

From Aliens to Apartheid: Reimagining Segregation in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009)

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Abstract

This review analyses how Neill Blomkamp's 2009 film District 9 uses an alien species forced into a refugee camp as an allegory for the institutionalized racial discrimination experienced in South Africa under apartheid. Three key aspects are explored in the following paragraphs: 1) District 9's resonance beyond typical sci-fi entertainment by engaging with pressing sociopolitical issues; 2) Its representation of dehumanization and oppression of marginalized groups through the alienation of the aliens; and 3) The film's innovative mockumentary style blending fiction with documentary realism to enhance emotional impact.

Keywords: Film; South Africa; Apartheid; Fiction; Framing; Racial Justice

Introduction

The power of cinema to transport us to extraordinary new worlds would be a mere illusion if it does not resonate with pressing social issues and real-life events. Indeed, in some cases, they are productive in offering a (dramatic) understanding of the past. Take the case of racial injustice, for example. Historical dramas such as John Boorman's *In My Country* (2004) and John Kani's *Nothing But The Truth* (2008) tackle racial injustice in apartheid South Africa, a rather dark period in that country's history. Another drama, such as Clint Eastwood's *Invictus* (2009), a film where Nelson Mandela used rugby as a unifying force to bridge racial divides, was also crucial in dramatize how reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa unfolded. In 2009, the same year as the premiere of *Invictus*, Neill Blomkamp's directorial debut *District 9* was released. *District 9* became the first film that tackled apartheid through the lens of science fiction and gained cult status in the following years. In this film review of *District 9*, I explain how science fiction, in its ability to speculate about alternate realities, works as a potent vehicle for social commentary. Unlike his drama-oriented predecessors, I show how Blomkamp in *District 9* took an inventive approach to exploring segregation and oppression as experienced in South Africa by transposing them into a sci-fi context.

In *District 9*'s alternate reality, where South Africa's institutionalized racial discrimination seems to have never existed, a massive alien spaceship has come to a standstill over the city of Johannesburg. The multi-ethnic South African government removes the extraterrestrial occupants from the ship and confines them to District 9, a segregated refugee camp. This alternative Johannesburg cityscape serves as the backdrop for Blomkamp to explore themes of apartheid, xenophobia, immigration policies, and media manipulation. In this film review, I explore three fundamental aspects. First, I argue that *District 9*'s socio-political commentary resonates far beyond the bounds of science fiction cinema, which is usually dismissed as mere mass entertainment. Second, I show how Blomkamp's film uses science fiction to reflect on historical and contemporary issues, explores the parallels between fictional and real segregation, and visualizes the metaphorical dehumanization of marginalized communities through alien characters. Third, I demonstrate how Blomkamp uses the mockumentary style to dive even deeper into topics such as apartheid, xenophobia, immigration policies, and media manipulation.

To fully grasp the film's political resonance, one must first delve into the historical backdrop that inspired it. In this regard, one of *District 9*'s most prevalent achievements is how it translates the harsh experiences of apartheid into a thought-provoking science fiction parable. In short and with the goal to simplify a complex operation of power, apartheid (a term derived from Afrikaans meaning apartness) was a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination. This racially discriminatory system was implemented by the Afrikaner National Party after it came to power under Prime Minister D.F. Malan in 1948 and lasted until the early 1990s (Beinart and Dubow 1995, 3). Its origins, however, can be traced back to 1910 when the right to vote was denied to people of color in certain regions of South Africa (Maylam 2001, 179-180). From that point forward, the South African government systematically stripped away and curtailed the rights of non-whites in every domain of society. District 9 takes the horrors that this history caused on millions of victims, predominantly non-white communities, and transmutes it into the tangible personal experiences of a series of characters that play a part in this story. Especially the way the aliens are treated and pejoratively called "prawns" for their distinct physical features is something that becomes relevant as the film continues to unravel. District 9, the ghetto where the aliens are forced to live, becomes an urban and social microcosm that illustrates the second-class citizenship that apartheid enshrines into law based on race or, in this case, species.

However, Blomkamp's creative vision extends beyond mere historical allegory to probe the deeper themes that underpin apartheid. The film explores institutionalized

discrimination through key aspects, particularly in how the government denies the aliens basic rights enjoyed by humans precisely because of their non-human status. This lack of rights granted to the aliens by virtue of their otherness kicks off the film's main storyline. Through legal formalities, the government seeks to remove the aliens from District 9, which has become a makeshift shelter in their stranded state, and relocate them to District 10, a new facility constructed miles away from the city. This process very much mirrors the South African segregated townships, or underdeveloped areas destined to non-whites, which reinforced the country's spatialization of race (Haarhoff 2011, 187-193). Moreover, in District 9, the government's forced relocation of the aliens to a segregated area exemplifies the systemic inequalities implemented to carry out spatial separation between humans and the extraterrestrial beings. Wikus van de Merwe is the film's main character. He is a bureaucrat who works for Multinational United (MNU), a private military contractor, and he is tasked with transferring aliens to District 10. MNU's management of the alien situation is ruthless. More so, it is driven by the exploitative pursuit of profit through the acquisition and control of the aliens' technology and resources for the human's military industry.

I focus on Wikus van de Merwe here because he embodies the obliviousness and the lack of moral sense of many white South Africans who enabled apartheid through their compliance with an unjust system. Indeed, I argue that his bureaucratic indifference to the aliens' suffering, which is prominent in the first half of the film, reflects the "banality of evil" described by Hannah Arendt. This concept arose from Arendt's report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi official who helped organize the mass deportation and murder of Jews during the Holocaust. Arendt was struck by Eichmann's very ordinary and bureaucratic attitude in the trial, which contrasted with the enormity of his crimes. Indeed, Arendt saw Eichmann's evil deeds as stemming from "sheer thoughtlessness" and an "inability to think" (Arendt 1977, 287-288). For Arendt, Eichmann's response during the trial showed that horrific acts are sometimes committed not by fanatics but ordinary people. In District 9, Wikus's initial lack of moral reflection shows him as the archetype of a bureaucrat who, within the confines of his role, becomes a cog in the machinery of oppression. He executes his duties with little moral questioning. He believes he is merely carrying out standard procedures. By doing so, he becomes a representative of the historical reality of many individuals who worked within bureaucratic systems and became complicit in enforcing discriminatory policies without necessarily embracing the ideologies that drive those policies.

Talking about the legal formalities Wikus enacts to displace the aliens, one could argue that they encapsulate the illusion of free will under coercion. A striking example

emerges at the beginning in a scene where Wikus approaches aliens that live in District 9 with documents for allegedly voluntary eviction agreements. On the surface, these actions are framed by MNU to be exercises in individual agency, and they are understood as the capacity to act and make choices within and as a result of the social, cultural, and political structures in which people (or, in this case, migrant aliens) live. In making the aliens sign the papers, they are responsible for and agree to their own eviction. However, this apparent freedom of choice, as the film reveals, is a deceptive façade. The decision to sign the eviction agreements is made under duress and devoid of genuine consent. The aliens, marginalized and vulnerable, are subjected to intimidation, threats of violence, and the prospect of losing their livelihoods. Indeed, the film highlights how oppressive systems operate by concealing their discriminatory practices under the guise of individual agency, which was precisely the case of the ‘real’ (or historical) South Africa. In the film, Wikus’s ironic trap lies in portraying these procedures as benign and voluntary agreements, when in fact, they represent a manifestation of institutionalized discrimination.

If film theory has taught us anything, it is how the dramatic transformation of main characters often drives the overall story. Thus, as the story progresses, Wikus van de Merwe undergoes a profound change as a character. After being sprayed with a mysterious fluid during the eviction, he slowly mutates into an alien himself. Wikus’s physical transformation into an alien prawn catalyzes the most pivotal shift in his identity and perspective. Here he transitioned from being a part of the oppressive system to becoming a member of the oppressed group. In one striking scene, Wikus examines his alien claw while also seeing his human hand holding it. This image represents the split that is taking place in his identity. In these initial stages of transformation, Wikus becomes forced to see himself through two sets of eyes, unable to reconcile his prejudices with his new oppressed identity. In a way, this experience reminds us of W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness,” coined to describe the psychological experience of African Americans who see themselves through both their own eyes and the prejudiced eyes of a white-dominated society (Du Bois 2020 [1903]). As a human, Wikus is deeply conditioned by his innate prejudice against the alien prawns whom he sees as inferior. However, upon mutating into a prawn himself, Wikus is abruptly forced to confront a new double consciousness. On one level, he still self-identifies as human and maintains his ingrained biases. He is also forced to see himself as the other. Thereby, he gains first-hand experiences of how prawns are dehumanized and oppressed by society. Just as Du Bois described the twoness experienced by black Americans navigating a

racist society, Wikus is painfully awakened to the prejudices the prawns are facing—prejudices he once perpetuated nonchalantly when he was a human.

Wikus's transformation is also productive in shining a light on society's othering and xenophobia toward the aliens, who may not even share human concepts of individual identity or dignity. Inspired on its repurposing of apartheid ideology, the South African society in District 9 has constructed the alien population as inferior others. This view justifies denying the aliens the same rights and privileges enjoyed by humans to fuel fear, spread disgust, and provoke hostility towards them. The dehumanizing label "prawn" epitomizes this othering process and reduces the aliens as mere vermin in society's eyes to further legitimize their mistreatment. This use of words reinforces the idea of other groups as fundamentally less advanced. Another way in which othering takes place is language itself. As the film showcases, language is a system that highlights the difference between aliens and humans. The aliens' language is portrayed as harsh, grunting noises that lack nuance, and their inability to speak English reinforce their isolation. Indeed, it is ironic that one of the few relevant alien characters in the film—Christopher Johnson—adopts an English name as an (failed) attempt to mingle with his new earthly environment. The aliens in *District 9* are ultimately segregated precisely because of their perceived difference and nonconformity to (imposed) human norms, stressing their frustration even more.

A powerful element in *District 9*'s portrayal of the dichotomy "us" versus "them" is its strategic use of visual devices to emphasize the aliens' otherness against the human society (to the audience's eyes). Here, story development becomes more audiovisual and less narrative-based. Close-up shots fixate on details like the aliens' crustacean-like shells, creepy insectoid mandibles, and quivering antennae. Extreme close-ups highlight their sharp fangs and slimy, green blood, which evokes disgust. The way in which the aliens are depicted here becomes especially relevant when Wikus turns into one of them himself. The aliens' bizarre physicality and strength are portrayed as something to be feared and rejected—the aesthetics intentionally play up qualities seen as strange or dangerous to manufacture an ominous threat. As film theorists like Laura Mulvey note, controlling the visual gaze can powerfully direct emotional responses and perceptions (Mulvey 2006, 344). To this end, the aliens' jarring, unpleasant aesthetic in *District 9* seems to be constructed by Blomkamp as a reminder to audiences about how aliens become prey to a prejudiced lens.

A final aspect I focus on in this film review is *District 9*'s witty use of mockumentary techniques, which is crucial to the film's effectiveness. The term mockumentary is widely credited to American film critic Rob Reiner in the 1980s to describe the mockumentary-style

comedy film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), which he directed (Roscoe and Height 2002, 120-125). A mockumentary is a scripted work of fiction that employs techniques and styles normally associated with documentary filmmaking. By constructing the film out of documentary codes and conventions like talking head interviews, handheld camerawork, and archival footage (especially in the first half of the film), Blomkamp aims to blur the line between truth and fiction to achieve an extraordinary sense of gritty realism. Ohad Landesman's notion of hybrid documentary explains how fiction benefits from the digital video's aesthetic of realism to endow stories with a sense and a feel of immediacy (2008). *District 9* does not use amateur technologies, but amateur-like aesthetic devices to pursue a similar intent that forces the audience to experience the film's heavy socio-political themes not as abstract commentary but as tangible, emotionally charged events unfolding before their eyes.

Indeed, this compelling illusion of reality is prevalent during the eviction sequence. Filmed with a chaotic mix of documentary-style video (with characters addressing the camera) and security cam footage, these scenes offer gut-wrenching immediacy. The documentary aesthetics make the events painfully believable and elevate a fictional story into experiential reality for audiences. Carl Plantinga examines how documentaries use specific stylistic choices and cinematic codes to elicit intended emotional reactions and guide the audience's sense of what feels "real" (2009, 86-96). In *District 9*, the intentional use of these aesthetic techniques serves to evoke empathy towards the aliens in the eviction scenes, confronting the audience with the moral dilemma of the situation. While the eviction itself is not presented as a positive action, the film's style further encourages viewers to question the ethics of the eviction and the treatment of the aliens as lesser beings—a moral quandary that is central to the film's commentary on oppression and discrimination.

District 9's use of mockumentary style to engage the audience emotionally and morally parallels pioneering works like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which also manufactures reality through pseudo-documentary verisimilitude. Raw emotions like anguish, rage, and despair come to the forefront via its you-are-there intimacy in both films. In this sense and drawing from Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner's discussion of documentary style expectations (2006, 8), I suggest that films such as *District 9* intentionally destabilize notions of absolute truth and authorial intent. By remixing the aesthetics of realist documentary genres, the film highlights how truth can be constructed and obscured. To put it simply, *District 9*, through fictional pseudo-documentary techniques, is ultimately self-reflexively questioning documentary truth claims.

As we saw above, *District 9*'s hybrid visual style, blending fiction with documentary style, enables the film to deliver its thought-provoking allegory of apartheid dynamics in a hard-hitting, experientially affective manner. The film's interweaving of stylistic creativity and sociopolitical reflexivity allows *District 9* to transcend mere symbolism. Instead, it takes a significant step in fostering empathy for injustices within the sci-fi genre, making the allegory all the more poignant and impactful. The issues dramatized in the film persist today, not only in South Africa but also in other parts of the world. The segregation and oppression of marginalized communities, as seen in the Gaza Strip, serve as a stark reminder that the themes explored in *District 9* remain relevant. As the boundaries between reality and fiction continue to blur in the digital age, *District 9* is a reminder that entertainment can and should tackle issues of discrimination, prejudice, and marginalization, ultimately providing incisive insights about society's past, present, and future.

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