmen-director-alfonso-cuaron.
17. On allegorical slippage, see Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*; Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964); Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974); and Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).
18. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 184.
19. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin; or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 2000), 4–5.
20. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 42.
21. "Whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 170.
22. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 228.
23. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 6.
24. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 176.
25. There is an extensive archive of work on the gaze spanning cinema studies, visual culture, and literary criticism that I am bracketing here. Much of this work focuses on the location of the viewer and on the dynamics of power inherent in the act of looking. I am more interested here in how visibility itself is

- organized, and also in how cinematic strategies solicit particular reading and seeing practices.
26. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.
27. See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Janice Boddy, *Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
28. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Mani, *Contentious Traditions*.
29. See Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror," in *Women's Studies on the Edge*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 81–114. For a discussion of the conjuncture between the feminist majority and the George W. Bush regime during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, see the epilogue to Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 189–200. Mahmood's work demonstrates that if feminism is complicit in imperialism, it also comes with a tradition of working against its liberal deployment.
30. One of the insights of these debates is that the liberal understanding of freedom underscores a whole spectrum of political projects, from neoconservative global interventionism to academic projects that seek out moments of resistance, disruption, and opposition to domination in their object of study. In addition to the works cited above, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman, *Feminism beside Itself* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
31. Evan Henerson, "Clive Owen Embarks on a Mission to Ensure Humanity's Survival," *Daily News*, www.dailynews.com/entertainment/ci_4866854 (accessed 23 July 2008).
32. For an alternate reading of the opacity of the black female body in cultural politics, see Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*:

Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

33. See, for example, Anthony Appiah's essay, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 21–37; and Stuart Hall, *Race: The Floating Signifier*, videorecording (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2002).
34. The phrase is from W. E. B. Du Bois's 1897 essay, "The Conservation of Races," in *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 73–85.
35. On bare life, see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
36. Hall makes this point most explicitly in *Race*.
37. The ambivalent position of Kee as a fetish and a stand-in for humanity is in keeping with the logic of cinematic visual pleasure as analyzed by Laura Mulvey. See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 199.
38. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 368–69 (J80,2; J80a,1).
39. In a letter to Benjamin, Adorno explains the process thus: "The alienated things are hollowed out and thereby come to acquire encoded meanings. Subjectivity appropriates these meanings by introducing intentional experiences of desire and anxiety into them. . . . Dialectical images are constellations between alienated things and injected meanings, resting in a moment of indifference between death and meaning." Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 114–15.

40. Walter Benjamin, *1938–1940*, vol. 4 of *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003), 183. Translation modified from “the commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension.” I am returning to an earlier translation that foregrounds visibility. See Walter Benjamin, Lloyd Spencer, and Mark Harrington, “Central Park,” *New German Critique*, no. 34 (1985): 52.
41. In fact, “allegory is the armature of modernity.” Benjamin, *1938–1940*, 183.
42. Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.
43. The foot-and-mouth disease caused flulike symptoms in livestock but was not fatal except in newborn animals. It made the animals less profitable since the milk (which did not carry the virus) was reduced and the meat could not be sold. It is also known to infect humans very rarely, and if people were infected, human symptoms rarely progressed beyond a cold sore. The government had a vaccine to combat the virus, along with proposed quarantine plans, but burning the animals was considered a less expensive solution. See Jonathan Freedland, “A Catalogue of Failures That Discredits the Whole System: There Must Be Public Inquiry into the Foot and Mouth Saga,” *Guardian*, 16 May 2001, www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/may/16/footandmouth.comment; and Emily Padfield, “Foot and Mouth Symptoms,” *Farmers Weekly Interactive*, 9 December 2007, www.fwi.co.uk/Articles/2007/09/12/105713/foot-and-mouth-symptoms.html (accessed 23 July 2009).
44. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.
45. Robert Young’s critique of poststructuralist readings of race, in favor of a conception of race based on an understanding of the division of labor, remains a necessary and cautionary account. However, an understanding of materiality in the *classically* Marxian sense cannot account for the powerful effect of race’s “obvious” inscription and its cultural and aesthetic signification. As Frantz Fanon reminds us, one must “stretch” Marx when discussing race. Benjamin’s emphasis on materialist aesthetics itself requires “stretching” and has received surprisingly little play in the extensive discussions on the truth of race. See Robert Young, “The Linguistic Turn, Materialism, and Race: Toward

- an Aesthetics of Crisis,” *Callaloo* 24 (2001): 334–45; and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 40.
46. See Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1988), especially the section “Estranged Labor,” 65–84.
47. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 874 (a°3); also see 540 (R2,3).
48. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, letter to Theodor Adorno, 17 July 1931, in Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 9; and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 32.
49. Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 10n2.
50. Hansen, introduction, xxxi.

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Figure 13. Kee reveals her pregnancy, *Children of Men* (2006)

