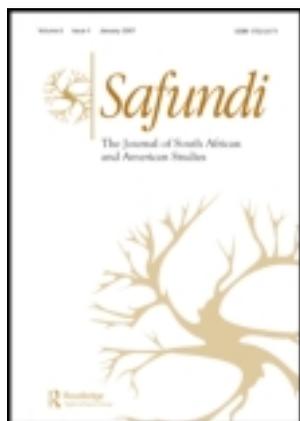


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Review Essays

District 9: A Roundtable

Michael Valdez Moses, Lucy Valerie Graham,
John Marx, Gerald Gaylard, Ralph Goodman,
Stefan Helgesson

DISTRICT 9

Directed by Neill Blomkamp. Written by Neill Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell. Produced by Peter Jackson and Carolynne Cunningham. Co-produced by Philippa Boyens. Executive Producers Bill Block, Elliot Ferweda, Paul Hanson, Ken Kamins. WingNut Films (Production), TriStar Pictures (Studio), Sony Pictures (Foreign Distribution). 2009.

<http://www.d-9.com/>

<http://www.district9movie.com/>

Neill Blomkamp's debut feature, *District 9*, has garnered fulsome praise in reviews in the United States, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Engaging as it does with the legacies of apartheid social engineering and forced removals as well as with the more recent history of xenophobic violence in South Africa's inner cities, the film speaks to a number of issues of interest to scholars and students of contemporary South African cultural formations – as well as of globalisation and cultural commodification in and of the postcolonial 'South'. I am grateful to the scholars and critics who responded so generously to my invitation to contribute to this groundbreaking review roundtable on the film. Their responses are offered below.

ANDREW VAN DER VLIES
Reviews Editor

I

THE STRANGE RIDE OF WIKUS VAN DE MERWE¹

Michael Valdez Moses

Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* has proven an unlikely commercial and critical success since its August release. (As of 20 September, the film, made on a relatively modest \$30 million budget, had grossed over \$111 million in the United States alone). Critics have been quick to seize upon the political dimensions of the film, and, with some exceptions, have praised it both for its "anti-Hollywood" esthetic and for its progressive social message. An anonymous reviewer for the online edition of the *Telegraph* writes: "What makes [the] film so radical is the clarity and force with which it proves that science fiction can tell us as much about the world we live in as any social documentary. It shows too the wealth of epic, extreme and immensely populist stories that exist to be told about the non-Atlantic world. Who needs Manhattan when there are so many megalopolises and sprawling slum republics about which brilliant films like *District 9* can be made?"² Many critics have seen *District 9* as an allegory of apartheid-era South African politics. The film opens in 2010: since their arrival on earth in 1982, extraterrestrial refugees have been segregated from the human population of Johannesburg by the South African government, and for nearly thirty years have been forced to live amid the squalor, crime, and violence of the fenced enclave known as "District 9." The aliens, (or "prawns" as they are pejoratively called by white and black South Africans alike) are to be forcibly resettled to a new relocation facility (in fact, a concentration camp) by Multinational United (MNU), a private multinational security and defense corporation working under contract for the South African government. Unsurprisingly, reviewers have routinely identified the aliens with South African blacks segregated in apartheid-era Bantustans (formally dissolved after 1994) and impoverished Townships such as Soweto (where much of *District 9* was shot). That the language of the aliens makes use of "clicks," which a South African audience will likely associate with the distinctive phonemes of San, Khoi, isiXhosa, or isiZulu, lends credence to this identification.

Some of the most sensational "revelations" of the film—aliens are being used as experimental test subjects by scientists working in the labs of MNU for the purposes of developing new weaponry—may allude to scandalous exposés that appeared in the press during the hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In 1998, Dr Schalk van Rensburg, a scientist who worked in the 1980s and early 90s for Roodeplaats Research Laboratories, testified that his research had been

¹South African viewers might have expected to see Wikus's surname rendered "van der Merwe" (not coincidentally, long the stock figure of jokes playing on the stereotype of the eager but naïve and boorish white Afrikaner male), but "der" is consistently spelt "de" in subtitles and the cast list, and we have chosen to retain this spelling in these review essays. Similarly, we have retained "Koobus" where "Kobus" might have been expected. Reviews Editor.

²"*District 9*, Review," *The Telegraph*.

directed toward the development of race-specific biochemical weapons targeting blacks; van Rensburg confessed that he was ordered to develop a vaccine that would render black women fighting for UNITA infertile.³ The methods of population control employed by MNU in *District 9* are cruder, but more effective: the protagonist Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley), who works for MNU and manages the resettlement of the aliens, orders the burning of an illegal “prawn” hatchery in District 9. He laughs light-heartedly for the camera when the alien fetuses start “popping” in the ensuing fire.

In what I am calling the prevailing “progressive” reading of *District 9*, Wikus is transformed from a staunch (and unreflective) defender of the segregationist regime that employs him into a courageous dissenter and freedom fighter who struggles on behalf of the liberation of the aliens. Having been accidentally exposed to a mysterious alien fluid, Wikus discovers he is being literally changed into an extraterrestrial. Wikus’s injured hand rapidly grows into a claw-like appendage characteristic of the “prawns,” and as the film progresses he undergoes an accelerating bodily metamorphosis à la Kafka. His human DNA rapidly fusing with its alien counterpart, Wikus is a potential biological and financial asset to MNU. The corporation has seized a massive arsenal of alien weaponry that can only be operated by someone (or something) possessing alien DNA.⁴ Wikus thus provides the key by which the defense manufacturer can gain access to a new lethal technology, but he will have to be vivisected and killed in the process. Wikus’s “turn” toward the cause of the oppressed thus comes as a result of his unintended exposure to an alien fluid and as a consequence of his being forced to assume the vulnerable and exploitable position of a “prawn” at the mercy of MNU and the South African government. Wikus soon joins up with Christopher Johnson, an elite alien who has repaired a command module (hidden beneath the slums of District 9) that will enable him and his son to operate the “mother ship” that has been stalled above Johannesburg for nearly thirty years. Together Wikus and Christopher break into MNU corporate headquarters and seize the precious alien fluid that Johnson had painstakingly collected over decades and that will fuel the command module. After the two renegades return to District 9, Christopher reactivates the command module, in which he and his son make their escape to the mother ship, while Wikus

³ Suggestively, one of the “interviewees” who appears in the pseudo-documentary news reports of *District 9*, a white man speaking in Afrikaans, comments that a solution to the prawn “problem” would be to develop a selective virus (“*n selektiewe virus*”). His comment appears to allude to the revelations of the TRC testimony. For a consideration of South Africa’s biochemical warfare program, including details of van Rensburg’s testimony, see Gould and Folb. For a brief discussion of the testimony of Dr. Jan Lourens at the TRC hearings concerning a secret South African program to create a “blacks-only non fertility pill,” see Mangold and Goldberg, *Plague Wars*, 260.

⁴ This “fact” raises a question: why have the aliens not used their own weapons to resist their incarceration and mistreatment by the South African authorities? Though this may simply be a narrative inconsistency on the part of the screenwriters, it is possible that the aliens may have consciously foresworn the use of force even in their own defense, at least until it is too late for them to do otherwise. Curiously, in the first scenes in which alien weaponry is used against MNU security officials and Nigerian gangsters, the killing is carried out entirely by Wikus. Christopher Johnson, Wikus’s alien accomplice, consistently refrains from using the weapons against humans (though his son later makes use of them to save both his father and Wikus).

successfully holds off the forces of MNU (killing a great many mercenaries in the process). Christopher and his son leave the planet, promising to return to earth in three years to “save” the aliens of District 9—who will have been relocated to District 10—and to provide Wikus with the medical treatment necessary to transform him back into human form.

Scripted by Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell, *District 9* seems an allegorical paean to the courage, conscience, and compassion of white opponents of apartheid, those converts who, having been (at least tacitly) complicit in the regime’s inhumane practices, unexpectedly learn that they share a common physical and spiritual bond with their oppressed alien brothers. Wikus’s story seems to celebrate the dramatic transformation of a man embodying the banality of evil into a political hero who risks his life for the cause of universal freedom and racial equality. If it tends to give disproportionate attention to the *white* (Afrikaner) dissenter and revolutionary political activist, *District 9* nonetheless appears superficially to be an inspiring story about how the evils of apartheid were overcome by the cooperation of whites and blacks who stood up together against an unjust political and economic system.

And yet, as several reviewers have noted, a troubling note of racism sounds throughout the film. Critics have singled out Blomkamp and Tatchell’s unflattering treatment of the Nigerian gangsters who make their living by exploiting the aliens of District 9. Led by a sadistic and partly paralyzed warlord named Obesandjo (Eugene Khumbanyiwa), the Nigerians overcharge the aliens for tins of cat food (to which the aliens have become addicted), run an interspecies prostitution ring (the women servicing the aliens are presumably Nigerian), traffic in alien weaponry, and generally terrorize the inhabitants of District 9. Practitioners of African witchcraft and the ritual dismemberment and devouring of “prawns” (the Nigerians believe that by eating the body parts of the aliens they will imbibe their power), Obesandjo and his gang members are a distillation of some of the most negative contemporary South African stereotypes of Nigerian immigrants, tens of thousands of whom have entered the country illegally since the 1980s, and some of whom are part of a nation-wide (indeed international) crime syndicate trafficking in drugs and engaging in other illegal activities that got its start in Johannesburg in the late 1980s. Given that Obesandjo’s name closely resembles that of former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, it is hardly surprising that Nigeria’s Information Minister, Dora Akunyili, has directed movie theaters in her country to ban the showing of *District 9*.⁵

But if reviewers have recognized that the damning portraits of the Nigerians in *District 9* trade upon the racist stereotypes of African “savages” typical in works of colonialist fiction, they have as yet not fully appreciated that Wikus van de Merwe’s transformation reworks another politically retrograde trope of imperial romance: the (European) white man “gone native.” Wikus’s physical metamorphosis is a visceral source of horror for him and the film’s audience. His bodily transformation is painful, frightening, disgusting, and degrading: Wikus drips black fluid from his nose, vomits up black bile at a party on his behalf, loses his teeth and finger nails,

⁵ See “Nigeria: ‘District 9’ Movie Not Welcome Here,” NPR online.

suffers from suppurating pustules on his chest and back, peels chunks of flesh from his body, and rapidly changes into an oversized humanoid crustacean. Wikus is so disgusted with his altered appearance that he attempts to cut off his prawn-like “claw” with an axe. To make matters worse, MNU and the media report that his metamorphosis has been caused by “prolonged sexual activity” with aliens in District 9, and his “exposure” to alien DNA is thereafter routinely compared to the contraction of a venereal disease. It is difficult to imagine a more nightmarish or less “progressive” story about “going native.” *District 9* seems only a more up-to-date and graphically explicit version of Kipling’s famous imperial gothic tale of 1885, “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes.” Wikus is Kipling’s Morrowbie Jukes, circa 2010. Like his late nineteenth-century predecessor, Wikus inadvertently becomes trapped in a remote native prison camp, where he rapidly degenerates into a lowly outcast forced to live a beastly existence: in order to survive, Jukes must eat crow, Wikus, tins of cat food.

The positive portraits of Christopher and his son notwithstanding (they are intelligent, creative, courageous, civic minded, compassionate, and heroic), the average “prawn” in *District 9* corresponds to a racial stereotype every bit as negative as that of the Nigerian gangster. Described as leaderless workers stranded on earth, the “prawns” are represented en masse as violent, uneducated, lazy, and dangerous. They live amid filth and spend their time picking through mountainous piles of garbage and refuse. They routinely sacrifice principles, personal loyalties, and even family ties for tins of cat food. They vomit and urinate copiously and unashamedly in public places. Given to theft, sexual license, kidnapping, physical mayhem, and casual murder, the prawns kill, dismember, and devour the body of Koobus⁶ (David James), head of the MNU security force, in the film’s climactic scene. If the Nigerians are a throwback to the negative colonial stereotype of the “primitive” African, the “prawns” correspond to both the old stereotype and a new one, no less negative for being up-to-date: that of the shiftless, violent, and degenerate urban African lumpenproletariat.

To be sure, the degraded condition of the aliens might be interpreted from a liberal perspective as the result of their mistreatment and oppression by the South African authorities and MNU, rather than the manifestation of their inherent viciousness. But this progressive view of matters does nothing to explain the most disturbing aspects of *District 9*, its thinly veiled portrait of *post-apartheid* South Africa as a political dystopia, and its persistent undercurrent of nostalgia for the old days of racial segregation. The ostensible white hero of the film does not want to join the aliens: indeed, his sole and abiding wish is to return to his comfortable home and his beautiful white wife, Tania (Vanessa Haywood). Suggestively, in the party scene at Wikus’s home, there are no blacks among the guests, only whites. Tania gives voice to Wikus’s deepest if endlessly deferred desire, the wish that “everything” were “back the way it was.” Tellingly, she asks her husband aloud: “how can we go back?” The implication is that Wikus and Tania would happily return to a world in which

⁶ Once again, South Africans would expect “Kobus,” but we respect the film’s subtitling and cast list. Reviews Editor.

humans and aliens do not mix, indeed have no reason to interact. The point is made again emphatically when Wikus tells Christopher that if they succeed in retrieving the canister of alien fluid from MNU headquarters: “I can go home. You can go home. *You can take all the prawns with you.*” What Wikus and Christopher envision is a radical segregation of their peoples, not a politically progressive multiethnic mix of cultures living in harmony.

Wikus, after all, makes no bones about wanting his former (white) body back. He never loses his disgust for his alien(ated) form, never embraces his physical transformation as anything except a temporary and painful (if necessary) stage on the way to the complete restoration of his old self. In the final scene of the film, we see an alien sitting amid the rubble of a slum (possibly District 9 or more likely the new resettlement camp, District 10) picking through garbage and crafting a flower made of scrap metal. Given that Tania has found such a flower mysteriously left on her doorstep, we infer that the “alien” is Wikus, whose transformation into a “prawn” is now complete. But if the scene is meant to be poignant or even tragic, it depends for its emotional effect upon the fact that Wikus has lost everything—his wife, his family, his job, his dignity, his community, his way of life. He now waits without any assurance for the return of *Christopher* and the alien craft, and for some kind of otherworldly deliverance from his degraded state. He has become indistinguishable from the oppressed alien masses he fought to liberate. With the South African authorities and their corporate bedfellows having been disgraced, but nonetheless still in positions of authority (Tania’s father, Piet Smit, continues as the head of MNU), and the new alien leadership having vanished from the scene, Wikus is more likely to be exploited by some new African warlord or gangster than he is to be freed from the third world hell into which he has descended.

For all of its progressive anti-apartheid energies, *District 9* stands as a troubling lament on behalf of South African whites for the world lost with the end of apartheid. Disturbingly, it literalizes the long-running nightmare of the white Afrikaner that the demise of apartheid spells the decline of the white ruling elite, who will be reduced to a condition identical to that of the continent’s impoverished, exploited, and politically oppressed black masses. Abandoned and alone, utterly without means to change his fate, Wikus is the lost member of his white tribe whose life consists of sifting through garbage in a slum, waiting, perhaps forever, for his transmundane saviour to return things to the way they were before the fall.

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II

AMAKWEREKWERE⁷ AND OTHER ALIENS: DISTRICT 9 AND HOSPITALITY

Lucy Valerie Graham

Here I shall briefly outline an interesting and potentially subversive aspect of *District 9* before going on to discuss three problematic aspects of the film. For me, the most fascinating moment in the film is where Wikus van de Merwe begins to transform into an alien or "prawn." In the scene, Wikus has been rushed to hospital on account of black liquid streaming from his nose, as well as other worrying symptoms including vomiting and the fact that his fingernails are dropping off. The doctor proceeds to cut open bandages encasing Wikus's left arm, which had sustained a minor injury but now seems to be infected. Horrifically, the bandages burst open to reveal an alien claw. What has happened is that Wikus is now becoming a "prawn" after having accidentally ingested an alien substance. This moment, where the boundaries between self and alien other begin to disintegrate on a physical level, obviously has a precedent in other sci-fi films, but the image of *the hand* specifically becoming other to the self also features in films such as *Dr Strangelove* as well as *Fight Club*, where, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, it may be seen as "an autonomous partial object" that has an interesting and complex relationship with totalitarianism and authoritarianism.⁸ Speaking of *Fight Club* in an interview, Žižek claims that the message of the film is not liberatory violence *per se*, but that "liberation hurts."⁹ What Žižek means here is that in order to extricate oneself from slave mentality one must first attack the enemy within, the part of oneself that keeps one in obedience to modes of control, which offer an "excess of enjoyment and pleasure," and "to get rid of that enjoyment is painful."¹⁰ In *Fight Club*, this involves the process whereby the fist attacks the self: "you first have to beat the shit out of yourself."¹¹ In so far as Wikus in *District 9* has no control over his transformation and regards the claw as foreign to himself (at one point he tries to chop it off), the alien hand can be seen as

⁷ "Amakwerekwere" is the derogatory South African word for non-South African Africans, that is, "foreign" or immigrant black Africans in South Africa.

⁸ Žižek in Fiennes (dir.) *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*.

⁹ Žižek, *Liberation Hurts*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Žižek in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*.

both autonomous and as a partial object.¹² The first visible sign of Wikus's mutation, the hand is what forces him out of his comfort zone—with its appearance suddenly he is treated as if not fully human, all his rights evaporate into thin air. And indeed, the black claw that bursts from the bandages like Lazarus from the tomb is what begins to destroy Wikus's attachment to the father-leader, to a xenophobic culture that will now exclude him. The alien hand is what gives the film its radical political potential.

I now move on to three problematic aspects of the film. First, *District 9* is part of a tradition of films that present, for Western viewers, the “problem” or dilemma of the other, but do so through the lens of a white male focalizer who becomes a point of identification. In South African cinema this tradition would include *Cry Freedom* (1987), in which, as many black critics pointed out, the trials and tribulations of Donald Woods are foregrounded over and above Biko's story, and *Goodbye Bafana* (2007), which focuses on Nelson Mandela's white male prison guard who undergoes a political transformation through his contact with Mandela. In *District 9*, the opening and closing shots are of Wikus, and even though in the final scene he has fully metamorphosed into a “prawn,” the entire film works through coaxing the viewer into sympathy and identification with his story, thus bolstering the premise that viewers would only respond with sympathy to the dilemma of a white male protagonist.

The second problem with the film has, of course, to do with the representation of the Nigerians, which has received much attention since the Nigerian government publicly complained about this aspect of the film. Here I would like to acknowledge the rather obvious point that although the film critiques xenophobia, it ultimately also perpetuates it. As I shall demonstrate, however, the problematic representation of the Nigerians in *District 9* is interesting in so far as it opens up questions of the parasite and the parricide, and of the *xenos* (the foreigner who receives hospitality) and *xenia* (the contract of hospitality). To start off, it is useful to compare *District 9* with the earlier film on which it is based, namely *Alive in Joburg* (2005), a six-minute short directed by Neill Blomkamp (who co-authored *District 9* with Terry Tatchell) and produced by Simon Hansen and Sharlto Copley (who stars as Wikus in *District 9*). In *Alive in Joburg*, the aliens illegally tap into human water and electricity supplies; they are far more obviously parasitic than they are in *District 9*, where they are not shown to be constant competitors for resources with humans and seem to live mainly on cat food. In addition, while the first shots of the aliens in *District 9* are of starving and helpless beings trapped in the darkness of their mother ship, the aliens in *Alive in Joburg* are immediately associated with aggressive robotic attacks on the police and military vehicles.

¹² As described by Melanie Klein, a partial object or “part-object” is an object (such as the mother's breast or other part of the body) “endowed in phantasy with traits comparable to a person's (e.g., it can be persecutory, reassuring, benevolent, etc.).” See Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 302. For Žižek, as for Lacan, the partial object is autonomous when it elicits a drive beyond the subject: “it wants . . . it follows its path and exacts its satisfaction at any price, irrespective of the subject's well-being”; Žižek, “Love beyond Law.”

In *District 9*, it appears that the Nigerians take on all the negative aspects that had characterized the aliens in the short film. They are shown to have developed a parasitic culture of crime and gangsterism that feeds off slum conditions, and they are the ones who ambush armored cars and the law-keepers of the state. By contrast, the aliens in *District 9* have the means by which to destroy the humans who oppress them—hugely powerful weapons that can only be activated by alien DNA—and yet they do not use these weapons (except finally to access a substance that will facilitate their escape to their mother ship). As Jacques Derrida proposes in *Of Hospitality* by looking at the story of Oedipus, the question posed by the *xenos* is “the unbearable question, the parricide question As though the Foreigner had to begin by contesting the authority of the chief, the father”¹³ Because the *xenos* “shakes up the threatening dogmatism of the paternal logos” he/she always already poses the question of revolution.¹⁴ Like the stranger from Elea in Plato’s *Sophist*,¹⁵ and *unlike* the Nigerians with their megalomaniac leader Obesandjo (whose name is strikingly similar to that of the former Nigerian president and prominent anti-apartheid negotiator Olusegun Obasanjo), the “prawns” in *District 9* however “beg” not to be thought of as parricidal. They seem to want to perform the role of guests, and to fulfill the contract of *xenia*. They are allowed to exist, but the hospitality offered to them is conditional on their obedience to segregationist laws, and eventually on their removal from the urban space to a relocation camp. Here the film demonstrates the difference between what Derrida describes as “absolute hospitality” and “the ‘pact’ of hospitality”:

Absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place that I offer them, without asking of them . . . reciprocity (entering into a pact).¹⁶

This leads me finally to the third problematic aspect of *District 9*. While the film obviously foregrounds and critiques xenophobia, no solution is offered to the presence of alien others within the city. For the authorities in the film, the only ways of dealing with the aliens are segregation in the spatial precinct of District 9 and, as a “final solution,” relocation to concentration camps. The problem is that by making the aliens of another species and thus wholly other, the film does not provide an opportunity for thinking beyond the carceral model. Indeed, the only outcome is for the “prawns” to go home, there is no possibility of integration within the urban space.

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¹³ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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III

ALIEN RULE

John Marx

The genius of *District 9* is its eagerness to take the most outlandish aspects of our present at face value. The arrival of aliens in Johannesburg triggers neither panic nor innovation from the local government but instead an atavistic return to the protocols of Apartheid, which, we are explicitly told, fit neatly into existing multinational administrative protocols. No sooner are the "prawns," so called, brought down to earth than they are put in a camp that strongly resembles a township. This is not an accidental resemblance: in interviews, the filmmakers have taken pains to stake the authenticity of their project on anecdotes of hardship endured during staging and shooting the movie in the neighborhood of Chiawelo. "The people are warm, but the environment is so caustic and unbelievably disgusting to be in," Neill Blomkamp told the *Guardian*.¹⁷ Subsequent news reports about residents of this Soweto quarter being relocated just like the filmic residents of District 9 confirm that, as always, life follows art. The movie makes viewers feel further at home with its administrative problem of how to manage a camp full of aliens through the shameless embrace of stereotyping, especially of the Nigerian gangsters, and via the enthusiastic embrace of a panoply of recognizable visual narrative forms, from the raw drama of CCTV footage to the splatter of first-person shooters and the reassuring sentimentality of the buddy film.

Even as it frames the strange in familiar terms, the movie's explicit recycling of visual forms also suggests something like exhaustion with the available ways of representing and organizing the collection of stereotypes on screen. The need for a novel administrative approach is only underscored by the movie's neoliberal twist on

¹⁷ Quoted in Smith, "Soweto residents report mixed feelings," *The Guardian*.

Apartheid's discredited tactics and strategies. The South African state in *District 9* appears to have yielded control to a corporation. The fabulously named MNU, "the global leader in technology innovation,"¹⁸ is in charge of keeping the aliens in their place, a task in which it engages zealously. In addition to its armored vehicles and very sharp choppers, MNU possesses an underground bunker-cum-biotech facility where a later-day Dr Mengele heads an alien dissection-cum-weapons-development program. Teams of gore-spattered scientists try in vain to make spectacularly powerful alien weapons usable by humans.

Because privatization makes *District 9* into a more freely floating allegory, it also begs the significance of the setting the movie otherwise works so hard to establish. Johannesburg is hardly the only location where it is possible to imagine that corporations are taking over governance, and when *District 9* renders the world outside the camp, we could be in just about any corporate downtown, any suburb. This should make us wonder why we might care about all the local culture presented on screen. One reason may be that the movie seems interested in getting us to recognize how reluctant we are to differentiate among particular instances of neoliberal governance. *District 9* frames the challenge of such comparative assessment when its corporate stooge/participant observer Wikus van de Merwe asserts that District 10, the camp to which the "prawns" are to be relocated, is worse than District 9. With its small tents and extra spools of razor wire, District 10 is set up more like a concentration camp, he says.

Potential assessments of this contrast may entail a philosophical parting of the ways. One path follows Giorgio Agamben's contention that a camp is a camp is a camp, or, in the words of *Homo Sacer*, that "the camp is the very paradigm of political space," that "the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself."¹⁹ This may well be the side the film is on, if we think *District 9* would have us believe that Wikus makes a distinction without a difference. But there is another path, one that follows the political science of fine distinctions expressed by such projects as the "Failed States Index" published by The Fund for Peace.²⁰ Here, one discovers endlessly interpretable variations of governmental dysfunction and malevolence, all of which may be located on a statistical norm and a color-coded chart. This attention to measurable detail makes the "Failed States Index" reminiscent of the highly flexible and adaptable theory and practice of governmentality studied by Michel Foucault. Belief in the significance of small differences may, it is true, appear difficult to come by in the main narrative of *District 9*—an interest in particularity is at best the domain of the talking heads who come in after the fact to explain what has happened, but seem powerless to intervene in the present, or make predictions about the future.

¹⁸ See the fictitious website, <http://www.multinationalunited.com/>.

¹⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 171–74.

²⁰ See http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=99&Itemid=140

Even if it seems plausible to argue that a slum is better than a concentration camp, both the message and the messenger in *District 9* make apparent the need for a third option. The alien known as Christopher Johnson is the movie's figure for the possibility of a radical departure from the available choices. The alien-tech "fluid" he scavenges from the detritus in *District 9*'s trash heaps causes Wikus to metamorphose into "prawn" (or Poleepkwa, as they call themselves according to the District 9 wiki²¹). That same fluid is the power source that allows Christopher to retake the mother ship at the movie's close. Although Christopher represents the most potent alternative to the current managerial approach, the movie's cliff-hanger ending leaves viewers with little sense of what that alternative might be. Indeed, to the extent that *District 9* equates human governance with bureaucracy and fascism, an alternative model appears nearly unthinkable—which is to say, truly alien.

District 9 makes clear that Christopher is a pilot who also knows his way around computing equipment and the snappy graphic displays of alien technology. But the movie does not clarify what such expertise means. One wonders if Christopher is not an expert but rather an aristocrat, a "prawn" with manners and intelligence, good at everything a leader by birth needs to be good at: weapons, command, technology. Questions about how his specialized knowledge distinguishes him from his fellows are pointedly unanswered. As for the motivation to govern, we know that Christopher is appalled by MNU's policy of experimenting on "prawns," but his interest in overthrowing the company's rule—or his ability to effect this—is impossible to verify. Christopher's actions may even give us grounds to doubt whether he represents a fully alien response to human habits of administration and social organization, moreover, given the ease with which the movie anthropomorphizes him into the stereotypes of the good father, leader, and the buddy. He cares for little more than his son, we learn, and when he and Wikus start to fight together, Christopher seems entirely willing to engage in homosocial bonding.

If his capacity to play those familiar roles makes Christopher seem a less likely vehicle for a radical alternative to the governmental options humans put on the table, this only affirms how hard the movie thinks it is to imagine such alternatives. *District 9* can appear so committed to leveling differences that it more or less rules out the possibility of imagining a polity that is not reduced to prisoners in a camp. It relegates transformative change to the realm of utopian fantasy, the return of the king in the unwritten possibility of the movie's sequel. By locating the prospect of radical change in the revenge fantasy of an alien father-commander with large expressive eyes, *District 9* nicely avoids the usual debate about whether dreaming of change on such a scale represents a palliative distraction from more pragmatic politics or a motivating ideal. Instead, the movie ends with something like the question of whether viewers are more terrified of the pernicious administration they know, or by the prospect of revolutionary—that is to say, alien—change. The movie also leaves hanging questions about what all its leveling accomplishes, who benefits from treating big corporations like the MNU, governments like South Africa's,

²¹ <http://district9.wikia.com/wiki/Poleepkwa>

organizations like the UN, and managers and experts everywhere as if they were exactly the same.

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IV

DISTRICT 9 AND THE PARKTOWN PRAWNS

Gerald Gaylard

District 9 has been a huge hit in South Africa. Intrigued by the idea of science-fiction set in South Africa that, moreover, has had audiences flocking in the United States, South African audiences have also scuttled off to this film and appear to have enjoyed it thoroughly. Their identification with Neill Blomkamp's film has been immediate and one wonders how an American, or other, audience would have understood the references to "Parktown prawns," "one prawn one bullet," the Afrikaans petty bureaucrat Wikus van de Merwe, eviction notices, the xenophobic violence of 2008 in Alexandra (and other townships), and so on. The Johannesburg audience in the film screening I attended not only identified with these local references, but recognized the setting immediately. So the peculiarity of the reception of this film in South Africa was the immediate recognition by the audience of "home." This evoked complex feelings. On the one hand, there has been a certain patriotic pride in local audiences who are thrilled to seeing their world, or at least some elements of it, reflected on a Hollywood big screen, particularly via the distancing effect of an often remote science fiction. In this respect, there was also some pride among younger viewers about the fact that South Africa has made it into a predominantly Western genre that represents the cutting edge of high technology and concomitant debates. Nevertheless, despite these patriotic moments, there was the discomfort of being identified with a dehumanizing apartheid past, a discomfort that accelerated as the

film did similarly. Moreover, at a more banal level, part of this distancing effect was the defamiliarization of Johannesburg that took place, especially via the large alien spacecraft looming over it.

This film features an interesting affective dimension. The satirical humor at the start functions to put the audience at their ease, especially a South African audience that gets the jokes immediately. The mockumentary sections in which various media personalities (including a member of the cast of *Isidingo*, a local soap opera) feature, were funny to South African audiences. Similarly, they cracked up at Wikus, the small-minded apartheid-era-like apparatchik, whose initial attitudes and antics appear ridiculous to a predominantly young audience, now far removed from South Africa's past. The movie, however, does not continue in this vein for long; the ease is a feint to put viewers off their guard as the message is hammered home in true *skiet-and-donner*²² action movie style. As humans attempt to remove the "prawns" from their township slum and relocate them to a concentration camp-like version of the same, so the conflict between the species escalates and the brutal anthropocentrism and cruelty of humanity is exposed. My point is that this change of emotional pace likely affected South African audiences quite a bit more powerfully than overseas ones, particularly given the suffering on their doorsteps and the still-livid memory of the xenophobic violence of 2008.

This non-anthropocentric, even misanthropic, aspect of *District 9* places it in the more skeptical vein of science fiction, a heritage that would include Lovecraft, Philip K. Dick, and William Gibson, among others. This makes it particularly interesting not only because of its direct challenge to the generic norms of science fiction, which typically features humanity's triumph, but because it is a non-anthropocentric text set in a "Third World" context. Indeed, Blomkamp is cited as saying that, as far as he was concerned, "the film doesn't exist without Jo'burg. It's not like I had a story and then I was trying to pick a city. It's totally the other way around. I actually think Johannesburg represents the future. What I think the world is going to become looks like Johannesburg."²³

Given that Johannesburg is a highly stratified city with a wide variety of areas and life-modes ranging from extreme wealth to shantytowns, and given also that the film entirely depicts the latter rather than the former, Blomkamp's use of the city serves the purposes of his apocalyptic vision. The ugliest side of Johannesburg is focused on in this film: brown, dusty, sun-bleached, polluted, this is only the Johannesburg of the corporate high-rise and the impoverished township with no suburban or other in-between. As one Jo'burg viewer commented, "where are the trees?" Blomkamp, filming in the most destitute parts of the township, is quoted as saying that "the people are warm but the environment is so caustic and unbelievably disgusting to be in. Every single thing is difficult. There's broken glass everywhere, there's rusted barbed wire everywhere, the level of pollution is insane. And then, in that

²² Lit. shooting and thunder/beating up.

²³ Smith, "Post-Apartheid at the Movies," 2.

environment, you're trying to be creative as well. But, of course, that gave birth to the creativity, so it kind of goes both ways."²⁴

Blomkamp appears to have a *Mad Max* apocalyptic perspective on how the future, a human future, an urban future, will evolve—fabulous citadels of wealth, power, and control will encrust a desertified landscape peopled by roaming gangs of brigands. In other words, Johannesburg in the film functions as a microcosm of Blomkamp's apocalyptic view of ecology and the relations between the West and the rest, between "First" and "Third" Worlds. The problem with this vision is that it tends to exacerbate the binaries and conflicts in these relations rather than ameliorating them; this interestingly contradicts the implicit plea for cross-species and intercultural tolerance and understanding made in the film. As Hayibo.com, a satirical South African website and social commentary forum, put it: "South Africans say that *District 9* has taught them that xenophobia is bad, adding that without the sci-fi blockbuster they might never have understood that setting foreigners on fire is upsetting to them. 'You only really understand something when you see it translated through the medium of high-budget special effects,' explained one former xenophobe."²⁵

Moreover, despite the plea for cross-species tolerance and understanding, the film indulges in a predictably crass way in the usual anthropocentrism of science fiction that portrays aliens as what Americans call "bugs." This portrayal appears to build upon arachnophobia and insect and reptile phobias. One of the biggest issues for the ecological movement is this issue of anthropocentrism whereby humans easily identify with "cute" mammals, but are relatively uncaring and dismissive of many other species, especially bugs. Of course, the film makes a joke about equating the aliens with Parktown prawns, a species of cricket (though most people consider it to be a cockroach) peculiar to Johannesburg, but perhaps many a true thing is said in jest. So if the film is sensationalist in its apocalyptic view of the postcolonial city, then it is not exactly ecologically progressive either. Still, that we feel at all for the "prawns" is some sort of achievement.

Finally, Nigerians have been upset by the movie's portrayal of them as superstitious gangsters. For all that the film might be said to "other" Johannesburg and cockroaches despite its anti-anthropocentrism, there is always another other.

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²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "South Africans thank *District 9* makers for new insights into xenophobia."

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V

THE ALLEGORY OF *DISTRICT 9*

Ralph Goodman

District 9 is for South African viewers a landmark, being the first science-fiction movie to be set in South Africa—an unusual target for space invaders, who most often choose to land in the more cinematically lucrative terrain of the United States. In addition, in *District 9* the alien arrival is not an invasion, but happens by chance, after their craft breaks down over Johannesburg, sometime in 1982.

For whatever reason audiences are currently filling cinemas in South Africa, many are undoubtedly drawn because social satire and the science-fiction/action genre are symbiotic in this movie. One view of *District 9* is as a carefully crafted and detailed allegorical story of an historic South Africa, having hopelessly lost its moral direction, and then, at great cost and suffering, finding itself again, but in a completely new place and time. In the first part of the movie, audiences are primed for the violence of the second part by a classic depiction of old-style South African bureaucratic crassness, the banality of oppression as well as its unconscious cruelty skillfully embodied in the main character, Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley). The violence of the second portion of the movie is the obverse of the first, reflecting the submerged anger of the first part, with a violence which is unremitting and insatiable, typical of the passion against any Kristevan abject which remains ineradicably present in the face of a schizoid contempt for its very existence.

Such contempt—so familiar to South Africans who lived during the apartheid era—springs from a deep-seated fear of the intolerable Other, evoking both a need to distance and compartmentalize it, and a tormented and never-ending obsession to be rid of it. These qualities emerge in the alternately cold and quietly frantic way Wikus van de Merwe interacts with the aliens, and these are the source of many of the darkly satirical anti-apartheid moments in the movie: Van de Merwe demands a signature from an alien who has no concept of either a signature or a document, desperate signs designate certain areas as not accessible to humans, an overwhelming force of armed men and aircraft is assembled to attack a population of aliens who—aside from a handful—are helpless, vulnerable, bewildered, and poverty-stricken. The aliens are dealt with as though all, even the most obviously harmless, are enemies of the status quo, capable of subverting the state and sowing the harm that their difference alone signifies. To those who manufacture and ceaselessly patrol the

boundaries of apartheid in this movie—the state and the powerful private interests—those boundaries can never be impermeable enough.

Some more recent aspects of South African history are reflected in the actions and the suffering of Wikus van de Merwe in the second part of the movie, a transition which evokes the trauma of awakening consciousness and the even more difficult journey toward change and redemption. Wikus emerges from his banality to become an allegorical figure, the classic knight on a long and dangerous quest toward ontological rebirth, flawed but gaining strength from his experiences, growing larger than life as his journey unfolds. The concrete events on which this allegory is predicated involve the dramatic effect of the TRC on the entire country, but here specifically on Afrikaner nationalists. As the process of the TRC publicly revealed the culpability of the South African state in crimes against humanity, a shocked majority of Afrikanerdom was faced simultaneously with a double revelation: their previous lack of full awareness and the fact that when it came to white Afrikaners, the general public often made no distinction between major perpetrators of evil deeds, and those who, like most whites, were guilty of quiescence, moral laziness, or willful silence in the face of clear discrimination against the majority of the populace. The response of a critical mass of Afrikaners to this situation has been slowly and painfully to alter the way in which they, as a group, respond to the racial Other, in word, look, and gesture—a transformation which has begun to earn Afrikaners as a whole a new respect within many post-apartheid South African circles.

The personal transformation of Wikus van de Merwe is initiated by an event, worthy, in its ironic significance, of some detail in a Greek myth: the disrespectful and depersonalizing curiosity with which he habitually examines the belongings of the aliens, until he handles a canister of liquid which contaminates him, causing one of his arms to take on the form of an alien arm. This, to him, disgustingly intolerable aspect of the Other is now inseparable from himself, an organic part of his own flesh, and one of his initial responses is predictable: he attempts to enforce separation and excise this alien aspect from his body, but in vain. The old strategy having failed, he is forced to the much more difficult position of accepting that which he feels to be alien to himself, but which is, ineradicably, part of himself. It is in the course of this heroic struggle that he gradually ceases to regard himself as some bizarre manifestation of part man, part monster, and begins to relate very differently to the aliens, in word, look, and gesture. Such behavior involves his speaking to and dealing with the aliens as though they were also human, showing protectiveness toward a young alien (as opposed to his earlier wanton destruction of alien eggs) and, finally, in a gesture worthy of any medieval tale of chivalry, his activation of a huge mobile war machine, with which he inflicts massive damage on the troops and vehicles of the aggressive and alienated society of which he was once a part. His experience has been one of conversion or revelation, based on the challenge offered to his corporeal identity by an alien invasion of his own body, and taking him further in his growth than he could ever have achieved by sheer will power.

Regardless of whether *District 9* is seen as social commentary or science-fiction spectacular, this age-old paradigm embodies a story calculated to satisfy any viewer.

The vast majority of science-fiction movies are more interrogations of what it is to be human than explorations of alien life forms. It is the proximity of human and alien that is the real source of interest, since there is an unspoken fear that will not release us: that the dreaded Other, the monstrous abject, is in fact a reflection of a part of ourselves—deformed perhaps beyond recognition but, on one level, a blood brother whom we dare not acknowledge, but by whom we are endlessly fascinated. That is the final secret of the success of *District 9*: it successfully evokes in us the main character's experience of horrified recognition and desperate rejection which is only healed when Wikus van de Merwe, former apartheid-style functionary, taking on an alien appearance and norms, fights for the salvation of aliens, while remaining fully human, enacting an intimate fusion of both human and abject, a cathartic act which soothes our deep-seated fears and replaces them with relief, at least for the moment. That is, of course, all that we can reasonably ask, given that many bitter wounds of racial discrimination remain unhealed in South Africa today—and allegory has to give way to real-life predicaments.

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VI

DISTRICT 9: THE GLOBAL SOUTH AS SCIENCE FICTION

Stefan Helgesson

First, there is the texture of the film: washed-out colors, the angular skyline of Johannesburg, the unforgiving surfaces of its ageing skyscrapers, and – from beginning to end – the filth and squalor to which the aliens are confined. If, way back in 1979, the first *Alien* film dared to imagine the future as something grimier than the glossy surfaces of the space-ship *Enterprise* in *Star Trek*, *District 9* sets a new standard for dirty realism in science fiction - dirty, *contemporary* realism that unceremoniously does away with the USA as the template of sci-fi imagination. Instead, it universalizes an alternative South African present where conflict and mass poverty constitute the seemingly untranscendable horizon of the social order. A dark film, indeed, yet it would be wrong to associate *District 9* with the apocalyptic tendency of sci-fi productions such as *The Matrix* and *Terminator* franchises. As I will argue, there is a light-heartedness amid the horrors that may well be the strongest mark that South Africa makes on the story.

I say that it comes “first,” but the texture is of course a result of the rigorous formal execution of *District 9*. Cutting between the audiovisual protocols of documentaries, newsreels, surveillance cameras, and more conventional (but intense)

cinematic narration, director Neill Blomkamp pushes the story ahead without allowing the viewer respite. The recurrent switches between aerial views of shoddier parts of Johannesburg (no leafy northern suburbs in sight) and shots of bodies in pain, alien bodies, dead bodies, exploding bodies, body fluids, and meat, produces an edgy yet consistent rhythm in the film.

Its texture and form, although highly contemporary in execution, give *District 9* a signature all its own. Having read about it in advance, and having seen Blomkamp's six-minute short "Alive in Joburg" (out of which *District 9* evolved), I must confess that it was more convincing than I had anticipated.

What I feared was a flat and predictable allegory. Reviewers have, after all, been telling us that this is the history of apartheid as a sci-fi drama. And the allegory is there. It is evident not just in the "humans only" signs, the allusion to District Six and forced removals, the casspirs²⁶, or the tell-tale clicks of the aliens' language, but also in such specific moments as when the protagonist Wikus van de Merwe goes from shack to shack to get the aliens to sign their eviction order. When an alien strikes the clipboard from his hand, Wikus says it counts as a signature. This is nothing less than a cinematic citation of Henry Nxumalo's legendary 1952 *Drum* article on working conditions at Bethal: illiterate workers at the farm Bethal were told to hold a pen in their hand, which counted as a signature of a slave contract.

In brief, script writers Blomkamp and Tatchell know their apartheid history. But the beauty of *District 9* is that it abandons straight allegory and opens up a plethora of other symbolic dimensions. It is worth asking if isn't the gritty, metonymic realism that enables this opening and safeguards the film from allegorical closure.

What I find particularly striking, as Shaun de Waal observed in the *Mail & Guardian*, is that the main conflict is not between the aliens and the state, but between the aliens and the corporate interests of MNU. MNU is responsible for the eviction of the aliens. In this respect, it acts with legal sanction and in accordance with popular sentiment. Wikus van de Merwe, in charge of the operation reminiscent of the forced removals from Sophiatown, is portrayed at first as a likeable buffoon with no understanding whatsoever of MNU's deeper motives.

Gradually, MNU is exposed as a major weapons manufacturer with a vast biochemical research unit intent on unlocking the DNA that enables alien weaponry to function (a key point in the story). Clearly, the conjunction of corporate interest and the biopolitical reduction of the aliens to "bare life" and *homines sacri*, outlaws who are susceptible to death but not sacrifice as Giorgio Agamben explains it in *Homo Sacer*, is the most chilling and potentially radical aspect of *District 9*. It is by mining this dark seam that the film speaks to our conflicted age. Think of the opening of the space ship, revealing the multitudes of undernourished aliens inside (African refugees perishing in overloaded vessels on the Mediterranean), think of the battle scenes (the "war on terror" and urban warfare in Iraq), the generalized, extreme poverty of the District (Mike Davis's "planet of slums"), the alien

²⁶ An armored personnel carrier developed in South Africa in the 1980s.

Christopher Johnson's discovery of MNU's laboratory (the legacy of biological racism, current day genetic research).

Had this been a conventional American sci-fi product, darkness would have prevailed. But, although this may sound scandalous, *District 9* is also genuinely funny—the alien infatuation with cat food being just one example of its absurd humor. The film counters in this way the apocalyptic mood of much contemporary popular culture in the West. If the taste for apocalypse stems from an experience that western exceptionalism is being threatened (after us, the deluge!), then the contemporary experience in the Global South—of which *District 9* is a symbolic representation—is much more complex. Whole populations in the Global South are in fact “living the apocalypse” (from the perspective of a once-dominant West), but even so, life goes on in a pragmatic, patchwork fashion. This is demonstrated most graphically when Wikus is exposed to alien chemicals and starts transforming into a “prawn.” He becomes a hybrid, one of “them,” and yet remains the likeable antihero Wikus. The last point is crucial: despite his own disgust and the sheer abjectness of his transformation, the viewer's sympathies remain with Wikus. This might well be the single most radical aspect of the film. Through his metamorphosis (shades of Kafka), Wikus effectively embodies the intolerable contradictions of the society he inhabits. Either insanity or humor ensues from such a predicament. The portrayal of Wikus moves between both registers.

Against its sophisticated critique of othering, one could however also point to curious lapses in the film, the most obvious case being the depraved Nigerian gangsters. Although the official Nigerian reaction to this is overblown, it is peculiar, indeed, disturbing, that Blomkamp seems deaf to the overtones of depicting Africans—and especially African *foreigners* in South Africa—as superstitious and violent. By the same token, the one-dimensional portrayal of colonel Koobus, who is out to kill as many aliens as he can, also betrays the complexity of the story. Even the gritty representation of Johannesburg risks hardening into a stereotype of its own, transforming it into an *other*, safely horrifying place far from most viewers. This reveals, perhaps, the limits of what can be done in a Hollywood production. If the aliens turn out to be less-than-bad guys, the inertia of genre trumps innovation. Hence, the generic function of the bad guy must be transferred on to someone or something else.

But this should not detract from the film's achievements. The future will tell if it marks the beginning a new, properly global sci-fi imaginary. For the time being, it deserves to be viewed on its own merits.

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