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## Aliens: *District 9* (Blomkamp, 2009) – Monsters of Hybridity

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# “If They Were from Another Country, We Might Understand...”: *District 9* for *The Monster Reader* (ed. Simon Bacon)

October 2019 draft

In *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, Vivian Sobchack attempts to distinguish between the horror and science fiction genres on film through the distinction she draws between the Monster and the Creature. “The horror film,” Sobchack says, “is primarily concerned with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of himself, the science fiction film with society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other”—or, to put it another way, the horror film deals with “moral chaos,” while the science fiction film deals with “social chaos” (29-30). Thus the Monster of horror “seems to arise inevitably out of a personal Faustian obsession or the inherent animal nature of Man” (30) reflected in what she describes as the “absolutely dramatically necessary ... anthropomorphic form” (30) of the Monster to register its essentially human character. Where the Creature of science fiction is “less personalized” and possesses little interiority—simply acting out without malice in accordance with a destructive nature we find mysterious, ineffable, and fundamentally inhuman—“conversely, in the horror film there is always something sympathetic about the Monster, something which gives us—however briefly—a sense of seeing the world through his eyes, from his point of view” (32).

Sobchack’s thoughts on recognizing the Monster versus the Creature as the dividing line between science fiction and horror provide a useful point of entry to Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009), a hybrid work which, like the films of James Carpenter or David Cronenberg for an earlier generation, hovers indeterminably between the two genres. If we follow Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s method of “reading cultures from the monsters they engender” (3), what might *District 9*’s pointed inversion of the familiar first-contact science fiction narrative how to tell us about the contemporary South Africa that produced it, and about the larger planetary community that made it such an international success? Although it mostly abandons the narrative frame partway through the film, *District 9* begins in a “found footage” mode simultaneously reminiscent of horror films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Cloverfield* (2008) on the one hand and cringe pseudodocumentary comedy like *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) and *The Office* (UK 2001-2003, US 2005-2013) on the other; we see the arrival of the spacecraft depicted both through the objective, horrified gaze of news media figures and sober, professorial experts and from the goofy, incompetent perspective of Wikus Van De Merwe (Sharlto Copley), a mid-level alien affairs employee for whom dealing with alien refugees is just another day on the job. What has happened is a sort of alternate history of contemporary South Africa, in which everything is different and nothing has changed. In 1982, a spaceship arrived over Johannesburg and hovered over the city for months without making contact; when humans finally took the initiative to cut into the spaceship they found not interstellar diplomats greeting them to some universal

Federation of Planets but starving, miserable refugees, helplessly huddling in their own filth, apparently unable to fly off or work the ship in any way. Even their technology, coded to their specific extraterrestrial biology, is completely useless to us; we learn nothing about propulsion or antigravity from studying the spaceship, and cannot commodify or instrumentalize anything they have brought with them. Accordingly, the aliens (derisively nicknamed “Prawns” for their insectoid appearance) soon become a problem rather than an opportunity, and soon become consigned to a slumlike refugee camp at the outskirts of the city, a temporary measure that becomes permanent as the decades wear on and no better solution presents itself. This camp is the “District 9” of the title—which for anyone familiar with the history of South African apartheid will trigger the memory of District Six, a division of Cape Town from which over 60,000 inhabitants were forcibly removed by the government in the name of ethnic cleansing and gentrification.

Rather than inaugurating a science fictional narrative of galactic expansion, a la *Star Trek*, *District 9* instead tells a much more grounded story about weak, desperate visitors coming to humanity in dire need of help, and humans treating them with malice and contempt—our own hackneyed fantasies about the glorious technoutopia to come returned to us as a nauseous vision of mass suffering and social-ecological collapse. The Prawns are monsters in appearance and behavior—essentially gigantic cockroaches, they respect none of the dietary or sanitary taboos that human society requires—but it is humanity’s callous and xenophobic species-ism that truly comes under critique as the narrative unfurls. The ordinary citizens of Johannesburg revile the Prawns, and simply want them gone, in an anti-immigrant panic made all the more disturbing when one remembers that the original *District 9* short, “Alive in Joburg,” was filmed by asking unknowing interview subjects what they thought about *Zimbabwean* refugees, with the science-fictionalized narrative context overlaid only in editing. In contrast, the multinational conglomerate who has been tasked with managing and administering the Prawn encampment, MNU, makes much of its money from the sale and manufacture of weapons, and is ultimately interested in the Prawns insofar as it can figure out a way to make their high-tech weapons available to human use; we discover as the film goes on that they are doing grotesque experiments on the Prawns in secret basement levels of their Johannesburg office park, but even before we see this we see Wikus and others happily abusing the Prawns, including a scene in which Wikus’s team torches discovered Prawn eggs (which seem to scream in pain in response), gleefully calling this grim procedure an “abortion.” Even before these nightmarish events, though, the impetus for the film, a campwide eviction notice, callously preformed at the borders of the legal to give a sheen of legitimacy to the raw violence of removal, is disturbing enough: the Prawns are finally being moved from District 9 to a new encampment, District 10, ostensibly intended to be permanent, but looking and feeling more like an carefully constructed concentration camp than District 9’s hacked-together shantytown.

As the film goes on, our sympathies become more and more aligned with the Prawns, despite their monstrosity, especially after we meet a Prawn named Christopher Johnson (played by Jason Cope, who along with Sharlto Copley acted in and was one of the producers of the “Alive in Joburg” short). Christopher Johnson—an aggressively generic white-coded name suggesting just how completely Prawn culture has been subsumed into human society—immediately appears different than the other Prawns: clearly more intelligent, and acting very parentally towards a young Prawn who seems perhaps to be his child, Christopher Johnson has a treasure trove of both human and alien technology that is soon revealed to be part of his plan to retake the ship and leave Earth. (This intelligence is perhaps marked most directly in the film by

the introduction of subtitles to depict Christopher Johnson's complex speech, which shows an intertranslatability between human thought and Prawn thought that earlier portions of the film denied, with the humans treating the Prawns more or less as animals acting by instinct.) While it is never revealed what happened on the spaceship to leave it in such disrepair, with scores of starving Prawns in the cargo hold the only survivors, many fans have speculated that Christopher Johnson represents the last surviving of a different caste than the "drone" Prawns we otherwise see inhabiting District 9, perhaps something akin to a queen or worker bee in a honey bee colony (and further blurring our sense of what gender and reproduction might mean among the Prawns in the bargain). Or perhaps Christopher Johnson is simply an exceptional Prawn, with genius technological acumen he seems to have passed on to his child as well.

While attempting to serve Christopher Johnson his eviction notice, Wikus discovers his cache of alien technology and becomes splashed with a mysterious black fluid that appears to be fuel for the Prawn's advanced technology. Now the film becomes fully invested in the transgressive, boundary-defying porousness of the monster; if, as Cohen notes, "the monster polices the borders of the possible," serving as a marker of what is prohibited and "call[ing] horrid attention to the orders that cannot—*must* not—be crossed" (12-13), Wikus's contamination by the fluid and the horrifying transformation of his body that ensues shows how unstable such prohibitions really are. Over the next few days, Wikus becomes a Prawn, beginning with his extremities and proceeding until his entire body has been transformed; while no explanation for this reaction to the chemical is ever offered by the film, the inescapable implication is that humans and Prawns are not so different after all, sharing some foundational biological similarities (and perhaps that *all* the Prawns were once human beings, transformed by the fluid under unknown circumstances after abduction by aliens and now unable to effectively communicate or advocate for themselves). The interchangeability of human and Prawn—the unexpected possibility that one might suddenly change from one to another—reveals that what separates the two being is custom of law, not biological essence; once Wikus begins to transform, his rights as a human being and as a citizen of South Africa vanish in an instant, and he becomes part of the same terrifying regime of unprotected statelessness as the Prawns (including subjection to the same secret weapons experiments being undertaken at MNU headquarters). Likewise, forced to occupy their abject subject position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, Wikus becomes forced to pay attention to the Prawns and their needs for the first time in his career—and suddenly the language of clicks and grunts that the Prawns use to communicate becomes a complex language he can use to negotiate complex schemes and mutually beneficial agreements with Christopher Johnson, when previously he dismissed their minds as entirely subhuman, completely unworthy of his respect. It takes Wikus some time to stop identifying with the humans and to begin identifying with the Prawns, but by the end of the film he is in full revolutionary solidarity with them, deploying Prawn weapons against his former coworkers in a desperate bid to allow Christopher Johnson the time he needs to reach the mothership and escape Earth.

Wikus's transformation is simultaneously a personal tragedy for him and an opening of his mind, allowing him to transform himself from the deeply unethical, Eichmannesque functionary of a horrific regime of exclusion and removal to a self-sacrificing hero fully committed to helping the helpless (even if this has all only happened because he is now one of them). Falsely accused of interspecies sex—the government's cover-story for how his transformation happened—at the end of the film Wikus is a figure for this transgressive desire, leaving a metal flower he has crafted with his Prawn claws for his wife as a symbol of his

continued love for her, despite her betrayal earlier in the film and everything that has happened since. Cohen notes in “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” how the figure of the monster often stands in for transgressive, normatively proscribed sex acts like homosexuality and miscegenation, which the monster narrative frames as objects of both “fear and attraction” (19). This becomes quite clear in *District 9*, where Wikus’s transhuman transformation from “normal, ordinary” human into one of the hyperbolically racialized and ambiguously gendered Prawns deeply ennoble him, and perhaps even saves his soul. The final shot of the film is of someone we assume is Wikus, now fully Prawn, working on another flower amidst the rubble and open fires of District 9; he briefly glances at the camera, perhaps in search of recognition, but soon returns to his sculpture, admiring his creation.

[INSERT IMAGE ONE AROUND HERE.]

*Wikus’s sculpture.*

Only as a Prawn is Wikus a better man, and so the initial body horror of Wikus’s monstrous becoming gives way to something almost utopian instead. On the level of allegory the message seems clear: it is only through the abandonment of the privileges of whiteness, straightness, maleness, cisness, First-Worldness—indeed, the taking up of arms against them, here depicted literally as violent revolt—that an ethically decent, politically livable, creatively vibrant life becomes possible. The alternative—the status quo—wouldn’t be worth holding on to, even if we could. “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born,” Gramsci tells us. “Now is the time of monsters” (qtd. in Žižek n.p.). *District 9*, in the end, thus invites us to embrace the fearful possibility of our own monsterization.

Or, as Cohen writes:

Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, human knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. (20)

Cohen begins this section of his essay with an epigram from *The Tempest*: “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine”—Prospero’s final concession that Caliban is not a monster at all, not outside, but inside, a being he owes both responsibility and dignity. *District 9*, with its barely sublimated transformation of the actually existing racism, xenophobia, and state violence that structures contemporary society, seeks to teach the same lesson. It is deeply unfortunate that the film as a whole seems unable to extend this same lesson to the Nigerians who populate its margins: they like the Prawns are depicted a cruel, monstrous deviation from the human, without the gift of a redemption arc, and their horrific deaths at the hands of Prawn weapons are treated simply as comedic spectacle, played for shock and for laughs. The breakdown in cosmopolitan solidarity here—that it is weirdly easier for the film to recognize the common humanity of cockroach aliens than nonwhite people—is a regrettable feature of too much genre fiction, which all-too-frequently reinscribes racist assumptions about the immutable nature of identity even as it attempts to allegorize anti-racist struggle and the better possibility of a post-racist, cosmopolitan future. *District 9* ends with another unexpected doubt about the transformative hope it has shown us, with Christopher Johnson and his son the lone inhabitants of the spaceship flying off to get help for the remaining Prawns they have been forced to leave behind. A sequel, often referred to

as *District 10*, has been long-expected, but has not yet materialized—so we have still to wonder whether Johnson will return at the head of a medical relief convoy or an invading armada. What if the Prawns, or their masters, return, only to do to us what we have done to them? After enduring *District 9*, there's little doubt we will have earned whatever harsh lesson they will carry back, if and when it ever comes.

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