

District 9, race and neoliberalism in post-apartheid Johannesburg

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Abstract: *District 9* is a sci-fi film, ostensibly concerned with the arrival of extraterrestrials in Johannesburg, that explores notions of regulatory control and economic supremacy in twenty-first century neoliberal South Africa. This commentary and political resonance are found beneath, and also work with the action and CGI special effects. This essay attempts to identify many real world features as allegories within the film: post-apartheid racism, economic subjugation and urban poverty and how, despite past economic constraints due to colour, the new neoliberal rhetoric of innovation and self-adjustment has replaced the white-centred nationalism of an older capitalism, but with devastating consequences. *District 9* is, the author argues, a powerful film through which to think about the structural, spatial and cultural failures of post-apartheid South Africa. The indifferences by the South Africans in the film carry strong ideological and social signification to the past: the extraterrestrials encode the urban landscape which is then decoded by audiences as they interpret the haunting remnants of segregation and urban poverty now reanimated by immigrant aliens (doubling for Nigerians and Zimbabweans) in the narrative. More importantly, via the substitution of subservient extraterrestrials for black immigrants new to South Africa, the film throws up for discussion many discourses over race, politics,

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remembrance, inequality and reveals decades-old problems recalibrated in *District 9*'s sci-fi dystopia.

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In recent years, Comic-Con International, the San Diego-based fantasy-sci-fi convention has turned to promoting certain global cinema texts amongst its mostly Hollywood fare. With an increased demand from attendees to see the latest teaser trailers for upcoming global blockbusters, both Comic-Con programmers and filmmakers recognised the potential value of exhibiting these trailers alongside much of the paraphernalia up for sale (from Spiderman comic books to Star Wars movie memorabilia, etc.). The 2008 convention saw a mix of anticipated movie trailers from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009) to *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), to other, lesser-known films at the time – notably, *District 9* (2009) directed by Neill Blomkamp.

Following the screening of *District 9* at Comic Con that July, the film garnered considerable buzz over its hybrid combination of popcorn action and repressed extraterrestrials set in post-apartheid South Africa. In many ways, the hype over this film at Comic-Con was understandable: an aesthetic similarity to the video game *Halo* as well as blockbusters such as *Terminator 3* (2003), along with insectoid-like extraterrestrials rendered by the latest computer generated imagery (CGI). Yet when the historical baggage of South Africa was thrown in, the complementary elements of science fiction and large-scale action became politicised, elements that proved provocative, even at Comic-Con.

Blomkamp's narrative *topoi*: racism, class inequality and unemployment

In dealing with post-apartheid South Africa, *District 9* makes visible new conditions for the experience of a neoliberal landscape. In effect, the visual seductiveness of the mise-en-scène says something about the existing socio-economic and racial conditions in Johannesburg. One could argue that Blomkamp is not so interested in valorising the status of black South Africans who live with constant economic and social dissolution, as in focusing his attention on the contagious nature of neoliberalism in the post-apartheid now.¹ These sentiments are in line with Patrick Bond's analysis that, since the 1990s, there has been a gradual shift towards serving the elite in South Africa over those from the disadvantaged classes. A telling sign of the distance travelled from the ANC's socialist policies for every class is to recall the 'emotional attachment to the principles of the 1955 Freedom Charter with its vague but prominent redistribution slogans: The People shall share in the country's wealth! The national wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people.'² There is a resonance of

how these slogans have failed in Blomkamp's narrative *topoi* – whereby racism, class inequality and unemployment do not linger at the edges of the film but instead transmit a competitive and volatile environment that the extraterrestrials and humans alike must try to overcome: South Africa's adoption of neoliberalism. The conflict between survivalist strategies by the extraterrestrials and the cynicism over urban destitution and 'race trouble'³ enacted by executive power in the film offers a formula for reading the overtones of neoliberalism in South Africa. Blomkamp's film puts us in 2009, where we find polarised human opinion about the extraterrestrials staged through sound-bites, news footage and talking head interviews. This is accomplished via a documentary-style, digitised aesthetic which constructs for audiences the trauma of social/species assimilation – xenophobia towards these new immigrants – contrasting the dubious images of rioting crowds, densely packed shantytowns and anti-alien posters hung on fences.

The struggle to find employment is a key issue in *District 9*. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, becoming South Africa's first elected black president, he initially supported the nationalisation of the country's banks, mines and other monopolies, a move greeted with anticipation by most of the underclasses. He reversed his stance, however, after attending a world economic forum in Switzerland in 1992.⁴ Publicly, at least, Mandela chose to advocate neoliberalism as the country's way forward, but this came at a price. Despite the powerful 'mining nexus, combined with the presence of pyramid conglomerates and the country's determined penetration into international markets', writes Hein Marais, 'unemployment for black, immigrant and female South Africans was nearly 40 % in the 2000s'.⁵ By Marais's account, 'Traumatic realities are buried in those numbers'.⁶ As a consequence, many black South Africans were phased out of work, and this new free market agenda sanctioned economic growth at any cost together with the advocacy of casual labour practices.

Later into his presidency, Mandela advocated GEAR (growth, employment and redistribution), a policy-turned-slogan that failed to ease unemployment. Quantitative evidence for a free market agenda by the Mandela administration is elaborated by Paul Williams and Ian Taylor who argue:

GEAR thus fitted neatly into the so-called international consensus around 'good' economic policy elucidated by such neoliberal gurus as Standard Bank's Conrad Strauss. Whilst the framework stunned many on the left within the ANC alliance, it offered conclusive proof that the neoliberal path to development was finally entrenched in government thinking.⁷

Yet these symptoms are attributable to what Bond masterfully sums up as the 'Talk Left, Walk Right' rhetoric upheld by the ANC, whereby 'ANC leaders took to doctoring simple statistics during the campaign. Some illustrations demonstrate why the government can make inspiring claims of delivery, but retain market-oriented policies'.⁸ Such small labour victories disguised the much larger

problem of unemployment and contract-based jobs. Thus, the urban wanderer and extraterrestrial in *District 9* stand in for those segregated immigrants and the unemployed in post-apartheid South Africa.

Nation, representation and hybridity in South Africa

When the Mandela administration asked for new cinematic expressions in South Africa in the mid-1990s, they received a kaleidoscope of film genres, styles and politics in the wake of their election victory. High levels of cultural production came after the dissolution of apartheid laws and 'the first democratic, non-racial elections that brought in the ANC in 1994'. This period provided

a moment of nationalism when both television and cinema were called upon to perform in the name of the nation, to address the nation as one within a multi-cultural diversity, and to bring about healing and oneness between peoples by preaching diversity as central to human equality. Hence the popular media jingle of those times: *simunye* (we are one).⁹

Yet the strengths as well as difficulties in providing a national voice via film are linked, in my view, to the diversity and density of populations and types of film-making found in the post-apartheid context: practices and methodologies that range from those of amateur collectives (Dv8), to independents who work in digital format (Teddy Mattera) to pan-Africanists (Akin Omotoso) to black South African politicians (Zola Maseko), to white South African-born, North American commercially trained transnationalists (Gavin Hood and Neill Blomkamp).¹⁰ Indeed, the era of democracy ushered in by the elections of 1994 promised equality and multiculturalism but the new government also called on its *griots*/story-tellers, artists and filmmakers to dramatically interpret the changes that had taken place. According to Frank Ukadike, 'In broader ideological terms, in African cinema there has been a deliberate attempt to use the film medium as a voice of the people; there has been a persistent mandate to interrogate narrative structures so as to develop new strategies for genuine indigenous film practice.'¹¹ This mandate has been rethought, in the last decade, by white South African directors making films about multiethnic experiences in Johannesburg.

Cinematic expression represents just one way to conceive national trauma in a diagnostic way. In contemporary literature, the following authors are worth mentioning given their contribution to anti-apartheid and post-apartheid culture and the way they reflect the polychromatic terrain through textual expression: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995), Kabelo S. Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001) and Marcelo Pires's *Nothing to Lose* (2013). More specifically, Lauren Beukes's cyber-punk novel *Moxyland* (2005), set in a future Cape Town, was to provide legitimacy for the sci-fi genre coming out of South Africa.¹²

And it is this mode of historical probing and genre-bending that has been taken up by Blomkamp (and Gavin Hood's gangland tale *Tsotsi* released in 2005).¹³

Their excoriating allegories invite South Africans, to varying degrees, to think about traumatic moments like the legalisation of apartheid law and the juridical residues that continue to separate black South African classes. Laws like the Development Regulations in 1993 or the Land Use Management in 2010 have attempted to sell off, redevelop sections, or whole townships, to better the urban experience in wider Johannesburg.¹⁴ However, despite the initiative to improve the well-being and community standards of long-time residents, many have found they were unable to keep up with the legal status of their land or were (and still are) priced out, due to rent increases imposed by local or international real-estate agencies. The combination of the legal separation of black inhabitants and gentrification is allegorised, to some degree, in Hood's *Tsotsi* which serves as an illustrative example.¹⁵

These filmic residues of separation can be viewed from another perspective, too. *District 9* reveals the persistence of both spatial and social inequality, even today, as a recalcitrant mutation of the same crisis facing the ANC: sustained urban poverty. Like a spectre, past apartheid laws, notably the Urban Areas Act of 1955 which permitted the removal of black people who were living as servants in white areas and in the townships, were strictly in place before the collapse of the National Party and apartheid in 1991. One legal action of forced removal occurred in District 6 in 1982.¹⁶ According to the content published on the District 6 Museum website:

District Six was named the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town in 1867. Originally established as a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, laborers and immigrants, District Six was a vibrant center with close links to the city and the port. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the process of removals and marginalization had begun. The first to be 're-settled' were black South Africans, forcibly displaced from the District in 1901. As the more prosperous moved away to the suburbs, the area became a neglected ward of Cape Town. In 1966 it was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act of 1950.¹⁷

By 1982, the most aggressive removal stage began, as black residents were forcibly removed from their homes which triggered much violence. The registers of social strife in images of squatters clinging to scraps of debris and garbage, resonate allegorically in *District 9*'s mise-en-scène. Blomkamp's film articulates the nuances of class and economic stasis for its black (and alien) characters. At the same time, the film is explicitly and implicitly concerned with social and cultural volatility post-1994 in the Mandela and Mbeki years: prejudice (to varying degrees), multiculturalism, urban degradation, and, most judiciously mined, echoes of the District 6 riots, particularly in *District 9*'s scenes of eviction and urban combat.

This insurrectionary reality becomes a historical trope in *District 9*, a text that engages 'with memory work and history ... retelling the African past and ... looking at the present in the past from ... diverse subject positions'.¹⁸ Indeed, the

realism of the film, in my view, is a digital realism that goes beyond this simple representational model and is more aesthetically and narratologically concerned with reconciling the difficult projections of displaced anxieties about the lower classes in Johannesburg. In other words, *District 9* entertains visually, and according to the codes of contemporary action cinema, but without losing its subtext: the impoverishment of the lower classes in South Africa – native and alien – and the ethnic divisions among them.

The strength of the film is that it is not just about the remnants of apartheid, but also about the post-apartheid influx of migrants from the rest of Africa (explicitly represented in the film by the Nigerian gangsters). In that sense, the collaboration of black and white South Africans to remove the aliens is quite realistic. Nevertheless, the decision to move away from direct representations of current and past black South African racial inferiority must be seen as deliberate: *District 9* uses digitised aliens, creatures that resemble seafloor crustaceans, to comment obliquely on the residues of racism still encountered by black South Africans living in Johannesburg today. Here Blomkamp flirts with the legacy of apartheid in the post-apartheid present. His substitution of South African blacks (but also African immigrants from Nigeria and Zimbabwe) with extraterrestrials illustrates a newer, technologically more sophisticated metaphor to locate dramatically the still occurring imbalances in South Africa. The hybrid combination of CGI aliens, layered on top of the legacy of racial discrimination still felt in the post-apartheid epoch, allows for the doubleness of these aliens as they are mapped onto a changing social sphere. The extraterrestrials in *District 9* constitute both suffering transgalactic figures (who can be interpreted as doubling for Zimbabwean immigrants in real world South Africa) and, at the same time, antagonists to other outsiders – in this regard, immigrant Nigerians.

The immigration of Nigerians to large metropolitan areas such as Johannesburg and Cape Town has led to one of the largest diasporic communities in South Africa. However, their presence has been met with mistrust, apprehension and xenophobia by many nationals. Compounding the prejudice shown towards Nigerians is South Africa's media. It often portrays them in an unflattering light, from covering stories of cult practices by those communities, usually animal slaughtering in residential areas, black magic, even belief in zombies, to high-tech pyramid schemes (where empty stock options to outright swindles on the public are common). But these dubious issues are envisioned by Blomkamp with little sensitivity. In effect, the Nigerians in *District 9* are politically incorrect stereotypes and their devilment is highly problematic. In the story-line, the Nigerians are played as villainous, even remorseless, gangsters, living in squalor, robbing from those around them and exploiting the extraterrestrials. The Nigerian characters unfortunately become typical action film 'villains' and nothing more, clearly less contemplated characters than the extraterrestrials.

Neoliberalism and the unemployed aliens in *District 9*

Early in Nelson Mandela's presidency, he faced accusations from within the ANC ranks of being a neoliberal turncoat. Mandela's presidency/administration reduced worker empowerment considerably, despite the fact that a Keynesian alternative had been set out in the 1996 COSATU policy document *Social Equity and Job Creation*, which was largely ignored in favour of free market measures. According to Richard Peet this 'advocated an expansion of the social wage through mass housing financed through public borrowing, a national health program, all-embracing social security, and job creation that never materialized into policy'.¹⁹ The decision to push instead for sustained growth at 6 per cent and the initiative for an outward-oriented economy crushed, for many, the utopian vision of a rainbow South Africa. It seemed that what Mandela had spoken of while the country was in political transition was now far off for many as economic policies hardened. Many black South Africans, who sought basic employment security and who were largely dispossessed under apartheid law now faced the reality of being part of the 'flexible' labour market. This provocative move was modelled after what Peet correctly highlights as 'neoliberal structural adjustment policies outlined by the World Bank and the IMF' in the mid-1990s.²⁰

The National Small Business Act, passed in 1996, was one government venture initially lauded in the South African media because it provided loans to many small businesses to capitalise their investments. Trouble emerged, however, as these loans were opened up to private, small banks.²¹ Repackaged via small bank loans from private lenders rather than government agencies, with no locked-in interest rates, this sell-off saw many black South Africans defaulting on repayments during the early 2000s.²² Equally, barriers to small businesses such as low employment and little retail experience also exacerbated the problems. *Star* and *City Press*, two metropolitan newspapers ran many features in the late 1990s about individual entrepreneurs and their problems in attempting to sustain healthy businesses. Such examples underscore that people were increasingly 'underserved' by 'the push to privatise', countering any rosy analysis about micro-entrepreneurialism.²³

Years later, under Thabo Mbeki's presidency (1999–2008) matters only worsened for many of the black lower classes. Indeed, his Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) strategy was a painful reminder of the unsuccessful policy for job creation. Marais provides the empirical evidence for the ghastly reality facing black workers under Mbeki:

The number of working poor has increased markedly. Using a purchasing power parity USD 2 per day poverty line, Casale et al (2004) calculated that the number of employed workers living in poverty increased from just over 900,000 in 1995 to about two million in 2003. One quarter of them were deemed self-employed. Of the 18 million people living below the poverty line in 2004, four

million lived in about 700,000 households that contained at least one income earner ... Driving these trends are two factors: the sustained shift towards the use of casual and subcontracted labor, and the related decline in real wages for low-skilled workers.²⁴

With the shift to urban development, the shades of neoliberalism in Johannesburg intensified, causing and encouraging not the rectification or disappearance of urban deprivation, but the regulation of such conditions. And the instability of the job market protracted job security further, leading to unemployment in the 1990s despite the country's successes in the financial sector and privatisation of public utilities like electricity, though not without fierce resistance in some cases.²⁵ Indeed, as cultural anthropologist Anne-Maria Makhulu observes in her historical survey of peripheral urban development from the post-war to the free-market periods in Johannesburg, 'while apartheid explicitly promoted housing scarcity through reductions to the black social wage, neoliberalism has tended to encourage poverty enabling or alleviating policies that seek less to replace slums and shantytowns than to "improve" them as a less ambitious goal of public and private intervention'.²⁶

Still others blame failed businesses on occult economic practices – involving 'the deployment, real or imagined, of elements of magic for material ends'.²⁷ Indeed, many unorthodox businesses have become part and parcel of the lax regulation in neoliberal South Africa. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have focused on occult economies in their ethnographic work on the post-apartheid period. Their ideas resonate with the traditions of scams and 'illicit accumulation' in cities like Johannesburg.²⁸ These illegitimate pyramid schemes also parallel the macabre selling of animal and human body parts known as 'muti' that finds loose association in *District 9*. The doomed-to-fail business practices and money magic schemes mentioned above are fictionalised in *District 9*. Here Blomkamp presents these realities by way of extraterrestrial joblessness and the illegal schemes they fall prey to.

In several fleeting moments in *District 9*, we see the extraterrestrials trying to purchase cat food from Nigerians at ridiculously inflated prices. They are presented as haggling over the food with gun-waving Nigerians, forcing them to pay either through addiction or the threat of physical harm. In other brief interludes, we see Nigerians selling slaughtered animal parts to hungry and wageless extraterrestrials. Ravenous, some are seen running off with their food or even devouring it on the spot. These interludes are not just a nod to occult economies outside *District 9*'s story-line, but a bona fide cultural reference to real problems with the mixing of magical superstition and neoliberal opportunism. Put differently, Hilton Judin writes that there is in Johannesburg a dual economy, rural and urban, and 'many versions with distinct customs, beliefs, desires, stories, and organized environments that can never be traveling in any one direction'.²⁹

The extraterrestrial urbanites of *District 9* are also forced to perform the most desperate acts: begging, scavenging, crime and prostitution due to their joblessness. Some scenes show female aliens being paraded around for what appears to

be some sort of exposé, depicted with black bars covering their genitalia as might be seen in such scenes on 6pm newscasts. In other, more lurid images, humans can be seen having sex with aliens. Such moments of sexual explicitness in *District 9*, particularly its portrayal of prostitution, are a theme in other global cinema texts, too. For instance, *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2002) looks at illegal UK immigration and the detrimental experiences of those at the very bottom of the service industry. This tale focuses on millennial London, where a Turkish illegal, Senay (Audrey Tautou), is employed in a garment factory after being fired from her hotel job. Once on site she is immediately put in a compromising position, as her new boss demands sexual favours in exchange for continued illegal employment.

In Johannesburg, and in *District 9*, smaller zonal centres like the shantytowns house aliens who face powerlessness and deplorable conditions, beyond their control, and who are a central problem in Blomkamp's narrative. In a slightly different way, while the characters in *Dirty Pretty Things* struggle to keep afloat, in *District 9*, there is no obvious employment for the extraterrestrials; the film does not show or comment on their labour. They have become a wageless class. Here the extraterrestrials exist largely as scabrous bottom-feeders, given limited state subsidy to live on. They drudge out a living as stateless and worldless immigrants, a problem which is amplified in host countries where real world immigrants face constant deportation.

Moreover, *District 9*'s extraterrestrial proletarians can also be tied to a displaced class, signaling their desperate nature. Their subsistence relies upon scavenging and individual pursuits (some fetishise discarded objects like women's clothes or cat food) – a situation that allows one to think of these creatures as a helpless class. They are what Makhulu calls new subjects, that is individuals 'shaped not so much by practices of consumption as by self-abnegation (or negative consumption) – they are not only moral or rational but have a highly pragmatic orientation to the lived world'.³⁰ In the first half of the film, extraterrestrial Christopher Johnson and his son search to find the missing fuel element to power their command ship. They forage through heaps of discarded rubbish to eventually recover the elusive material, exemplifying, in this regard, such self-abnegation, by using second-hand objects rather than consuming new ones. Such hard work undertaken to improve their socio-economic conditions and return to the mothership occurs not through material consumption but through intelligent gathering. However, Christopher's move away from being a jobless proletarian highlights the limitless possibilities of this under-class species, only realised through solidarity with his son and the most unlikely of fraternal bonds: with Wikus van de Merwe, the film's central protagonist.

Ethnic stereotypes and racism: Wikus van de Merwe

The Wikus character in *District 9* is a jovial buffoon, at first. He begins as the foil to the aliens and then becomes the radicalised protagonist of Blomkamp's film.

His physical appearance and gestures are typical of a comfortable but apathetic Afrikaner middle-class manager. What is most striking about Wikus, at least in the first half of the film, is his living up to the unambitious ideals of the status quo, in what Gramsci termed a 'subordinate class'.³¹ There is a technique, one could say, on Blomkamp's part to show Wikus's subordination through costume. In the film he appears almost boyish, wearing beige chino pants and a pale-coloured short-sleeved shirt, matched by a greasy but neatly parted hairstyle – a naive uniform and a style of sorts. The audience gathers their first impression of Wikus seconds into the film as he appears overwhelmed by the enormity of the mass-scale eviction he is about to oversee. The various cuts in the opening of *District 9* show Wikus bumbling around Multi-National United (MNU) headquarters, recorded by a cameraman on the day of eviction as the units prepare to mobilise towards District 9.

One can discern from Wikus's mannerisms that he is tense about the political implications of the illegal land seizures. Thus to cover his nervousness and any political apprehension, Wikus preoccupies himself with flat, ill-timed jokes that fail to lighten the mood. Such dopey traits fall in line with the Wikus surname, which is an important cultural reference in South Africa: 'van de Merwe' is a generic name given to characters who are the butt of ethnic jokes against Afrikaners but also jokes that circulate amongst white urban Afrikaners to reinforce cultural identity across and above ethnic self-understanding. In general, these are spoken by black South Africans about white South Africans and the witticism is so popular that hundreds of blogs provide different variations.³² Moreover, the purposeful character name Wikus establishes him as an Afrikaner 'everyman'.

Such colloquial and at times distasteful jokes fill *District 9's* dialogue exchanges. In particular, Wikus's gross mistreatment of the aliens is important. An extreme case is found in one of the scenes of eviction, where Wikus displays complete disregard for the new species and their incubating (and unhatched) alien foetuses. He demonstrates for the camera how to abort one of the forty eggs found in a JV-766 shanty shack by pulling out its incubation feeder, cutting off the alien from its food supply. He then radios for ground support, whereupon a soldier arrives and torches the hut with a flame-thrower.

Wikus's complete lack of compassion over this specicide is appalling, even in the fictional context. This is Wikus's most unsympathetic, debauched point in the film. But his behaviour also points to the absolute fetishisation of time as a neo-liberal ideal. On the one hand, Wikus is a poster child for time management and the clock-watching in *District 9*. But on the other, in a larger sense, the rapid pace of the film hints at the speed of Wikus's professional, biological, social and political metamorphosis, evolving from once cold and bigoted middle manager, to eventual alien. Wikus becomes conscious of the severe inequality grasped from his new underclass perspective (and treatment by his former capitalist employer).

Time is a central tenet of neoliberalism. Broadly speaking, managerial efficiency is connected to time management, and it is no surprise that Wikus's

character is initially complicit in rushing the eviction process to completion. Historically, if we relate the figure of Wikus to a neoliberal common denominator, there is a consensus amongst scholars that the manager has been given increased power over the last thirty years. Hence, problems such as unbalanced management, friction with clients and extreme insensitivity are similar in *District 9*. No doubt the neoliberal characteristics displayed in Wikus's micro-managing of this project, one of thousands for the company, and, in this instance, his and MNU's inhuman demands on levels of productivity during the eviction, led to the specicide.

Critical reception of *District 9* has been surprisingly lopsided, leaning towards aesthetic critiques.³³ James Zborowski's analysis of the film throws up for discussion the visual language, characterisations, and narrative in *District 9*, but leaves insufficient room for deeper contextualisations of South Africa's culture and political economy. His article contends that Wikus's moral traits are flimsy, action-film fodder, and he is a character one cannot 'believe in or value'.³⁴ However, Zborowski misses what Wikus stands in for in the still-tense climate of post-apartheid South Africa: an archetype and everyman for the destructiveness of neoliberalism.

Although Zborowski's reading of the Wikus character is not without merit, I wish to add a further reading. I am of the view that Blomkamp, as someone from South Africa of a certain generation, understands institutional modes of racism, and conceptualises this in Wikus's political and cultural awakening. Indeed, Blomkamp's real-world recognition of race and inequality, his conception of Wikus as a class-consciousless white male, is vital for understanding the film's ideology concerning racist archetypes as set against the larger neoliberal landscape. This is important because it revisits what Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein term 'the consequence of xenophobia' as it surfaces in *District 9*. Balibar and Wallerstein, who have both written extensively on racism and class in South Africa, are instructive in helping to uncover the racist imprint found in the film.³⁵

Balibar and Wallerstein see collective memory as one way to 'draw the parameters of present racism'.³⁶ Fluctuations in anti-apartheid culture in the 1980s meant that political pressure allowed more black national literature to emerge, but only now, in the post-apartheid present, can we sketch the parameters of racism more clearly. In this regard, I see *District 9* as building not only on the legacy of anti-racist cinema in the country but also on the presumption that racism has not ended with the abolition of apartheid. Because of Blomkamp's probing of racism, Wikus becomes an obvious 'everyman' for the guilty white South African in the post-apartheid present. However, Wikus's acquiescence in this separating out of a new species echoes the stance not only of the largely middle-class white South Africans who turned a blind eye to racial segregation, but also the culture that produces such an oppressive reality.

At various moments in the film, and despite working in the Department of Alien Affairs, Wikus views the extraterrestrials as a community – a consenting

group in sociological terminology. His use of the derogatory word 'Prawn' implies a twofold reading: a class and racist usage. The class root of Prawn as adapted in *District 9* relates to 'Parktown Prawn', which is what lower-class South Africans aver upper-class South Africans (living in upscale Johannesburg suburbs like Parktown north) call the giant cockroaches that are a ubiquitous feature of Johannesburg life. The suggestion is that the upper class cannot contemplate the idea that their homes might be infested with cockroaches. Instead of admitting the infestation they call them 'Prawns' to ease their minds.³⁷

Racially speaking, *District 9* codes the Prawn in the film's dialogue, a term Wikus utters nearly fifteen times in the first twenty minutes. But his usage does not connote a distinct full-blown hatred for the new species; rather, it registers as a hegemonic slur in the fictional world, one that is normalised, rather problematically, by Blomkamp's mostly white characters. The importance of drawing attention to the usage of the word Prawn is that it parallels real-world Hutu propaganda in Rwanda, where the term cockroaches was used to refer to the Tutsi people.

So, in South Africa, Blomkamp interrogates, by analogy, the historical baggage of the racial slur 'Kaffir' used to describe black (Zulu) South Africans through adopting the term 'Prawn'. The term Kaffir is ultimately derived from Arabic for 'non-believer'. In South Africa it connotes a dim-witted and useless black South African and was disseminated in apartheid literature, news media, music, film and television. Testifying to its usage, Alex Callinicos avers that Kaffir is a 'generic term of abuse for all Africans (not just or indeed initially Zulu, since the first Africans whites encountered in South Africa were Xhosa-speaking), as opposed to Indians, "Colored", Khoisan, and, of course, whites'.³⁸

Perhaps the most troubling filmic portrayal of the Kaffir as a central character came in the international cult hit *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980). Directed by Jamie Uys, the film was the target of a good deal of derision; particularly apt is Maingard's recent critical appraisal.³⁹ She accurately sees the apartheid regime as weaving propaganda in the film through supposed satire. This apartheid era comedy deploys crude references to pre-modern, tribal culture, spun in the narrative of a Khoikhoi (indigenous tribesman) lost in modern South Africa. The dialogue in the film tries, with little success, to satirise the idea and usage of Kaffir. This was done similarly but more successfully in the United States through Spike Lee's postmodern use of 'Nigger' in *Bamboozled* (2002), a similar, though older, racist epithet to Kaffir. Lee, however, discards irony as a way of legitimising the 'N' word and seeks instead to suture, not sever, the historical resonance of the term for contemporary African Americans and its dissemination and linguistic usage in wider American culture (from the Ku Klux Klan to black comedian David Chappelle).⁴⁰

In contrast, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* presents a negative and rather unsophisticated parable about indigenous culture in South Africa, and thus fails, despite some humorous moments, to delegitimise the racist stereotypes of the Kaffir. By

comparison, *District 9*'s linguistic play on Kaffir, substituting it with Prawn, is ingenious in the way this neologism allows audiences to understand the severity of apartheid culture while, at the same time, using science-fiction aliens instead of Uys's Khoikhoi to explore the implications of racial and racist notions of difference.

Finally, one could also say *District 9* is careful not to place any black South African characters in compromising roles. Indeed, the few black actors given speaking lines mostly make up Wikus's eviction team – Fundiswa Mhlanga (Mandla Gaduka) and Thomas (Kenneth Nkosi). These sequences contain the most interaction between Wikus and black urban South Africans, in respect of which the film's political correctness comes across as somewhat heavy-handed. However, this does not deter the film's exploration, in populist rather than polemical terms, of the immigration and subsequent racist conditions inherited in the post-apartheid era.

Finally, I would like to consider more fully the annexed spaces of oppression that *District 9* models in an augmented but real Johannesburg cityscape.

Deprivation and the Chiawelo Shantyscape

The Chiawelo shantyscape found in *District 9*'s mise-en-scène is vital for contemplating the film's notions of deprivation. I refer specifically to the sweeping aerial shots of shack shanties that occupy a central position in the film and that are also a mainstay in the cultural tapestry of most South Africans' lives, especially those living with this *other* city on their doorstep. The poverty conditions captured in *District 9* also provide the backdrop to other popular entertainment media and genres, namely Hip Hop music videos and trendy vernacular photography which appropriate these spaces for little more than commercial gain and street credibility. James Ferguson summarises the contradictory visibility and palatability of the shantytowns in mainstream news and film:

The 'New South Africa' has not done away with townships, shanties, or extreme poverty. Indeed, while a prosperous new black middle class is growing, the plight of the urban poor has by many measures actually worsened under the ANC's neoliberal regime and the mass unemployment that has come with it . . . But if widespread urban poverty endures, the *image* of South Africa's poorest urban areas, and especially of the vast periurban shanty towns, has changed radically. No longer a scandal or a horror demanding to be exposed and denounced, the poorest sorts of informal housing are now actively celebrated in a clutch of new, glossy coffee table books with titles like *Shack Chic*, whose vivid, colourful images and cheerful text document the creativity, ingenuity, and aesthetic flair of those who build and decorate these makeshift shelters. Upbeat 'cultural tours' of Soweto and the Cape Flats are now popular among visitors to South Africa.⁴¹

Blomkamp tries, in my opinion, to avoid the cliché appropriations of Chiawelo by doubly casting it as sci-fi fantasy-scape and an anthropologic rendering of post-apartheid poverty. Alexandra and Chiawelo are indeed milieu-building wastelands in *Tsotsi* and *District 9*. But I would argue that *District 9* makes a statement beyond the tacky Hip Hop videos or street photography that fetishise these lower-class makeshift shelters. The geographical specificity of these two shanty townships is, of course, unique to twentieth- and twenty-first century cinema in South Africa. They challenge, one could argue, the notion that all cities relate via their interlocked financial networks. Inversely, however, the predominance of Johannesburg and its fractured realms of commerce and poverty calls into question how globally integrated these townships actually are.

District 9 conceptualises this division via its unwaged and unused extraterrestrials and what I see as the disconnected sections within a neoliberal, autonomous city like Johannesburg. The geography of these wastelands, where destitution is found and is turned into economic opportunity, drives Blomkamp's narrative. 'Thus, on the one hand expressions of need and, perhaps even more significantly, of desire – few are immune to fantasies of wealth and conspicuous consumption – echo erratic market speculation; on the other, more modestly, hopes of fulfilling basic needs are increasingly associated in the popular imagination with a concept of work that had far greater currency in the past.'⁴² The desire to achieve basic standards of living is an overarching concept that *District 9* wrestles with, and it is compounded repeatedly by the constant visualisation of the Chiawelo.

The Chiawelo township is part of the larger Soweto suburban sprawl, an abbreviation for 'South Western Townships'. It comprises just one suburban area in a roughly sixty square-mile patch of townships that encircle most of Johannesburg city proper. In this regard, think of the banlieues and their relation to metropolitan Paris. In much the same way the Soweto configuration of townships is similar to that of Paris, at least in terms of centre and periphery, yet architecturally speaking, they are worlds apart. The Soweto townships in wider Johannesburg are home to nearly 1.4 million inhabitants and make up thirty-five different suburban districts, ranging from Braamfischerville to Jabulani to Orlando (once home to Nelson Mandela) to Zola, to name but a few. Each township has its own cultural and economic life and, architecturally speaking, they are anything but homogenous in form. Some dwellings, for example, were built in the 1950s for black labourers and are nothing more than one-story brick and mortar buildings with two to four rooms for living. These bare-bones 'homes' were made visible in Lionel Rogosin's *Come Back, Africa* (1959) and in Oliver Schmitz's late 1980s anti-apartheid film *Mapantsula* (1988). These homes constitute typical but crudely designed and constructed postwar residences.

In contemporary Johannesburg, years later, after the successful *Mapantsula*, Schmitz began filming his second feature in Chiawelo ghetto; *Hijack Stories* (2000), another film dealing with gangsterdom that revolves around criminal tales of car-jacking, which contain unbelievable dialogue and low-budget special effects

that have drawn much online comment. However, this cheap-looking realism also attempts to create a spatial and social orientation to Chiawelo.

Like *Hijack Stories*, *District 9* was, as has been said, filmed extensively in Chiawelo. Its blemished and colourful shacks were greyed down for maximum effect in postproduction. Today shantytowns like Chiawelo have become the cityscape of choice for many directors. Indeed, the use of the centre (Johannesburg's gated communities for middle-class whites and now middle-class black residents) and periphery (Alexandra's slum areas, home to a mostly destitute black population) offers a shifting dialectical strategy to convey urban inequality amongst the black community. Such a dialectical approach in *District 9* articulates levels of poverty better; it does so through the urban geography mapped out in Blomkamp's film. We get a sense of the physical edges of Chiawelo but also the scale of these shantytowns. At one point in the film, when Wikus evades capture after his run in with the MNU scientists, we see him on top of a hill, flanked by endless grey and white rubbish bleached out by the African sun, trash that fans out in every conceivable direction for miles. Off in the distance, we get a glimpse of the modernist architecture of Johannesburg and the extraterrestrials' hovering space craft. And it is such cinematic framing of Wikus that is crucial to my notion of visualising the poverty that is entrenched in the narrative and sceneplay.

The violent action found in *District 9*, stitched into the images of incredible destitution, relies on the rubbish and shanty shacks to make the battle environment realistic, but, at the same time, these milieu downplay such images of action. After all, the spectator is aware that he and she are seeing poverty as a backdrop that can be read as both compelling social criticism and as artful mise-en-scène. Indeed, these images of destitution draw in the spectator by the sheer otherworldliness of the appearance of row upon row of corrugated metal. In many ways, audiences are exposed to this zone of despair as characters and the narrative get absorbed into this Chiawelo labyrinth. Impoverishment is what the spectator looks at, is what they are given above all, outweighing, in my view, the momentum of the sci-fi-action plot.

In other scenes, Wikus begins to operate a high-tech battle droid, stolen from MNU by Nigerian drug lords. After Wikus commandeers the droid from the drug lords in order to engage his MNU enemies, we get another example of urban rendering as most of this scene is shot in first person. Of equal interest are the diagonal tracking shots of Wikus, in battle droid suit leaping and manoeuvring Chiawelo shacks. The acrobatic cinematography, at moments zooming in on close-ups of shanty shacks, provides detail through the multi-coloured paint flaking off or the graffiti tags by local gangs, which heightens the vernacular contours of the mise-en-scène. The cartography of suffering provided in the violent last chapter of the film reinforces the desperation of its characters and could be understood as an allegory of African destitution.

Finally, moving from the Chiawelo labyrinth to the modernist skyscraper found in *District 9*, one is struck by the dialectical play on edifices. The MNU

building is a reminder of the efficiency and panoptic-like control of the former apartheid system and its encroachment on District 9. In the film, for example, the MNU building acts as headquarters, which rises above the entire capital, protruding and overshadowing the urban sprawl for miles. Its modernist structure, sleek and functional, also elicits the scope of apartheid, a remnant of systematic bureaucracy; if the shantytown is a hive, buzzing with activity, the MNU corporate headquarters is a network of approved regulatory procedures that stricture movement and reinforce the eviction process. In real life, of course, it sustained apartheid initiatives. The MNU building is not only an unmistakable structural and architectural landmark in Johannesburg, it is a potent symbol of the previous system and its yet to be eradicated legacies.

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- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 7 Paul Williams and Ian Taylor, op. cit., p. 33.
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- 9 Lucia Saks, *Cinema in a Democratic South Africa: the race for representation* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 14.
- 10 Dv8 is a South African film collective that has released, amongst others, film such as *Zimbabwe* (Darrel James Roodt, 2008) or *Shirley Adams* (Oliver Hermanus, 2009); while Teddy Mattera, though affiliated with Dv8, has found success outside of the thinktank-like funding, releasing commercial films like *King of Tears* (2004); Pan-African Akin Omotoso looks at the intercultural dynamics of South Africa and Nigeria in his *Man on the Ground* (2011); Swazi born Zola Maseko, was of the most outspoken critics of apartheid and much of his filmmaking revolves around themes of injustice in and outside of South Africa.
- 11 Frank Ukadike, 'Video booms in Anglophone Africa', in Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake, eds, *Rethinking Third Cinema* (New York, Routledge, 2003), p. 34.
- 12 In the visual arts, the polemical satirist, Anton Kannemeyer, who works in lithograph prints, addresses, in similar tone to Blomkamp, the traumas of racism, disease and neoliberal cronyism in the Rainbow State.
- 13 Interestingly, Hood's 2013 adaption of Orson Scott Card's sci-fi novel *Ender's Game* is yet another example of a South African director venturing into this new genre.
- 14 See the official City of Johannesburg website for more information: http://www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=552&Itemid=9.
- 15 It is important to point out that Hood adapted Athol Fugard's apartheid novel of the same name and set it in the post-apartheid period, roughly in the 2000s.

- 16 See the 'South Africa: overcoming apartheid, building democracy' website: <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?id=65-259-6>.
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- 36 Ibid., p. 41.
- 37 My appreciation goes out to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out the Parktown Prawn cultural reference in South Africa.
- 38 Conversation with Alex Callinicos over the history and use of the term kaffir in South Africa.
- 39 See Jacqueline Maingard, 'Framing South African national cinema and television', in Ntongela Masilela, ed., *To Change Reels: film and culture in South Africa* (Detroit, MI, Wayne State University Press, 2003).
- 40 This is masterfully accomplished via the film's intelligent historiography of the term. Lee draws from US film archives to comment on sustained racist representations via black face and minstrel shows, making a point about the contemporary stereotypes found in media and Hollywood, largely indistinguishable from earlier racist silent-era films, for example *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1904), *The Slave* (1905) and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).
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