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Keywords
Alfonso Cuaron, film, cinema, globalization

Abstract
Alfonso Cuaron's 2006 film, Children of Men, not only suggests that the economic pressures on contemporary Hollywood directors differ little from those in the studio era, it also suggests that film style in the age of globalization is not as homogenized as many fear. The long take is the most prominent feature in Children of Men, including many which are digitally contrived. Lofty reasons by the filmmakers are given for these long takes, but there are more pedestrian reasons behind this. Other examples past and present suggest that often the long take serves the needs of both filmmakers and their producers, at least for awhile. Cuaron himself paid his dues over the years with more generic films, and is now making a bold auteurist declaration with these long takes. The question remains whether the economics of Hollywood will allow him to continue.

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Child of the Long Take: Alfonso Cuaron’s Film Aesthetics in the Shadow of Globalization

The question about the relationship between film style and globalization implies that somehow globalization changes everything, including film style. Underlying this is the often unarticulated fear of increasing stylistic homogenization; that somehow everything is blending into a sort of stylistic “global pudding.” Yet some questions arise. First, what exactly does globalization mean in cinema? Second, and more importantly, when exactly did the era of globalization begin? From its inception, from the very moment Lumière cameramen brought their novelty around the globe, film has had a global reach of sorts. Moreover, Hollywood as a global cinematic presence is virtually as old as the classical cinema and its concomitant rules of continuity. Hollywood throughout its history has also easily found room for foreign talent as diverse as Ernst Lubitsch, Michael Curtiz, Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, Luc Besson, John Woo, Fernando Meirelles, to name a few. Certainly we can agree that these trends have accelerated in recent decades. We can also acknowledge that the most definitive break in Hollywood has been the slow decline of the old studio system and the eventual rise of multi-national, multi-media conglomerates under which the old studios now serve. Admittedly, while Hollywood remains the economic center of gravity for cinematic globalization, this no longer means American supremacy so much as transnational corporate dominance, which Vivendi and Sony have long verified. Yet for all the real economic changes these entail, do they also mean a fundamental, qualitative change in film style? Certain cases suggest no.

One of the best cases in recent memory would have to be Alfonso Cuaron and his 2006 film, *Children of Men*. Not only is this a relatively big-budgeted Hollywood production shot in the UK, it is also directed by a Mexican-born-and-raised director who has worked in Hollywood for most of his career. Not only is its disturbingly dark, dystopian message an extreme risk for such a prominent Hollywood entity — Universal — to distribute, its style also features traits far from the norm for a Hollywood film in any day and age. The most prominent aesthetic feature in this film would have to be several attention-grabbing long takes — shots with durations...
well beyond the industry standard. But what do these long takes imply? Ultimately, they imply that as much as certain things change, other things do not. Cuaron is not simply defying contemporary Hollywood with this audacious long take style; rather he is joining an older tradition where the long take occasionally has emerged as a marker of aesthetic and authorial distinction even within the Hollywood system. Moreover, this is but another example of the Hollywood director who is in a position to push the aesthetic envelope, revealing that the system does allow a modicum of stylistic heterogeneity, but only within manageable limits. Once they go too far, the system eventually reins them in — or simply shuts them out.

The purpose here, then, is to determine the ends these long takes serve. The answer is that they serve multiple ends at once. Cuaron and others involved with the making of *Children of Men* defend their use of numerous long takes largely on Bazinian grounds even without naming Bazin in their discourse. Yet these long takes do not serve a phenomenological reality per se, nor do they serve mere narrative and thematic concerns of serious import; they also serve the seemingly symbiotic needs of both Cuaron and his supporters. Not only do long takes not violate the rules of continuity, they can also be highlighted in the critical discourse, resulting in product differentiation of a prestige production helmed by a newly recognized Hollywood auteur. As a result, these long takes become not merely the stylistic fabric of abject spectacles about the end of the human race; they become spectacles in their own right which not only flaunt Cuaron’s ability as a director, but the daring of those who pay him. All of this becomes clear when we look at when and where these long takes are most prominently employed in the film. We can also interrogate the rhetoric offered by Cuaron, Immanuel Lubezki and others, comparing them with the multiple ways long takes have been utilized and discussed both within Hollywood and without. Together these insights suggest that the long take can be all things for all men, but also that there always have been limits to its employment in Hollywood.

When word first leaked out about *Children of Men*, there was likely some uncertainty as to which Alfonso Cuaron was directing this work. After all, there is the Cuaron who competently and yet conventionally helmed such generic Hollywood fare as *The Little Princess* and the third installment of the *Harry Potter* series, yet there is also the daring director of *Y tu mama también* (2001), the Mexican-made, but Hollywood-backed work which first gave him widespread notoriety. A clue emerged in the portmanteau work released a few months earlier in 2006, *Paris, je t’aime* not only provides a prismatic perspective of a globalized metropolis by eighteen directors from around the globe, it also suggests several things at once.
about the current state of film style. For starters, these chapters on particular Parisian neighborhoods collectively suggest there are no territorial boundaries for many age-old stylistic devices; shot/reverse shot, eyeline matches and matches on action are ubiquitous global norms even with filmmakers not originating from Hollywood per se. Likewise, editing (and primarily continuity editing) remains the lingua franca of filmmaking the world over. Of the eighteen chapters, six have an average shot length between five and eight and a half seconds, while seven have average shot lengths of less than five seconds per shot. Yet the remaining five chapters of *Paris, je t’aime* indicate that the long take still retains a cachet as a somewhat more rarified cinematic technique. Significantly, two of the five averaging more than ten seconds per shot are American directors: Alexander Payne, who clocks in at 11.3 seconds per shot, and Gus Van Sant at 13.3. For those who might argue that both Payne and Van Sant currently represent independent versus mainstream Hollywood filmmaking, we should remember that even independent filmmaking is not outside of the global economic provenance of Hollywood, something best illustrated by Disney’s purchase of Miramax back in 1993. Still, Cuaron’s brief vignette in *Paris, je t’aime* stands out by far with the longest average shot length, an astonishing 61.6 seconds per. (Coming in at a distant second is the segment by Nobuhiro Suwa from Japan, at just under fifteen seconds per shot.) Remove the four brief introductory shots recorded by a second unit, and this becomes in effect a plan sequence of nearly five minutes in length, a hand-held tracking shot following Nick Nolte and Ludivine Sagnier along a street at dusk.

Depending on our view of Cuaron, this marked stylistic departure from the other seventeen directors may be either surprising or to be expected. Either way, we must keep in mind that Cuaron has been an established Hollywood director for much of his career. Furthermore, his next feature, *Children of Men* was not "independent" even in the pedestrian sense of the term. Unlike *Y tu mama también*, it was not released by a specialty division of a major distributor such as Focus Features. Instead, it was distributed directly by the putatively skittish Universal Pictures who released it as a prestige picture with Oscar potential by highlighting Cuaron’s name as the “director of *Y tu mama también*.”

That earlier Spanish-language film represents the key pivot in Cuaron’s career both stylistically and thematically. Until Cuaron made *Y tu mama también* in 2001, he could not have been considered a long-take director. His first feature film made in Mexico, *Solo con tu pareja* (1991), averages right around 6 seconds per shot. His 1995 release, *A Little Princess*, clocks in around 5 seconds per shot. His modern-day adaptation of Charles Dickens from 1998, *Great Expectations*, once
again comes in around 6 seconds per. Even as recently as 2004, when he helmed *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, he remained firmly ensconced in this same narrow 5-6 second range with an average shot length of 5 1/2 seconds per shot. (Even more telling is how close this figure is to the first two installments of this franchise directed by Chris Columbus, both of which are just under 5 seconds per shot on average.) These numbers all imply a mostly conventional editing scheme by today’s standards, and close viewings of these films confirm just that. Suddenly in 2001 in *Y tu mama también*, the average shot length jumps up to an unexpected 19.6 seconds per shot. The longest take in the film, the last meal among the three main protagonists, lasts almost seven minutes uninterrupted by the reputed machinations of editing.

Given his Janus-faced career, it was hard to know what to expect stylistically from Cuaron in *Children of Men* given the direct involvement of Universal. He answers almost right away in the third shot of the opening scene as to how far he is now willing to go. Expertly introduced in this single shot is a grim, dying world in which the Clive Owen character is but one small, languid part. It is a tour de force in terms of its set design, lighting, camera movement and most of all its daringly intricate orchestration of multiple animate and inanimate elements. Yet the most telling sign is the duration of the shot: this is a long take of over fifty seconds, which with almost devious subtlety leads to a most unexpected denouement, an explosion segueing to a title shot with uncanny effect. It is an impressive beginning to a film which overall deeply impressed select viewers, critics and scholars alike. Alfonso Cuaron has accomplished the seemingly impossible: he proffers a dystopian message concerning globalization, yet he does it under the auspices of one of globalization’s key cultural players — Hollywood. Yet he also accomplishes this in indelible aesthetic terms. After seemingly reverting back to more conventional form with *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the long take makes a roaring return in *Children of Men*, with an average shot length of just over sixteen seconds per, an astonishing figure for a present-day Hollywood feature which sometimes can average less than two seconds per shot (*Hollywood* 122). Moreover, even if slightly shorter on average than its Spanish-language predecessor a half a decade earlier, these long takes are more complex and more accomplished in their design. As we shall see, they are too good to be true. Indeed, these long takes are contrived spectacles in their own right.

There is an overall pattern for long take in *Children of Men*: the more action and violence a particular scene possesses, the longer the shot duration generally becomes. This does run counter to current Hollywood norms. Many have recently noted how big-budgeted, Hollywood action films in particular tend to lead the way
in faster cutting rates which are often employed for maximum impact (Bordwell, *Hollywood*, 122, 58-159; King, *New Hollywood*, 246). *Children of Men*, of course, is not a traditional action picture, but a science fiction work with deep philosophical underpinnings. Yet during its non-action scenes often involving conversations between characters, Cuaron is more likely to use conventional editing schemes, most of all the ever reliable shot/reverse shot. Cuaron saves his most audacious long takes for the sequences where violence and action are at their highest pitch, with the longest reserved for the prolonged battle at the refugee camp at the end. Despite their reliance on long takes in lieu of “impact” editing, it is these moments in the film which seem to be most memorable.

What is most telling is how these long takes give the *appearance* of taking place in “real” time and “continuous” space. Cleverly disguised is how they are often multiple shots melded together digitally in post-production. The above mentioned opening scene, for example, was shot over two days, the first day covering the indoor portion in the café, while the second day involved the complicated section outdoors. However, in the finished product, the third shot begins indoors and then proceeds seamlessly outdoors, meaning somehow a single, “continuous” long take was shot over two days time. Using the café doorframe at the moment Clive Owen leaves the frame, the camera is deviously slow to catch up, and the special effects crew disguised the cut digitally in post (Fordham 34). In short, the opening scene is not three shots, but four shots disguised as three with the last being a long take under false pretenses.

Figure 1. The door frame on the right helps disguise the cut to the outdoor portion of this opening long take of a dying world.
This is not an isolated instance in *Children of Men*. The now famous scene in the automobile took two months to plan, eight days to shoot on *three* separate locations. The camera’s impossibly free movements in the car were in fact impossible — they were only realized by being filmed in six separate sections where often not all of the actors were present at certain stages. Once again, this was all amalgamated into a single artificial long take by digital means (Fordham 39). Claiming to replicate the feel of a documentary, this shot is also impossibly precise for any documentary shooting as events transpire. True, they did use mostly available light in a real setting, allowing every flare and reflection on the glass to remain, much like in a documentary. But no documentarian has ever had the luxury of a twin-axis doggiecam rigged above a missing car roof which is then digitally filled in during post-production. The resulting camera movements would also be impossible for a documentary — in fact in a way that has never been done by fictional filmmakers either. Particularly noteworthy is the powerful effect of that moment when the camera returns to the front and Julianne Moore reappears at the right edge of the frame, now undeniably no longer among the living. Documentarians are rarely able to be that measured, and are hardly that lucky.

The longest take in the film is over seven minutes in duration, occurring during the climatic battle at the refugee camp when Theo Faron attempts to rescue the kidnapped baby. Being one of the most complex long takes ever attempted, it is in fact too complicated to be a true “long take.” Instead, this was shot at two exterior locations plus a studio; the first major section was filmed at Bushey Hall, while the second part was shot two weeks later at Upper Heyford. This particular

![Figure 2. Documentary fortuitousness? Julianne Moore, now clearly deceased, reappears precisely at right edge of frame due to the Doggiecam camera movement.](image-url)
transition was digitally disguised using the corner of a building, much like what they had done with the doorframe of the café in the pre-credit sequence (Fordham 42). Additional elements added to the seemingly real but impossible spectacle: for example, no documentarian has been so fortuitous as to follow someone just as Theo Faron passes a soldier dying in his half-severed body, yet reaching out for him with one last moaning grasp at life. The three sections combined comprise a highly calculated, and remarkably well-orchestrated game of lost and found where Theo loses the mother and child to the engulfing chaos, only to find them again in that same chaos, all within this same faux long take. Meanwhile, by scanning this dense, dreary mise-en-scene, Cuaron and Lubezki not only disguise cuts, they continue a deeper strategy seen also in Y tu mama también: to show a much larger world than merely the characters themselves, a world that becomes almost hyper-real due to the careful construction of the long take coupled with other stylistic devices. So spectacular are these long takes that they become spectacles themselves which became endlessly talked about by reviewers, scholars and film aficionados alike. And that appears to have been precisely the reason why they are employed in the film during those particular sequences which proved to be the most challenging.

Cuaron did not want the artifice behind these “long takes” to be readily known. Given the wider potential audience, the extras on the DVD released by Universal never fully acknowledge that these are multiple shots combined to give the false appearance of continuous long takes. Only Fordham’s article in Cinefex, which is aimed at a more technically oriented audience, fully acknowledges the technical underbelly of digital artifice. In this article the visual effects supervisor
Figure 4. Later part of “same” take shot two weeks later at Upper Heyford.

Figure 5. A dying soldier reaches out – too perfect to be documentary?

from Double Negative, Frazer Churchill, makes this stunning admission about the doggicam shot in the car: “until now he [Cuaron] asked us not to talk about the technical aspects of the achievement, to avoid overshadowing the artistic impact
of the scene” (Fordham 39) But what exactly did Cuaron want to hide? More than anything, he did not want to wholly concede how highly crafted and designed these long takes are. Certainly he did not want to acknowledge that this is as "transparent" or as “invisible” as one can possibly get, a charge usually leveled at conventional continuity editing’s erasure of the fragmentariness of the production process. Interestingly, Cuaron and company instead justify these scenes in terms which are quite familiar to film scholars. In the DVD extras, Cuaron himself says they used “fluid long takes to take advantage of the element of real time” (Children of Men). Emmanuel Lubezki, the director of photography, explains that they opted to do this because they did not want to glamorize the violence, and they took their cues from news or documentary footage of wars, which lack “coverage” and “beautiful close-ups of the gun, or the trigger in slow motion.” Both Cuaron and Lubezki have said this film tried to achieve a documentary look (B 70). At one point Lubezki says, “It looks like you are there; the image is very objective. You don’t see our tracks” (B 70). Similarly, a visual effects supervisor who worked on the film says the Cuaron and Lubezki wanted to do “incredibly long takes” in a shooting style similar to Battle of Algiers, “which they loved for its naturalism and documentary feel” (qtdp. in Fordham 34).

While his name is not mentioned, these ideas being proffered appear to come straight out of Bazin. Our purpose here is not to flesh out every nuance of Bazin, but a brief review of his core ideas are in order here to see how they have trickled down even into the discourse of contemporary Hollywood filmmakers such as Cuaron and Lubezki. For a long time it was often suggested that the core of cinema as an art form lay in editing, something peculiar to this artistic medium. Moreover, even outside of Hollywood most scenes are comprised of multiple shots from multiple camera angles usually shot out of sequence. These shots are then edited together to create the illusion of temporal and spatial continuity in most cases, although on occasion the editing might be employed to fragment time and space. Either way, the tacit assumption is that for film to be an art, it has to get beyond merely recording what is “there.” Bazin, however, saw things differently, taking his cues from the philosophy of phenomenology. For Bazin, the long take is a principle means of directly linking the cinematic image with phenomenological reality, which the film medium can directly record. The long take supposedly ensures a truth of the spatial and temporal relations within that said reality. The long take allows the world to be seen as it is — objectively — without the imposition of the filmmaker’s world view, which occurs when one edits and thus manipulates cinematic time and space. And according to Bazin, this in turn this offers the possibility of revealing
the ambiguity of the world before we impose our ideas on it (Bazin, “Evolution” “Virtues” 23-52). To this it can be added that Bazin often linked fictional filmmaking and documentaries via the long take, noting in particular the documentary-like qualities found in the films of Italian neo-realism (Bazin, “Reality” 20).

Ever since, Bazin’s ideas have resonated through many different writers with different agendas. Recently Mark Le Fanu defends those who still pursue long takes today by looking to the past through the lenses of Bazin: “In the epoch of MTV and of the ‘quick thrills’ associated with the ‘event movie,’ we no longer, it could be claimed, have the patience to look — that is, to linger, to explore, to risk boredom in the search of epiphany — that not so long ago was part and parcel of serious cinemagoing experience” (Le Fanu). He later praises those “unplanned moments” which are more likely to occur within long takes which are “always in some sense documentary, even in a fiction film” (Le Fanu). Ioana Uricaru notes the ambiguity which results from the long takes in Cristian Mungiu’s 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (2007): “The blunt, non-explanatory, non evaluative style of the film makes the point that there may be no specific answer to the question, no single motivation” (Uricaru 16). Note the common linkages here: the long take involves real time, true duration, yet it also promises deeper layers of truth about reality, even if the “epiphanies” reveal an underlying ambiguity.

Significantly, some of these widely held assumptions about long takes are being reinforced here by Cuaron and company because they have use-value. Many are still more likely to assume that documentaries are nothing but long takes, when in fact most documentaries are often highly edited, carefully crafted cinematic artifacts, even Direct Cinema classics such as Primary or Salesman. In the latter film, people are more likely to remember the traveling shots following bible salesman and overlook the highly edited sequence of one feckless salesman sitting alone on a train, which is cross-cut with images of a sales meeting where the pressure to succeed is highlighted. There is no way of knowing what that salesman was thinking while on that train, but the editing leads us to conclude that he is at that very moment pensive about his own recent less than stellar sales record, a trick that dates as far back as D.W. Griffith. Meanwhile, Children of Men may resemble Battle of Algiers (1966) in terms of its use of real locations and hand-held camera, but not in terms of shot duration. Battle of Algiers does not feature any prominent long takes; at just over eight seconds per shot, it is a highly edited film compared to Cuaron’s supposed imitator, with a plethora of matches-on-action, eyeline matches, a quick-paced montage of various torture techniques used by the French, not to mention several explosions which are often shot with five to six cameras at once which are
then edited together in the final cut. This is not to say that long takes in *Children of Men* do not feel just as real, or that they don’t de glamorize the violence — they accomplish both. But they are carefully designed to accomplish that effect, in part by creating a charade playing on the commonplace assumption that long takes and documentaries — and somehow “reality” — *always* go hand in hand.

The rhetoric and the reality diverge elsewhere as well. These are long takes coupled with everything else, including editing. One of the more profound moments in the film is when even the government soldiers cease fire momentarily as they witness the miracle of a newborn baby after a global hiatus of eighteen years. This is not covered in a single long take, but utilizes a simple alternating pattern of A-B-A which does nothing to lessen the impact of the moment, including when they return to their fighting. (Other elements, including sound, play a powerful role here as well.) Lubezki says in *American Cinematographer* that he and Cuaron have an aversion to such A-B-A-B intercutting, and tried to avoid it as much as possible, even if in some cases they still could not. He rightly notes that such editing patterns are too commonplace today, along with what he calls “an incredible abuse of close-ups,” conventions which seem to make each film too similar to the next. “Maybe our ideas for this movie came as a reaction to some of the stuff that bothers us in current cinema” (B 62). This statement is of interest not only because of this counter-example in *Children of Men*, but also because for much of their career together, Cuaron and Lubezki were adept practitioners of these conventions they now decry, and which they only broke away from in 2001 with *Y tu mama también*. Moreover, they still returned to these conventions for the most part in the third *Harry Potter* film just before embarking on *Children of Men* project.

There are other reasons to not take the filmmakers’ discourse about *Children of Men*’s long takes at face value. For starters, there is no consensus as to what long takes actually accomplish. Pier Paolo Pasolini famously argued that the long take is subjective, not objective, unlike montage (3-6). Pasolini believes that the long take can only replicate the subjective view of the bourgeois cinematic narrator, whereas only montage can engage in “a dialogic relationship with that of the characters” which in turn provides a more objective view of the world (Orr 45-46). Raymond Durgnat states that besides preserving spatial unity, “long takes can fragment space as incisively as bold cuts” (43). He further quotes Theo Angelopoulos, the famed contemporary long-take master as saying: “Realism? Me? I’ve not a damn thing to do with it. The religious attitude to reality has never concerned me”(44). Gabor Gergely makes a similar argument concerning the films of Jean-Luc Godard, which feature both fragmentary editing and long takes: “*A bout de souffle* is his first attack
against Bazin, dealing mostly with his ideas on the limitations of montage, showing that the longer take, contrary to what Bazin claims, does not necessarily lead to greater realism” (120). Even the association of long takes with documentaries is suspect in the minds of some. States David MacDougall, a documentary filmmaker himself: “the long take has become *terra incognita* of the modern documentary film, a blank space in a practice which devotes itself almost entirely to other properties of the shot. And this is contrary to its heritage, for documentary was born in the pleasures of watching such ordinary events as leaves shimmering on a tree or a train arriving at a station” (36). Even Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema were not as beholden to the long take as commonly assumed. (These movements from the 1960s are the primary reasons why documentaries and long takes are still seen in almost matrimonial terms.) Jeanne Hal’s lucid analysis of Primary and other works associated with Robert Drew in the 1960s reveals a sharp divide between the rhetoric of the movement versus the stylistic reality of the films themselves. As she concludes about how the advent of new technology was actually employed by the filmmakers: “even when the equipment functioned flawlessly — making innovations such as long, on-site, synch-sound segments possible — the films were often edited and narrated rather conventionally”(45). Finally, Bazin himself admits that the long take does not always have the same effect: citing Wyler as an example, he says the long take only makes the ambiguity he lionizes a possibility, not an inevitable result (“Evolution” 36).

It is clear that Cuaron and others took great effort to create faux long takes. It is also clear that their given reasons do not reveal the entire picture, especially given how there is no consensus as to what long takes can actually accomplish. So why would a Hollywood director in a relatively big-budgeted picture go through all this trouble? The short answer is because he wanted to show he could. The long answer involves a complex industrial backdrop for his career which created possibly a once in a lifetime opportunity. We should first remind ourselves that the long take and continuity editing are entirely compatible. The long take does not violate the rules of continuity since by its very definition it reinforces temporal and spatial continuity, (or at least the appearance of such as we have seen in the case of *Children of Men*). Brian Henderson argues quite convincingly how even great long-take masters such as Orson Welles and Kenji Mizoguchi used editing for pronounced and varied effects which always depended on what a particular film or sequence called for (314-324). True, *Children of Men* defies current trends of “intensified continuity” already well documented by David Bordwell (*Hollywood*, 121-38). Yet the film melds seamlessly into a longer standing tradition where the
long take has on occasion found a home in Hollywood, largely as a spectacle in itself, often in prestige productions by ambitious but studio-supported auteurs, often in hopes of critical praise, awards and some financial payback. Amazingly, this is true not only today, but was equally true during the height of the studio era.

The paradigmatic case in this regards would have to be Orson Welles. Certainly Welles had predecessors when it comes to the long take, not only with Renoir in France in the 1930s, but even John Ford in his perpetual battles with Darryl Zanuck’s penchant to reedit his films at Fox. But Welles consciously pursued outlandish long takes in his first two films at RKO with the complete sanction of the president, George Schaefer. It is here that we witness the often temporary symbiosis of employer and employee when it comes to the long take. Welles was able to negotiate a well-publicized contract giving him a degree of freedom never granted a Hollywood director before. Yet for Schaefer, the contract itself served as good advanced publicity (Schatz 90). In such an environment, Welles was expected to innovate, which he did most of all in collaboration with Greg Toland, the cinematographer, who helped realize Welles’ desire for long takes which call attention to themselves. Certainly this artistic blank check was short lived in the case of Welles at RKO, as evidenced by his losing the right of final cut with The Magnificent Ambersons (1942). According to Thomas Schatz, Citizen Kane’s less than stellar box office performance illustrated the economic limits of both product differentiation and a filmmaker’s trademark status (96).

Nevertheless, history would repeat itself. The long take has had a recurring cachet both within Hollywood and without. Bazin in particular called attention to the long takes in Welles and others, and in post-war European cinema the long take becomes a trademark of certain art cinema directors such as Tati and Antonioni who are no less concerned about product differentiation within the festival realm. (Indeed, auteurist trademarks can be said to be the sine qua non of competitions in the international festival circuit.) Even in Hollywood, the long take can sometimes become almost an end in itself. That Rope (1948) contains only eleven shots has led David Brodwell to conjecture that in the late 1940s “Hitchcock, like many of his peers, took the long take as a challenge, an occasion to reshape contemporary norms of storytelling” (Poetics, 42).

Of course, there is no denying that the Hollywood of today is not the Hollywood of the old studio system — it is the New Hollywood under the economic dictates of synergistic and multinational media conglomerates. Moreover, this is the Hollywood doing business after the cautionary tale of Heaven’s Gate (1980), which nearly brought down United Artists, vividly reminding everyone in the industry of
the economic perils of unfettered auteurism. This particular incident came on the heels of another heyday of auteurism in the 1970s when directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Altman pushed their own aesthetic agendas in radically different ways. Yet respective studies by Justin Wyatt on Altman and Jon Lewis on Coppola both suggest that even the boldest auteurs have a limited window of opportunity before the political economy of Hollywood constricts their aesthetic/auteurist choices. Nevertheless, even today in this radically different and now increasingly globalized climate, the long take can still resurrect itself for strikingly similar reasons as days past.

Take the case of contemporary American independent cinema. Even though these films are primarily marketed and distributed by subsidiaries of the Hollywood majors, you can still sometimes find directors flaunting their “independence” via the long take. Gus Van Sant, for example, has had three distinct stages in his career: his early independent stage, his mainstream Hollywood phase, and his recent return to his “independent” roots. Until Van Sant came out with *Gerry* in 2002, however, one would never mistake Van Sant for a long-take director. *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) and *My Private Idaho* (1991) are both quirky with certain stylistic flourishes (most of all in their use of home movie-like footage). But their average shot lengths are nearly identical to his later mainstream work such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and *Finding Forrester* (2000), all clocking in just over six seconds per shot. His most recent films, by contrast, display startlingly long takes for an American director who has worked in the mainstream: *Elephant* (2003) comes in at 48 seconds per shot, whereas *The Last Days* (2005) is 47 seconds. His most recent *Paranoid Park* (2007), while “merely” averaging 17.3 seconds per shot because of frequent inserts of home movie-like footage, shows how much the long take is now part and parcel of the new Gus Van Sant. There is little doubt that these long takes are wedded to the tone and purposes of the subject matter in the respective recent films, but they are also very much in tune to the purposes of the niche indie market as well. Most significantly, these long takes call attention to themselves. Geoff King notes how “there is a distinct sense of the formal dimension being offered to the viewer as an attraction in its own right rather than a dimension intended to disappear into the background” (King 78). In Van Sant’s case, the long takes seem to serve as a bold announcement that his independence was once lost, but is now found; the long take serves not “reality” so much as his directorial career at a particular point in time.

The example of Paul Thomas Anderson offers further illustration. Even before *There Will Be Blood* (2007), Anderson had already long established himself as a long-take director on the cutting edge of Hollywood. In his earlier films, most of
all *Boogie Nights*, the long take is more of a baroque artifice, a bold statement in its own right by a brash young director who thought himself too good for NYU and nearly everyone else, yet who was not deluded about his abilities. Gavin Smith ascribes to the opening long take in *Boogie Nights* an “uninhibited exuberance” and “will to cinematic mastery” which “announces the advent of a new stylist, one young enough to make old devices seem new” (171). David O. Russell saw in the film’s style a macho-like bravado: “I thought it had an amazing energy in it, amazing testosterone and all this other stuff going on” (qtd. in Waxman 191). Anderson brings into sharp relief how there is often a certain bravado ascribed to the long take, largely because accomplishing polished and seamless long takes are exceedingly difficult. Alex Cox once aptly compared shooting in long takes versus editing in continuity as “the difference between cooking your own food and eating at McDonald’s” (Broderick).

Both Anderson and Van Sant offer evidence that Cuaron is hardly alone. Like Van Sant, Cuaron paid his dues carefully in the system with genre films, all of which are well-made, but none bearing the stanch markers of auteurism, and none prominently featuring the long take. Then he decided to work partially outside of the system with *Y tu mama también*, yet involving Good Machine in the process, much as Van Sant has worked with HBO in recent years. Given how *Y tu mama también* represents an abrupt shift in his career, the film required bold strokes in every possible way, including aesthetically. Thus, having never used many long takes before, Cuaron now uses them with unexpected aplomb, coupling these with an innovative sound design. Next, Cuaron takes a “step back” in a sense with *Prisoner of Azkaban*, paying yet more “dues” to the system. Then, a la Paul Thomas Anderson, he uses the long take in an even brasher fashion in *Children of Men*, so much so that nearly everyone who has seen the film notices the long takes above all else. Some of their own rhetoric concerning *Children of Men* belie these auteurist aspirations couched in the phenomenal “reality” of the long take. Cuaron and others also beam with pride simply for having pulled off these long takes. Frank Buono, the doggicam operator for the famed long take in the car, calls this a “landmark shot” never done before and a source of pride for everyone involved. Cuaron himself speaks of this in almost macho terms: “. . . [W]e were going to do these shots with a lot of forces against us, saying that it will never work, and some people wishing that it’s not gonna work. We did the shots that everybody thought was going to be impossible. It was sweet. It was sweet” (*Children of Men*). In the end, perhaps being true to “reality” or being “documentary-like” are not of primary importance: being true to one’s own status as an auteur in contemporary Hollywood offers as much motivation for the long take as anything else.
Still, one has to wonder if Cuaron has not reached the limits of the long take in a Hollywood setting. We should remember that Cuaron’s previous two films made ample money: *Prisoner of Azkaban* was a major box office hit while *Y tu mamá también* more than made up for its reportedly low budget and the less than three hundred prints needed for its limited release — a real money saver in itself. Without these successes, it is hard to envision that Cuaron would have been allowed to take the aesthetic chances he does in *Children of Men*. Designed to be spectacles of the abject, the long takes in *Children of Men* were a great risk for both Cuaron and Universal, a risk the latter may be regretting. According the Box Office Mojo.com, the total box office gross, both domestic and foreign, did not quite match the film’s reported $76 million production budget. Universal did not directly finance this project, but assuming that the marketing costs equaled or exceeded the production costs (as is the norm), it does not appear they made any money on it despite all of the critical praise. To wit, the film is an undeniable aesthetic success, but hardly an economic one. Moreover, past examples such as Welles, Altman, and Coppola suggest that the economics in Hollywood can seemingly sustain such artistic risks only for so long. Given these harsh economic facts, there is no telling what to expect from Cuaron here on out. For now, two of the four projects (all currently slated for 2009, according to IMDB.com) will return to Mexico at a key time in its recent history. All four projects are being backed by Hollywood, but only one is being supported by Focus Features/Universal, while the other three are being backed by Warner Bros. Perhaps Cuaron would not have so much on his plate at the moment had he not displayed such stylistic prowess. Still, in Hollywood the long take has to serve both the sacred and the profane, including filthy lucre. In the case of *Children of Men*, we may have a masterpiece which Cuaron will never be able to repeat. If he does approach this level of artistry and profundity ever again, it will likely have to be on a much smaller budgetary scale. In any case, we can at least be grateful that on occasion films as outside the Hollywood norm as *Children of Men* get made in the first place.

The example of the long takes in Alfonso Cuaron’s *Children of Men* suggests several things at once about cinematic style in the era of Hollywood globalization. First, it suggests that stylistic homogenization need not be of greater concern today than it was sixty to seventy years ago, but also not any less. Second, since Cuaron is not alone in this regards, it suggests that even in the current era of “intensified continuity” the long take can and will sometimes reemerge just as it did during the studio era. Third, it suggests that the reasons for this reemergence are not all that different than during the by-gone studio era: directors are attracted to the long
take as an assertion of aesthetic distinction; producers sometimes support such “independent” moves in the hope that they will result not only in some financial returns, but some prestige as well. No matter whether past or present, within Hollywood or without, long takes entail both aesthetic and economic risks. For this reason, the long take remains the more rarified yet more revered style, one which sooner or later another filmmaker, and another producer in the background, will likely take a chance on. Whether Alfonso Cuaron will ever get another chance like he had with Children of Men remains to be seen.

Notes

1 There is a problem of demarcation here. When does a shot of “normal” length become long enough in duration that it can be considered a “long take?” There is no hard and fast rule. Since most shots in films today average well under ten seconds per shot, it seems safe to say that anything over a half minute in duration should be considered a long take. Then again, the most noticeable long takes are those that are well over a minute in length, and on occasion several minutes long. Of particular note are those rare instances where a single long take is used to cover an entire scene in a film, in what is known as a “plan sequence.”

2 All calculations of average shot lengths (ASL) here are my own unless otherwise indicated.

3 The ASL for There Will Be Blood is 13.7 second per shot, by my count. In Anderson’s career, this comes in second after Punch-Drunk Love (19.5 seconds). Boogie Nights averages 10.8 seconds per shot, while Magnolia averages 11 seconds per shot. By any contemporary Hollywood standard, these are long-take films.

Works Cited

Benjamin, B. “Humanity’s Last Hope.” American Cinematographer. 87.12 (December, 2006): 60-75.


Alfonso Cuaron’s Film Aesthetics in the Shadow of Globalization


**Selected Filmography**


*Children of Men.* Dir. Alfonso Cuaron. Universal, 2006

*Citizen Kane.* Dir. Orson Welles. RKO, 1941.

*Elephant.* Dir. Gus Van Sant. HBO, 2003

*Great Expectations.* Dir. Alfonso Cuaron. 20th Century Fox, 1998


*The Magnificent Ambersons.* Dir. Orson Welles. RKO, 1942.


