District 9. Dir. Neill Blomkamp. Perf. Sharlto Copley, Jason Cope. TriStar Pictures / Wingnut Films / QED International. 2009. Film.

District 9 is an odd beast about odd beasts. Released in 2009 under the banner "Peter Jackson Presents," it is best described as a science fiction action thriller that explores issues of immigration, xenophobia, and the dangers of global capitalism. It has no major stars (although its lead actor, Sharlto Copley, has since found roles in Hollywood films such as *The A-Team* (Joe Carnahan, 2010)), and Neill Blomkamp had not previously directed a feature film. Rather than being set in the United States, its narrative takes place in Johannesburg, and while it does feature the arrival of aliens from another world, complete with huge spaceship, they are refugees rather than invaders. Despite these unusual features, *District 9* is, perhaps inevitably, reminiscent of various other science fiction films. The huge spacecraft looming over a city echoes *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), and a mechanical suit recalls *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) and *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009). The aliens, given the derogatory term "Prawns," are reminiscent of the extra-terrestrials in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987). And in its themes, *District 9* joins the ranks of politically-charged science fiction films that include *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951), *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982).

From the beginning *District 9* makes its politics clear, integrating them into its generic tropes. The Prawns are clearly coded as an underclass, mistrusted and resented by humans and contained within the eponymous ghetto. *District 9* is a shanty town, militarized and rife with crime, including prostitution, smuggling and weapons-trading. Concerns over weaponry and capitalism run throughout the film, as MNU (the corporation charged with relocating the Prawns) is an arms manufacturer, desperate to acquire alien weapons from which it can reap massive profits. MNU also provides a framing device, as much of the film is presented as corporate video footage of the eviction of Prawns, led by the film's protagonist, Wikus Van De Merwe (Copley). Wikus begins the film as a proud corporate man, but his experiences change his attitude dramatically. Similarly, different views and styles appear throughout the film, as footage from the MNU corporate video is intercut with security camera footage, news reports and apparent

documentary footage of talking heads giving their expertise. All of these styles are intercut with more standard, objective filming with no diegetic source, but even here, hand-held cinematography and abrupt editing maintain a documentary aesthetic, as though the footage were grabbed on the ground without the luxury of set-ups and retakes.

This mixture of styles can be a problem. The talking heads discuss the events from a historical perspective, which partially frames the film as a (fictional) documentary. But this conceit is not maintained, as much of the film follows Wikus without any reason for him to be filmed. There is no clear division between what is and is not "documentary" or "found footage," and the set pieces utilize an action film aesthetic, reminiscent of *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Paul Greengrass, 2007) or *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007). These contrasting styles and a lack of demarcation suggest that an interesting experiment was abandoned in favor of entrails-strewn pyrotechnics. The film can also appear messy and disjointed as the director throws everything at the screen. It is therefore to the film's credit that a great deal of it sticks. A sense of rawness pervades *District 9,* especially during the action sequences that look messy and un-choreographed, which is consistent as Wikus is trying to survive and only does so through blind luck. Wikus is a very engaging protagonist due to his status as an individual in increasingly dire straits, losing everything he knows and holds dear. This central thread ties the film together, and Copley's performance effectively conveys fear and the desperate desire to go home. His status underscores the film's political critique, as MNU treat him as callously as they do the Prawns.

Several corporate figures represent corporate greed, including MNU's CEO Piet Smit (Louis Minnaar) and its chief of security, Koobus Venter (David James). Venter is a racist, violent soldier, who enjoys killing as much as he excels at it. When he threatens Wikus' Prawn friend Christopher Johnson (Jason Cope), he snarls sadistically: "I can't believe they pay me for this," and he displays similar relish when he has Wikus at his mercy. The callousness of MNU is part of *District 9*'s exploration what it means to be human, both biologically and ideologically. Through having his humanity threatened, Wikus develops empathy and compassion towards the Prawns, people he previously ignored because of his loyalty to the company. It may not be innovative to portray large corporations as evil, but District 9 incorporates this typical plot device into its political critique.

MNU's interest in weapons and disregard for life, either alien or human, is presented as mundane, described by the talking heads as part of normal business practice. The film is highly critical of global capitalism, suggesting that in the event of an extra-terrestrial encounter, humanity would react with greed and xenophobia. Through the surrogate figure of Wikus, the viewer can experience the terror and oppression caused by global capitalism, and the inconsistent aesthetic actually aids this. Everything in *District 9* is chaotic, spilling out of the narrative events into the fabric of the film itself with its mishmash of styles. Profoundly postmodern, the film uses its fragmented assembly of viewpoints and styles to create a confusing and disturbing experience, a verisimilitude of life under global capitalism. The chaos of the style and narrative is ultimately a strength rather than a weakness, as *District 9* emerges as one of the most disturbing and powerful science fiction films of recent years.

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