Representation Of Relationships And Experiences Of Witnessing In Children Of Men

The representation of relationships and experiences of witnessing are explored by the medium of narratives. Alfonso Cuarón's Children of Men (2006) implements stylistic methods to convey Theo's narrative as the plot is uncovered. Theo willingly transforms from a witness without any relationality to a participant due to the intersubjectivity embedded in the movie, and the different forms of narratives he uncovered. I will explore the change in the main character's autobiography, in reference to Jens Brockmeier's definition. In addition, I aim to explore how Theo's relationship with other characters and his encounters with other narratives shaped his identity and helped him create his own narrative.

Children of Men is centered around Theo Faron's struggle to place himself in sync with the stories he is surrounded by. His struggle stems from the fact that he does not have an identity for himself because he views the world as a witness rather than a participant. He is a mid-level bureaucrat who alienates himself from his own story. Theo's role as a witness is prevalent in the opening scene of the movie. The movie opens with a black screen as the voice of a newscaster reports the death of the youngest person on the planet. In a blink of an eye, the black screen switches to a crowded café filled with people of different ages and races, all devasted by the news. The impact of Baby Diego's death is evident in their tragic facial expressions and stagnant body language. Theo's entrance is marked by his disconnect as he makes his way through the crowd and orders his coffee without paying attention to the news. He glances at the television screen while waiting for his order and leaves right after, as the people around him have their eyes glued to the screen. His fleeting interest in the news and careless facial expressions convey his detachment from the world around him. The opening scene consists of a long take that tracks Theo walking away from the café and pouring whiskey into his coffee. The fluidity in this scene is due to a handheld camera being used to follow Theo away from the cafe. The camerawork portrays the opening scene as if another human being is framing the images. The restless handheld camera is used as a set of eyes that follows the dark world to create uneasy tension, as it investigates fragments of lost stories that are impossible to fit within the space of the larger narrative being portrayed. The lost stories of immigrants, suffering, poverty, death is all portrayed as the camera surfaces the faces of helpless people. The darkness and lack of color depicts Britain as despoiled and plagued with terror and violence. Cuarón paints the political landscape as grim and filled with the dehumanization of "fugees" as they are locked in cages and sent to camps. As Theo continues to be occupied with his coffee, a bomb explodes on the busy street even before the movie announces its title. The after effects of a bomb, a ringing in the ear, is heard as Theo arrives for work at the Ministry of Energy, visibly indifferent to the bomb explosion he witnessed earlier in the day. He watches his co-workers grieve the death of Baby Diego as he is unfazed and distant. Thus far, Theo has had no immediate dialogue related to the narrative surrounding him. We do not hear a scream, a cry for help, or any sort of fear verbally relayed by Theo. He is nothing but a pair of eyes, witnessing the world from a distance.

Although, Theo is reduced to nothing but a pair of eyes in the beginning of the movie, he emerges as a central character that utilizes the narratives around him to build and illuminate his own identity. The discovery of his identity transforms him from a witness to a participant. In

Creating a Memory of Oneself, Brockmeier relates autobiographical memories to the shaping of identity. He states that when it comes to stories that give shape and gestalt to our identities, they do not simply grow by themselves out of the events and experiences in our lives. We have to take initiative and connect themes, experiences, and relationships to make it a story (Brockmeier 5). Theo dissociates himself with the stories and relationships around him because he does not resonate with the ongoing issues and therefore has not made it a part of his story. He does not interpret his experiences and lives his life in the thick of ongoing events and entanglements (Brockmeier 6). Brockmeier's idea of the self as an inner editor that overlooks and edits many perceptions, reports, thoughts and storylines that are swirling around inside of us, relates to the turning point in the formation of Theo's narrative when he willingly "edits" his life to take part in an activist movement. The construction of Theo's identity begins when Julian, his estranged ex-partner, reenters his life twenty years later. Within the first few seconds of their encounter, Theo refuses to speak about politics to which Julian remarks that it was all he ever used to do. It is the first time that his previous endeavors are brought to light, but he succumbs back to his role as a witness by claiming that he is much more successful staying out of politics. Julian's request causes Theo to contact his powerful cousin, Nigel to request transport papers for the east coast, a task that Theo successfully carries out. His encounter with Julian's story and her drive to pursue the role of an activist influences Theo's emergence as a participant. He attentively listens to her mission rather than willingly participating in it. However, her abrupt death symbolizes Theo's new role as a leader which blossoms when he encounters the narrative of Kee. Therefore, the roots of his participatory characteristics are embedded in intersubjective relationships starting with his encounter with Julian and later on Kee.

As an enervated, former activist, Theo encounters the story of Kee. Kee mentions that Julian had told her to only trust Theo and that he would help her board the Human Project ship, the Tomorrow. Although, he is not bound to this promise Theo willingly takes up this role once he realizes the danger Kee is surrounded by. His plan to escape the safe house is the first time we see Theo as a participant. As Brockmeier remarks, the focus on narrative as a social practice turns people into protagonists —including oppressed, marginalized, and disadvantaged people who often have their rights and voices denied (Brockmeier 8). In this case, Theo's own narrative and autobiographical identity changes when he meets Kee; previously comfortable in his own life he is now restless and determined bring an unborn child to safety, thereby assuming his role as a protagonist. He embarks on a journey filled with obstacles which Alfonso Cuarón beautifully captures using film techniques. The role of Theo as a participant is seen in the lack of close shots and the use of long, single shot sequences. The lack of cuts creates an adrenaline rush and tightening tension that makes the sequences raw and real. The long shot in which Theo is escaping the safe house with Kee and Miriam depicts his courage and persistence. The tension created by the long shot allows the audience to feel the events as if they were happening in real time. We can draw parallels from the tension created by the shot to the emotions Theo must have felt during that sequence such as anxiety, and pressure. The breakthrough of this tension brings out Theo's identity and characteristics central to his identity such as, his determination to help others and we can see him transform from just a pair of eyes and ears to a driven human being.

The continuity in Theo's construction of his own narrative relates to Brockmeier drawing on Gidden's argument that the individual's biography, if he is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self. Giddens draws on Taylor's argument that "in order to have a sense of who we are, we have to

have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going (Brockmeier 18). I interpret Gidden's argument as a reality check in which one reflects upon themselves and take a moment to realize who they have become and where they are going. In order to maintain their autobiography one has to continuously construct their narrative around events taking place in their life, they must submerge into these stories and fuse these events to make it their own. Theo acts in a similar fashion in which he is reminded of his own past as he overhears Jasper, Miriam and Kee conversing about Julian and Theo's relationship. Chance and faith are two important themes in his past. Their faith brought Julian and Theo together at a rally where they met, and chance played a role in the birth of their first child, Dylan who also by chance became the victim of a flu pandemic. Although, these events are a part of Theo's past, the emergence of this anecdote gives a meaning to his pursuit to save Kee's unborn child. The fatherly instinct he portrays such as being involved in the birth of the child and the child being ultimately named Dylan, places Theo in a father figure position. His actions reflect this position as he integrates Kee's unborn child in his own story.

Theo's aligns himself within the larger narrative associated with the future of the world and infertility. His personal journey is emphasized by Alfonso Cuarón's choice of never having a sequence solely with Theo. Although, he is the central protagonist we never see him by himself. He is always depicted in crowds as an onlooker or in tension filled situations amongst other people. As he is surrounded by immigrants caged and yearning for help, he navigates through a multitude of identity stories, swimming in them like fish in water in an effort to engage in autobiographical self-exploration (Brockmeier 20). The buildup of suffering around him launches him on a path to find himself and most importantly bring to life the activist in him.

He recognizes Kee's suffering and plight and willingly invests himself in her story. His effort to save Kee and her child is driven by the ray of hope he has for the future and humanity. The birth of a child represents the biological continuation of humanity, something Theo had lost hope in after the downfall of the world and most importantly after the death of his son. Although, there are various scenes where Theo and Kee's relationship is beautifully portrayed, their humanistic relationship is evident in the last sequence of the movie. Theo runs into a building that's being ambushed and finds Kee ducking in a corner as bullets are fired back and forth. He dodges bullets to place himself across from Kee, while a hole in the wall between them overlooks the war going on outside. He reaches his hand out to Kee and immediately pulls back as gunshots are fired in their direction. They try once again, this time Theo successfully pulling Kee into his shadow to protect her and the baby. He wraps Kee with both of his arms to protect her from the firing bullets. In this scene, touch is used as a form of intersubjective communication that makes their relationship stronger. Until now, Kee and Theo had only communicated through words and emotions; it is the first time he uses his own body as a shield to protect them. Theo's wound is revealed as they await for the Human Project ship, on the verge to being saved. During his final moments he is still entangled with Kee's narrative as he proceeds to teach her how to put the baby girl on her shoulder and tap her back to stop her from crying. His hand motions as if he is holding a baby; this speaks to the loss of his child and he is able to relive that moment by watching Kee tap the back of the baby. Theo knows he will not survive because he tells Kee to keep the baby close at all times and not to listen to anyone, even in his final moments his focus is still on the safety of the baby and Kee. A man that was so distant from the world in the beginning, had now integrated himself in Kee's narrative and made it his own. The union of their stories is symbolized by the baby girl being named Dylan.

Theo's efforts are fruitful as he achieves his goal of protecting the ray of hope he invested in. It

is interesting to note that the movie begins with the death of people due to a bomb explosion and ends with saving a new life, the rebirth of the human race. This juxtaposition illustrated by Alfonso Cuarón is captivating and thought provoking.

At the end of the movie, the coherence of the episodes in Theo's life comes together. Life story, represents a comprehensive level of personality that encompasses traits and character features. Bringing together different parts of ourselves, including the remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future, and integrating all of them into a meaningful and convincing whole, life stories give coherence and stability to our identities (Brockmeier 23). We see the merging of Theo's past coming together with the continuity of his present which in the end establishes his identity. Alfonso Cuarón creates a world in which the audience can feel the impact of Theo's sacrifice, and how his role fit within the larger narrative of the future of humanity.

Works Cited

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