

Jack Darcy

27 November 2009

### Exploiting Apartheid in *District 9*

*District 9*, a science fiction movie directed by Neil Blomkamp and produced by Peter Jackson, is an action movie throughout. One could view the entire film without noticing any sort of metaphorical depth, and simply enjoy *District 9* based on the merits of its wonderful visual effects, gore, vulgarity, and fast-paced content. In order to achieve this blissful nirvana, the viewer would have to empty his mind of any knowledge regarding the South African apartheid. The apartheid metaphor is so thoroughly imprinted onto the plot, visuals, and characters of the movie, that anybody who has studied South African history to any extent would be remiss not to take notice. The presence of this metaphor attempts to create one of the hallmarks of good science fiction: depth and meaning.

Classical science fiction often creates a metaphor for contemporary society. This sort of story uses the science fiction setting as a protected soapbox from which criticisms about modern culture can be made. George Orwell's 1984 is perhaps the most famous example of this, but more ordinary sci-fi comments also: popular shows like *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica* contain themes and messages that have clear parallels to current events. *District 9* is a movie with such a message, and its message is about apartheid.

Director Neil Blomkamp is originally from South Africa, where *District 9* takes place. Blomkamp has said about the apartheid, “It all had a huge impact on me: the white government and the paramilitary police [and] the oppressive, iron-fisted military environment” (Qtd. By Lee). All of the themes Blomkamp has mentioned are very strongly integrated into *District 9*, especially apartheid. The apartheid in South Africa was a period of time from 1948 to 1994, during which segregation was enforced, often resulting in evictions of thousands from their homes. One particularly famous and large eviction was that of District 6. Once a mixed community, in 1968 the South African government deemed it a “Whites Only Area”, and forcibly relocated about 60,000 people.

In *District 9*, clear parallels to these events take place. The Aliens in the movie, pejoratively called “Prawns”, are forcibly contained within an area known as District 9. The clear allegory here is to District 6, and the aliens are taking the metaphorical place of those “colored” South Africans who were displaced during the apartheid. This may all fit into what Roger Ebert calls the “higher realms of science fiction” (alluding to movies with message), but there are disturbing components of this metaphor that should not be overlooked. The implications made about Blacks or native Africans by *District 9* may fly beneath the radar of most viewers, but when the movie is put under thorough scrutiny, disturbing analogies appear. The apartheid allegory in *District 9* is presented in an irresponsible, exploitative and highly problematic manner. Specifically, *District 9* contains colonial tropes which are antithetical to the movie’s supposed message against apartheid, racism, and segregation.

The racial implications made by *District 9* are vast and particularly insulting. A genuine colonial style dialogue, facilitated by white protagonist Wikus Van der Merwe appears early on in the movie. During the scene where Wikus is first going out to District 9 in large armored white trucks, he speaks to his black subordinate, Thomas. Wishing the large and silent Black man “good luck”, Wikus is shown to be an authority figure and voice of the common man. Later on, when Wikus is performing an “abortion” by destroying a Prawn breeding facility, Wikus gives Thomas a “souvenir for [his] first abortion” so that Thomas can “feel like [he] did something”. Thomas replies with a chuckle and a subservient, “yes boss!”

Unfortunately, the Prawns do not even get the dignified yet subordinate treatment that Thomas (a real black person instead of a metaphorical one) receives. Prawns are seen publically urinating, savagely ripping meat apart, and fighting with each other constantly. In a scene directly after the “abortion”, Wikus is seen walking up to a Prawn, who is drinking what one can only assume to be Colt45 from a white plastic jug. The prawn immediately vomits a viscous black substance into the street below. Later, a Prawn is shown publically urinating in the middle of the street, and Wikus says, “Hey! Don’t urinate there!” He then confronts the alien, and patronizes it over such a disgusting act.

When scrutinized beneath the lens of metaphorical analysis and historical context, one can see how Blomkamp’s depiction of the Prawns is extremely problematic. Common colonialist stereotypes of Black people or of native Africans can be seen depicted in the Prawns, and this is obviously offensive. Creating a metaphor where the Prawns directly equate to Black Africans implies that any traits imbued upon

the prawns are present in real life Africans. The assertion that *District 9* makes is that colonialist tropes have basis in reality.

In one of the “interviews” presented in *District 9* as part of its faux documentary style, Entomologist Clive Henderson explains the nature of the prawns. He says that “What we have stranded on earth in this colony [are] basically the workers. They don’t particularly think for themselves, they will take commands, they have no initiative.” All of these traits attributed to the Prawns were common stereotypes of Blacks during the turn of the century (unfortunately, to a slightly lesser extent these stereotypes still show up in modern society). Laziness, stupidity, and a need for disciplined authority were criticisms commonly attributed to Blacks in the early twentieth century. In Lewis M. Terman’s The Measurement of Intelligence, copyright 1916, the author describes the intellect “commonly found among [...] Negroes” as “uneducable beyond the merest rudiments of training. No amount of school instruction will ever make them intelligent voters or capable citizens in the true sense of the word. Judged psychologically they cannot be considered normal (Terman, 91).” This correlates perfectly with the typical colonial view of Africa, its inhabitants stupid savages who need the White man’s help to be civilized (see: *The White Man’s Burden* by Rudyard Kipling). Not only are the prawns demonized and belittled in the film, but real live Africans are as well.

There has been an outcry by the government of Nigeria to censor the movie in their country. Information Minister Dora Akunyili says that he has “written to the producer and distributor of the film, Sony Entertainment, expressing [his] displeasure and demanded an apology” (Qtd. By CBC). This is because in *District 9*, Nigerians are universally portrayed as scam artists, thieves, drug and weapon dealers, and even

cannibals who practice some brand of stereotypical 'juju mysticism'. In one particularly offensive scene (to the Nigerians, I imagine), the audience sees the Nigerian crime lord character in his compound. A sort of witch doctor is nearby, and hands him a severed Prawn arm. She tells him, "You must eat them! And their power... will live in you!" The witch doctor then shakes herself violently and rolls her eyes, as the crime lord savagely bites the alien arm. This is not the only objectionable depiction of Nigerians in the film.

Earlier in the movie, a faux news report speaks of the "cat food scam" that Nigerian gangsters are running in District 9. Although these depictions do not conform to the colonial archetype that is so problematic with the Prawn metaphor, it certainly serves to clarify that Jackson and Blomkamp are not at all afraid to portray all Nigerians as scammers and thugs. Although this may not be apparent to most viewers, the name of *District 9*'s Nigerian crime lord is Obasanjo. This name references the former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, a real person. Clearly Blomkamp and Jackson have no issue creating an intensely one-sided and problematic depiction of an entire country, going as far as naming a chief villain in their movie after the real-life former president of Nigeria.

Insensitivity on the part of the director and producer is nothing new for Peter Jackson. His adaptation of *King Kong* is much more overt in its racist tendencies than *District 9*, because Jackson doesn't disguise the stereotypes presented in the movie through the veil of metaphor. *King Kong* is actually set in the colonial period, and features colonial style explorers setting off to a dark and mysterious island. This dark and mysterious island is of course full of dark and mysterious people, who are a bit more dark than mysterious. The natives depicted in *King Kong* are blacker than any

human being could ever be – they are literally shoe-polish black, and exhibit many of the stereotypes about Black people that *District 9* features. The natives are savage, cruel, and speak unintelligibly. On top of this, the natives have a penchant for kidnapping white women, echoing the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fear that Black men would “steal” white women. King Kong himself is another problematic metaphor for the Black man, since he is in chains, is an animal, and is obsessed with a white woman. It seems everywhere one looks in King Kong, there’s something objectionable to be found.

Did Peter Jackson learn his lesson from making King Kong? Possibly. Maybe he learned that in order to incorporate colonial tropes into his movie, he best be subtle, and do so under the guise of attaining Ebert’s “higher realms of science fiction”. Jackson is now a repeat offender, and has shown through *District 9* that he is completely insensitive to whatever problematic implications his movies may make. *District 9* is only the continuation of a long history of repeated colonialist rhetoric, and if society is to move past its transgressions during the colonial era, it needs to put such painfully backward depictions of Africa and Africans behind it as well. *District 9* would have been just as good (if not far better) of a movie had it depicted the Prawns as beings on par with the humans they were forced to share a home with. An even-handed portrayal of all parties involved (including the Nigerians) would have been sufficient to cure the movie of its unfortunate and offensive implications. Changing the characterizations may seem like a minor detail, but when thought of as moving human culture away from cruel depictions of entire cultures, one blockbuster movie can go a long way.

## Works Cited

Davis, Jeff. "King Kong Faces Racism Charge." Altermedia news U.S.A. 18 Dec. 2005.

Web. 18 Nov. 2009.

*District 9*. Dir. Neil Blomkamp. Perf. Sharlto Copley. Sony Pictures, 2009. DVD.

Ebert, Roger. "District 9." Rev. of Movie. Sun Times [Seattle] 13 Aug. 2009. Web. 10

Nov. 2009.

*King Kong*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Adrien Brody, Jack Black, Naomi Watts. Universal Studios, 2009. DVD.

Lee, Chris. "'District 9' and the alienation of apartheid." LATimes.com. 3 Aug. 2009.

Web. 12 Nov. 2009.

<<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/herocomplex/2009/08/district-9-is-an-alien-vision-of-south-african-apartheid.html>>.

"Nigeria denounces District 9 movie." CBC News. 19 Sept. 2009. Web. 10 Nov. 2009.

<<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/film/story/2009/09/19/district9-nigeria.html>>.

Terman, Lewis M. The Measurement of Intelligence. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916.

Print.

[Undergraduate Diversity Conference Home](#)

[PWR Home](#)