



From District Six to *District 9*

APARTHEID, SPECTACLE AND THE REAL

Neill Blomkamp's 2009 science fiction blockbuster captivated audiences around the world, garnering four Academy Award nominations including Best Picture. While genres like horror, science fiction and action are undeniably popular with viewers, these sorts of films are rarely considered 'serious' enough for Oscar consideration. So what made *District 9* – a film about aliens and spaceships – so different? Its spectacular effects and familiar science fiction story about an extra-terrestrial invasion make it pleasurable to watch, but by focusing on humanity's xenophobic treatment of the aliens in contemporary Johannesburg, *District 9* also functions as a powerful allegory for the very real traumas that faced South Africa, the film's country of production, during and after apartheid. Even the title *District 9* evokes associations with

South Africa's segregated past: District Six was an area outside of Cape Town that the government declared 'white only' in the 1960s, forcing the removal of over 60,000 non-white residents from their homes. By employing elements of documentary filmmaking to tell its tale, *District 9* acknowledges from within its own diegesis that the boundaries between fiction and the real can be powerfully and meaningfully blurred.

District 9 is not the only film that employs the structures and iconographies of a particular genre to make a political statement. *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) is a zombie movie that makes a powerful comment on the North American civil rights movement that rocked the country during the 1960s and 1970s. Many science fiction films of the 1950s – including *The Day the Earth Stood*

ALEXANDRA
HELLER-NICHOLAS



Still (Robert Wise, 1951), *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953), *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) – are broadly understood as allegorical responses to the Cold War and the threat of nuclear warfare that marked this period. Science-fiction-as-allegory was also certainly not restricted to the United States; the famous Japanese monster film *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, Ishirô Honda, 1954) is almost impossible to watch without thinking of Japan's involvement in World War II and the bombing of Hiroshima. *District 9* clearly earns a place in this history of the politically minded science fiction film, but it also adopts elements from other genres and categories including horror, 1980s action movies (especially the 'buddy' film typified by Richard Donner's 1987 classic *Lethal Weapon*), conspiracy thrillers and even Japanese anime traditions. Its incorporation of other genres gives *District 9* ample room to play with a range of thematic and stylistic elements that unite to create its final impact.

District 9 was co-written by Blomkamp and based on his 2005 short film *Alive in Joburg*. The film begins with Wikus Van De Merwe (Sharlto Copley) from private military organisation Multinational United (MNU) being interviewed about the corporation's relocation program in District 9. Wikus is granted the task of leading the operation by his corrupt boss and father-in-law, Piet Smit (Louis Minnaar). With his colleagues, Wikus must evict the 1.8 million aliens from their shanty-like homes in District 9 to what he later describes as a 'concentration camp' 200 miles outside Johannesburg. These aliens – derogatorily referred to by humans as 'prawns' – arrived in Johannesburg in 1982 in a large spaceship and, after being discovered onboard their craft in ill health, they were housed in the slum-like conditions of District 9.

Wikus becomes ill after accidentally spilling an alien liquid on his skin, and MNU, with Piet's support, conducts torturous experiments on him. Piet then releases false information to Wikus' wife and the public that the infection is a result of human-alien sexual relations. With nowhere else to go, Wikus returns to District 9 and, overcoming his discriminatory attitudes, rallies with the alien Christopher in an attempt to cure his infection and to help Christopher and his son return to their ship. Through this story, *District 9* utilises the generic elements of the science fiction film to critique both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.





ALLEGORY AND DISCRIMINATION

Apartheid refers to the institutionalised system of racial segregation that was legally enforced in South Africa between 1948 and 1994, though the policy has clear historical origins before this period and the country continues to face issues about race and equality. The aliens of *District 9* mirror the non-white residents in District Six, who were already victims of the most flagrant injustices at the hands of government-sanctioned discrimination before they were forcefully relocated. Blomkamp's film exposes the horror and cruelty of this eviction, emphasised by the upbeat bureaucratic approach Wikus and his colleagues take to ruining the lives of those who are clearly already living in substandard conditions due to ideologically unsound government policies.

District 9's critique is not solely focused on the country's apartheid past, and much critical attention has been given to its treatment of globalisation. While globalisation is a hard term to pin down, the film examines the global issue of powerful multinational corporations infringing upon differing regional cultures and economies. The private military company MNU, which supports this view of globalisation, stands in place of the government in the film: we never see government officials or government soldiers, but we see a lot of MNU officials and

military contractors like the villainous Koobus Venter (David James). The very name Multinational United implies that South Africa is not the only place where commercially minded corporations have effectively replaced regional government structures, and while this story is focused on the events at District 9 in Johannesburg, it implies that such global corporate dominance may be behind less metaphorical abuses in other parts of the world. In addition to MNU's institutionalised discrimination against the aliens, the ethically unsound medical experiments that Wikus discovers in the bio-lab reinforce the image of the global corporate identities that MNU typifies as nothing but greedy, cruel and corrupt. Wikus' journey from an unthinking, bigoted representative of MNU to a heroic alien-human hybrid that fights against the company provides one of the film's primary methods of critiquing globalisation.

It is important to note, however, that *District 9* has not been universally celebrated as a progressive text. Even though it is a film about xenophobia, it has been accused of racism itself in its depiction of Nigerians,¹ a group of which run organised crime in District 9, including an interspecies prostitution ring and an illegal supply of cat food (which has a drug-like effect on the extraterrestrials). Additionally, Nigerians are amassing a high quantity of alien weaponry and engage in folk rituals where they eat alien body parts in an attempt to gain the

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aliens' strength. Many Nigerians were outraged by this depiction – particularly by what some viewed as its hypocritical placement in a film supposedly about xenophobia – and the film was banned outright in Nigeria. Is *District 9* itself a racist film? Can the stereotypical depiction of Africans as savages and cannibals be dismissed because of the villainy of white characters like Koobus, or is it more complicated than that? Does Blomkamp's defence that he included these depictions to be realistic because 'the bottom line is that there are huge Nigerian crime syndicates in Johannesburg'² make the negative portrayal of these characters in the film acceptable?

District 9 is by no means an easy film to dissect, and these are some of the many questions that students and teachers alike may wish to address when discussing the film.

FAKING THE REAL

Blomkamp's attempts at realism contrast sharply with the film's overtly fantastic conceit of space aliens living in Johannesburg, but it is this juxtaposition of the real and the deliberately fictional that grants the film its allegorical force. A number of the film's eviction scenes were shot in an area of Soweto during a period of violent conflicts between native South Africans and those born in other parts of Africa, and at the time of filming many residents of this area were themselves being forced out of their homes by the government. Even the word prawn has a very specific real-world meaning: the Parktown prawn (*Libanasisidus vittatus*) is a type of insect that has plagued large parts of South Africa.

This desire for realism is demonstrated not only by association with these real-world phenomena, but also in the way that

District 9 is formally constructed. The movie opens like a documentary, with the nervous and geeky Wikus explaining in an interview the task that lies before him. News footage of the giant spaceship is shown regularly, and voice-overs and interviews with a number of experts (including sociologists, aid workers, doctors and journalists) provide the background to Wikus' and Christopher's stories. The action-fuelled climax employs supposedly real news footage that records the events as they unfold, with news cameras showing tanks as they roll through the area. Handheld footage is intercut regularly with surveillance footage and other kinds of audiovisual 'evidence'.

These stylistic elements add a documentary tone to the fictional story unfolding, contributing a degree of verisimilitude to the events. *District 9* is not the only blockbuster film to use the mockumentary approach, as demonstrated by the phenomenal success of movies like *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) and *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006). Bill Nichols' foundational work on documentary filmmaking provides a very useful basis for dissecting and understanding exactly how Blomkamp subverts features of documentary filmmaking to tell his fictional story.³ For example, the observational mode of documentary filmmaking – sometimes referred to as direct cinema or fly-on-the-wall cinema – aims to capture the moment with as little involvement from the filmmaker as possible. In *District 9*, this is employed when Christopher and Wikus fight with the MNU soldiers. The blood that splatters onto the camera lens implies the presence of on-the-scene reporters, adding immediacy and a sense of confusion and reality to the proceedings. *District 9* also heavily utilises the interactive mode, which relies on interviews. These talking heads are often considered to be

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professional experts on a subject or witnesses to a story, and this mode is reflected in *District 9*'s interviews with doctors and other experts in addition to Wikus' family and friends. That so many of the attitudes and explanations given by these experts are wrong also raises the issue of propaganda, and students and teachers may wish to use Nichols' documentary modes to discuss how so-called truth is represented for certain political agendas in *District 9*.⁴

THE 'WOW!' FACTOR

While the political and historical aspects of *District 9* may appear to be the most immediate sites of critical interest, it is important to not dismiss spectacle. In fact, the film's most immediate appeal lies not in its political allegory, but rather in the pleasure it offers through its exciting depictions of aliens and spaceships. These aliens were designed by the New Zealand WETA Workshop group, famed for their work with Peter Jackson on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003; Jackson also produced *District 9*). The spectacle of special effects in *District 9* provides much more than just something exciting for viewers to watch, however, and many of the film's

most memorable and sympathetic depictions of the aliens occur when they are anthropomorphised. Small additions to their characters – for example, aliens are shown at different points wearing human clothes such as a pinwheel hat and a pink bra – transform foreign and monstrous entities into something very human. Their communications with each other also highlight their similarity to humans, such as when Christopher tells his friend early in the film to 'be polite' to Wikus and the MNU officials. This merger of technological spectacle and narrative significance via the humanising of the aliens is nowhere more overt than when Christopher and his son rise from the slums in their cobbled-together spaceship to return to the giant ship that has hovered above Johannesburg for the last twenty years. The father and son are symbolically reunited with the 'mother' ship, restoring the nuclear family unit that had been disrupted by the earthly corruption of xenophobia embodied by MNU.

While many argue that the problematic depiction of Nigerians makes it far from the progressive anti-discrimination film it purports to be, there is little doubt that *District 9* powerfully deploys a science fiction concept to examine and explore various elements of South Africa's past and present. This





allegorical force relies heavily upon the pleasures of its technological spectacle, and if *District 9* makes an impact upon its viewers, the role of these pleasures cannot be undervalued. Through its science fiction and mockumentary elements in particular, *District 9* addresses a range of very real issues facing South Africa today. That such a complex array of issues is allegorically presented in such an upbeat manner make it an ideal text through which to explore the power of genre, style and meaning in cinema.

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- ² Andrew O'Hehir, 'Is Apartheid Acceptable—For Giant Bugs', *Salon*, 12 August 2009, <http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/beyond_the_multiplex/feature/2009/08/12/blomkamp>, accessed 1 December 2010.
- ³ Bill Nichols, 'The Voice of Documentary', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, vol. 1, California University Press, Berkeley, 1985, pp.258–273.
- ⁴ For a more accessible and updated reflection on Nichols' documentary modes and how they apply to contemporary screen cultures more broadly, the following chapter is recommended: John Izod & Richard Kilborn, 'The Documentary', in John Hill & Pamela Church (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp.426–433.

Endnotes

- ¹ For differing views on this subject, see Nicole Stamp, 'District 9 is Racist', *Racialicious.com*, <<http://www.racialicious.com/2009/08/18/district-9-is-racist-alternate-perspective/>>, accessed 1 December 2010; Tola Onanuga, 'Why *District 9* Isn't Racist Against Nigerians', *The Guardian*, 8 September 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2009/sep/08/district-9-racism>>, accessed 1 December 2010.