On District 9 – the Alien as Racial Other

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Abstract
This essay examines Neill Blomkamp’s District 9 (2009) and its use of the figure of the alien as a metaphor for the racial other. Following the trend of contemporary fantasy film and television, District 9 incorporates stigmatizing discourses and iconography that have contributed to the cultural construction of the category of race. While the film self-consciously stages and exposes prejudices and the social injustices of apartheid, segregation, police brutality, medical experimentation, and exploitation, it unwittingly reproduces and reinforces racist discourses. The essay begins by looking at the way in which the film maintains white supremacy through its focus on and focalization through the white main character, Wikus Van de Merwe. In addition, the essay shows how the film portrays a binary between “civilized” and “uncivilized” forms of being through its representation of human versus animalistic or savage characteristics. Finally, it explores how the film essentializes rather than challenges racial difference through scientific and medical discourses and the minor plot elements of genetics, disease, [...]

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On District 9 — the Alien as Racial Other

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The aim of this paper is to explore District 9’s positioning of the figure of the alien as the racial other through the use of discourses and iconography that have traditionally surrounded the construction of the category of race. As Bram Dijkstra suggests, writers of popular culture fiction have continued to integrate stigmatizing scientific discourses of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries into their work, despite the fact that these discourses no longer have any validity.

The extravagant speculations of science provided the rapidly expanding field of popular culture — and particularly the early movie industry — with a ready-made set of crowd-pleasing themes. These, in turn, helped shape the worldview of the millions who flocked to that cheap, new, easily accessible and digestible form of entertainment... Much like discarded fashions the ghosts of poorly considered scientific theorems tend to float through our fantasies long after they have been formally discredited. In our imagination everything is real. Thus, when, toward mid-century, in the aftermath of World War II, the biologists finally got around to discarding some of their formerly “inconvertible truths,” the media had already turned those mistakes into cultural commonplaces — into “natural laws” of the entertainment industry. (4-5)

Whether their presence is intentional on the writer’s part or not, the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and other identity categories have been constructed remain to this day part of a collective (un)consciousness that constantly resurfaces in popular media as well as other forms of expression.

Without a doubt, science fiction is a prime example of this practice. With distant planets and alien figures as metaphors for the unknown and the foreign, it has often been noted that the genre is a literary space in which the white man can explore his anxiety towards the racial other. Robert Scholes remarks that “the form has been a bit advanced in its treatment of race and race relations” (187) and extends his argument thus:

Science fiction...has taken the question so spiritedly debated by the founding fathers of the United States — of whether the rights of man included black slaves as well as white slave-owners — and raised it to a higher power by asking whether the rights of being ended at the boundaries of the human race. The answers have ranged from the most xenophobic human racism to the most transcendent worship of being itself. (189)

Evidently, with both “xenophobic racism” and “transcendent worship,” the alien remains the other, whether through abjection and repulsion or through exoticism...
and admiration. Yet what of a science fiction film such as District 9 where there seems to be an effort on the part of the writers to render the alien as equal to humans? While Dijkstra would argue that mistaken scientific theorems are placed into popular culture film thereby perpetuating the construction of race and racial stigmatization, District 9 seems at first sight to use this practice in order to critique it.

District 9 opens as a faux-documentary that relates the events of the past twenty years during which time an alien mothership stalls over Johannesburg, South Africa. As the aliens appear to be suffering from an illness, they receive “aid” from the local authorities while they are simultaneously quarantined in a fenced camp entitled District 9. Over the years, the aliens are left to fend for themselves and the camp develops into a slum. A Nigerian gang feeds their addiction to cat food and interspecies sex in exchange for alien weapons. Problems with the South African population arise when the aliens leave their camp and threaten the city’s order and segregation laws, causing the government to hire a local corporation with a military unit, Multinational United or MNU, to move the aliens to a camp outside of the city limits. We then follow Wikus Van de Merwe, an MNU delegate, as he enters the camp and proceeds with the initial process of removing the aliens. As Wikus searches the alien homes for weapons and other “unauthorized” material, he mistakenly ingests an alien chemical fluid that then causes him to transform into an alien himself. Wikus is immediately sequestered by the MNU who wish to use his body for experimentation in the hope of gaining control over the aliens’ very advanced, alien DNA-identifying weaponry. Wikus manages to escape but is unable to return home to his wife as the MNU fabricates incriminating photos of him having sex with an alien and places them in the media. Taking refuge in District 9, he meets the alien, Christopher Johnson, who offers to help Wikus return to his fully human state and the camp develops into a slum. A Nigerian gang feeds their addiction to cat food and interspecies sex in exchange for alien weapons. Problems with the South African population arise when the aliens leave their camp and threaten the city’s order and segregation laws, causing the government to hire a local corporation with a military unit, Multinational United or MNU, to move the aliens to a camp outside of the city limits. We then follow Wikus Van de Merwe, an MNU delegate, as he enters the camp and proceeds with the initial process of removing the aliens. As Wikus searches the alien homes for weapons and other “unauthorized” material, he mistakenly ingests an alien chemical fluid that then causes him to transform into an alien himself. Wikus is immediately sequestered by the MNU who wish to use his body for experimentation in the hope of gaining control over the aliens’ very advanced, alien DNA-identifying weaponry. Wikus manages to escape but is unable to return home to his wife as the MNU fabricates incriminating photos of him having sex with an alien and places them in the media. Taking refuge in District 9, he meets the alien, Christopher Johnson, who offers to help Wikus return to his fully human state while the latter must help the former to return to the mothership and leave earth.

As this brief summary indicates, District 9 clearly refers to apartheid and seems to do so intelligently. It is a complex, hybrid film in which science fiction meets with the “harsh reality” (Blomkamp, “Audio Commentary”) of Johannesburg, in which documentary-style filming mingles with traditional Hollywood cinematography. In this respect, it is an admirable film – the two filming techniques blend together fairly seamlessly, as do the two genres. At the same time that the science fiction genre and its common thematic elements of non-human beings, genetics, technology, and bodily transformation give the film the opportunity to explore the definition of the human or the limits between the human and the non-human, the South African social context allows a questioning of the relationship between the self and the other in terms of power, intelligence, race, class, and social behavior. The film’s writers, Neill Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell, manage to critique not only racial stigmatization and segregation, but also corporate military power, medical experimentation on live beings, and police brutality. In many ways, by intentionally placing stigmatizing racist discourses into their film and exposing them as morally unjust and problematic, Blomkamp and Tatchell demonstrate their awareness of race as a culturally constructed category. However, while the film succeeds in exposing social injustices as well as in blurring the boundary between the human and the non-human and the self and the other, it also reveals hegemonic and ideological discourses, some of which are the very discourses the film purportedly works against. Indeed, in other ways, the film repeats and contributes to other racist discourses that continue to remain largely unacknowledged in Western social and political consciousness. Through its use of focalization through humans and specifically a white South African man, the film can be seen to position white humans as subjects and the aliens as objects and reinforces the view of whiteness as morally superior. While the film’s characterization of its aliens as animalistic with “recognizably” human traits appears progressive, it unwittingly propagates essentialist beliefs about racial differences and (re)constructs the binary between whites and Africans, as well as between humans and animals which contributes to this belief in “essential” differences. Finally, the scientific and medical discourses of biology, genetics and disease that the film’s narrative seems to work against actually contribute to the ideological belief in the necessary differentiation between humans in terms of race, gender, and sexuality.

A Privileged Position

Despite their intention to use aliens as a metaphor for the racial other, the film’s writers have attempted to escape criticism for any problematic depictions of race and race relations. In the making-of-the-film documentary, “The Alien Agenda: A Filmmaker’s Log,” Blomkamp’s co-writer, Terri Tatchell, states that “Neill was very adamant...that this isn’t a political statement film. First and foremost, it’s meant to entertain.” Such a comment works as a disavowal of the film’s racial content and context, aligning itself with the science fiction genre in terms of its...
function as (pure) spectacle while disregarding the genre's abundant use of racial metaphors. However, Blomkamp and Tatchell were certainly aware of the history and conventions of the science fiction genre, placing both what Scholes defined as "xenophobic racism" and "transcendent worshipping" of the alien other within their narrative. Through Blomkamp's documentary-style filming technique, the spectator watches characters being racist and then being judged as racist by interviewees. Similarly, the film ironically highlights news report depictions of the triumphant alien spaceship as it rises from the ground at the end of the film. With declarations from the newscaster such as "it's quite extraordinary", "I've never seen anything like it" (1:31:10-13), and "This is a momentous day" (1:37:12), Blomkamp exposes the role that power and technological prowess play in race relations, and the potential hypocrisy in the self's regard (and/or disregard) of the other. There are two points to make here: first, the film provides its own critique of racism and social oppression within the narrative, such that spectators are left feeling as though their interpretative "work" has been done for them and no questions need be asked. Second, in a sense, the film partly appears to be a reflection on the use of racial metaphors in the science fiction genre (even though they are at the same time disavowed), which then might allow it to escape any critique of its own depiction of race.

In other words, the film seems to place itself above reproach; and in a similar manner, it places the spectator above what appears on screen. This is done in several ways, one of which is the rhetorical strategy of humor. To turn again to the writers' intentions, Blomkamp has stated that District 9 is "at its heart...a very funny film" ("Audio Commentary"). Yet rather than one-liners designed to lighten the dramatic tension, most of the film's humor consists in making the aliens and Wikus into the objects of laughter, thereby placing the spectator in a position of superiority — in the case of Wikus, of moral superiority, for he is clearly an antithero with an oversized ego. In addition to being naïve, he is, perhaps more importantly, racist. It is in this regard that spectators are invited to distance themselves from the character and identify themselves as non-racist.

For the (white) Western spectator outside of South Africa, this identification against the character of Wikus contributes to the literal distancing or displacement of racism from one's own country to apartheid South Africa. Rosemary Jane Jolly writes, for instance, that "Derrida's Racism's Last Word, [with its] condemnation of apartheid as 'the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many' strikes [her] as a dangerous one because "it creates the impression, regardless of the author's intent, that all other societies have now been freed from racism" (n2, xvi). For white South African spectators, Wikus might represent a figure onto which racism and apartheid can be pinned, thereby erasing their own (historical) complicity. For Tony Simoes da Silva, Wikus might be similar to other white characters in post-apartheid South African writing termed "victim[s] of racism" (an interesting parallel to other forms of victimization that Wikus suffers throughout the film). Da Silva writes:

The 'mantra of betrayal' which Whites now repeat endlessly legitimizes a reading of the post-1994 nation in which they have mastered the tools of their own invisibility. Invincible they may no longer be, but they have yet to give up the privileged position as serving as the normative center that defines civilized forms of being. (10)

Thus the character of Wikus may serve as a scapegoat for racism, which then allows the white audience to maintain a privileged position as "the normative center."

This privileged position that defines "civilized forms of being" is demonstrated through the film's focus on and through Wikus. While the narrative initially appears to be centered on the aliens and the racism and oppression that they suffer at the hands of the humans, it quickly becomes apparent that this is a story about Wikus. Not only does the film open and end with shots of him, but also interviewees evoking the "secrets" of the District 9 camp are quickly replaced by others discussing Wikus and his "mysterious" disappearance. The spectator's desire to uncover the mystery of the District 9 camp is replaced by the desire to discover Wikus' story — the story of a white South African man, a "victim" of racism. Initially appearing as a naïve and indoctrinated victim of racist discourses, he then literally falls prey to racism as he gradually transforms into an alien himself. In a sense, Wikus' metamorphosis serves as a condemnation or punishment not only of his racism, but also of his seemingly erroneous naming and defining of the aliens' behavior, practices, and belongings. His desire to show the documentary viewer his supposed knowledge of alien life is precisely what leads him to inadvertently come into contact with the chemical fluid that will lead to his transformation. The film then seems to condemn the "privileged position" in which Wikus is initially placed. However, the film does its own "defining [of] civilized forms of being," as I will discuss later.

Wikus eventually redeems himself at the end of the film by choosing to sacrifice his human form and reunification with his wife in order to help Christopher Johnson to return to his spaceship and escape human control. With such an emphasis on this sacrifice of self and family life for the other, combined with the focalization through Wikus and the relative lack of focalization through alien characters, District 9 is similar to other anti-apartheid films in which the sacrificial virtue and the victimization of whites appears to take precedence over black victimization. For example, Chris Menges' 1988 film, A World Apart, centers on a little white girl and how she suffers when her family is torn apart due to her parents' anti-apartheid activism. Euzhan Palcy's 1989 A Dry White Season is focalized through Donald Sutherland and his covert political action which leads to the separation of his family and eventually to his death. In all three films, as
As Jolly writes of a passage in Andre Brink's novel *A Dry White Season*, "the rhetoric of white liberalism mirrors the rhetoric of the security forces" (26). Indeed, even though *District 9* clearly positions brutality against and medical experimentation on the racial other as morally wrong, it maintains the notion that it is for the white subject to observe and judge it as such, meaning that the racial other is still left in the position of the object. It then becomes difficult to dissociate the notion of the object from that of the potential victim whose body can be the receptacle of violence and medical experimentation. Therefore, Wikus' victimization and his redeeming act function to position his character above the others, functions as a usable property or currency that is deployed to support, defend and perpetuate white dominance" (Moreton-Robinson, Casey, and Nicoll, x). As Jolly writes of a passage in *A Dry White Season*, "the rhetoric of white liberalism mirrors the rhetoric of the security forces" (26).

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**Civilized Forms of Being**

Much thought appears to have been given to the characterization and conceptualization of the aliens by the film's creators. If we consider the alien figure in popular contemporary Hollywood films, such as Spielberg's *E.T.* and Ridley Scott's *Alien*, *District 9* 's aliens seem to consist in varying degrees of these two representations, with Christopher Johnson's son's big eyes and cute, child-like persona, and their insect-like bodies, behavior and physical power. Blomkamp wanted his aliens to look like insects with a "worker bee mentality" ("Audio Commentary"). Yet unlike Scott's alien whose main purpose was to scare audiences, Blomkamp wanted to humanize his aliens in order to create sympathy in the spectator. *District 9* 's aliens, therefore, are meant to combine animal and human characteristics, and, as such, they might be classed as hybrid beings, ultimately blurring the boundaries of what is defined as human. Indeed, finding what is "human" in the non-human might work to question the definition of "human," in which case Blomkamp's aliens would qualify as post/human representations. Elaine L. Graham writes: "Representations of the post/human are an occasion for acknowledging what has always been the case — that 'human nature' is as much a piece of human artifice as all the other things human beings have invented" (37). However, despite the combining of human and animal traits in one being, the film ultimately maintains a clear-cut binary distinction between the human and the animal that intersects with racial stigmatization.

In some respects, Blomkamp's use of the insect with somewhat human characteristics is brilliant as it plays on the white spectator's perception of the racial other as both abject and in need of sympathy. Yet, as previously suggested, sympathy also contributes to the superiority of the spectator over the aliens — and here, to some extent, it works with the white persona of the aliens. Blomkamp imagined his aliens as part of a "drone society": "they are there to execute whatever the higher echelons of the society want them to do...they need direction" ("Audio Commentary"). According to Blomkamp, the "short history before the film takes place is that some sort of virus...killed off the upper echelons of their society" ("The Alien Agenda"). Evidently, the director needed a "rational" explanation for the aliens' general portrayal as unintelligent, in need of guidance, and therefore easily subject to crime and violence, and this explanation is their insectness or animalism. It is a logic that is dangerously similar to the one used by white colonizers as well as white liberal thinkers regarding minority populations in city ghettos. In other words, it is the humans' (or whites') responsibility to help the aliens (or racial minorities).

The use of animalism to characterize *District 9* 's aliens is reminiscent of discourses that align Africans with animals. This is what Carol J. Adams terms "the Animalizing Discourse of Racism" stating that "the marker of attributed beastliness, of less-than-humanness, exists to constitute whiteness.... White supremacist beliefs depicted people of color in general and Africans and African-Americans in specific as not (white) man and (almost) beast" (73). The film may be producing this alignment between the racial other and the animal purposefully in order to call it into question. However, in highlighting the human-like characteristics of the alien as what the spectator will like versus the insect-like traits as something the spectator will dislike, a hierarchy between the human and the animal is maintained. As Adams shows, this hierarchy intersects with other forms of oppression:

> In intersectional thinking we apprehend that shared ideological beliefs...exist as the foundation of a white supremacist and speciesist patriarchy. For instance, the analysis of racism against African-Americans points both to the specific way attitudes toward animals intersect with human oppression...it demonstrates the way supremacist ideology inscribes intersecting forms of otherness (race and species). (79-80)

Indeed, humans' perception of their superiority over animals and their right to control them can only contribute to other beliefs in superiority, such as race, class, and gender.

I would now like to look more closely at the human traits used to characterize the aliens. However, I must first underline the fact that there are only three aliens in the film who appear to be humanized, and only one of them has a name, albeit an Anglo-Saxon name which the audience might imagine was paternally imposed upon him rather than chosen by him. Christopher Johnson and his son are virtually the only aliens who appear fully clothed. They are also
the only two alien characters with a significant amount of dialogue, and they are two of the very few who are depicted expressing (human) emotion and using human-like gestures. Yet perhaps more importantly, the father and son form a family. In a sense then, Christopher Johnson and his son are distinguished from the other aliens in the same ways in which Western perception differentiates the human from the animal or the "savage," "uncivilized" human from the "civilized" human. The notion of family works to elevate the aliens' status, just as it serves in Mel Gibson's 2006 _Apocalypto_ to separate the "good Indian" from the "bad Indian." As such, _District 9_ seems to attempt to define an essential human nature (or humanity), rather than to depict it as a construct. The film represents a humanist discourse in which race is theorized "as a specific variant of the universal...assum[ing] it is possible to transcend difference" and unite under a "common human essence" (Young, 3). The film asks its spectators to like the aliens because of "sameness" rather than inviting them to overcome differences.

Working with the film's definition of "civilized forms of being" and the differentiation between the uncivilized and the civilized human is its depiction of Nigerian immigrants. This is the one point at which the film did not escape criticism — the Nigerian government understandably protested and even went so far as to ban the film in their country. Indeed, while other African immigrants remain nameless in the film, although their "threat" to South Africans served Blomkamp in the making of his mockumentary, Nigerians are identified and positioned within the narrative as responsible for the corruption in _District 9_. Their role in the narrative as a powerful competitor to the MNU is interesting. Both are fighting for control over the aliens' weapons and Wikus' body, but each in a very different way. The one employs military power, scientific and technological experimentation, and control over the media, while the other uses gangster-like strategies of exchange, offering drugs (cat food) and prostitutes for weapons.

Evidently, the narrative condemns both, suggesting that corruption and desire for power are everywhere. Yet, where this juxtaposition becomes problematic is through the fact that the vilification of the MNU does not extend to white South Africans as a whole. The film portrays other white South Africans in the mockumentary portions speaking out against the injustices committed against the aliens, whereas it offers no positive character portrayals of Nigerians to counteract their cruel, criminal personas. Rather, the film provides a totalizing portrait of Nigerians as an entire population. In the light of the attempt to provide a faithful, realistic account of life in a Johannesburg district, the Nigerian government's accusation of the film as "xenophobic" is completely justified (qtd in Smith). Furthermore, the focalization of the film from a white South African point of view means that the Nigerians are positioned as objects in the same way that the aliens are.

Yet while the aliens are portrayed as easily susceptible to crime, they remain the victims of the villainous Nigerians. In other words, one of the ways the film creates sympathy for the aliens and one of the ways in which it humanizes them is by demonizing and dehumanizing the Nigerians. Richard Pithouse writes that this is a symptom of the move from apartheid to post-apartheid: "[The] move from apartheid to post-apartheid changed who we turn into aliens but didn't put aside the assumption that we should construct our society against the alien... As we humanize one alien we create another." The Nigerians do not merely represent uncivilized forms of being in their characterization as traffickers, drug-dealers, and prostitutes, as outside of social and legal norms, but they also appear as "bad savages" in their portrayal as cannibals. Evidently, cannibalism has been used to stigmatize indigenous cultures for centuries and it is no different here. While mockumentary interviewees briefly relate the practice to Muti, or "witch-doctoring" (32:10), Hollywood filming techniques frame the cut in which a Nigerian woman chants spells and gyrates over the arm of an alien. As the Nigerian leader bites into the arm, the dark lighting, the fire, and the sinister music tell the spectator that this is an evil, virtually demonic practice (32:25-32:35), one which the Western spectator is meant to feel as alien. Ironically, it is through the film's rendering of the aliens as less animalistic and more human that the Nigerians are considered cannibals — more animalistic than human.

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3 Blomkamp interviewed South Africans about their opinions on Zimbabwean immigrants and has accordingly said that his aliens can also serve as a metaphor for immigrants from other African nations ("Audio Commentary").

4 Interestingly, Blomkamp never refers to the reason why he chose to portray Nigerians in this light, rather than Zimbabweans, for instance. One might imagine a distinction, intentional or not, between the immigrant and the refugee, in which case immigrants (the Nigerians) appear threatening in their desire to migrate and with their facility in traversing borders compared with refugees (the aliens) who are involuntarily displaced across borders. Although the narrative depicts the aliens (or refugees) as threatening to the local South African population, while the Nigerians are left to do as they please within the enclosed space of _District 9_, the film's demonization of the Nigerians seems to represent and work with contemporary political and social discourses against immigrants and immigration.

5 In addition to using real comments from South Africans regarding immigrants, Blomkamp shot the film in an abandoned shantytown of Johannesburg. All the props used in that setting originated from the shantytown.

6 In his DVD commentary, Blomkamp worries that this scene will appear too foreign to American audiences, but imagines that they might relate it to voodoo practices of the Caribbean. As such, his intention seems to have been for the scene to appear as foreign and dangerous, but not without a reference to other cultures in the Western imagination. Significantly, he chose to cut a scene that depicted an African woman explaining Muti practices that are less harmful and threatening to live beings.

7 Indeed, this stigmatization and the audience's reception of the Nigerians as cannibals would not work if the aliens were framed as more animal and less human. Conversely however,
Essential Differences

However, where the Nigerians do escape stigmatization and the aliens do not is through the discourses of disease and genetics that permeate the film, suggesting that there are essential, biological differences between the humans and the aliens. Again, rather than asking us to overcome them, the film’s narrative shows that the two species should not be mixed, nor should there be any desire for them to be. In discussing his aliens’ “drone society,” Blomkamp states that it is meant to be a “clear departure” from “human social constructs” as well as from “human biology” (“Audio Commentary”). For their creator, the aliens’ behavior is based on their “genetics” and “DNA-coding,” and their weaponry certainly reinforces this biological identification (as it will only recognize and operate in the hands of an alien). As Elaine Graham suggests in her discussion of the implications of the Human Genome Project, the notion of DNA has often served the discourse of liberal humanism: “Issues of representation – and especially metaphors of geneticization, of DNA as cracking the ‘code’ of human essence – construct narratives of what it means to be human; narratives of increasing cultural and economic potency” (110). If DNA-coding appears to unite humans regardless of racial (and other) differences, Blomkamp uses it to separate the human from the non-human, to define what is essentially human and what is essentially other. With the aliens as a metaphor for the racial other, Blomkamp’s emphasis on DNA certainly echoes 19th century scientific studies that were used to distinguish and create a hierarchy among races.

The problems and dangers that can arise from mixing human DNA with that of animals has been a common theme in science fiction film, from David Cronenberg’s 1986 The Fly to the recent cinematic release of Vincenzo Natali’s Splice. The transformation undergone by Wikus is undeniably horrific, from the black liquid he vomits is reminiscent of the black slime the disgust at the idea that Nigerian women would prostitute themselves to the aliens as sex with non-humans and are pretty damn eager to eat people. Disgusting” (qtd in Smith).

found on the door to the aliens’ ship at the beginning of the film. In addition, the aliens themselves are meant to be suffering from a virus, the one that Blomkamp imagines as having killed off the upper echelons of their society. Thus, the film’s narrative presents Wikus as in need of a “cure” – and this is precisely the term Christopher Johnson uses when he offers to help Wikus, as if agreeing with the idea that being an alien means being diseased and contaminated.

The MNU attributes Wikus’ transformation to interspecies sex, or rather miscegenation and although the audience knows the MNU’s allegation is false, this narrative element ultimately contributes to the intersection of race and disease, as well as gender and sexuality. Wikus’ denial of the act to his wife (stating: “I would never have...sex with one of these fucking creatures!” 50:17) clearly highlights the undesirability of the act for Wikus, thereby stigmatizing those characters who do have sex with the aliens – the Nigerian prostitutes. The MNU’s claims that Wikus has contracted an “alien sexual disease” are reminiscent of historical medical “findings” in which certain sexually transmitted diseases were linked to Africans, such as syphilis in the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment – but we might also think of the AIDS virus, originally seen as a disease that homosexuals contracted, now considered largely a problem for the continental African population. In other words, disease has worked with racial stigmatization historically and continues to do so in the present.

The evocation of miscegenation is a reminder of the way in which race is always constructed in relation to gender and sexuality. Judith Butler writes:

If...women of color are “multiply interpellated,” called by many names, constituted in and by that multiple calling, then this implies that the symbolic domain, the domain of socially instituted norms, is composed of racializing norms, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another. Hence, it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference or, for that matter, to make them into fully separable axes of social regulation and power. (182)

Evidently, Butler is writing with humans, not with other species, in mind. Interestingly, a cut scene from the film demonstrates that Blomkamp had originally chosen to depict the aliens as hermaphroditic. While such a representation would have doubled the othering of the aliens in terms of race and gender, it might have also worked as a threat to the gender binary and to its participation in the construction of race. Yet the film maintains no overt references to the aliens’ sex and gender. Rather, there are covert references which position the aliens as male, for instance, in that the only alien characters that the spectator meets are thought of as male within the narrative.8 It seems then that in

8 There is one scene in which an alien wears a brassiere. Yet, rather than using the bra to identify the alien as female, it is meant to be a humorous scene – not because the alien is
humanizing the aliens, a position within the sex and gender binary became necessary for Blomkamp who either chose to frame them as male or allowed for this assumption. Yet because of the narrative’s suggested sexual acts, both heterosexual and homosexual, between aliens and humans, the aliens are “multiply interpellated” as the racial other and as sexually perverse.

The sexual acts that are suggested between humans and aliens appear as either heterosexual (with female prostitutes) or as potentially homosexual with Wikus positioned in such a way as to suggest sodomy. According to Butler, conceptions of homosexuality and miscegenation work together to maintain gender, heteronormativity and racial purity.

The disjunctive ordering of the human as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ [takes] place not only through a heterosexualizing symbolic with its taboo on homosexuality, but through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation... Homosexuality and miscegenation converge at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure production. (167)

Homosexuality, therefore, intersects with disease and miscegenation in order to further stigmatize Wikus. While he is, of course, meant to be stigmatized within the narrative, and the spectator might, therefore, judge those who accuse him and those who see him as perverse, it does not change the fact that the film presents sex with the racial other as an unnatural and undesirable act. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert finishes by writing that the aliens are “loathsome and disgusting” and that “the movie mentions Nigerian prostitutes servicing the aliens, but wisely refrains from entertaining us with this spectacle.” That this is Ebert’s last comment is significant. Despite an argument in support of the aliens’ humanization, the aliens remain “disgusting” – and the way in which they are the most “disgusting and loathsome” is not through the way that the film depicts them on screen, but in the mere suggestion that they have sex with humans. The racial other is thus not threatening in itself, but rather through its potential physical contact with the self.

In the end then, the film provides a very conflicting representation of the aliens that works to stigmatize on several levels. In humanizing them, they become evaluated based on the sex/gender system and as either inside or outside heteronormativity. The depiction of Wikus having intercourse with an alien then suggests that the aliens are both heterosexual and homosexual, or polymorphously perverse (which would of course match with the aliens’ characterization as child-like in their lack of intelligence and need of guidance). Yet it is only in dehumanizing the aliens that they become threatening heterosexually. In other words, it is only in considering the aliens as non-human, animal-like beings, that Roger Ebert is able to feel disgust and that the Nigerian government is able to feel anger. All in all, the film’s use of the aliens as a metaphor for the racial other, along with its representation of miscegenation through both heterosexual and homosexual practices, highlight a desire for racial purity and heteronormativity rather than a desire to transgress these boundaries.

In conclusion, despite District 9’s attempt to critique racial inequality, injustice, and stigmatization, its representation of the racial other remains extremely problematic. Indeed, it is perhaps even more dangerous to our present day worldview than other science fiction films that portray xenophobic human racism, because it seems to propagate the notion that enough awareness of and progress against racial injustices have been achieved. While the film undeniably reveals the ways in which certain discourses have contributed to the cultural construction of race, it nonetheless reinforces hegemonic and ideological beliefs in the category of race as well as racial stigmatization. Blomkamp’s District 9 succeeds neither in questioning white supremacy, nor in blurring the boundary between the self and the other as it would initially seem. Rather, it reinforces a belief in white superiority through its decision to prioritize the white South African point of view. Even while the film criticizes the main character, Wikus, it allows him and its white spectators to maintain morally superior perspectives over Africans. Rather than simultaneously humanizing and animalizing its aliens to question the definition of the human and the ideological belief in human superiority over animals, the film maintains the binary between them, which then intersects with the social construction of race and contributes to the distancing of the self from the other. Finally, DNA-coding and genetics work with human versus non-human essentialism, while disease is portrayed as a potential danger and further stigmatization for those who engage in miscegenation. The aliens in

9 Another indicator of a homosexual relationship between Wikus and the aliens is through his eventual bond with Christopher Johnson, which places the film in the category of the “buddy film” or the “bromance.”

10 I am referring to the aliens as a group, because the film also makes generalizing statements about the aliens instead of allowing for different alien identities – Christopher Johnson and his son being the only exceptions who stand apart from the group as a whole. This means that the film does not allow for certain aliens to be identified as heterosexual and others as homosexual, but instead suggests that their sexuality is both or neither. Yet again, although this might work to break down the binary between these two identity categories, it is only used in a stigmatizing manner within the film.
District 9 remain, thus, fundamentally other and inferior to the humans, and, as they are metaphors for the racial other, the film thereby may be seen to suggest that the gap between the self and the other is unbridgeable and that attempting to close it is undesirable.

Works Cited


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