

District 9, an attempt at serious science fiction

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As *District 9* opens, we learn that an alien spacecraft stalled over Johannesburg, South Africa sometime during the 1980s. Upon boarding the alien ship, a team of human investigators discovers its crew in distress. Unable to return to their home planet, the aliens are brought down to Johannesburg and placed into a militarized ghetto encampment called District 9. Their ship remains hovering in the sky. The aliens live in extreme poverty, their tiny shacks a stark contrast to the advanced technology in the air above them.

Decades later, the presence of the aliens has become a major source of conflict. Because of their appearance, many of those opposed to their stay on Earth have begun to refer to the aliens as “prawns.” There are protests against the aliens as well as demonstrations supporting them. The aliens themselves riot and protest their conditions.

Under the pretext of relocating the alien race to another camp with better living conditions, a private military contractor called Multinational United (MNU) begins the forced removal of the aliens in District 9. In reality, they want to capture the aliens’ weaponry and unlock their secrets. Because the weapons only recognize alien biology, MNU conducts secret experiments on the bodies of aliens in the hopes of finding a way to adapt the high-tech weaponry for human use.

Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley), an MNU agent and something of a nervous bureaucrat, is placed in charge of the alien eviction program. When, during the course of the evictions, Wikus is exposed to a strange fluid that slowly begins transforming him into one of the alien creatures, his organization turns on him. He soon finds himself in an uneasy alliance with the alien chemist known as Christopher Johnson (Jason Cope). Together, they must find a way to reverse the

transformation process in Wikus and to get Christopher Johnson and his fellow aliens home.

District 9, directed by Neill Blomkamp, is based on Blomkamp’s own 2005 short film *Alive in Joburg*. Both films are inspired by actual events surrounding the infamous District Six in Cape Town, South Africa.

In 1966, the apartheid government of the National Party used the segregationist Group Areas Act of 1950 to designate District Six as a whites-only area. By 1968, the forced removal of black Africans had begun. By the 1980s, no fewer than 60,000 people had been turned out of the district. Declared a slum area, all the homes there were bulldozed. Within a few years, the government hoped to open the newly “cleared” area to developers. The area would be “rehabilitated” for new, mostly middle-class white residents.

While the historic crime of apartheid in South Africa may be the immediate source of inspiration for Blomkamp, one can also draw parallels between the conditions faced by the characters in the film to those faced by the Palestinians under Israeli occupation, to say nothing of the atrocities committed against the people of Iraq by US imperialism.

District 9 attempts to show the horrors involved with “forced removals” and apartheid conditions. Aliens are pulled out of their homes and killed. An “illegal” nest in which the alien young are still developing in their eggs is burned to the ground.

And yet one has reservations about the depictions of alien life. The aliens are completely debased, described as “workers” in the sense of “worker bees,” meaning some kind of drones lacking intelligence. The notion that the aliens might save themselves appears to be out of the question.

How are we really meant to consider them? The film’s depiction of the aliens would seem only to prove

the MNU's arguments against them. One finds it difficult, at times, to relate to them because, with the exception of the two leading alien characters—Christopher Johnson and his child—they have not been sufficiently humanized for us. Most of the aliens remain in the background.

One feels Blomkamp is sincere in his outrage over the conditions forced on those in District Six as well as the characters they inspired. But the director stumbles over more difficult questions.

At the center of the story is Wikus and his transformation from a, perhaps, unthinking and indifferent but not consciously brutal bureaucrat, into someone who empathizes with the aliens' struggles. It is not an entirely convincing journey, though Copley is able to do something with it. On the whole, one feels this character and the social type he is meant to embody could have been depicted more sharply.

More than any other element in the story, Blomkamp has emphasized the need for Wikus, the middle-class bureaucrat, to "walk a mile" in the aliens' shoes. This is best expressed in a close-up shot of Wikus's face, progressing further into his transformation, with one human eye and one alien eye present. He is, finally, seeing "both sides of the story," the film seems to suggest. That Blomkamp should want to encourage empathy for the oppressed is commendable. But one feels the way the director has gone about it only confuses matters. Here the film almost seems to appeal to the apartheid government itself, or one of its representatives, to be more "understanding."

Blomkamp has also not done an adequate job of illuminating the circumstances faced by the victims of this apartheid, and consequently we do not *feel* the journey of Wikus even as he himself develops an intimate knowledge of their suffering. The very decision to place Wikus at the center of the story and not, for example, the Christopher Johnson character perhaps suggests the filmmaker, in spite of his apparently sincere convictions, was not entirely comfortable or confident in exploring an experience that he may have felt was too alien from his own.

The lack of concreteness and a more thoroughly textured picture of the world ultimately leaves this work with a distinct feeling of incompleteness. It's as though an interesting conversation had begun but was

suddenly interrupted. One ought to be more moved by this film than one is.

Having ignored these important avenues, which would have brought with them far richer opportunities for drama, the film almost inevitably finds itself arriving at the sort of conclusion one has come to expect from action and science fiction movies today.

Wikus will have to take up arms and don an alien battle suit to fight off MNU mercenaries. The heroic individual will attempt to hold off the MNU long enough for Christopher Johnson to make his way to the alien spacecraft.

Blomkamp's film is well-meaning, but too much has been skipped over, the surface barely broken. The director has expressed interest in shooting a sequel to *District 9*. Perhaps he will. There's a great deal more to be said.



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