

THE SPACE BETWEEN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SEMIOTIC INTERPLAY BETWEEN CINEMA AND  
LITERATURE AS IS PRESENT THROUGH LANDSCAPE IN *CHILDREN OF MEN*

By

Austin Haley Shaw

Submitted in Partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in  
the Department of English  
Texas Christian University  
Fort Worth, Texas

05/07/2018

THE SPACE BETWEEN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SEMIOTIC INTERPLAY BETWEEN CINEMA AND  
LITERATURE AS IS PRESENT THROUGH LANDSCAPE IN *CHILDREN OF MEN*

Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: A. Layne Craig, Ph.D.

Department of English

Bonnie Blackwell, Ph.D.

Department of English

Kimberly Owczarski, Ph.D.

Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media

### ABSTRACT

Film and literature have fascinated audiences for as long as each respective form has been available, but often times for differing reasons. Whereas each form has intricate and unique ways of conveying imagery, crafting narrative, and exposing realities about our world, both mediums are incredibly distinct from one another. Because of these differences, finding similarities that give equal merit to both art forms can be an arduous task. Fortunately, by looking at the ways each medium approaches landscape through the lens of semiotic theory, a level foundation emerges that reveals the unique ways each medium is able to engage with place. By assessing the specific methods prevalent in P.D James's 1992 novel *The Children of Men* and Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men*, film and literature will display their unique ways of interacting with the inherent gap understood through semiotic theory. Eventually this will reveal literature and film's unique ways of communication as well as their ability to allow readers and viewers to insert their own experiences into a specific text and interpret the semiotic discourse for themselves.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2 – Semiotics: The languages of Film and Literature .....	11
Chapter 3 - Landscape.....	23
Chapter 4 - Children of Men .....	36
Chapter 5 – Conclusion .....	51
Works Cited.....	53

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Film and literature have fascinated audiences for as long as each respective form has been available. Because each medium is able to transport an audience from the mundane daze found in every day normalcy to another world, through the placement of a beautifully framed shot or a beautifully composed sentence of description, film and literature will continue to fascinate audiences for many years to come. However, though most readers love their books and viewers love their films, a discrepancy arises when a film is created from a book (or vice versa). Phrases such as “they left too many important parts out” or “I just really think the book captured the emotions better” seem to be common and can even be considered to be a natural response. Unfortunately, when combined with language such as “tampering” or “interference”, the attitude surrounding adaptations, “give the whole process an air of deeply sinister molestation” (McFarlane 12). The dialogue that has arisen from these feelings has created a rift between literary and cinematic forms and a rivalry has ensued.

Such attitudes towards cinematic adaptations of books have not been ignored by members of critical and academic circles, and are explored fully in Teresa Heffernan’s article titled “When the Movie is Better Than the Book: Fight Club, Consumption, and Vital Signs”. Though Heffernan’s thesis proves too strong for our own study due to her claims of superiority of film over books in certain instances, her initial observations of the perception of film adaptations proves helpful. Referencing both Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon, Heffernan states that “film versions are often dismissed with morally loaded language and accused of betrayal, bastardization and infidelity” (Heffernan 91). What Heffernan observes is that theatre-goers are often unsatisfied after experiencing the adaptation of an originally literary text due to

what Brian McFarlane describes as fidelity criticism. Fidelity criticism's predominant tenets depend on the reader of a text expecting a "single, correct 'meaning' which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with." (McFarlane 8). Because of viewers' expectations that a film subscribe to their own singular impression of the story, they often leave the theatre disappointed by the results. Heffernan observed this reality and argues that film should not be seen through the lens of fidelity, but instead through "questions of remediation, mutation, creative reinvention, translation, and intertextuality" (91). Although there is an underlying desire in her research to see film as an independent medium and artistic form, Heffernan still subscribes to theories of adaptation, creating an inseparable linkage between literature and film.

However, to consider a film as a direct interpretation of a book or the book as a direct adaptation of a film would be to discredit each medium in their own respective methods of storytelling and the language associated with doing so. Film and written language each employ a plethora of tactics that construct the innate language present within each medium used to convey their stories and ideas. Arguably, each text is equal in its ability to construct the same ideas, themes, conversations, scenes, etc. and thus to compare the two is to undermine the intricate language developed through each craft that sets it apart as a unique creative medium. Instead, in looking at ways to engage in discussion concerning each medium, understanding the nuances of each medium is foundational. One lens provides insight into many of the key distinctions between these mediums: semiotics. Semiotics is a theoretical framework through which to analyze languages (in whatever fashion that is defined). In order to embark on an understanding of the differences between film and literature, we will first explore the

foundational concepts of semiotics and its application to literary and cinematic theory.

Secondly, we will look at the resulting interpretations this lens can provide through the analysis of landscape and its role in both literature and film. Finally, after engaging with each of these theoretical frameworks, specific analysis of *The Children of Men* by P.D James and *Children of Men* directed by Alfonso Cuarón will serve as a platform through which we can apply the previously described concepts. Before engaging in thorough discussion on the matter, a brief synopsis of each section should allow for an idea of the direction of the paper and key ideas to consider while reading.

## **Semiotics**

The topic of semiotics, its application, and the methods of interpreting these ideas are complex to say the least, but when given proper treatment, are quite informative in deepening our understanding of both film and literature. By looking at the foundational principles set forth by the integral theorist of the subject, Ferdinand De Saussure (as well as individuals who have interpreted the meaning of these functions) semiotics emerges as a way to understand each respective linguistic form and the ways they interact with their surrounding environments. Saussure's establishment of the linguistic sign and its basis for understanding the inherent space within semiotic systems is integral to the foundation of this body of research.

As will be seen, the concept of semiotics was used by Saussure predominantly to describe the field of literature and to understand the interaction of written language with our surrounding environment. However, since Saussure's initial observations, research, and analysis, the same concepts have been applied to a variety of other fields including, most

important for our purposes, the field of film. In this new and inventive way of thinking about the concept of semiotics, theorist Christian Metz was able to successfully analyze the various elements of semiotic theory as applied to literature and shift its application smoothly to that of the cinema. Nevertheless, this shift is contested by critics such as James Monaco who claim that “Film is not a language... but film is very much *like* language” (152). Such have been the two predominant stances on the semiotic status of film since these concepts were first introduced. Perhaps though, through this research, it will become more clear that although the semiotic discourse of the cinema operates rather differently than literature, it can still be considered a merited, full-fledged, semiotic practice.

### **Landscape**

Many elements of both film and literature would have provided a good focus for this study, but landscape is, by far, the most applicable for the specific semiotic issues present in our analysis. Landscape will be seen through a broader lens than is typically provided by the traditional picturesque impression often associated with the term landscape. Instead, landscape will be seen as an inherently semiotic form itself. By drawing on research from John Jackson, Paul Groth, Svend Erik Larsen, and others that detail the history of landscape and its interaction with various societies and cultures, landscape will embody a way for a reader or viewer to infuse their own experiences with a particular type of place with the landscapes provided by a film or literary work. Because of individual interactions with place external to the story world of the film or book, interpretations of various landscapes will have different meanings and implications for different audience members. In effect, we will be able to identify

a form of semiotic expression contained within a medium that is dependent on its own forms of semiotic expression. Not only will this concentrate our focus on the very specific manners through which literature and film interact with an audience, but it will also make the theories imbedded within semiotic theory more accessible and easily understood.

### **Children of Men**

*The Children of Men*, originally a 1992 novel by P.D James and then a 2006 film directed by Alfonso Cuarón, is a dystopian story set in an age where infertility has become a worldwide phenomenon and has severely threatened the extinction of the human race. Theo, the protagonist in each version, comes into contact with the first woman to be pregnant in the world in over fifteen years. As he learns of this phenomenon that has the potential to rescue their society from its downfall, Theo becomes invested in a small group of revolutionaries secretly working to save the baby and keep it away from the government. The story in both texts capitalizes on similar themes such as fear, our role as citizens, and the dynamics of trust between people. Both the film and the book explore these themes through Theo's internal and external conflicts. Apart from the similar broad overarching plot piece, some character names, and dystopian themes, there is very little that is similar between these two texts.

One major distinction to be noted is the attitude towards the political structures in place during literary and cinematic interpretations of the story. James constructs a culture where the government requires fertilization testing, and also mandates state-sanctioned suicide for anyone once they turn 60. It is a grim world, and the government is constantly treated as a force that is as corrupt as the dystopian aesthetic. However, though this sets the backdrop of

the story, James eventually focuses on how individual people behave under such a political structure as is seen through the character Rolf, a member of the revolutionary group the Five Fishes, who leaves the group to tell the governmental powers about Julian and the baby. This causes the finale of the book to focus on Julian, Theo, and Miriam (the midwife) as they flee from the government until the baby is born.

The film also establishes a corrupt governmental structure, but its approach is much more subtle than the novel. In the *mise-en-scène* there are billboards that inform the reader of the mandated government fertility testing, but in most regards, there is not an immediate threat from the government as is the case in the book. Instead, Theo and the Fishes are proactively fleeing the country so that there is no chance for the baby to be born into the control of the state. In this way, the film focuses on an inherent distrust of all governmental structures whereas the novel is more concerned with the behavior of people within a corrupt governmental structure.

## Chapter 2: Semiotics The languages of Film and Literature

In its most basic form, the study of semiotics is the study of the life and meaning of the signs and symbols that are created, constructed, and conveyed within the context of a particular society. In our world, we are surrounded by objects, places, and things, but we need a way to describe these items. Language was developed in part to describe our surrounding environments. Some might argue that language and speech were natural traits to humanity from its origin, but “no one has proved that speech... is entirely natural” (De Saussure 10). This is important because it shows that, at some point in time, humans were forced to create an unnatural method to describe our surrounding environment. By exploring this phenomenon, semiotics finds its most useful purpose. In order to understand the different ways humans have chosen to interpret our natural surroundings, we must study language and its construction. Semiotics tackles this task, and De Saussure even goes so far as to claim this study as one of “science” that is unique and distinct from all other institutions because semiotic systems “show up clearly only in language” (De Saussure 17). Throughout his work, De Saussure works at “setting up the science of language” allowing the ideas imbedded within semiotics to be observed, measured, analyzed, and assessed based on the functionality and effectiveness present within the context of the particular language system (17). And in doing so, De Saussure lays out methods, approaches, and interpretations through which to assess semiotics as it is present in language.

One incredibly elementary example of this concept can be seen through the example of a stoplight. Across the United States, we have decided that when the light at a stoplight shines red, we will inherently stop our cars. Yet In its purest form, there is nothing implicit in the color

red that directly means anything related to stopping a motorized vehicle. Nevertheless, as a society, we have taken the color red and created and constructed an understood meaning to stop our cars when this color is seen within the context of a traffic light. We have taken the color red - a phenomenon in our surrounded, shared, cultural experience - and provided it with the arbitrary meaning of "stopping." Though painful consequences would occur if one were to ignore the message presented by the red of a stoplight, it is only due to the correlation between red and the action of stopping that has been so tightly linked together that we think to stop our cars at the sight of the color red.

One initial reaction to the example provided above might be that light and color in and of itself is not language; a working definition of language that looks at the variety of implications and nuances associated with such a vague word, may then be useful. For the sake of simplicity in this portion of our analysis and in understanding the current focus (semiotics), language should be understood as "a system of signs that express ideas" (De Saussure 16). This means that language should not be restricted to the idea of things such as Spanish, German, French, or English. Instead, as shown by De Saussure's definition, language should be seen as a system of expression. In doing so, the precise methodology of how the expression occurs is not a primary concern. In other words, simply the presence of a system is what should emerge as most important rather than what the particular system may be. As will be explored later, this allows for the examination of many methods to be seen as case studies for a semiotic lens which, for this project, will be accomplished by examining the semiotic study of the cinema.

For now, in returning to the definition of language (a system of signs that express ideas), two operating parts emerge that give facility to the language. First, there is the idea of a

“system of signs” which denote the compilation of various words, objects, shapes, etc. that hold and evoke a specific meaning and understanding. Second, there are the “expressed ideas” that are brought to mind because of the use of a particular sign. De Saussure goes on to provide a further interpretation of these two operative pieces, giving them the more precise titles of “signifier” and “signified”, the signifier being the word, or symbol used to suggest a “signified” meaning. Together, the signifier and the signified work to create one symbol or, as De Saussure calls it, a “linguistic sign” (66). In his own analysis, De Saussure uses the example of a symphony to describe the idea conveyed by “signifier” and “signified”.. Stating that language (and by default, the linguistic sign) “is comparable to a symphony in that what the symphony actually is stands completely apart from how it is performed” (De Saussure 18). In this example, the idea of the symphony expressed through written markings on a piece of sheet music does not at all help an audience hear or imagine the music that one particular symphony will decide to play. Instead, the symphony (operating as a signifier in this example) serves as an expression of the music through a written language whereas the music that is being played by a particular symphony and is heard by audiences becomes the implicit understanding for what the symbol seeks to explain. By taking a linguistic sign and analyzing each specific part, its meaning, effectiveness, and interpretations, one engages in the study of semiotics, and doing so can offer incredible insight into a culture’s understanding of the world.

Returning to the example of the stoplight used above with the application of our new terminology, the red light shining at an intersection would be considered the signifier, and the understood interpretation and reaction of stopping your vehicle would represent the signified meaning. As can be seen, the two pieces of this linguistic sign are tightly interlinked, and it

becomes difficult to separate the signifier from its designated signified meaning. In fact, the two are “intimately united, and each one recalls the other” (De Saussure 66). It would seem that the signifier and signified are so closely related to each other that, for instance, the color blue could never be used for the sake of stopping cars at a stoplight, but another fundamental concept contained within the study of linguistic signs is that, with very minimal exceptions, signs are traditionally completely arbitrary.

Because language was constructed in response to a need to describe our environment and surroundings, at base value the “linguistic sign is arbitrary” (De Saussure 67). There will always be an inherent gap between a word or symbol chosen to describe the environment and the thing it describes. Though not described explicitly by De Saussure, this phenomenon is experienced any time a natural phenomenon, emotion, or event occurs that, as an individual you are unable to describe. In a hypothetical world, even if one individual had complete knowledge of a particular language and its vocabulary, according to the principles set forth by De Saussure, there will still always be a gap between their surrounding world and their ability to be descriptive about it. At this point, knowing first that a linguistic sign is “intimately united” but also that it is “arbitrary” may present some confusion. However, these two seemingly contradictory statements do not make the idea of semiotics irrelevant or ineffective. Yet again, De Saussure points out that despite the fact that language is arbitrary, “the community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language” (De Saussure 71). We are bound to language and the need to describe our surroundings. But because we are limited by needing to use linguistic system, semiotics offers a way to rectify the inherent gap

between language and our surroundings and allows for a deeper understanding of these systems.

Literature then, as a medium in service to the governing force of semiotics, undoubtedly has inherent gaps present in its words and its pages. Despite even the best writing, authors are dependent on the reader having experienced something in their own life that is relatable to the elements in their scene regardless of how well details or descriptions of people, places, or events are conveyed. For instance, in P.D James's novel *The Children of Men*, she places a moment of description that says, "From the back window I can look out over the small walled garden with its single silver birch tree" (James 31). In many regards, this is a fairly descriptive sentence in the way it describes the view from the window having one singular birch tree visible through the window pane. However, in this example, James supposes the reader knows what a birch tree looks like in order for this description to function as intended. If, for instance, the reader had never seen a birch tree before (and is uninterested in utilizing the beautiful functionality of a Google search) one might instead be tempted to imagine an oak tree, a pine tree, or a more common tree from their own experience. Furthermore, because of the previously described issue of linguistic difference being present because of the inherent attributes of language, even if a reader had experienced a birch tree, it would most likely not be the precise birch tree that the author had imagined. With this in mind, the use of language and specificity within descriptions takes on a unique and creative role.

By using descriptions and details that may not be available to a universal audience, literature allows a reader to take the story, plot, or narrative and insert these pieces into the actual experiences that the reader has had for themselves. Returning to the example of a birch

tree, if a reader had never experienced such a tree before, they would likely not dismiss the image of a tree altogether, but instead fill in the image of a tree that they had experienced in their own life. In fact, my own interpretation upon reading James's description initially was a weeping willow tree that sat beyond the kitchen window at my childhood home. Though a weeping willow tree is not even remotely close in appearance to a birch, this shows that literature has the power to allow readers to apply their own personal experiences in moments where the details and descriptions are not essential to the plot of the narrative in order to make the text much more relatable.

In ways, this could present a possibly vulnerable position as an author. To allow the audience to use their own imagination in the interpretation of your story leads to uncertainty and a proliferation of different interpretations of the text. In turn, audiences may stray too far from the original intent of the work, and thus an inclusion of as many specific details is necessary to attempt to ground the reader within some unified meaning. But, because of this written linguistic form, not every detail will be available to all audience members, and thus an unavoidable aspect of the semiotic form of language emerges. It is through the inherent uncertainty of language that literature is able to fully enter the semiotic space and thus allow the audience to begin crafting their own understanding and interpretation of the text.

De Saussure was clearly aware of this phenomenon, and as a result was primarily concerned with addressing the presence of semiotics in the written form. In part, this was likely due simply to the frequency through which people encounter written and spoken language. But more so, De Saussure understood the power positioned within literature to structure our own thoughts, beliefs, and ideas both as individuals and as a society. Giving consideration to the

theories set forth by Benedict Anderson, a common shared language (of both the spoken and written variety) can reach a point among a particular society where “it becomes equally worthy of study and admiration” by all people of that society (Anderson 71). According to Anderson, when language is used as a common tool in this manner, it can become responsible for something as powerful as shaping nationalist sentiment. Without entering a discussion on nationalism or the various elements entailed in creating such a sentiment, this brief look at Anderson shows why the written and spoken language would have been most available for study by De Saussure. His points in this text (as well as throughout the course of his argument) hold that languages are powerful and if a single system can be responsible for the establishment of a nationalist sentiment in a particular culture, it also has the ability to formulate, create, and express thoughts, ideas, and opinions throughout society.

What becomes even more interesting is that, though the work of De Saussure focused primarily on the written text, analysis and scholarship by critics such as Christian Metz and Bill Scalia have demonstrated appropriate application of the same semiotic theory presented by De Saussure of written language and applied these theories to film. If film has become a common language as Anderson imagined (which, considering that over 1.2 billion movie tickets were sold in the US and Canada in 2017, one must admit some frequency and a ‘common’ acceptance of film in our culture) it would be reasonable to assume that film has the same ability to push a shared ideology among a culture as literature does. As a form of language that is frequently used and consumed by large portions of the public, it can be considered part of the “common language” and because “vernacular languages-of-state assume ever greater power and status,” film has this same ability (Anderson 78). Yet because this discussion is interested in viewing

written language alongside the language of the cinema, it is appropriate to begin examining how the same ideas proposed by De Saussure for written language are as applicable to that of the cinema in terms of its function as productive linguistic mode.

It is largely accepted that words are the written representation of spoken language. As stated above in describing the idea of signifier and signified, the written word would be considered the signifier which shows the signified idea associated with that particular word. This should not be disputed after considering the principles of semiotics and De Saussure's interpretations of the concepts. However, defining film in a linguistic manner can be more arduous. Partially because the mode is multisensory, combining elements of audio with that of a visual production, the medium already requires a more layered approach than literature. Furthermore, with regard to the visual elements, one must consider a vast majority of elements from *mise-en-scène* and the deliberate placement of certain props within a scene to convey meaning to the devices of framing employed by the cinematographer. Because so many different choices are made in a film deliberately to convey some sort of meaning, it is difficult to focus and define one specific strain of the cinematic process that could function independently as a sort-of language.

In beginning to parse through the Ogre-like layers of the cinematic medium, the tenets of auteur theory offer a helpful beginning point. Auteur theory is a framework that attributes the majority of creative vision contained within a film to one individual, usually the director, who usually has a hand in the writing, producing, or some other element of the film. The idea of an auteur was by François Truffaut's writing in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In Truffaut's study, the idea of a "politique des auteurs" came forth which ultimately depended on "choosing the

personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then of assuming that it continues and progresses from one film to the next” (Monaco 410). This morphed into a largely held perception that the director of a film is the single most significant figure in culminating the creative vision for a film, executing the necessary steps for this vision to be expressed. These same ideas were then introduced into the American conversation through the research of Andrew Sarris who initially set forth the notion of the auteur by posing the question, “is it possible to honor a work of art without honoring the artist involved? I think not” (Sarris 503). Sarris then goes on to describe the role of an auteur as a three-stage process that can be imagined as 3 concentric circles. The largest of these circles denotes the technical nuts and bolts of the auteur’s craft, simply exploring whether the films made by an individual are considered “good”. Although this category is largely subjective and difficult to define (as confessed by Sarris himself), the second two qualifications provide a better structure for the role of the auteur. The second of the circles described by Sarris takes the idea of technique a bit more intentionally and looks to see if, over the span of several films, the director has crafted a specific, unique, and personal style. Finally, within both of the previous two qualifications, one must look to see if there is “interior meaning... [that] is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material” (Sarris 513). When meaning and purpose are both instilled into a film through the technical and stylistic decisions of the director and this same technique is used across a span of the director’s films, an auteur emerges, placing him or her as the guiding voice behind the film and its meaning (much like an author in their novel or an artist in their painting).

Though an interesting concept (and one that seems to instruct the way we study film, determines what films are important to watch, and helps to craft a canon of cinematic pieces) auteur theory is certainly not without its critics. For instance, André Bazin (a French film critic) stated that the “cinema is less individualistic an art than painting or literature” (Qtd. by Sarris 503). Bazin’s impression underscores much of what many critics of Auteur theory are concerned with; placing too much of the creative credit in the director’s corner. However, regardless of whether or not you accept the notions associated with auteur theory, what is clear and agreed upon by most is that there is a distinct creative aesthetic present within a film. Whether or not this presentation is attributed to the director or to the summation of the cast and crew that produce a film is seemingly unimportant for this study. Instead, because of the ability of film to provide a visual stimulant showcasing exactly the sort of impression the creator (or creators) hope their audience to experience, the actual process of watching a film can become a more pointed experience for the viewer.

One potential criticism of this idea would be that, if the audience is not allowed to infuse their own ideas and experiences into the cinematic moment, then there is no communicative form present. Furthermore, if film eliminates the effective distance between the communicative language and the viewer’s own personal experience (thus bridging the gap between signifier and sign), there would seem to be no semiotic language present. In fact, James Monaco, an important film theorist (who spent much of his writing interpreting Christian Metz’s application of semiotics to the camera) claims that “Film is not a language in the sense that English, French, or Mathematics is” (Monaco 153). The major reason for the assessment relies on the belief that it “is impossible to be ungrammatical in film” as well as the fact that “it

is not necessary to learn a vocabulary” (Monaco 152). His implications in this phrase are rooted in his observation that even young children that cannot yet speak or communicate have still been known to laugh at and enjoy films and television shows. Monaco uses this phenomenon to jump to the conclusion that because film can be understood by even the smallest human, there must not be a complex, intricate system that must be learned in order to reach a place where understanding film is possible.

Others with less severe interpretations are under the impression that perhaps the same ambiguity and distance present between a signifier its signified object that exists in literature may not be quite as present in the sector of the cinema. Bill Scalia claims that in literary disciplines such as poetry, there is a necessary production of words (or signifiers) that culminate into the final poetic work, signifying ideas in a literary manner. However, Scalia claims that in fields such as film or photography, “the camera is the means of production; in cinema, the camera does this for us” (Scalia 47). Scalia seems to believe that because the camera is physically responsible for capturing the actual images present in photography or film, it somehow bridges a gap between the symbol and symbolized in a greater sense than a production of words from one’s mind would. To give merit to these theories could lead to the conclusion that literature becomes a more reader-centric medium, allowing for a greater sense of freedom for the reader to interpret their own ideas of a text than would be available for film. Furthermore, because of a greater richness of a full-scale semiotic language, literature would possibly emerge as a more sophisticated medium. However, what this argument would assume is that film must operate in the same manner as literature in order to be considered a full-scale semiotic language. Instead, what simply happens is that the language of film simply does not

operate in the same way as literature. Thus the two mediums must be seen as different but with equally valid semiotic models that simply enact different ways of communicating meaning and ideas. The seeming bridge created by the presence of a visual element in film simply allows for other ways of communicating in the medium that simply aren't possible due to the constraints of the literary form.

Each of these scholars who subscribe to the idea that film does not contain the same semiotic sophistication as literature is answered by the foundational principles presented by Christian Metz, a theorist equally as important to the application of semiotic theory to cinema as De Saussure was to its application in literature. Again, although the ideas presented by Monaco and Scalia are sound in many regards, by redefining the framework through which we understand the semiotics of the camera, their arguments become more shaky. Monaco in particular comes closest in cracking Metz's foundation by claiming that in fact the "signifier and the signified are almost identical: the sign of cinema is a short-circuit sign" (Monaco 158). A common thread between each of these critics of the strength of the semiotic theory of cinema is simply that, because much of what the camera accomplishes is nearly identical to what in literature would be considered the signified object, there is really no language present to be able to learn. However, what these scholars are forgetting is that the degree to which the arbitrariness of the signifier (or the gap between the signifier and the signified) is present is not ultimately the overarching issue. Regardless of the system and whose theories are being drawn upon, there will be some portion of gap between the signifier and the signified. Furthermore, what is even more important (especially for the specific purposes of this study) is how the language system that employs the usage of signifiers operate differently from one another,

thus understanding why the language of film is actually a legitimate impression becomes critical.

Metz's ideas offer a way to incorporate the ideas of semiotics in a way that makes our analysis relevant. In his analysis, Metz claims that the "signs" of cinema are as significant and of equal merit as a linguistic structure. He states that a film shot is the smallest unit of measurement that can be made in a film, but adds, this shot does not directly correlate to the same impression as a word would signify in a sentence, line of poetry, or phrase of prose. Instead, the shot operates as a "statement" (Metz 81). He then goes on to describe this theory through the example of the filmic image of a revolver. A frame of the gun does not initially relate to the specific word "revolver". Instead, it causes the audience to respond to the image with a thought similar to "this is a revolver" (Metz 81). Understanding this distinction is critical because it places the specific shot of the revolver as the signifier. Because the one isolated shot causes some sort of interpreted understanding, the shot in and of itself operates as a signifier. This is no different than the word "revolver" written in textual form were to evoke the image in a reader's mind of a short black gun. Again, the primary critique of this belief would be that because the signifier is of a visual medium, it removes some variety of ambiguity associated with the resulting image. In a written form, the word "revolver" can evoke the image for one reader of a short metallic gun and for another reader the image of a wood-handled gun with a black barrel and a metallic hammer. However, in this instance, the point of ambiguity does not lie in how one interprets the frame as a gun or not a gun, but rather, what the context surrounding the gun may be. For instance, if the cinematographer chose to show the revolver with a high-angle shot, it would be up to the interpretation of the audience to know that,

typically, a high-angle shot is used to show the inferiority of the object or person being described. However, this idea of a high-angle shot being what is used to denote the inferiority is as arbitrary to filmmakers construction of the “language” of cinema as a word would be to the English language. For this reason, if we return to the original definition provided for language, “a system of signs that express ideas” (De Saussure 16), film and the usage of the camera is no different than written language.

Because film satisfies the two functional components of language - being a system of signs that has a shared, understood meaning and interpretation –then film can be as prestigious a medium as literature. The world of the story is crafted to reflect the implicitly understood meaning (and is therefore arbitrary) and thus the language of film is able to be analyzed through the lens of semiotics. In a paper focusing on how the semiotic language of the cinema compares to the semiotic language of literature, being able to understand film through this approach is quite obviously a necessary facet to the argument. Although some scholars would disagree with this interpretation, claiming film to simply be “very much like language,” to Metz, film is a language (Monaco 152)

To conclude the discussion of semiotics, the role of both film and literature’s distinct functions are the subject of the paper’s future analysis. To summarize, the distance in semiotic space in film has been seen by some as less than that of literature. Though film can be considered more denotative in some ways than literature, the different operations of the medium that simply aren’t present in literature (such as camera technique) offer a different space for semiotic interpretation. Because of the differing methods of constructing meaning in film, it can be considered an equally sophisticated source for semiotic analysis as literature.

Up until now, much of this paper has focused on a clarification of why film should be considered alongside literature as an equally merited text. However, in carrying on with our discussion, we must remember that literature is also an equal piece of my analysis. As such, in moving forward into sections concerning landscape, specific analysis of *Children of Men* (both the film and literature versions), and a discussion of the effectiveness of each text's unique form of communication, the status of both film and literature must remain at the forefront of the conversation. Instead of using the lens of a semiotic system to discredit one method or another, this paper will provide a deeper and more robust understanding of the practical functions present in both film and literature. This will hopefully lead to a more informed community of readers and audiences who will respond to each text appropriately due to a knowledge of a difference of each system.

### Chapter 3 – Landscape

No thanks to the arbitrariness of language, at the mention of the term “landscape” many various impressions may come to mind. Whether rolling green hills that extend as far as the setting sun, a warm, calming, pastoral setting, or bone-chilling mountain range, landscape tends to evoke emotions of calmness that place a reader, audience member, or consumer of whatever media form is in use into a state of nature. Furthermore, we also tend associate images of expanse with a sense of grandeur alongside these ideas, leaving a small and quite narrow interpretation of what might qualifies as landscape. Due to this discrepancy of understanding about the true nature of landscape, our analysis will provide a new and expanded definition of this term as well as provide insight into the way it operates through the mediums of literature and film. In doing so we will discover that landscape is much more than simply expansive, nature images, as it is truly an interactive element in any context to the story being told, is arbitrary in much the same way as other semiotic forms thus making it well-suited for our analysis, and interactive with characters and events that construct a story.

A helpful place to begin our conversation of landscape is perhaps at the point where much of the confusion arises. The most common dictionary definition that encompasses landscape reads that it is “a portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance” (Jackson 3). As can be quickly inferred, this definition is riddled with issues, vagueness being one of the most prevalent. However, in the way that we most commonly understand landscape, one of the most frequently quoted landscape descriptions in circulation (at least at the time of Jackson’s analysis during the early 1980’s) according to Malcolm Andrews comes from John Milton’s *L’Allegro*.

“Right against the eastern gate,  
 Where the great Sun begins his state,  
 Rob'd in flames, and amber light,  
 The clouds in thousand liveries dight.  
 While the ploughman near at hand,  
 Whistles o'er the furrow'd land,  
 And the milkmaid singeth blithe,  
 And the mower whets his scythe,  
 And every shepherd tells his tale”

As can be seen in this passage, the usage of words such as land, eastern, mower, and shepherd set an overwhelming tone of a pastoral landscape while the lack of action (in a sense that would propel any sort of story forward) allows this scene to operate effectively as a singular picture. As was described above, it is not hard to imagine an expansive scene through this description, nor would it be unreasonable to feel a sense of beauty, serenity, or quaintness from the passage. In this regard, this passage from *L'Allegro* would certainly conform to the traditional norms associated with “landscape”: however, a more useful word to describe this subsection of landscape can be found in the more accurate term “picturesque”.

“Picturesque” contains implications of “beauty, pretty, or quaint[ness]” and can be applicable to any sort of nice, peaceful scene such as “a thatched cottage, a gnarled fisherman mending his net” or other similar scenes such as the one described by Milton that, as the title would imply, might make a nice picture (Andrews vii). Although picturesque can certainly be used to describe some sorts of landscape scenes, it is insufficient to encompass the full extent

of the word. With this in mind, a new working definition will be explored that will be more useful in understanding the proper treatment of landscape across all art and communicative forms, but especially in the ways landscape operates in the Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 rendition of *Children of Men* and its 1992 literary counterpart *The Children of Men* by P.D James.

In its most pure sense, landscape is better understood as an idea rather than as a specific checklist of images that one might imagine to be the backdrop of a passage of description, photo, painting, or other art form. In fact, landscape in many ways functions as a form of semiotic expression much like language or cinema. However, in its most simple form landscape is simply a "three-dimensional shared reality" (Jackson 5). This would include the more picturesque idea of landscape that has become the predominant impression of the word, but can also be a much more generous and inclusive term. Regardless, what makes this definition useful is its distinction between the private and a public audience. According to Jackson's assessment, what makes a landscape truly authenticated is when it is a shared space for a variety of people. This perhaps grinds against a traditional impression of landscape which we associate with typically being void of human impact, or only having limited focus on people. Yet, in a study of landscape, we cannot separate the meaning and significance of landscape without considering the human involvement. For this reason, Jackson sees fit to craft a new definition stating that landscape is "a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence" (Jackson 8). Paul Groth also offers a similar understanding of the utility of landscape by stating that it "reveals the effects of individuals...as well as dominant cultural values" (Groth 7). Clearly, much of the understanding

of the way landscape operates is because of the interactive relationship between the experiences of humans, culture, and society with their surrounding environment.

Thus if we accept these assessments of landscape, it would not be unreasonable to assume that other “-scape” words such as cityscape, townscape, roadscape, and the like, that have somehow been separated as different than landscape, are in fact simply factions that can be assimilated under the presiding “landscape” title. In application, this will force a complete overhaul of the ways landscape should be considered in the contexts of film and literature. For instance, this means that the description of a shopping mall, filled and congested with people dashing from one store to the next, would be as appropriately deemed a landscape as the images described in Milton’s *L’Allegro*.

Though this example might be a bit extreme, the need to derail the entrenched thinking of landscape as serene, pastoral, or rural will be necessary in accepting the primary premise of this paper. *Children of Men*, both the novel and its cinematic counterpart, employ several different types of landscapes throughout the works. Moving from a run-down London cityscape to overgrown, lush forests in the book, and from a similar forest setting to post-apocalyptic crumbling cities in the film, landscape can be seen crossing the expectations of traditional notions of “landscape” in both literature and cinematic forms. In order to help dismiss the preconceived notions we might have towards the term “landscape,” several theorists will provide insight into the way landscape can serve a more diverse role in our mediums.

One impression of landscape that may seem contrary to our traditional understanding of the term is found in that of a war zone. Svend Erik Larsen addresses the way war zones specifically underlie the presiding term of landscape. In doing so, Larsen first crafts a definition

of landscape similar to that which we have already described, saying “Landscapes always contain an appeal to a collective identity; not only in literature, but in all publicly shared symbolic forms” (469). Larsen also subscribes to the ideas described previously that landscape must be considered in conjunction with the influence of humanity upon the land. He uses the World Wars as examples of how a specific place in and of itself is not really the important piece in considering landscape. Because the World Wars took place on a global scale, “we generalize the very notion of space to an abstraction beyond any landscape” (Larsen 470). Generally, Larsen is claiming that landscape does not depend specifically on the place, because what makes landscape significant extends much beyond the physical place. Instead, what becomes most crucial to a landscape is the imagined impression that the place evokes or the notion that we associate with a certain place.

Although Larsen is imagining this principle in the context of war landscapes, these same theoretical principles can easily be applied to landscape as a whole. Imagining that landscape is not so much about a specific physical place but rather about the emotions, feelings, sentiments, and experiences that a characters, readers, or viewers might traditionally associate with place allows for much greater fluidity in the way we understand landscape. In other words, with landscape, what should become more interesting is a focus “on the history of how people have used everyday space” and as such, a powerful use of landscape could range from the backdrop of an empty intersection, a frantic hospital ward, or, in a more traditional sense, an expansive mountain range (Groth 1).

The tendency at this point would be to assume that landscape is thus synonymous with setting. And, in some ways, this might seem logical considering that each of these landscapes

just mentioned could be considered setting, but this could only be the case if it were possible to completely separate human experience from the particular place or landscape in question. In many ways though, quite the opposite is true. In fact, I propose that instead of, what might seem to be true, that all landscape could be considered setting, instead what is more likely is quite the opposite. Regardless, some theorists do in fact attempt this task and define what has been described up until this point as landscape instead as setting and then associating landscape with the more traditional form described previously in this section. Film critic Martin Lefebvre writes that “as long as natural space in a work is subservient to characters, events and actions, as long as its function is to provide space for them, the work is not properly speaking a landscape” (Lefebvre 4). Unlike the other cited critics up unto this point, Lefebvre expresses exactly the opposite ideas surrounding landscape theory even more strongly: “If the autonomy of represented space is essential in visual arts for the emergence of landscape as a pictorial concept distinct from the mere setting that comprises characters, actions and events, then one might legitimately question dominant cinema’s ability to present landscape” (Lefebvre 4). Without our discussion on the inability to separate landscape from the human experience and the plethora of critics who support the idea of landscape being able to extend beyond an isolated and natural scene, Lefebvre’s assessment might be considered more strongly. If it were possible to separate the place itself from the human interaction and experience with it, landscape might be simply the natural place void of human interaction. However, as it stands, this is not actually possible due to an inherent connection of character experiences (or even personal experiences) to the landscape.

The question now becomes, if landscape is tied to human interaction and alteration, then is landscape susceptible to various interpretations, depending on the contexts and circumstances of a film or literary text, that guide readers or viewers to specific analyses of a particular scene in a film? Larsen identifies four primary stages through which landscapes pass in order to achieve symbolic status. Initially, landscape was, as Lefebvre seems to still believe, simply a physical surrounding. In this stage, it was a “natural resources in their cultivated or natural state” (Larsen 476). However, as humans interact with this landscape, it then became classified as a “geographical and geological entity” (476). Most significant about this stage is predominantly the fact that classification between different types of landscape seems to form based on region. After this classification was enacted, the third stage begins to move landscape into the more theoretical threshold through which we are now looking at it with the “symbolic phenomenon” stage (476) in which Larsen regards the attitude people held towards landscape as “revealing of the intentions or...power of God” (476). This begins to show that interaction between the landscape and people is an intimately intertwined phenomenon which leads into the final stage of landscape being a mental projection. As such, this final stage is responsible for the theoretical frameworks described up until this point in my analysis.

The succession of each stage leading to the culmination of the final stage does not simply prove effective in expanding the notion of landscape as more expansive than what Lefebvre (and many of us) might misinterpret as “landscape.” But it also helps reveal another key element of the study of landscape; landscape “has no identity of its own; it is simply a means to an end, a human end” (Jackson 28). Or, to revert back to terminology used in our semiotic discussion, the implicit meaning behind a certain backdrop or landscape is “accidental,

arbitrary, or occasional” (Larsen 470). What each of these theorists are expressing through these statements are ideas that were embodied in our semiotic discussion. Essentially, landscape (like the medium of film or literature) is only associated with some variety of meaning, symbolism, or emotion due to the arbitrariness of experiences and interpretations that people associate with that particular place.

To put this theory into perspective, consider the plot of David Patrick Lowry’s most recent film *A Ghost Story*. In the film, the audience sees a single plot of land inhabited by a ghost who is forced to reflect on the place where he lived when alive. During his own life, the land was a quaint little home to his wife and himself. However, after a tragic car accident he passed away and was left to inhabit the house as a ghost. He watches as numerous other families and groups inhabit the same plot of land. In consideration of the arbitrariness of emotion attributed to a particular plot of land, this film does an impeccable job in revealing how a single place or piece of land or environment can mean one particular thing to one person based on his or her experiences. But to someone else who has a different experience, that same place can mean something overwhelmingly different. To the ghost, the land represented his happy marriage, but to the family that moved into the house next, the land represented a place of fear due to the fact that it was haunted by a ghost. *A Ghost Story* shows that one individual place obtains a particular meaning to people who experience the place in various means.

In much the same way, a consideration of the way landscape interacts with both the characters of a film or a novel as well as the interpretations of the consumers of the text depends greatly upon our arbitrary understanding of the setting that is being described. It

depends greatly on the context of the medium, the experiences a character has had up until their interaction with a particular landscape, and previous associations of similar landscapes in other similar texts. Regardless of which of these possibilities seems most prevalent “it is exactly this arbitrariness that gives literature, and other media, a role as literature” (Larsen 470).

Simply put, though landscape is in another arbitrary signifier, like the movements and interpretations of a camera or signifiers written on a page, at some point we must accept the arbitrariness and begin to look at how these implied meanings (whether accurately representative of our own experience or not) influence the engagement between the characters of a text and their surrounding landscape.

If we are, in fact, able to accomplish this task (though still keeping in mind the limitations that languages can have), landscape becomes an interactive element in any sort of medium. Literature and film, according to Larsen’s quote, are able to use the arbitrariness of character experiences and emotions in order to both inform the landscape as well as use the landscape to inform our own interpretations of the characters. Because of this dynamic relationship between the landscape and the characters in the work, landscape becomes a much more significant piece of each respective form.

The theoretical implications associated with landscape are clearly important in both media, but a more distinct connection of these ideas to the concept of semiotics is needed. In general, landscape (as a topic) is a small, isolated, focused, and detailed aspect of both literature and film. For instance, if we were to look at the interplay of audio, sound design, camera movement, costume design, mise-en-scène, and casting, it would be quite difficult to derive any meaning or interpretation without needing to delve into the theoretical frameworks

associated with each other aspect of film. For this reason, looking specifically at the way landscape is portrayed offers (appropriately) a background that is specific enough to use as a lens to analyze the ways film and literature operate. As such, we are able to assess the interactions of landscape with the characters and actions occurring within a film. Because of this, it becomes much more feasible to compare and contrast the ways in which the semiotic language of the camera operates both similarly and differently than the semiotics associated with written language. By assessing each of these semiotic languages and the ways they interact with landscape, it will become more apparent how each artistic method best informs our own living reality.

#### Chapter 4 – *Children of Men*

The obvious distance in plot between the movie and novel forms of *Children of Men* are not very dissimilar to the differences between the application of semiotic theory to literature versus film. In both cases, the application is appropriate, but operates differently within each text. Because of our understanding of semiotics as well as the way landscapes can (and do) function in both literature and film, practical application of these theories will help to show direct examples of the ways landscape can operate in similar texts being told with a differing linguistic form. Various elements present in both the literary and cinematic interpretations of this story present an incredibly helpful platform for understanding the different nuances of literary and cinematic discourse. In viewing specific moments of landscape present in each text, the innovative uses of the tracking shot, and the deeply referential elements present in both texts, it will be seen how the semiotic language of the cinema operates differently from that of literature.

When asked about the motivation behind writing *Children of Men*, P.D James sought to address the question, “If there were no future, how would we behave?” (Qtd. Amago 213). Her novel certainly addresses this question, perhaps answering in some regards with a response that would be unsurprising to the likes of Thomas Hobbes. However, similarly a driving question in this paper might be, “If there were no landscape, how would film and literature behave?”. Hobbes may not be quite useful for answering this question, but an answer is nonetheless present through analysis of *Children of Men*. The functionality of landscape and its interaction with both literature and film respectively is incredibly complex, and each medium can scarcely be imagined without the presence of landscape in some regard. *Children of Men* - the text and

the film - serve as perfect examples of landscape impacting the greater story, our understanding of characters, and our perception of the story world. Both texts deal with the imagery and landscape of an old and decaying playground. In the midst of a society where infertility is a global issue, old, barren, and decaying playgrounds offer a striking emotional tug. However, each text describes this poignant landscape differently. This begins to address the methods in which landscape operates differently on the screen in contrast to on the page. Landscape serves a narrative function, propelling the story forward in ways that dialogue, character interaction, or (in the case of film) a well-placed audio bite simply could not accomplish alone. This same scene in the two versions also shows how landscape can provide a deeper and richer understanding for the characters present in the story.

The second chapter of James' book accomplishes, in two short sentences, what Cuarón spends an entire four-minute scene on in the film. However, in the book, the brevity of James's description is invaluable. Theo describes the state of playgrounds during the first twelve years since Omega (the term in the book used to describe the last generation born on earth) including details such as "the swings were looped up and secured, the slides and climbing frames left unpainted." (James 9). Overall, James describes a bleak and decaying landscape. However, the use of descriptive verbs like "looped" and "secured" imply that society in the first twelve years after Omega was taking active steps to combat a culture without children. Because of this, the reader can begin to imagine why these actions were even taken. Perhaps they were done in a frustrated response to the fact that no more children were being born or rather to try and help society forget about children as a whole. Regardless, just as one begins to imagine why these steps were enacted, Theo's second sentence of description shows that after the first

twelve years, all hope for a future was lost, and “they [swings] have finally gone and the asphalt playgrounds have been grassed over or sown with flowers” (James 9). The transition from a sentence implying action to one where hope has been abandoned seems abrupt, but is key in establishing the emotional and mental state of Theo’s contemporary culture. James is attempting to express that the individuals who have lived through Omega and the infertility of the human race are worn individuals who have given up hope of any sort of a future. As suddenly as James describes infertility setting forth in the book, this description of playgrounds needs to be equally as abrupt. By leaving the reader in a place of idleness and hopelessness, an emotional foundation is being laid down.

In a similar tactic of instilling the same feelings of hopelessness and despair into the reader as is present within the book’s society, there is limited plot development in “Book One: Omega.” Before embarking on the rapid plot development, action, and events that occur in “Book Two, it is necessary for James to establish the static, hopeless, and somber nature of the response people had towards humanity’s infertility issue. Thus this brief playground description operates as a portion of the exposition of the novel, setting the scene for what is normal and expected in their society. This speaks to landscape’s ability to operate in a narrative manner, able to establish a (very literal) background through the images, scenes, and places being depicted. Furthermore, not only is this scene reflective of landscape’s narrative capacity, but semiotic theory would also suggest that these moments help to draw the reader into the text by allowing them to craft their own interpretations of the scene being described. Because playground can be interpreted in a number of various ways depending on one’s personal experience with a specific playground, each reader will imagine this description differently. As

such, the inherent gap of the semiotic process is fully displayed and reflects literature's ability to allow the viewer to interpret many of the elements of a story in ways that are particular to their unique experiences.

Cuarón's usage of the playground landscape is comparable aesthetically to James's counterpart, but in his interpretation of *Children of Men*, his playground operates incredibly differently. In his rendition, Cuarón reveals an overgrown and rusted swing set surrounded by fallen leaves and dead trees. Additionally, the sun is setting behind the scene, offering a yellow hue over the already browning color palette of the scene. Though the description in James's depiction did not embark on details as specific as color or time of day, the same idea of decay is certainly present. However, despite what aesthetic similarities might be present, major differences are seen in the way characters interact with the landscape. Throughout this scene, Theo (Clive Owen) and Miriam (Pam Ferris) engage in conversation inside an old elementary school classroom (which is also clearly overrun) while Kee (an additional character in the film who takes the role as the pregnant mother that is held by Julian in the book) wanders throughout the playground in the background. During her wandering, Kee sits in the seat of one of the swings. This moment is crucial because as Kee sits in the swing, her baby (though still inside her belly) is also sitting in the swing. Unlike the book, this scene is incredibly hopeful and foreshadows the eventual success of Theo and Kee's mission to find The Human Project. As with the book's usage of landscape, Cuarón's playground offers narrative insight into the eventual future of the story, but it also operates on a different level. This usage of landscape works to offer insight into the emotional state of the characters.

Up unto this portion of the film, much of the outlook held by the main characters of the story was grim and less-than-hopeful. However, as is made relevant by the usage of camera, for the first time Theo truly recognizes and sees the hope around him. In this moment, though there is no cessation of the use of tracking shots, Theo's own focus in these shots shifts from a selfish motivation to one that is more interested in saving Kee and the human race. The camera offers a clear close up shot of Theo looking from the classroom to the playground and absorbing the monumental moment represented through Kee. In this moment, Theo as a character begins to shift as well, after having listened to Miriam tell about her experience of being there "at the end" of children's birth before the years of Omega, Theo offers a positive hopeful line of "now you're gonna be there at the beginning" (Cuarón 1:03:24). Because of the interaction of the landscape with the characters in the film, not only is Theo able to shift into being inspired by the presence of a new child, but he also begins to encourage and provide hope to the other characters of the film. Had Cuarón chosen to not to imbue symbolism in this interaction between Kee and the landscape, the meaning of the scene would fall flat, leaving the audience unconvinced by Theo's response.

*Children of Men* also utilizes other cinematic techniques throughout the film that highlight the cinema's own unique semiotic form. One of the most representative examples of this is seen in cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki's and Cuarón's use of the tracking shot. A tracking shot occurs when the camera moves within the three-dimensional space of the film, typically following some sort of action or movement within the scene. This differs from a pan or tilt because with a tracking shot, the camera actually moves alongside the action being captured, rather than staying in one place and simply rotating to capture the action.

Traditionally, tracking shots are used to immerse the viewer completely within the film in a way that other still shots would not be able to accomplish. Provided that the camera is always acting as the eyes of the audience throughout a film, the tracking shot becomes even more immersive as it allows the camera to become the body of the viewer as well. Unlike other shots, the tracking shot effectively gives the audience “legs” to be able to explore the space as if they were actually in the world of the film, and in doing so, the viewer is transported further into the world on the screen. Initially, this may seem like a positive attribute of the cinema, but what becomes more apparent with the tracking shot is that the viewer’s point of view seems even more limited than in the typical still frame. In a still frame, the viewer has the ability to scan around the frame while the dialogue is being delivered or action performed, but because of the movement present in a tracking shot, the need to focus solely on the subject becomes more immediate. Therefore, the tracking shot is used to lock the viewer into the perspective of the character (or characters) being followed by the camera, thus causing the viewer to become more intricately entwined with the character’s experience than in other potential shot selections.

The tracking shot is certainly not unique to *Children of Men* (although Lubezki has proved to be one of the most sophisticated cinematographer in Hollywood today as seen through his work in *Birdman Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and released in 2014). Films such as *Pulp Fiction* (directed by Quentin Tarantino and released in 1994) utilize this technique as when Butch returns to his apartment to find his golden watch. Similarly, in the 1980 film *The Shining* (directed by Stanley Kubrick) Danny is shown riding his tricycle down the halls of the Overlook Hotel with a long tracking shot

being used to follow his ride in order to create an identification between the child and audience. In each of these films, the tracking shot allows the audience to truly immerse themselves within the experiences of the characters, whether they are riding tricycles or breaking into apartments. However, the tracking shot is not used pervasively throughout these film as part of the aesthetic style of the work. Instead, these films selectively use the tracking shot in order to highlight discreet moments of character immersion. These films unquestionably establish the expectations of tracking shots, but *Children of Men's* usage of this same technique adds a further layer of depth to the film.

The use of the tracking shot in *Children of Men* rejects the traditional elements assumed with this shooting style, and reflects the ability of the cinema to incorporate semiotic discourse within the text. The first point to note about the function of the camera in this film is that all point of view shots and tracking shots that are presented come solely from the perspective of Theo (Amago 220). At no other point in the film is another character given the luxury of a point of view shot, thus situating the viewer solely in the position of being able to experience that which Theo is experiencing. Furthermore, the uses of tracking shots in this film sit as a large presiding aesthetic theme of the film. From the opening shot that is a minute-long tracking shot of Theo, to the four minute long tracking shot used when the Fishes' car is attacked by Omegas (the term used in the text used to denote the last generation born before infertility became prevalent) and throughout the nearly fifteen minute scene during the conclusion of the film when Theo and Kee are running through the warzone trying to escape to the Human Project, it becomes clear that as an audience we are supposed to be intimately connected with the

experiences of Theo. Thus we should see what he is seeing as he is seeing it. The tracking shot is an intricate piece of this film and is as crucial to each scene as a verb is to any sentence.

Frequency is certainly not the only unique treatment of the tracking shot in *Children of Men*. Instead, what emerges as the greatest difference and most innovative technique is the drift of the camera during the tracking shots. A majority of tracking shots in *Children of Men* follow Theo in an objective point of view framing; avoiding subjective point of view, the camera strays away from Theo's perspective and allows the audience to see the surroundings that perhaps Theo is missing. In some ways, Theo begins to embody a self-centered persona as he moves through the film without truly adopting the realities of his surroundings. The opening scene in the film utilizes this effect powerfully: Theo exits a coffee shop just before a bomb detonates. The camera follows Theo as he leaves the crowded store, but as soon as the bomb explodes, the camera drifts from Theo's perspective, letting the audience see the effects of the explosion upon Theo's surroundings while Theo sprints off-camera, seemingly concerned only with his own safety (00:02:010). In this moment, Lubezki demonstrates his prowess that has earned him three consecutive Academy Awards for Best Achievement in Cinematography (*Gravity*, *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, and *The Revenant*). When the camera drifts off from Theo, not only does this break the tendency of most tracking shots to remain devoted to following the subject, but it redirects the audience to the landscape of the scene. As we have discussed previously, regardless of the fact that this scene takes place in a crowded and dirty London street, because it is a "shared reality" (Jackson 5) that "reveals the effects of individuals... as well as dominant cultural values" (Groth 7), this scene serves as a landscape for the film. Using a tracking shot in this moment not only sets the aesthetic standard

for the rest of the film, but it also reveals to the audience the realities of the desolation and bleakness of Theo's own future and the future of his city.

If this were not enough information imbedded into one single drift of the camera, the effects that this unique moment of camerawork and landscape has upon the discussion of semiotics adds an even deeper level of interpretation. When the camera opens out onto the London street, providing the audience a glimpse of the world exterior to Theo's own experiences, it not only gives us a glimpse of the landscape, but also allows the gaze of the audience to be expanded beyond the point of view of Theo. In effect, this gives the audience a more interpretive role in the film due to the fact that there is no singular point of focus that demands attention in the drift. Thus the audience is able to direct their attention to any point of the frame, whether it be the woman walking out of the coffee shop holding what seems to be her arm disconnected from her body, the man rolling in the street from the force of the explosion, or the smoke that fills the air (0:02:47). Though the audience is still governed by the four bounding frames of the on-screen space, because we have seen Theo's perspective as well as a 180-degree pan of the street, there is a much greater degree of off-screen space available to the audience for interpretation of the scene. Had the camera remained focused solely upon Theo and his own perspective, this would not have been the case, and the direction of the film would have been increasingly more limited. In nearly every tracking shot, this same technique is used, drifting to Theo's surroundings in order to invite the viewer into the landscape of the scene and immerse their own experiences, thus becoming one of the shared realities as deemed by Jackson.

Other moments like this occur throughout the final thirty minutes of the film as Theo and Kee are dashing through the city trying to escape and find the Human Project. Although at this point of the film Theo has begun to embody a more empathetic and selfless attitude, he is so incredibly focused upon Kee that he pushes her wheel chair right past a wailing woman holding her dead son on the side of the road (01:24:37). At no point does he even glance at this tragic scene, and as a result, the camera deems it necessary to drift for a moment from the perspective of Theo onto the realities of his surroundings. These moments culminate in the gunfire storm when Theo walks down the flights of stairs holding the unnamed newborn child and the camera drifts from Theo's perspective to the faces of the on-looking soldiers and citizens (1:33:00). Again, these moments direct the attention of the viewer from the specific perspective of Theo to the perspective of the shared community. The landscape would suggest a corrupt and deteriorating society as seen by the crumbling walls, grimy textures and aesthetic qualities to the color, and a severe lack of any natural life source such as a tree, grass, or plants, and this is in fact the reality of the world that has been created. However, because the landscape sets the standard for this shared reality, when the lens of the camera pans away from Theo and Kee, the viewers are able to interpret the deteriorating society in their own terms. They are given the choice of empathizing with the characters that fill the scene or a particular piece of the landscape that allows them to connect the experiences of the film with their own reality.

Another element that is present within several of the tracking pans, but also throughout the film are references to art, culture, and paintings. One of the clearest examples of this is when Theo seeks transit papers for Kee from his cousin, an art collector who has possession of

the world's finest art pieces and sculptures in the world such as Michaelangelo's *David*. As they sit at the dinner table, the view of London is interrupted by a large, pink, floating, inflatable pig hovering directly in view of Theo (0:20:44). Basic interpretations such as "Theo will get the necessary transit papers when pigs fly" could possibly work, but would be elementary compared to the true reference of the scene. On a 1977 Pink Floyd album entitled *Animals* the cover art featured a factory with four tall smoke stacks, in the middle of which floated a large, pink, floating, inflatable pig. Contained within the concept of the album was the influence of George Orwell's 1945 novel *Animal Farm*, an allegorical text commenting on the status of Russian culture leading up to the 1917 Russian revolution. Using the references to *Animals*, Cuarón is implementing signifiers within the landscape of the film that point towards the signified implications of the political structures present within Theo's society. If a viewer was unaware of this series of references, they would not be able to implement their own knowledge of the world, the Russian revolution, or the political commentaries of Pink Floyd into their understanding and interpretations of the film. In this way, film is able to insert a variety of layers that are available for a viewer's interpretation. However, due to a viewer's knowledge of the references, and interpretation of these symbols, a variety of experiences with the text become available. Thus, *Children of Men* successfully instills pieces of references into the text, showing that film is able to provide a range of possibilities through which viewers can engage with a text.

At the beginning of this same scene, Theo's cousin makes the statement, "Couldn't save La Pieta. Smashed up before we got there" (0:18:47). Previously, a scene was described where the drifting camera focused upon a woman holding her dead son – an obvious reference to

Michelangelo's *Pieta* - on the side of the road. In this example, this woman and her son were part of the landscape exterior to Theo's own focused perspective. However, the placement of these characters in this scene was a direct reference to the La *Pieta*. In order to draw the viewer's attention to this piece of art, Theo's cousin mentions the sculpture in hopes that the viewer might be aware of the reference when its time came in the film (01:24:05). However, in the scene, this rather obvious reference operates in the same way as the floating pig, and allows the viewer various levels of experience and interaction with the text. To an audience member unaware of this sculpture, this scene is simply a sad image capturing the direness of the crumbling European town. However, with knowledge of the referential piece of this text, an entirely new level of interpretation becomes available to the audience. By understanding the source text of this reference, themes of maternity and death become even more intricate to Kee and Theo's present circumstances as well as the influx of religious iconography into the text.

Like Cuarón's interpretation of *Children of Men*, James's text also contains a variety of referents, though the two often employ different source texts. The title of the work (which must be credited to James because the book was written far before the film) is referential to Psalms 90 which says, "You return man to dust and say, 'Return, O children of man!'" (English Standard Version Bible, Psalms 90:3). Even without the context of the entire chapter, this short verse contains themes relating to the inevitability of death when the speaker says that God is responsible for returning man to dust. From the beginning, a religious subtext underlies James's novel, primarily represented through Julian's character, but heightened through the strategic and symbolic placement of landscape throughout the scene. Unlike the film, Julian is the child

bearer in the novel, and much of the conversation surrounding her suggests that she is likely an emblem of Mary, the mother of Jesus. For instance, one of the earliest conversations between Theo and The Five Fishes in the book takes place in a church. Described as “a small stone building” that “with its short twin-belled turret it looked very like an unpretentious stone house with a single chimney stack,” Theo walks into the church where Julian (and by default, the fetus) are waiting (James 53). Though Theo isn’t yet aware of the pregnancy at this stage, Julian is beginning to be associated with religious symbolism and imagery. In a season where “there aren’t many churches left” (in this circumstance, churches imply the community of Christians rather than the building itself), Julian and her unborn child are standing in the church representing the return of life into both the church as well as the world. Part of the reason this operates well is due to the presence of a landscape within the description of the church. By highlighting various pieces of the church, the reader is able to imagine and immerse themselves within the text based on their own experiences. However, more importantly, the references that the landscape allows infuses Julian with religious symbolism.

Julian’s representation of Mary carries throughout the text up until the final pages of the novel. Nearing the climax of the pursuit by the state of Julian, Miriam, and Theo, the remaining Fishes are able to escape into an old, worn, wooden shed in the forest. Described as a “dilapidated, three-sided building of blackened wood” (James 223) this hut is clearly not the most optimal space to give childbirth. Furthermore, in a statement made on the overall atmosphere of the hut in the woods (which would seem to be a rather intimate, quiet, and private place) Theo recalls that “it was less private than [he] remembered.” (223).

As a brief aside, Theo's own memory of the shack reflects perfectly the idea that experience dictates our interpretations of a particular place. Upon realization that the shed was less private and "larger than he had expected. Memory, contrary to its custom, had diminished, not enlarged [it]" (223) we see Theo's previous experiences with that specific place being intimate, small, and private. His decision to take Miriam and Julian here only several pages prior reflect this same theory as he "pictured a solitary summer walk, a shadowed path beside a broken stone wall leading deep into the forest, then opening out into a mossy glade with a lake and, further up the path to the right, a wood-shed" (James 211). His memories surrounding this place are incredibly specific and remind him of a secluded, safe, and intimate place that would be ideal for escape from the state. He then specifically names the place, telling Julian and Miriam to "Get in the car... we're making for Wychwood Forest" (James 211). In a story where many of the places have been nameless, depending upon only descriptions to acquire meaning and personality, the decision to name the forest speaks to the fact that Theo's memories and feelings towards the forest are incredibly specific. Thus, when he returns to the forest to find that it is quite the opposite of what he remembered, Theo experiences the same phenomenon's of assigning his own impressions and previous experiences onto a place that the reader has been forced to do throughout the text with each landscape description.

Returning back to the way this section is involved with referential, this parallels the biblical story of Jesus's childbirth quite accurately. After a long journey across treacherous landscape, Mary and Joseph were only able to find lodging in a stable because "there was no room for them in the inn." As a result, Mary gave birth to Jesus in what could also likely be considered a non-private space and not the most optimal place for childbirth. Because of these

parallels, the landscape allows the reader to engage with a raw and vulnerable moment with the characters of the text. By imagining the landscape of a broken and overgrown barn could be both referential as well as representative of the moment of childbirth a deeper layer of connection between the character and audience is established.

What is overall seen in this scene is that despite the differing uses of semiotic language, landscape serves as a platform through which meaning can be understood in the texts. In the film, landscape is able to offer base through which Lubezki and Cuarón have a plethora of decisions for showing precisely how to show a particular scene. However, regardless of how it is done, whether with a tracking shot or a still, with wide lenses or short compression lenses, the viewer will be able to experience some sort of emotion and, if they are well-versed in the cinematic semiotic language, will be able to derive meaning from the scene that would not ordinarily be understood by the average movie-goer. In literature, because of the ability of the medium to allow the reader to invest their own experiences into the descriptions provided by the landscape, these descriptions allow the reader to engage in the text in ways that aren't possible in film.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion

Although certainly an intriguing and engaging area of research, Semiotics has frequently criticized for being ultimately rooted in the theoretical realm, and is ultimately unproductive in any sort of application of the theories to the production practice. Monaco claims that much of the pleasure that surrounds a study of semiotics is due to the “pure intellectual creativity” but that in the United States, “semiotics had little effect, except to serve as a tool for academics” (Monaco 422). However, although the implications of this study do in fact reveal the theoretical brilliance imbedded within Semiotic theory, they also reveal practical applications of the theories as well.

Semiotics allows a much greater level of interpretation of film that is much more layered than previously thought. Because of the semiotic language of the cinema, not only are there various layers of interpretation present within a film that (depending on a viewer’s fluency in this linguistic form) will dictate the degree and manner in which a viewer will interpret a piece of cinematic discourse. Thus in the practical creation of a film, directors, cinematographers, set designers, (and really any individual with creative input towards the film’s overall vision) must be conscious of the degrees of interpretation in order to effectively craft a space for semiotic interpretation.

The ways in which the cinema engages in semiotic discourse differ from its literary counterpart, but both mediums are highly sophisticated and effectively give the audience the ability to absorb the details presented by the director or author of the text and infuse their own ideas, associations, and interpretations accordingly. Though a variety of interpretations may be available, because of the terms of semiotics, this is what must occur in order for a true semiotic

form to be present. With literature, close analysis of the playground description revealed that despite which adjectives or phrases were used to describe the old and decaying playground, the reader was left to interpret these details as he or she pleased. During the same moment in the film, despite the fact that the viewer can physically see the swing set in the frame and thus formulate the impression being conveyed by the filmmakers, cinematically specific techniques such as camera angles, framing, mise-en-scène, and coloring of the shots allow for various interpretations of the meaning of this shot. Because the viewer has a plethora of places through which to derive information about the scene, and the choices of which pieces of information will vary by viewer, cinema is able to also subscribe to the semiotic process.

With the sum of this information, *Children of Men* and *The Children of Men* reflect the inherent gaps present within the semiotic processes. Through the treatment of landscape as well as the impressions of various places throughout each text, the audience is allowed to craft their own theories and ideas about the texts, thus allowing each text to be fully considered as a part of Saussure's brilliant theory. As with any form of media, the implications of this study will continue to evolve with the changing media culture. With the rise of technologies such as virtual and augmented reality as well as 360 video – platforms that allow a much more personalized experience for the user - there will be a new need to apply the same semiotic theories. Until then, the space between the semiotic interplay of literature and film will suffice to satisfy our desire for conversation on the matter.

## Works Cited

- Amago, Samuel. "Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Future in Alfonso Cuarón's '*Children of Men*.'" *Discourse*, 32:2, 2010, pp. 212–235.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed., Verso, 2006, pp.71-78. Print.
- Andrews, Malcolm. *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1989. Print.
- Cuarón, Alfonso. *Children of Men*. Perf. Clive Owen, Julianne Moore. Universal Pictures, 5 January 2007. Film.
- De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959. Print.
- Groth, Paul, and Bressi, Todd. *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997. Print.
- Heffernan, Teresa. "When the Movie is Better than the Book: Fight Club, Consumption, and Vital Signs." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*. 57:2, 2016, pp. 91-103.
- The Holy Bible: English Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments*. Crossway Bibles, Wheaton, Ill, 2001.
- Jackson, John B. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984. Print.
- James, P.D. *The Children of Men*. London: Faber and Faver, 1992. Print.
- Kubrick, Stanley. *The Shining*. Perf. Jack Nicholson, Shelly Duval and Scatman Carruthers. Warner Bros, 13 June 1980. Film.

- Larsen, Svend Erik. "Landscape, Identity, and War." *New Literary History*. 35:3, 2004, pp. 469–490.
- Lefebvre, M. "On Landscape in Narrative Cinema." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies-Revue Canadienne d Etudes Cinematographiques*, 20: 1. Winter 2011, pp. 61-78.
- Lowry, David Patrick. *A Ghost Story*. Perf. Casey Affleck, Rooney Mara, Will Oldham. A24 Films, 7 July 2017. Film.
- McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Clarendon Press, New York, Oxford, 1996.
- Metz, Christian. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. New York: Oxford UP, 1974. Print.
- Milton, John. "L'Allegro." The Poetry Foundation.  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44731/lallegro>. Web.
- Monaco, James. "Film as an Art: Film and the Novel" *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media, Multimedia: Language, History, Theory*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.
- Sarris, Andrew. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." *Film Theory and Criticism Introductory Readings*. City: Press. 1974, pp. 500-515. Print.
- Scalia, Bill R. "Toward a Semiotics of Poetry and Film: Meaning-Making and Extra-Linguistic Signification." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 46-53, *Screen Studies Collection*,
- Tarantino, Quentin. *Pulp Fiction*. Perf. John Travolta, Samuel L. Jackson, Ving Rhames, and Uma Thurman. Miramax, 1994. Film.
- Whyte, Ian. *Landscape and History since 1500*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002. Print.