
Dirty alien shadow-selves: Delving into the dirt in *District 9*

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Abstract

Beginning with a discussion of the concept of dirt, including synthetic dirt, as contextualised by film critic Peter Brook, I raise pertinent ideas from the work of Nicolas Bourriaud about contemporary visual art. I then move on to an analysis of the representation of literal and synthetic dirt within the science fiction film *District 9*, directed by Neill Blomkamp (2009). Using Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's work on the implications of the significance of the encounter with the alien as the ultimate contact zone between self and other, I concentrate on the physical, emotional and aesthetic effects achieved as the central protagonist of *District 9* moves from a human to an alien embodiment. I chart the progress of the body-horror and ethical development entailed in this change of state, making reference to ideas first developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas. The viewer's responses are shown to be complex and muddy, composed of warring impulses of revulsion and admiration. As the central character, Wikus, becomes an alien his body becomes a rich symbolic ground. His increasingly leaky, abject body reflects ideas which can be interpreted universally, but more specifically within the South African context reveal anxieties about the cohesion of a minority group. I conclude by analysing the end of the film, which is moving, future-directed and insistent on the significance of art in society.

Key words: Dirt; synthetic dirt; *District 9*; aliens; science fiction; relational form

Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes (Bourriaud 2002:13).

Introduction: dirt and Brook's 'Rough Theatre'

In this article I explore the significance of the concept of dirt, including synthetic dirt, as applied to the South African film, *District 9* (Blomkamp 2009). I begin by commenting on my use of the metaphor of dirt, including the term, synthetic dirt, which originated in electronic music, but which has been applied by Peter Brook to drama, and can equally be applied to film. I then proceed to apply three theoretical strands to *District 9*, using Nicolas Bourriaud on aesthetics, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay on science fiction, specifically representations of aliens, and Mary Douglas on anthropology, in order to reveal the effects of conceptualising the film through the lens of types of dirt, including synthetic dirt.

The central concept of significant, symbolic dirt which I employ in this article is explained in a chapter entitled 'Rough Theatre' in the book, *The empty space*, by influential theatre and film director, Peter Brook (1996:79):

If we find that dung is a good fertilizer, it is no use being squeamish; if the theatre seems to need a certain crude element, this must be accepted as part of its natural soil. At the beginning



Figures 1 & 2: Example of official movie posters (left) and viral campaign (right) for *District 9*. (© Sony Pictures)

of electronic music, some German studios claimed that they could make every sound that a natural instrument could make – only better. Then they discovered that all their sounds were marked by a certain uniform sterility. So they analysed the sounds made by clarinets, flutes, violins, and found that each note contained a remarkably high proportion of plain noise; actual scraping, or the mixture of heavy breathing with the wind on wood: from a purist point of view this was just dirt, but the composers soon found themselves compelled to make synthetic dirt – to ‘humanize’ their compositions. Architects remain blind to this principle – and era after era the most vital theatrical experiences occur outside the legitimate places constructed for the purpose ... The Rough Theatre is close to the people ... it is usually distinguished by the absence of what is called style.

Brook’s (1996:79) discussion of metaphoric dirt forms part of his analysis of the crucial role played by popular or ‘rough’ theatre, in which he contrasts its qualities: lowbrow, comedic, obscene, anarchic and militant, with the attributes of ‘serious’ theatre: highbrow, legitimate, artistic and conventional. Brook’s (1996:79) concept of dirty, rough theatre does not imply mindless, crowd-pleasing works; instead, it refers to gritty, challenging drama. In the field of film, the distinction would be between arid, over-intellectualised art-films, and popular, but grounded and demanding, films. The incorporation of dirt in a theatrical work, then, may be conceived of as an antidote to the pure, rarefied, abstract and ethereal; its representation of the concrete, corporeal and contaminated ensures vitality within a play, or, by extension, other artworks, such as films. Synthetic dirt is a subset of dirt; it is deliberately added to a work to impart

the flavour of roughness: '[s]alt, sweat, noise, smell' (Brook 1996:78). The vitality imparted by including dirt is specifically associated with the properties of being human, and implicitly calls into question what it means to be human, and what the connection is between humans and dirt. These considerations are illuminating in analysing the science fiction film *District 9*, which incorporates literal and symbolic dirt in its *mise-en-scène*, and which amalgamates a number of genre frameworks and varied camera techniques, thus eschewing the purity of a single form.

While the long quotation above contains the only reference to the concept of synthetic dirt in Brook's book, in the rest of the chapter 'Rough Theatre' he discusses the use of roughness in theatre in terms of appearance, intention and reception, emphasising the positive contribution of dirt:

[o]f course, it is most of all dirt that gives the roughness its edge; filth and vulgarity are natural, obscenity is joyous: with these the spectacle takes on its socially liberating role, for by nature the popular theatre is anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-pretence. This is the theatre of noise, and the theatre of noise is the theatre of applause (Brook 1996:81).

The dirt alluded to by Brook (1996:81) is an objective correlative connoting both filth and fertiliser. It achieves its effects by choices made by the director and actors with regard to such issues as settings, costumes, overall vision, appropriate acting and interpretation of the meaning of the play; these effects ideally lead to an engaged, active response on the part of the audience. Brook's chapter, 'Rough Theatre', provides a number of contextualisations which resonate interestingly with issues explored in the film *District 9*. The empty space by Brook conceives of four different types of theatre (which are not necessarily watertight compartments, and which are to be seen suggestively, rather than

programmatically) from the viewpoint of actor, subject, audience and director. *Deadly Theatre* (Brook 1996:9-41) is often, but not necessarily, commercial, and is vacuous, glib, formulaic, uninspired and moribund; *Holy Theatre* (Brook 1996:42-64), which deals with metaphysical exploration and transcendence, reveals the invisible made visible; and *Immediate Theatre* (Brook 1996:98-175) is self-reflexive and responds to the pressing issues of the day, ideally leading to a memorable catharsis. The category which is pertinent to my discussion, *Rough Theatre* (Brook 1996:65-97), is a popular, down-and-dirty, physical, anarchic form characterised by invention, ideas, laughter and coarse vigour.¹

Brook (1996:84) observes that the most compelling comedy, one of the forms of *Rough Theatre*, employs archetypal characters in mythic situations which are reflective of current social situations. The plot-line may entail travel into the unknown and involve a simultaneous expansion of the psyche as the result of a wish for change or transformation. For Brook (1996:86-104), the prime exemplar of *Rough Theatre* is Bertolt Brecht, whose alienation effect entails a disruption of the spectator's comfortable identification and an appeal for the spectator to assume responsibility for internalising the significance of what is being viewed in terms of society's capacity for change. Brook (1996:89) makes passing reference to the alienation effects on the viewer of Charlie Chaplin's mixture of sentimentality and affliction, pointing out that the disruption of simple stock responses is difficult to achieve. In theatre and in film, the incorporation of Brook's (1996:78-119) notion of the *Rough*, including dirt, synthetic dirt and alienation effects, make possible gripping artworks which allow for uncomfortable questioning.

The drama of *District 9* chimes with Brook's (1996:84) suggestions about compelling comedy and *Rough Theatre*, displaying dark humour and stereotyped characterisation, whilst exploring the effects of contact with

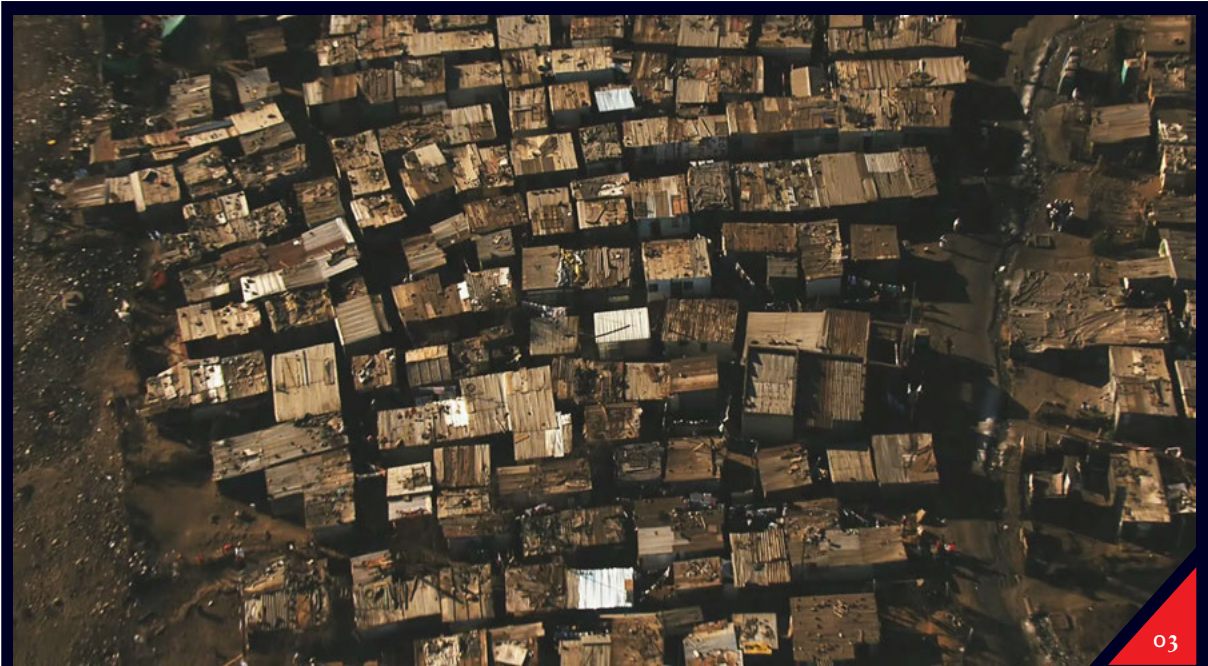


Figure 3: Aerial view of the setting of the film, in the informal settlement of Chiawelo, Soweto.
(© Sony Pictures)



Figure 4: The encounter with the alien depicted in computer-generated and concentration camp imagery.
(© Sony Pictures)

otherness, a theme of relevance for South Africa in terms of the legacy of apartheid and in terms of outbreaks of xenophobia, but also a theme of universal applicability with regard to the treatment of refugees, migrants, prisoners and the poor. In viewing *District 9*, we are presented initially with a stock comedic character, Wikus van de Merwe, brilliantly portrayed by Sharlto Copley. Wikus is first seen as the epitome of the bumbling, self-satisfied white male South African bureaucrat. Yet the characterisation deepens and becomes archetypal, as Wikus becomes an outlaw and an alien, and is forced into a quest involving his bodily integrity and sense of self; his humanity, signalled by his unchanging love for his wife; and his changing affiliations, signalled by his friendship with Christopher Johnson. The science fiction genre in which the film is conveyed is often portrayed by purists as an example of a low or debased form, not to be taken seriously.² However, I would argue that much science fiction provides trenchant social commentary, and that *District 9* allows for a complex response on the part of the viewer,³ typical of Brecht's alienation effect – whether or not this was the director's intention.

Bourriaud's 'Relational form' and *District 9*

It is important to acknowledge the status of *District 9* as dramatic spectacle, but it is also vital to focus on the significance of the visual qualities of the film. While Brook's reputation for stunning visual effects in his television, cinema and opera work suggests his awareness of the importance of the visual in the contemporary world, Bourriaud concentrates specifically on visual culture in the book *Relational aesthetics* (2002), particularly in his chapter 'Relational form'. Although he privileges the art exhibition as 'the place that produces a specific sociability' (Bourriaud 2002:16), many of his comments on contemporary artistic practice and its cultural

potential are suggestively applicable to *District 9*. Coming from a materialist intellectual tradition, Bourriaud (2002:12) sketches a history of the twentieth century in which North-South dynamics loom large:

[i]nstead of culminating in hoped-for emancipation, the advances of technologies and "Reason" made it that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth ... and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques ... So the modern emancipation plan has been substituted by countless forms of melancholy.

The global politics of exploitation and oppression, as well as self/other and margin/centre oppositions alluded to here, likewise form the backdrop to *District 9*, with the history of South Africa providing a particularly trenchant example of oppression within the borders of the country, and the encounter with aliens showcasing gruesomely graphic subjugation and extermination. The film reveals emancipation to be illusory, and melancholy to be rife. Nonetheless, Bourriaud (2002:13, emphasis in original) insists on the importance of sustaining a vision of transformation; he refers to a contemporary trend in the art world of '*learning to inhabit the world in a better way*, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution.' He elaborates that 'the role of artworks is no longer to *form* imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually *be* ways of living and models of action within the existing real' (Bourriaud 2002:13, emphasis added). As my epigraph makes plain, Bourriaud (2002:14) should not be assumed to be anti-utopian, although he views grandiose socialist utopianism as 'Messianistic' and a destructive myth. The emphasis in his sentence above is on active engagement on the part of the contemporary artist, who has a duty not simply to create alternative modes but also to model what it means to live afresh in possible realities, enacting 'everyday micro-utopias' through the use of 'imitative strategies' (Bourriaud 2002:31).

These creations turn 'the setting of [the artist's] world (his links with the physical and conceptual world) into a lasting world' (Bourriaud 2002:14). Bourriaud's (2002: 14) view of the artwork embodying grounded realities but suggesting effective modes of behaviour is consonant with Brook's depiction of a Rough Theatre, including and transcending the dirt of everyday experience.

Instead of following an artistic model of opposition and rebellion, as proposed by earlier avant-garde artists, Bourriaud (2002:13-14) sees artists as implicated in society, and thus they can act as transitional agents between a commodified existence and alternative, less mechanical modes of engagement. As his chapter title, 'Relational form', implies, visual artwork in contemporary times is inter-subjective; it foregrounds the theme of 'being-together' (Bourriaud 2002:15), and requires both in-depth engagement on the part of individual viewers and collaborative meaning-making by communities. Bourriaud (2002:14, 15) conceives of relational art as stemming from global urbanisation, resulting in a city model of cultural forms, and also resulting in a shift from art as a space to be traversed to 'a period of time to be lived through', like a film narrative. As Bourriaud (2002:15) further notes, a prime means of evoking relationality in an artwork is through the use of the semiotic power of the image to generate empathy and connection. Some potent semiotic devices used within *District 9* include billboards demarcating zones for aliens, dirt in various aspects, depictions of the body, both human and alien, and flowers. As Bourriaud (2002:15) points out, images such as 'flags, logos, icons, signs' can generate emotions of empathy, sharing and bond in a group – however, it must be noted that in addition, they can generate negative emotions of disgust, fear and antagonism to others. Bourriaud (2002:14-18) places contemporary art in the zone of the interstitial, and within this zone he emphasises the

significance of human gestures of connection in representations, in dialogic relationships with prior formations, in ethics and as expressions of desire. The end of a film always provides a potent concentration of imagery, and later I shall analyse the final effects on the viewer, in terms of symbolism, bond, relational gestures, triangulation, desire for change, and melancholy.

District 9 represents an individual's paradigm shift from his own historically and culturally inculcated prejudices to a more progressive and sympathetic viewpoint. This occurs in an alternate reality contemporaneous with our own present, against the dystopian setting of a Johannesburg overhung by an alien spacecraft. The aliens are being moved from the eponymous *District 9*, the name of which is evocative of the infamous destruction of District 6, to a concentration camp further from the city. The historical associations raised by the spectre of District 6 include the systematic injustices of the apartheid era, segregation, social engineering, forced removals, expropriation, eviction, evil laws, compliant enforcers, dehumanisation and social breakdown. The reference to concentration camps is a reminder of the camps that were used by the British during the Anglo-Boer War to incarcerate Boers (mainly women and children) and Africans, thus implying a repetition of inhumane confinement starting before the apartheid era, continuing during this period in the form of townships and homelands, and persisting in the post-apartheid present of the film, and, by extension, this country's actual present.

Science fiction films which fit into Brook's (1996) conception of the Rough are effective in presenting viewers with an imagined alterity and its social ramifications, and the most radical ones take up the challenge of relational aesthetics posed by Bourriaud (2002:11-24), suggesting inter-personal bonds and ways of living that

are better than those of the past and the present. District 9 is a place of dirt and squalor, whose occupants, both human and alien, are initially viewed as debased by the central protagonist, Wikus van de Merwe, and the viewer alike. Wikus's becoming-alien and his capacity for connection are accompanied by a seismic shift of consciousness, which may be paralleled by the viewer's own imaginative entry into the domain of the other. As is typical of thoughtful science fiction, the film is characterised by an engagement with 'the existing real' in terms of its genre of production, its socio-political context, its representation of the abject body, and its emotional effects on the viewer. One of the prime ways in which these engagements can be observed is by reference to literal and synthetic dirt.

In terms of form, *District 9* deviates from conventions of purity in various ways. It does not slot cleanly into one film genre, but mixes a number of genres, including science fiction, most obviously, and also allegory, body horror, fugitive action, conversion from one point of view to another, the buddy movie and a love story. Adjusting to the requirements of responding to these different modes demands adroitness and a receptivity to changing registers on the part of the viewer, which is appropriate to the themes of the film. In addition, the film intersperses hand-held camerawork of purported interviews and other ostensibly documentary footage with conventional cinematic techniques. This combination juxtaposes the reflexivity and intimacy of the documentary style with the broad sweep of the cinematic, thus imparting a polyvocality to the film and a blurring of the modes of the private and public, aware and oblivious, minor and major keys, and past and present. With regard to the science fiction framework, director Blomkamp deliberately goes against the grain of contemporary shiny, sanitised or saccharine Hollywood renditions, instead filming in Chiawelo, a part of

Soweto abandoned after its inhabitants were moved to RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) housing. The gritty social realism of the squatter camp setting (consonant with the ideas of dirt discussed in relation to Brook's Rough Theatre) grounds the film in South African realities of racism and xenophobia, and issues a rebuke to glossy, anodyne science fiction. The immediacy and psychological depth of earlier films such as *Alien* (Scott 1979), *Aliens* (Cameron 1986) and *Blade runner* (Scott 1982) are evoked, re-injecting the human trace of synthetic dirt which has been erased from many current, slick science fiction films, such as those directed by Michael Bay or Steven Spielberg, or those which sacrifice challenge for profit, or foreground sterile Computer-generated Imagery (CGI) technology at the expense of political or philosophical questioning.

Dirty alien shadow-selves

District 9 promotes political and philosophical questioning on the part of the viewer by its focus on the significance of the encounter with the alien, which forms the ultimate contact zone between self and other. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (2007:1), author of *Some things we know about aliens*, comments, '[a]liens are our shadows, and we are theirs'. They are encountered unexpectedly, through means of 'technoscience' (Csicsery-Ronay 2007:1), posing a category crisis for humans on account of their legal and social status, and their call upon conflicting conventions of hospitality and self-preservation. Csicsery-Ronay (2007:1-2) notes that in English, unusually, as compared with usages in other languages, the term 'alien' refers both to humans from another area, and extraterrestrials. This slippage makes even clearer Blomkamp's allegorical point about the difficulties of overcoming prejudice and bridging the divides of privilege and (for example) racial, cultural, linguistic or culinary alterity. In the second sense of the

word, extraterrestrial aliens often combine technological expertise and bestial characteristics, exacerbating the anxiety provoked by the encounter. Csicsery-Ronay (2007:5) notes that because the human species possesses qualities which are unique, it is necessary to create an other against whom humans can gauge their kind: '[t]he alien is the fictive event horizon of a parallel singularity from which we may derive what we are'. Although the difficulties of entering alien consciousnesses are profound, three types of representation which assist in this imaginative process are perceptual, sympathetic and symbolic (Nagel cited by Csicsery-Ronay 2007:8). All of these effects: the physical, emotional and aesthetic, assist the viewer of *District 9* to undergo a process of creative engagement with the other which mirrors that of Wikus.

The ambiguity associated with the aliens in this film derives from, on the one hand, the graphic effects of body-horror as Wikus becomes alien, portrayed in terms of metaphors of dirt as his body loses its human integrity and is utterly transformed into insectoidal difference. This inexorable, literal dehumanisation leads to visceral reactions of revulsion, fear and identification from the viewer. On the other hand, however, aliens are shown as having similar emotions and aspirations as humans, and Wikus's ethical growth is portrayed as he sloughs off barriers of conditioning and becomes more sympathetic, both in himself towards others, and to the viewer. In the remainder of this section I itemise the film's trajectory of Wikus's physical alienation, and in the next section I examine its significance in terms of Mary Douglas's anthropological work on purity, dirt and danger.

Wikus's bodily integrity is threatened when he is squirted in the face with black fluid from an iconic, phallic cylinder. Theatrically, the handling of the potent object has mythic and fairy-tale resonances, evoking Eve and the

apple, and Bluebeard's key. In a twist on the gender dynamics usually found in such tales of curiosity associated with sexual knowledge, Wikus is infected and symbolically feminised in the encounter. This cross-gendering effect intensifies the anxiety provoked in the viewer by the visual image of foul pollution coded with stereotyped colour associations. The contaminating moment is marked by Wikus's physical and emotional reactions: he gasps, coughs, swears and tries to cut filming of this section of the mock-documentary recording his handling of the eviction of the aliens. His façade of control is ruptured. The magical liquid, both rocket fuel and transforming agent, marks the aliens as technologically advanced, although the viewer is not allowed the comfort of any simple identification with the aliens. In fact, as Csicsery-Ronay (2007:18) notes, 'ugly invading aliens who possess technology superior to ours ... draw not on disgust for the primitive, but hysterical fear of the morally depraved but technically advanced other'. The threat that such aliens pose feeds into a racist mindset, which depends upon dehumanising the other, who is perceived in terms of imagery of dirt.

The appearance of the cylinder is a visual echo of the tubing used by the aliens to convey rotting cow juices to nourish their developing eggs; tubing which Wikus previously blithely disconnected to effect an 'abortion' of 'the Prawn's' illegal procreation'. This scene conveys both the aliens' revolting, insect-like alterity, and Wikus's callousness. Visually, the aliens' bodies, although bipedal, are a cross between insects and crabs; their mouthparts look like squirming worms or tentacles; and their eyes have no melting expression to tug at the heartstrings like ET. Their behaviour as filmed in the early documentary-style footage is angry, impulsive and violent. Most disgusting of all is the representation of a nursery of large numbers of fertilised eggs growing on putrescent meat, like maggots, instead of individual babies developing inside the sanctity of the

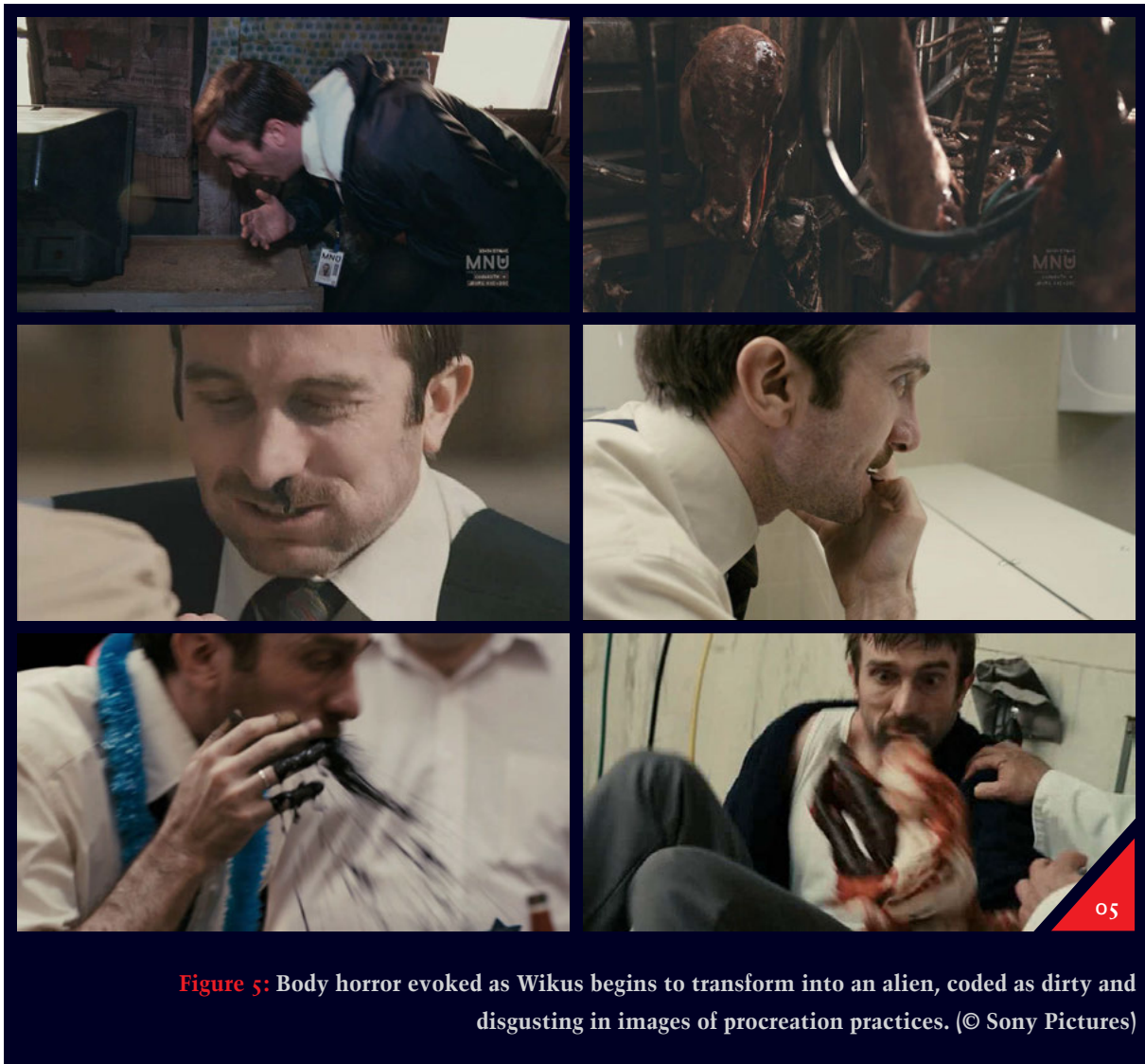


Figure 5: Body horror evoked as Wikus begins to transform into an alien, coded as dirty and disgusting in images of procreation practices. (© Sony Pictures)

maternal body. Human pregnancy, with its ideal associations of clean, personal nurturing, is implicitly contrasted by the image of multiple young battering on filth, sparking conservative associations with uncontrolled breeding habits epitomising excessive sensuality and lack of restraint. Yet Wikus's moralistic commentary on the scene, his ordering that the shack housing the eggs be destroyed by fire, his breaking off a feeding cylinder to give to a colleague as a memento of his first 'Prawn abortion', and most of all, his delight in drawing the camera-operator's attention to the sound like popcorn popping, as a result of the baby aliens' exploding in the fire, all horrify the viewer. As a result, the viewer's response is complex and riven, as visceral disgust towards

the aliens' obscene habits and ethical abhorrence directed at Wikus's genocide war with one another.

Although Wikus excites the viewer's revulsion at this stage of the film, our engagement through the genre of body horror in the unfolding process of utter physical change maintains identification and sympathy with the character. Body horror evokes a frisson through its hyperbolic, displaced signification of common corporeal processes, such as altered states of consciousness, puberty, old age, illness and death. Body horror relies heavily on imagery of dirt to convey its effects, as the boundary between the body and the outside is breached in various ways. So Wikus's allegorical physical dissolution



Figure 6: Wikus symbolically dies, becomes an outlaw based on false accusations, and his body continues to metamorphose. (© Sony Pictures)

begins: he shamefully vomits in public, after having rebuked an alien for public urination; he has a leakage of black fluid from his nose, pointed out by his colleagues; his fingernails become loose and he twists two off with his teeth, thus participating in his metamorphosis; he enacts the nightmare scenario of entering his darkened house and confiding in his wife that he thinks he has lost control of his bowels, to be greeted by guests shouting 'Surprise!' as the lights are turned on; sound is hallucinogenically distorted, showing his distress and tenuous grip on consciousness; he vomits again, this time on his celebratory cake at the surprise party celebrating his promotion to officer in charge of alien evictions; he passes out; his left (sinister) hand is converted into a crab-like claw. These effects signal loss of bodily control, and humiliation in work and social situations. Wikus is disorientated, and filled with melancholy, fear and terror. The characterisation, consonant with Brook's *Rough Theatre*, effectively uses graphic depictions of dirt and dissolution to convey significant psychological battlegrounds, and in addition, symbolically places

Wikus in the position of the exploited, melancholy victim of global power dynamics as referred to by Bourriaud (2002:12).

To compound his affliction he becomes a valuable commodity as the security corporation Multi-National United (MNU) realises his potential as a human/alien hybrid and abducts him for experimentation: he is zipped into a body bag like a corpse; he is forced to use alien weaponry, which humans cannot operate, to shoot a pig (an unclean animal) and then an alien (considered by him at this stage unclean but not-quite-animal), an act which appals him and leaves him spattered with black alien blood; he is threatened with vivisection to determine his hybrid physiology; and after he escapes from the Mengele-like laboratory he is rendered an outcast by his father-in-law's smear campaign accusation that he has contracted a highly contagious sexual disease because of prolonged sexual activity with aliens in District 9. The success of the poster campaign featuring a doctored picture of Wikus engaging in sex with an alien



Figure 7: Wikus shown as a debased figure, crawling through the dirt, with one human eye and one alien eye signifying his abject, hybrid status. (© Sony Pictures Entertainment)

and the television news broadcast elaborating on this scam are testimony to the power of the visual image and the media to promote moral panics. Wikus's metamorphosis continues as he consumes the aliens' favourite food, canned cat food, and spits out a tooth, then pulls out another loose tooth. Boils erupt on his skin, and he painfully peels off a strip of his flesh to reveal the developing carapace beneath. He cries as he yearns for reunion with his wife, Tania, expressing his love and longing with the purest of the bodily fluids (which are socially categorised on a continuum of acceptability for display). In contact with the subculture of the Nigerians, he is mocked for his supposed 'doggy-style' intercourse 'with a demon', and is again viewed as a sacrificial offering, as Obesandjo craves his alien arm to eat in order to access alien powers.

To save himself from his pursuers, Wikus enters an alien exo-suit, and becomes a cyborg, as he has probes drilled into his brain which enable him to interact with the Transformer-like suit replete with weapons. When Wikus

hears that his alien friend, 'Christopher Johnson', will be killed by the mercenaries working for MNU, in an ethically redemptive act he sacrifices his own safety to assist his friend; the cyborg body is frail in the face of the onslaught, and is shown anthropomorphically vomiting as it ejects Wikus. He is shown as a debased figure, crawling through the dirt, with one human eye and one alien eye signifying his abject, hybrid status. A mockumentary flashback pictures the uxorious Wikus lovingly rubbing his thumb over the photograph of his 'special angel', Tania, who in the present of the film is shown carefully unveiling a metal flower, which she believes has been made by Wikus, despite the scoffing of her friends. Confirming her belief, at the end of the film we are shown an alien in the dirt of District 9, crafting a flower from detritus – a characteristically kitsch but emotionally redolent artefact which epitomises the transcendence of mere dirt found in Brook's (1996:79, 81) *Rough Theatre*, and which illustrates that Wikus-become-alien retains his previous emotional bonds and makes concerted relational gestures to keep them alive, even

while he embodies change and is mired in solipsism and melancholy.

Impurity and danger

Mary Douglas's seminal anthropological text, *Purity and danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (1991, [1966]), is pertinent here. Various theorists, pre-eminently Julia Kristeva, have built upon the foundations of Douglas's work, developing the notion of the abject, and since the 1980s a number of artists have incorporated the concept into their work. However, as the abject explicitly employs universalising psychology and is feminist in impulse, I find it more consonant with the themes and setting of *District 9* to apply Douglas's original critical ideas to the film. Douglas (1991:116;121) analyses the significance of material entering or leaving the human body, which is classified in different contexts as either clean or dirty, either acceptable and life-enhancing or associated with defilement and taboo. She notes, '[r]eflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to non-order, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death' (Douglas 1991:5). Hybrid forms are considered anathema to habits of categorisation; the body 'provides a basic scheme for all symbolism' (Douglas 1991:163-164); food should fit suitable categories; and anxieties concerning secretions or excretions past the borders of the body represent a need to conserve the cohesion of a minority group. Social danger may come from outside, inside, the margins or from an internal struggle, where 'at certain points the system seems to be at war with itself' (Douglas 1991:122).

Examining Wikus's trajectory of metamorphosis through the lens of Douglas's conceptions of purity and danger, one sees that his skin proves permeable to contagion,

the entry point of which is his face, representing the most unique aspect of the individual's personality. It might be noted that Wikus's name, in full Lodewikus van de Merwe, has certain appropriate connotations with regard to his representativity. 'Lodewikus' is derived from the Old German words 'hlod', meaning 'glory', and 'vig', meaning 'fight' (Johnson & Sleight 1975: 131). To develop my suggestion of the significance of the choice of name for the film's main character, his surname is a variant on that of the archetypal South African slow-witted anti-hero, while his first name suggests a symbolic battle being waged in his persona. After Wikus is infected, correct boundaries between the clean and the dirty, the human and the alien, that which enters the body and that which is expelled from it, and the socially appropriate and acts confined to the private realm, are all violated as he loses substance and betrays his increasing difference: his bodily expulsions of vomit, a black nosebleed and faeces are cogent reminders of the leaky and porous human physiology and the impossibility of maintaining purity or stasis. Body parts – nails and teeth – are painfully lost, while the change of hands to pincers reduces both dexterity and identity, causing such anguish that Wikus cuts off one of the offending appendages. Patterns of ingestion are also altered, and he greedily consumes cat-food, which is not fit for human consumption. As Douglas and many commentators, including scholars of post-structuralism, gender studies and post-colonialism have pointed out, the hybrid body, which in *District 9* occupies most of the screen time, constitutes a scandalous category generating suspicion, anxiety and hostility (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000:24). Wikus's near-death and rebirth clearly aptly symbolise his interstitial status, as does the claim that he has overstepped the bounds of group identity by engaging in unbridled sex with aliens, a bodily image suggesting mingled sexual fluids which represents the breaching of cultural norms.

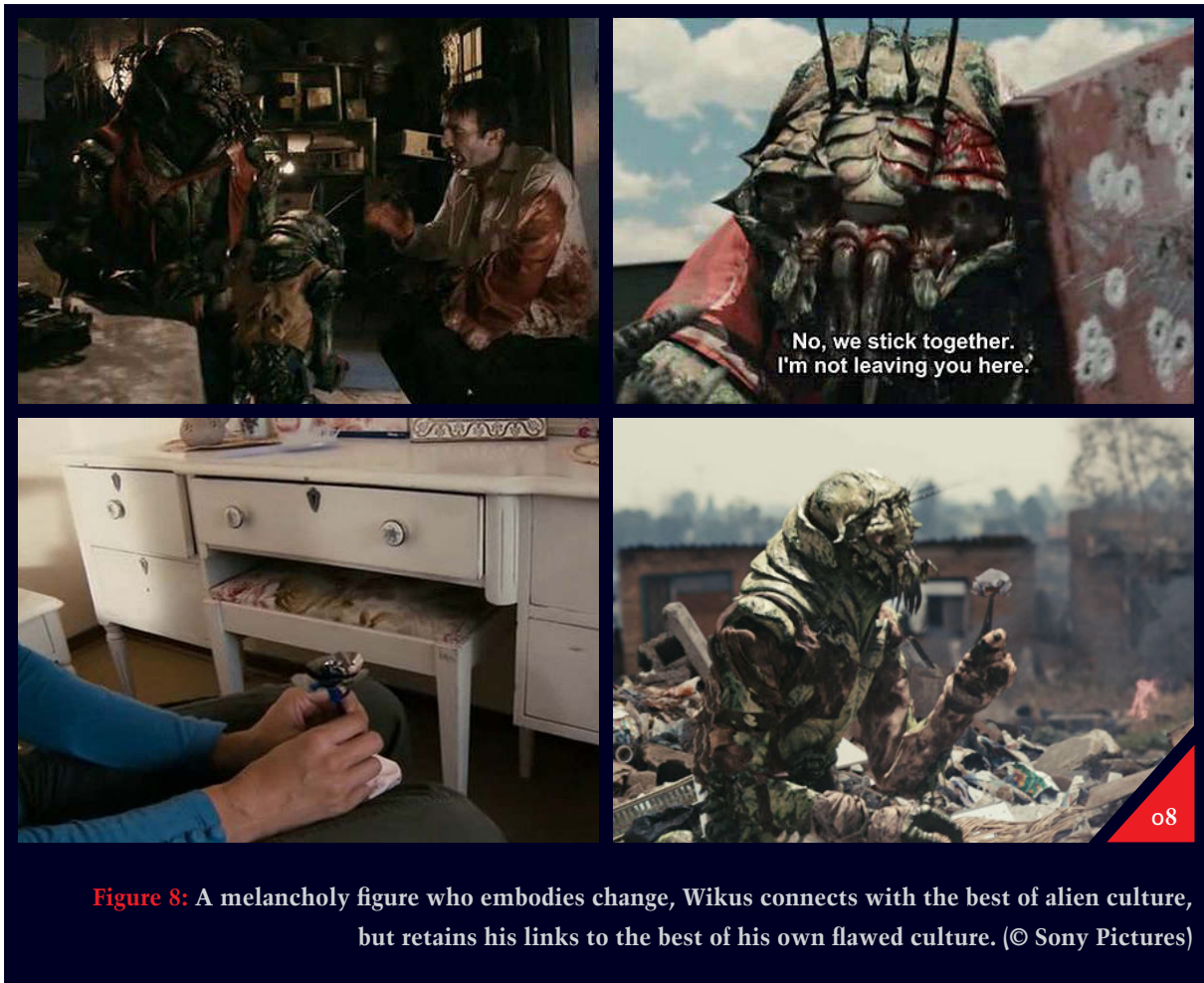


Figure 8: A melancholy figure who embodies change, Wikus connects with the best of alien culture, but retains his links to the best of his own flawed culture. (© Sony Pictures)

So while it is possible to read the allegory of *District 9* as a universal conflict between self and other, the insistent, dirty setting in Soweto and the iconic coding of Wikus as having the body, name and point of view of a white, Afrikaans-speaking South African male, together invite us to see his leaky body and his shape-shifting as representing a culturally specific and painful loss of power and control. The film is racist and sexist⁴ in its assumptions, but it engages sympathy by its depiction of a triad of characters who display ethical standards and are prepared to respond positively to changing circumstances: Wikus, Tania and Christopher Johnson. Wikus, as the prime centre of consciousness in the film, loses bodily integrity, family, home and community. In the chronological beginning of the film he unthinkingly and publicly treats the aliens like dirt, and over the course of the narrative he metaphorically becomes

dirt himself. He faces being sacrificed to corporate-government interests in the shape of MNU's aspirations, or continental needs, in the form of incorporation by Obesandjo. He must embrace change as he fears annihilation and the obscenity of death. Technoscience provides no salvation for his dilemma; all he finally has to sustain him is his tearful and loving connection with Tania, whose name is a variant of 'Anastasia', a name considered particularly suitable for girls born at Easter-time, derived from the Greek word for 'resurrection' (Johnson & Sleigh 1975:14), and his hope for deliverance from his bodily imprisonment by his alien friend, Christopher Johnson, whose name, while imposed, is suggestive, as 'Christopher' means 'Christ-bearer' (Johnson & Sleigh 1975:45), and 'Johnson' references a masculine lineage, while 'John' means 'the Lord is gracious' and became a popular name thanks to two

New Testament characters, John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist (Johnson & Sleight 1975:116). All three of these characters' names have clear religious connotations, thereby deepening the existential nature of Wikus's bodily disintegration and quest for changed values.

The film shows the possibility of a shift of mindset and a rapprochement between human and extraterrestrial. Yet it also shows quite clearly class and economic divisions and the difficulty of trusting fellow humans who, diabolically, indulge in the ultimate taboo of eating the flesh of bipedal sentient beings – as do aliens. Further, it shows the height of romantic love in Wikus, which makes him see Tania as a 'special angel', belonging to a rarefied realm, worlds apart from the sex workers and female *sangoma* in *District 9* and reminiscent of the social gulfs portrayed in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness*. At the end these stereotypes and contradictions are not reconciled, but hang in a murky balance. As Csicsery-Ronay (2007:12) observes, '[t]he alien reveals human beings to be a single species. If it reveals sexual, racial, and other differences within that species, these are not accidental differences, but constitutive. We are a Species that Is Not One'.

Douglas (1991:198-199) reveals that the vain search for oneness is at the heart of rituals and conventions of purity and danger, and that these practices are not static, but constantly evolving in response to various pressures. Similarly, over the course of *District 9* Wikus moves from a position of unthinkingly relishing the destruction of alien eggs, to horror at being required to kill an alien, to an act of altruism towards Christopher Johnson, as empathy is forced upon him as his body changes. Although Christopher Johnson and Tania do not undergo physical metamorphoses which parallel mental shifts, they too show signs of development over the course of the film. Christopher moves from

justifiable suspicion of Wikus to making a pledge to him to return from his home world, after acting to save his people, to reverse Wikus's bodily changes. The chronology of events is disrupted by the juxtaposition of before-and-after documentary-style segments, highlighting the differences in Tania, who at the beginning is diffident and easily led by her father, but by the end is more self-assured, insisting that the police return confiscated material relating to Wikus, so that she can maintain her material sense of him through these artefacts, including kitschy creations made by Wikus, of obvious sentimental value to her. All three characters show their steadfast loyalty to their loved ones or intimates. Christopher has a bond with his son and Wikus; Wikus has a reciprocal bond with Christopher and Tania.

The viewer, too, is required to make shifts over the course of the film. Initially we view the aliens as anarchic and debased, even though their plight is moving; however, a shift occurs when Christopher is shown mourning his dead friend, even though his own life is imperilled by his lingering by the corpse. Although human, Koobus Venter consistently reveals revoltingly brutal xenophobia, epitomised by his comment that he can't believe he is paid to do such an enjoyable job; he loves watching Prawns die. So when he himself is killed, the viewer breaks species solidarity by feeling relieved, even if we are horrified at the spectacle of his being torn limb from limb and devoured by aliens.

Conclusion

At the end of the film an unrecognisable Wikus is left with the memory of a bond made with the aliens, through Christopher Johnson, and the promise of a return, which propels the film into the future and the hope of living in a better way; aliens 'impinge on human existence and incite our longing either to be better

than we are, or at least not worse' (Csicsery-Ronay 2007: 11). And as guarantor of Wikus's constancy, despite his transformation, we are given the emblem of a love-offering: the gift of a flower, with all of its wealth of symbolic associations, fashioned as the art of the possible, from dirt. To return to Peter Brook, whom I discussed at the beginning of this article, what we have here in dramatic terms is Rough Theatre, showing archetypal characters in mythic situations conveying current social crises, and showing the need to embrace change, agonising though this is. At the same time, emotional warmth and steadfastness are valued in the film, and these qualities are displayed visually through the medium of the artwork, as produced by Wikus and treasured by Tania. This calls to mind Bourriaud's (2002:13, 31) conception, referred to earlier, of modelling 'micro-utopias' or 'possible universes' through art. The sight of clumsy alien claws fashioning a flower intended to convey love and a promise is moving. Wikus is in a state of triangulated suspension, only able to communicate obliquely with Tania, and hoping for a return to their former life; at the same time, his bond of friendship with Christopher suggests that life can never be the same again, even if the alien is able to return. Wordlessly, Wikus-turned-alien poignantly suggests desire, yearning and melancholy. The viewer is partly seduced by the sentimentality, but as Brook (1996:87-89) suggests, Brecht's (1964:136) alienation effect demands a more rigorous response than simple sympathy and identification. It is also necessary to acknowledge the difficulty of Wikus's battle, and the pain of crossing into impure dimensions in a quest for answers to the question of what mirror image the alien holds up to the human race in general, and South Africans in particular.

The success of the film as deeply meaningful dramatic spectacle, or Rough Theatre, lies in the viewer's response to Wikus's trajectory from his privileged position as

self-satisfied collaborator in an unjust system to exemplar of alterity himself. This process is not glamorised or represented as a willing conversion. The 'dirt' of South Africa's past forms the backdrop of this narrative, including colonisation, concentration camps, apartheid, racism, sexism, patriarchy, poverty and xenophobia. The unwitting inclusion of patterns of oppression such as racism and sexism in the film indicate the embeddedness of dirty habits of power. Yet as Brook (1996: 79) suggests, even filth can act as fertiliser for changed states to occur. Wikus's mind-shift is not total: he connects with the best of alien culture, but retains his emotional connection to the best of his own flawed culture. In Bourriaud's (2002:12) terms, Wikus is awaiting emancipation to deliver him from his melancholy. It is a future of relationality between self and otherness, as well as between self and those-like-self, that the film proposes. By revealing the worst of human nature, the encounter with the alien, as Csicsery-Ronay (2007:11) points out, urges humans to reflect on their treatment of others, and ideally broaden their mental scope and act to create a better world. At the end of the film Wikus is changed and creative, yet he is solipsistic and in a suspended state, waiting for action from others. The denial of catharsis for Wikus or the viewer demands meaningful self-questioning about the possibility of collective rather than isolated mind-shifts leading to the elimination of social barriers.

Notes

- 1 Although any adaptation of Brook's types of theatre to the cinema is highly personal, the following examples give the flavour of the categories as I would apply them to specific films or directors. Deadly films include *Notting Hill* (Mitchell 1999) and *Twilight* (Hardwicke 2008) and its successors in the series. A notable example of Deadly, formulaic science fiction

low on ideas or characterisation is *Star wars* (Lucas 1977), the first released film of the epic space opera film series, which became a pop culture phenomenon. Holy film directors include Ingmar Bergman and Andrei Tarkovsky, and two examples of Holy films in the science fiction genre are *Contact* (Zemckis 1997) and *The matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999). Some Immediate films are *Dirty pretty things* (Frears 2002), *Hotel Rwanda* (George 2004) and the science fiction film *Minority report* (Spielberg 2002). Directors of Rough films include Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, David Lynch, Mike Leigh and Pedro Almodóvar. A key example of a science fiction film which fits into the Rough category is *Blade runner* (Scott 1982).

- 2 This attitude towards science fiction in general stems from memories of its manifestation in pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, when it was frequently racist, sexist and lacking in challenging intellectual content, and had a large readership of adolescent boys.

Interestingly, in the field of literature, Margaret Atwood, who has won the Arthur C Clarke prize for science fiction, and who has three novels which clearly fit into this category, refuses to apply the term to her own writing. She claimed in a BBC interview that science fiction dealt with 'talking squids in outer space' (Langford 2003:[sp]). Such a claim is an attempt to rescue the author from the ghetto of science fiction, and place herself at the pinnacle of Literature with a capital L. As David Langford (2003:[sp]) points out, critics reviewing Atwood's work, such as Sven Birkerts, Michiko Kakutani and Lorrie Moore, have clearly displayed their prejudices against science fiction. A further example of this prejudice is provided in a newspaper article about the death of science fiction author JG Ballard by

his American editor at Norton, Robert Weil, who said, 'His fabulistic style led people to review his work as science fiction. But that's like calling *Brave new World* science fiction, or *1984*' (quoted in Howell 2009:[sp]). In response, famed science fiction and fantasy author Ursula Le Guin commented, 'It is shocking to find that an editor at the publishing house that had the wits to publish JG Ballard (as well as the Norton book of science fiction) can be so ignorant of what Ballard wrote, or so uninformed about the nature and history of the science-fiction genre, or so unaware of the nature of literature since the 1980s, that he believes – now, in 2009! – that to say a writer wrote science fiction is to malign or degrade his work' (quoted in Howell 2009:[sp]). Le Guin continued by mocking the hypocrisy of a literary establishment that concluded that 'literary authors are incapable by definition of committing science fiction' (quoted in Howell 2009:[sp]).

In the field of film, Lewis Beale notes with concern that producers think poorly of science fiction. They are prepared to finance potentially lucrative films which follow the *Star wars* template, and rely heavily on special effects at the expense of ideas and characterisation, designed to appeal to a mass audience; however, they run shy of adapting challenging material by authors such as Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Samuel R Delaney or Arthur C Clarke (Beale 2001:[sp]).

- 3 My use of the term 'the viewer' in this article is a convenient fiction, referring primarily to myself as viewer, but also including the community of those persuaded by my argument.
- 4 The Nigerian government banned the film, and demanded an apology from Sony (Nigeria 'offended' 2009:[sp]). Ato Quayson and others, in an eSymposium published in *The Zeleza Post*, have pointed out

instances of racism in the depiction of Nigerians in *District 9* (2009:[sp]). In *District 9: A roundtable*, Michael Valdez Moses, Lucy Valerie Graham, John Marx, Gerald Gaylard, Ralph Goodman and Stefan Helgesson discuss their perceptions of racism in the film. Sexism within the film can be seen in the marginal role played by women and the virgin/whore dichotomy of these representations. While the stereotyping of Nigerians and women in the film is to varying degrees offensive, it is important to bear in mind that the entire film relies on stereotypes.

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