

Forgiving the Sci-Fi Alien:  
*District 9* as a Postcolonial Apologia

It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.<sup>1</sup>

Julia Kristeva

Yet they needed them in order to draw from their nature an experimental knowledge.

Thomas Aquinas, quoted by Giorgio Agamben

My friends, it is Noman that is slaying me by guile and not by force.

Polyphemus

---

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (Columbia University Press), p. 1.

An Afrikaner bureaucrat named Wikus van den Merwe, from the fictitious South Africa of the film *District 9*<sup>2</sup> is a noman, caught in the cave of a beast comparable to Polyphemus in its enormity. The land that accommodates humanity, a myopic cyclops, is a trap that the outsider finds inexplicably vile. Wikus, insider-turned-outsider as his human nature is overtaken by the extraterrestrial, sees his knowledge of facts about the alien's situation be replaced by an empathy, as he becomes persecuted for his treading the dividing line too much. Still, his only intention is to break free from his entrapment in a space and a body. Like Odysseus in the cave of Polyphemus, he is not acting on behalf of a kingdom, a race or a species, but is driven by the instinct of self-preservation. When Odysseus adopts the non-name, and when Wikus becomes the object of the watchful eye of humanity for what – not who – he is, the narrative is about the subject that recedes further back from his dismantled or destroyed identity and acts precisely as a total outsider, following his survival instinct. If the drive for survival requires the perception or detection of the other, then the shift from human to animal/alien is not necessarily lethal, as long as the victim departs from the conventions of the system that exiled it. Hence Odysseus and his companions escape as sheep and Wikus mingles with the nameless mass of aliens. Of course, they adopt their new nature only as disguise, but then again, what is left to the fugitive other than the need for speed or camouflage in the face of an invincible captor or predator? And in the last analysis, it is wit that saves the prey. Wikus is as heroic as Odysseus for he overcomes his torture and though not so cunning as the latter, he finds his way out of the monster's mouth through a mind-and-body superiority, as his hybrid nature gives access to both realms: the native and alien.

In the work that is considered by many the first science fiction in history, *True*

---

2 *District 9*, dir. by Neill Blomkamp (TriStar Pictures, 2009).

*History*<sup>3</sup> of Lucian of Samosata, men in their cultural and natural integrity traverse unreal universes. Serving mainly as criticism on the historiography of Herodotus and on the allegedly wild imagination of poets, *True History* has a group of Greeks sail on an adventurous journey of exploration and opportunity. Among those adventures, they are caught up in wars between the armies of the moon and the sun and swallowed by a gargantuan whale. Inside the whale the explorers meet a man, an ancient Crusoe that has been stranded there for 27 years with his son who, like settlers in a virgin land, lead a rural life in an uncomfortable coexistence with the local tribes that share the whale's inside. He says, "It's our neighbours here that we can't stand – all of them savages and sociopaths [...] weird and inhospitable. There, in the western part of the forest, near the tail, dwell the Saltyfish tribe, with eels' eyes and prawn faces, who are wild, warmongering and eat their meat raw. [...] Near the center live the Lobsterfaces and the Flounderfoots, savages, as well and quite nimble."<sup>4</sup> The marooned explorers promptly decide to exterminate the other tribes, for their safety and comfort in exploiting what the whale's world has to offer. Never attempting any kind of communication with their (inadvertent) adversaries, the humans succeed, thanks to their better weapons and armour. After this total domination over the land, the party starts enjoying the spoils but are then faced with the reality that was concealed by the presence of threat: "We looked like prisoners that are let loose and have the time of their lives in a huge prison, but that can't possibly escape."<sup>5</sup>

*True History* may be centuries away and with different intentions than modern science fiction. But if we were to assign to Lucian the title of the forefather of science fiction, we should look beyond the creation of strange universes and into the notion that our familiar vices and virtues would still dictate human action even in the remotest and most

---

3 Lucian. 1982. *Alithini Istoría* (True History), (Ypsilon books).

4 Ibid., p. 44.

5 Ibid., p. 47.

utterly inhuman world. As science fiction is understood to be defined by conceptual imagination in aesthetics and context, that sets about from actual or anticipated knowledge, some certain fears and hopes reiterate. The purpose of this essay doesn't contain the optimism of science fiction, therefore this is going to be only briefly mentioned. Instead, concerns like the stability of a society that is no longer regulated by the same moral codes that we are familiar with, the origin and extent of an authority that is in hold of an unimaginable technological arsenal and the degradation of cultural identity into a new high-tech medieval provincialism inform my scope. I am going to ponder on the ill times of *District 9*, a film set in a post-apartheid South Africa that has followed an alternative history, where the arrival of technologically superior aliens ends up causing a stagnant refugee crisis and where issues like racial identity, state control and segregation mark an urban landscape of sociopolitical decay that serves as the backdrop of an otherwise usual thriller of escape from repression.

*District 9* has been called “the pure artefact of a pop culture that no longer pays attention to the local and social background of its consumers.”<sup>6</sup> This being an accurate description, the film breaks with enough conventions to be considered innovative and yet the issues it addresses might even seem redundant. The main issue is apartheid, which in a first reading would consist of an infertile ground for discourse, as it is widely accepted as a finished history. The case that *District 9* makes is that the occurrence of apartheid is atemporal, in that by changing the victims, the powers that lead to it or its name, its reality remains the same. In showing apartheid as a reality beyond its historical delimitations – and the alternative past of *District 9* reinforces this understanding – the phenomenon is shown as intrinsic of the human nature; an original sin that does not pertain to a myth, history, or a certain people but is a characteristic of the human condition.

---

6 <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/> - Retrieved 20-August-2011

The film begins with Wikus who introduces himself in a documentary and explains: “You see behind me the Alien Affairs workers, and what we do here, at this department, is we try to engage with the Prawn on behalf of the MNU and on behalf of humans.” The Multi-National United or MNU, the largest producer of weapons and the responsible, on the designation of the South African government, for the safety and care of the aliens and their transfer to a new and “sanitized” settlement. The real interest of MNU behind the pretences is the appropriation of alien weaponry and the ability to use them, as they can only be operated by the aliens. On the naïve appearance of Wikus and the archetypal paraphernalia of bureaucracy that adorn the background – like the stacked boxes with files waiting to be processed and archived – the appearance of legality is ensured. Later, a sociologist from the fictitious Kempton Park University explains how the initial relief camp set up for the malnourished and unhealthy aliens became militarized and eventually a slum. Her voice is cut by the scene of an alien chopping raw cow heads with vigour at an appalling stall. As the group of experts includes an entomologist, it goes without saying that the alien presence doesn't lead to a new dialectic between two groups but is addressed by humanity as an issue to research and successfully manage; an issue of public (i.e. human) health and safety. Throughout the movie we are presented only with one account on the interspecies relations: the human one. Adding to the obvious lack of a weighted approach, any alien speech is personal and only gives hints about their species' ways.

## Alternative history and the Unhistorical

In Arthur C. Clark's *2001: A Space Odyssey*,<sup>7</sup> a past as remote as 3 million years ago is altered, as a means to link the entire past of humanity with the narrative. The monolith that is sent as a device for evolution of intellect is perhaps a subtle case of alternative history in science fiction, the crucial events in other cases being more contained in time and magnitude. The fictitious future confirms fears and hopes on the first level, but on the second level pre-, or rather “post-supposes” certain processes within humanity's evolution in all spheres: political, social, scientific, economical and cultural in the wider sense. Hence the future is only novel due to whatever goes unexpectedly out of course in the concocted utopia or dystopia. In this respect, *District 9* surprises with its alternative present, as the moment of contact with the aliens, that equals the beginning of fiction, is in the past. What has occurred in the time between that moment in 1982 and the present day is left untouched, while the significance of the events of that current time puts the viewer in a reflection of what happens here and now, or anywhere and at anytime. The present day is as such not only because of the alien presence, and this is made evident by the attitudes of the people towards it: They view it as a problem that is imported from outer space, but that is nonetheless a problem within their society. Beings from another world are judged by human standards, their own society being virtually non-existent and their difference reduced to the degree in which they don't fit the establishment. As the alternative past is made realistic by the use of TV reports and interviews with experts, the reality effect makes the scenery mundane and its being alternative makes it independent from space and time. Hence what matters is what happens in any such reality.

During the opening scenes of *District 9*, experts are talking, in an interview style, describing the arrival of extraterrestrials and the issues that arose by their presence. A

---

<sup>7</sup> Arthur C. Clark. 1968. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, (New American Library).

certain UKNR Chief Correspondent begins with commenting that the ship didn't stop over Manhattan, or Chicago but went straight to Johannesburg, echoing in the same time the surprise of both the audience of the documentary and of the actual film viewers, that are not accustomed to view Africa beyond any scope other than an alleged innocent human relation with nature, the victimized continent forever doomed to stay behind, a kind of eternal periphery of the city reminiscent of Hegel, who understands Africa as having no “movement or development to exhibit” and representing “the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History.”<sup>8</sup> Johannesburg is not, of course, a typical example of Africa, as its history is much more colonial than it is local, but it is still a city that lies outside the geography, as it were, of the developed world. If Africa is behind the historical process, Johannesburg is behind the facade of the justified and healthily functioning city; the metropolis as we know it but without any local connotations that may downplay its damaging growth. As the ship arrives without warning and since no contact has been made by the aliens, the South African government, under the eyes of the world, assumes the historical task of establishing contact. But even though South Africa is presented as a locus of history, and the national government as bearing a role of great historical significance, the procedure is undertaken without fanfare, by workers in yellow uniforms and the initial anticipation for the contact is met with the disappointing discovery of a throng of filthy and terrified creatures. In *District 9*, history takes place without grandeur, and even the impressive image of the hovering spaceship becomes merely the epitome of the social malady.

---

8 G. W. F. Hegel. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Jibree. (New York: Dover Publications), p. 99.

## Attitudes and functions of science fiction

“In my opinion, the film doesn’t exist without Jo’burg, [...] It’s not like I had a story, and then I was trying to pick a city. It’s totally the other way around. I actually think Johannesburg represents the future. What I think the world is going to become looks like Johannesburg.”<sup>9</sup>

Neill Blomkamp

*District 9* is the first feature film of Neill Blomkamp, a director with a visual effects background and employed so far mainly by the advertising industry. Though the film enjoyed the production assistance of Peter Jackson and a budget that allowed it worldwide outreach, Blomkamp had the artistic freedom to present a concept and a narrative that doesn't necessarily fit in the Hollywood conventions. It is visually spectacular and with a not too unusual plot, but it is also his employment of science fiction for a critical approach to social phenomena that has garnered critical acclaim, as well as commercial success. The success and, in my opinion, the artistic skill with which these social phenomena are addressed through the science fiction lens counters another convention, that is not restricted to Hollywood, namely that criticism on contemporary society is more suitably undertaken through realism. By using both a mockumentary style and a science fiction setting, Blomkamp abides to and in the same time refutes this convention. Besides, social critique has been incorporated in the science fiction genre, especially literature, for a long time.

In order to showcase how social criticism suits science fiction, we can first look into some certain approaches towards humanity and its destiny that have characterised the genre throughout its history. These approaches don't necessarily demarcate hermetically separated sub-genres, but still they very well define certain works of science fiction as adhering to one or the other scope.

---

9 <http://mhambi.com/2009/08/district-9-and-the-politics-of-xenophobia-and-racism/> - Retrieved 20-Aug-2011



One such approach is a futuristic euphoria, where humankind has reached an impressive level of technological and/or sociopolitical advancement, sometimes crowned with a spirit of worldwide peace. The optimism of these dreams is further propelled by an explicit belief that the projected future is bound to happen and that humanity will not have to wait for too long, since in most of these cases the hypothetical timeline is extended to specific dates. Usually, the human technological progress is epitomised in the ability to break through the physical limits of the planet, solar system and so on, which is equally often accompanied by the settlement of other worlds. This positive projection of humankind ironically reproduces notions that we already know are problematic. The continuous growth of the human population that is assumed, the exponential growth in the need for resources or living space as the reason for the creation of colonies and the application of the coloniser's understanding on wholly distinct environments, inhabited or not by equally distinct native beings, are notions that inhabit a considerable part of science fiction without being effectively challenged.

The technological optimism is countered by another approach, that of the idea of a technologically superior invader, that though it has appeared as a theme as early as 1898, when H. G. Wells wrote the *War of the Worlds*,<sup>10</sup> it establishes itself mostly in the context of a Cold War threat from a culturally, technologically, as well as sociopolitically different enemy. In the two aforementioned attitudes humanity is either proud of its progress in the former or admirable for its durable principles in the latter, which help it survive and thrive. But there is another approach where the cracks in the self-congratulating fantasies of humankind inform a more sober and to-the-point representation in science fiction. Dystopias like *Metropolis*<sup>11</sup> of Fritz Lang and *Alphaville*<sup>12</sup> of Jean-Luc Godard take

---

10 H. G. Wells. 1993. *War of the Worlds*, (Aerie Publishing).

11 *Metropolis*, dir. by Fritz Lang, (Universum Film, 1927).

12 *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard, (Athos Films, 1965).

humanity's contemporary sense of course and conceptualise it in the future in order to let fears – like technology gone out of control – be visualised and maybe confronted and cleansed. Ralph Pordzik argues for the essentiality of utopias and dystopias: “[W]hile classical utopias project a society considerably better than the one against which it is set and dystopias extrapolate from the imperfect present into a nightmarish future, anti-utopias generally call into question the very possibility or desirability of a utopian society.”<sup>13</sup> Anti-utopia can be understood as the discourse against the vision of a static utopia, a meta-narrative's ultimate destination, and is thus similar to the attitude of *District 9*, that doesn't address the anxieties about how humanity might end up if it follows the current track but is informed instead by a self-loathing sentiment about how humanity actually is. The dystopia of *District 9* is a violent and repressive universe that has existed virtually unchanged, thus is not a destination, but a point of departure, or rather a temporal and spatial trap.

---

13 Ralph Pordzik. 'Nationalism, Cross-Culturalism, and Utopian Vision in South African Utopian and Dystopian Writing 1972-92', *Research in African Literatures*. (32:3, Fall 2001), p. 192n4.

## The despicable refugee; The horror of the elusive bodies

If refugees (whose number has continued to grow in our century, to the point of including a significant part of humanity today) represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state, this is above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis.<sup>14</sup>

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*

In Graham Baker's *Alien Nation*,<sup>15</sup> a film whose theme is to a certain extent similar to *District 9*, the aliens are slowly incorporated into the city life (of Los Angeles) as normal(ised) members with jobs and homes. Immigrants are more likely to be tolerated and accepted if they integrate, in other words proactively subdue their differing cultural identity in case it clashes anyhow with the *leitkultur*. Still, for all the natural and social conformity, the beings from *Alien Nation* are still discriminated and their territorial freedom is contrasted by a functional segregation. Yet even this symbiosis, problematic though it may be, wouldn't be possible were it not for the similarity between the human and alien appearance. In *District 9* it is first of all the abhorrent look of the aliens that makes coexistence unsustainable. "I would never have any pornographic activity with a fucking creature!" cries Wikus to his wife when she confronts him on the rumours that he was caught having sex with an alien. The slander targeted at Wikus as having contracted a highly contagious disease by sexual intercourse with aliens is broadcast and makes him a walking panic instigator. An unmistakable reference to AIDS, along with the appearance in the office of an interviewed policeman of a poster that has an alien figure crossed and says: "Infected? - Don't risk it, they are all carriers", it shows the contraction hysteria as concentrated on the alien race only and on all alien beings.

The irremediable alienation is further intensified by the abuse of the alien body by the

---

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press), p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> *Alien Nation*, dir. by Graham Baker, (American Entertainment Partners II L.P., 1988).

Nigerian mafia, via prostitution and dissemination of a drug, namely cat food. The body is the only property left on the alien, and ironically it is both the most despised and most desired one, as the key to the alien treasure lies within their genetic code. MNU could have tried to enlist the aliens and use them as slave-soldiers and we can argue that this wouldn't necessarily be so difficult, after all. But the power inherent in the alien body is to be extracted and used without any restraint and the alien life left devoid of a vessel. For this purpose experiments are consistently being undertaken aiming at the blending of human and alien DNA. Michel Foucault states that “for a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was to decide life and death.”<sup>16</sup> But the genetic engineers of the sovereign prove to be incompetent, as hybrid after hybrid fails to develop or dies promptly after birth. This notion of power even over the unborn and non-conceived body is also seen in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien: Resurrection*<sup>17</sup> and in both films the manipulation of human (as well as alien) life goes more or less unnoticed. In contrast to MNU appropriation of Wikus's body, the rival power of the slum, the Nigerian mafia seeks the same power in his body, only the method of extraction is cannibalism. Shane Moran cites the Zulu legends about cannibalism: “To eat property, is, to digest it, to take possession of it, to appropriate it to oneself. To eat a man, is, to digest his property, to confiscate it.”<sup>18</sup> If the control or dissection of body equals surrendering of the person's mind or death, respectively, the body remains nevertheless a property to be acquired. The body horror manifested by cannibalism is complemented in the film by the brutal killings of MNU soldiers and Nigerian gangsters. The soldier that was going to execute Christopher, Wikus's alien companion, is amputated by Wikus who spreads death from a *mech*, an anthropomorphic machine, and then sees his severed arm being squashed by the *mech's* weight. The archenemy of Wikus, the para-

---

16 Michel Foucault. 1990. *History of Sexuality*, (Vintage), p. 119.,

17 *Alien: Resurrection*, dir. by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (Brandywine Productions, 1997).

18 Shane Moran, South Africa and the Colonial Intellectual, *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 40, Number 2, Summer 2009, p. 114.

military officer, is dismembered and devoured by a gang of aliens that leave no trace than a pool of blood and the alien weapons make humans burst like water balloons, in an almost amusing way. Body horror becomes a spectacular medium for dehumanization that further accentuates the in-humanity of the pawns of the ruthless colonizer.

The spectacular festival of violence is degrading the body while the storyline elevates it to a Holy Grail status. The alien body is the key to technology, as their technology has gone the full circle from attachment to nature, beyond the mastering of it and into the integration of body and tool. The *mech*, like a companion animal with shared senses, is an example that has a long tradition in science fiction and beyond, going back to the mythical Minoan Kingdom, whose guardian, Talos, an animated bronze warrior, was the focal point of a mythology of a technological superiority, menacing but in the same time fascinating. The *mech* is a device where the natural, muscular strength is invested and the user doesn't control the machine, but rather the machine becomes the user's armour. When the *mech* "dies", it spurts out the user and collapses, both user and machine being stripped of the power that, as invested, was shared and indivisible.

The epitome of alien technology is itself a metaphor on the immeasurable value of the body and the interest in its control. The nature-altering fluid that serves in the same time as the fuel of a gigantic spacecraft is as valuable as *melange* in Frank Herbert's *Dune*,<sup>19</sup> the so-called *spice* that was extracted from a single planet and made space travel possible, among other uses. The fluid in *District 9*, this quintessence of power, is an invention, not a rare resource. It eclipses human technology in the sense that the humans, attached as they are to their land, are unable to either reach out of their world or to narrow down their sum of technological advance into a small tube of liquid. The human dependence on land is expressed as an utter need for a sense of control over it; a kind of

---

19 Frank Herbert. 1965. *Dune*, (Chilton Books).

magnified love and care for the farm, that so obsessively wants the aliens away that it fails to consider that if they are there, they can be anywhere. The obvious fact that the aliens are technologically superior is both what monopolizes the human establishment's interest, as manifested by MNU's and the Nigerians' hunt for weapons, and what humanity neglects in social and political level, by daring to enslave and torture a species that may very likely have the power to eradicate humans in the long run. Human race is shown as oblivious to the overwhelming balance of power that weighs against it as Wikus is ironically ignorant when he meets Christopher Johnson – his name reflecting the colonial tendency to impose western names – whom we know as the becoming mastermind that can turn on the dormant spaceship, and remarks: “Obviously he is a little sharper”.

## Genetic “othering” in science fiction

Man (or the State for him) in modernity begins to care for his own animal life, and by which natural life becomes the stakes in what Foucault called biopower. Perhaps the body of the anthropophorous animal (the body of the slave) is the unresolved remnant that idealism leaves as an inheritance to thought, and the aporias of the philosophy of our time coincide with the aporias of this body that is irreducibly drawn and divided between animality and humanity.<sup>20</sup>

Giorgio Agamben, *The Open; Man and Animal*.

As science fiction stems from the human understanding of the world and the (again) human assumptions about the future and about other worlds, the exercise in creation of realms and identities becomes a repositioning of one's self in front of a distorted mirror – producing endless variations on the same theme. We can say that science fiction offers a wealth of opportunities to counter our identity with any conceivable “other”, but still, the postcolonial heritage occupies a considerable part of our imagination. Patricia Melzer, talks about how contemporary literature that is inspired by Africa still reproduces the notion of Africans as people to be dominated and in the same time fearful, so that the white imagination is secure within dichotomies of self/other and master/slave. In this respect, Melzer mentions the works of Mike Resnick, “whose depiction of Africa as an alien and mystifying place aligns its position with the “dark continent” that inspired the fascination of white colonialism and shaped much of white literary imagination.”<sup>21</sup> Science fiction goes along the postcolonial mindset in repositioning similar dichotomies, albeit within realities where the origins and the specific identities of the constituent parts of these dichotomies are left to wander freely in the imagination. In Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca*,<sup>22</sup> the distinction is between two genetic classes of humans, the “valids” and the “invalids”, the former being genetically modified to have a durable composition, resistance to mental and physical

---

<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Agamben. 2004. *The Open; Man and Animal* (Stanford University Press), p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Melzer. 2006. *Alien Constructions; Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* (University of Texas Press), p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> *Gattaca*, dir. by Andrew Niccol, (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1997).

disease, while the latter are results of the random selection of natural conception. The genetically engineered universe of *Gattaca* is squeaky clean and sophistication hides the underlying segregation, that sees the “invalids” limited to menial jobs and a status of second class citizens. Again on the genetic definition, H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*<sup>23</sup> has the cataclysmic collapse of human civilization be succeeded by millions of years of functional eugenics that lead to the nether-humans, so to speak, and the innocent, natural human-creatures that still dot the earth's surface. The genetic composition of the dominant and the subservient race is another expression of the human/animal dichotomy, which informs an understanding of human identity and value in terms of genetic code and not cultural advancement. In *District 9*, the difference in human and alien DNA creates a dichotomy of civilized/grotesque (in human terms), yet the difficulty in placing the alien in a concrete sociocultural setting, as their society is radically different, together with the existence of a language that is as complex as the human one renders the dichotomy clearly problematic. As Giorgio Agamben criticises the distinction between man and animal on the basis of language versus muteness:

What distinguishes man from animal is language, but this is not a natural given, already inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical production which, as such, can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal. If this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes, unless we imagine a non-speaking man – homo alalus, precisely – who would function as a bridge that passes from the animal to the human. But all evidence suggests that this is only a shadow cast by language, a presupposition of speaking man by which we always obtain only an animalization of man (an animal-man, like Haeckel's ape-man) or a humanization of the animal (a man-ape). The animal-man and the man-animal are the two sides of a single fracture, which cannot be mended from either side.<sup>24</sup>

Agamben argues that beyond the persistent notion that has the human defined as non-animal due to a “natural” quality of speech, the animality of man, that is to say, the aspect of human life, *zoe*, that is not in any way defined by the human civilization forms the one

---

<sup>23</sup> H. G. Wells. 2005. *The Time Machine*, (New York: Penguin Books).

<sup>24</sup> Agamben. *The Open*, p. 36.



end of “the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict”; the other end being the humanity of man, or *bios*, which we can translate as the sum of the individual's experience and thought, viz existence in the political realm. It is from that point on that Agamben explains: “in its origin, Western politics is also biopolitics.”<sup>25</sup> Blomkamp presents a Johannesburg where biopolitics affect society in a most visible way, a direct heir to the apartheid. The alien nature is the impassable barrier between the designation of humans and non-humans.

---

<sup>25</sup> Agamben. *The Open*, p. 80.

## Like a dog, like an alien

Lurie: “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”

Lucy: “Like a dog.”

Lurie: “Yes, like a dog.”<sup>26</sup>

J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*

From the absolute destitution of the aliens of *District 9*, a fresh start in the human perception for them becomes possible. Their behavioural affinity to animals and in some cases to humans becomes the means for the spectator to sympathise. However, there lies the irony that in order for the human to sympathise, the alien must become bare and then a bond can start forming based on those particular behavioural traits of the aliens that comply with the human aesthetics. This half-original half-designated perception further complicates the nature of the aliens, as they are portrayed as neither non-human nor human-like. The use of affinity can also be read as a criticism on the actual sympathy for the kinds of people or even species of animals that present similar appearance and behavioural patterns with the subject of this sympathy – furry animals are cuter than the slimy, hence Chewbacca from *Star Wars*<sup>27</sup> can be accepted as a loyal companion. When Wikus witnesses Christopher talking to his son about them never seeing home again and hoping that District 10 will be a decent compromise, he feels sympathy and discloses the lie that District 10 isn't any better than where they are. Christopher's immediate reaction as an equivalent of a human “What?” is completing the humanization of the alien image.

Departing from the notion that the insect is an utter counterpart of human, the appearance and social organization of the aliens in *District 9* are in the greatest possible

---

<sup>26</sup> J. M. Coetzee. 2000. *Disgrace*, (Penguin Books, 2000), p. 205.

<sup>27</sup> *Star Wars*, dir. by George Lucas (Lucasfilm, 1977).

distance and thus offer an infinity of contrasts. Kafka's Gregor Samsa is turning into the *Ungeheueres Ungeziefer*, which, according to Stanley Corngold, stood for the “unclean animal unsuited for sacrifice.”<sup>28</sup> This is precisely the non-sacrificable that Agamben problematises under his title *Homo Sacer*, going back to Pompeius Festus who wrote: “it is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide.”<sup>29</sup> The “bad or impure man” is therefore called sacred. The limit-concept that Kafka has created with his characters is essentially no different than the *District 9* aliens. Odradek's eerie existence within the house of the human, for instance, is the utter expression of the *nuda vita*. His laughter “has no lungs behind it,” no different than the clicks of Christopher, it “feels like rustling leaves.”<sup>30</sup> The focus on the blurred limit between the political and the unqualified life helps us formulate and clarify here the concept of the arbitrariness of law in its exclusion and inclusion. To quote Agamben,

“If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the enfant-sauvage or homo ferus, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form.”<sup>31</sup>

---

28 Christopher Hollingsworth. 2001. *Poetics of the Hive; Insect metaphor in literature* (University of Iowa Press), p. 197.

29 Quoted in Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 71.

30 Franz Kafka. 1971. *The Complete Stories*, (New York: Schocken), p. 248.

31 Agamben. *The Open*, p. 37.

## violence that makes Law

There is no rule that is applicable to chaos. Order must be established for juridical order to make sense. A regular situation must be created, and sovereign is he who definitely decides if this situation is actually effective. All law is “situational law”. The sovereign creates and guarantees the situation as a whole in its totality. He has the monopoly over the final decision.<sup>32</sup>

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

While on the way to District 9 for the eviction operation, Wikus explains to the MNU camera that “The prawn doesn't understand the concept of ownership of property. We will go now and say 'this is our land, please will you go.’” The aliens are puzzled when informed that they are evicted, as they don't necessarily understand the operation of the judicial system that is valid outside the confines of District 9. The ridiculous insistence of Wikus on the purported legality of the eviction process and his lack of a wider scope that would enable him to see the “prawns” not merely as ignorant to the human law, but members of a distinct social organization, is not a new concept. We see it in the bureaucratized colonial rule of India, for instance, when the concept of private ownership was forcibly introduced in a land that was used until then communally. In the case of *District 9*, where the counterpart of South Africa is an even more dramatically different society, the lack of human concepts is enough to render it backward.

South Africa as a political body is only mentioned once in the beginning of the movie where we are told that at the moment of the spaceship's arrival all eyes were on South Africa and that they wouldn't afford to make any mistake. But later it is eerily absent, while MNU remains the only agent of authority, as a corrupted UN or a subcontractor of the state that isn't properly controlled. The concrete sculpture that adorns the entrance to District 9, where a human and an alien support a star up in the air and an inscription reads “Paving the way to unity” – reminiscent of Truth and Reconciliation Committee's motto: “Truth, the

---

<sup>32</sup> Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 16.

road to reconciliation” – hints to an initially optimistic and collaborative spirit in the human-alien contact that has grown sour. MNU acts like a watchdog in the appearance of a caretaker, as the existence of an Alien Affairs department pretends to be confirming. Its actions can incur dire consequences for the entire human race but still it isn't under effective control by any political body.

On top of this and, in fact, hidden very well behind this supposed function and purpose, MNU is exercising power over life and death. In its laboratory, the experiments on hybridization of human and alien DNA defy any respect on life, regardless of the species. As Agamben depicts the biopolitics of Nazi Germany not merely as racism, a negative attitude as such to other races, other genetic groupings, but an absolutisation of the care for life, “founded on eugenic concerns”,<sup>33</sup> MNU is the paradigm for the totalitarian authority. An authority that has a goal to reach and that in order to attain that goal it employs the sum of its resources, including the bodies of its subjects.

Confirming the paradox of an oppressive authority that needs to pass as benevolent, District 10 is advertised to the aliens, even though they don't have a choice but be deported. The advertisement works two-fold: On the one hand, clearing the conscience of the subject of power, for he knows what is best and is effective in materializing it; on the other hand removing any hazardous doubt by the object of power that the decision is justified and legitimate. The legitimization of the deportation relies on human understanding of law and property and the subject's explicit consent, regardless of its veracity. We see this game of confession/consent in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, where David Lurie is expected to play along with the protocol of law and therefore recognize it as having authority over his body.<sup>34</sup> Instead, Lurie bypasses it by abstaining from the realm of language, conferring absolute

---

<sup>33</sup> Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> J. M. Coetzee. *Disgrace*.

power over the judges in what regards his fate. As paradoxical as it is to resist authority by surrendering to it without terms, it is similarly paradoxical for the bearer of law to apply it in the form of eviction papers presented to subjects that don't know or care about their meaning and context.

The very operation of distributing the eviction notices is a farce in that a small convoy is sent to notify more than two and a half million subjects by knocking door to door. Likewise, the recording of the operation by camera can be understood as an effort by MNU to document and thus legitimize or merely pretend to be monitoring the procedure. The securing of a demonstrable alien consent, via signatures that the aliens don't know why they are asked to or are anyway coerced to give, has obviously nothing to do with ensuring that law is properly applied, for the very process is only in name judicial. The law is actually ridiculed in the image of a naïve prejudiced bloke that seeks to out-wit the ignorant alien. The bureaucrat is the messenger of a law that is applied on beings in the state of exception and as the operation is endorsed by a para-military organization, order is wrought, not brought, echoing the colonial practice that establishes a complete bureaucratisation of an incompatible reality, rendering the conquered categorisable. As Shane Moran says,

From the very beginning the subject of colonialism folds back on the need to analyze, both as the name of an activity (at once materialistic and rhetorical), and as the name of an epoch. It undermines the temptation to naturalize the processes of intellectual production for there is always contamination. The very concepts used to comprehend historical processes are themselves produced by history. Even naming is not neutral here, for what is colonialism in essence but the power to name, the authority to authorize how something should be known?<sup>35</sup>

---

35 Shane Moran, *South Africa and the Colonial Intellectual*, *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 40, Number 2, Summer 2009, p. 111.

## Difference in the social formations

For the first time, it became possible to picture an Other that was natural and unconnected with the mythoreligious patterns of the past. Ready to fuel this imaginative breakthrough was the accumulating work of insect watchers, who as early as 1586 were beginning to see the beehive as a distinctly nonhuman society. [...] It is no wonder, then, that the social insects began to signify in a new way: suggesting a new sort of alterity, one natural and yet highly organized. Empowered by the blessing of science, it was not long before the poetic picture of the insect society became the sovereign image of human civilization's nonhuman equivalent.<sup>36</sup>

Christopher Hollingsworth, *Poetics of the Hive*

The command pod is disproportionately small compared to the alien mothership, much more so than the ship bridge so typical of science fiction. This makes one assume the lack of a prestigious elite, a central authority, visible strata and all those elements that accompany every historical human social construction. The entomologist describes the alien society as a colony consisting of workers left without leadership. As Blomkamp explains, the alien society, that resembles more the bee-hive than the human community has lost its leadership, their queen and elite and the surviving drones are lacking a communal conscience.<sup>37</sup> The ship is as massive as it is incomprehensible. Curiously enough, life still goes on under it, for one would expect the land underneath to be highly undesirable. The enormity and proximity of the obviously hazardous mass points out that ominous presences can be repressed or looked over.

As for the human society, in the alternative present of *District 9* there is no hint as to whether the social dynamics that followed the actual history – Soweto, TRC etc. – occurred or not. Still, the blacks seem to be second class citizens, yet concerned more about the underdog aliens and the nuisance they cause them, rather than strive for a better place for themselves, equal or superior to the white. They don't even seem to accuse the white for

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Hollingsworth. 2001. *Poetics of the Hive; Insect metaphor in literature* (University of Iowa Press), p.154.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with director Neil Blomkamp, by Tasha Robinson, August 12, 2009  
<http://www.avclub.com/articles/district-9-director-neill-blomkamp,31606/> – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

failing to contain the aliens or the whole (white dominated) world for not contributing substantially, as is apparent. The aliens are incorporated into a landscape, on which the hovering spaceship eradicates any doubt as to their inclusion to a certain and permanent reality, while their pariah status finishes off what their pitiful state at the moment of the first contact started: they are vulnerable, lacking initiative, dangerous but containable. It is the eventual ordinariness of the aliens, however spectacular and horrendous they are, that makes them detach from the context of the story and become, as a whole, the story. The aesthetic convention that has them necessarily disgusting proves their ordinary nature, that of the average alien species of the human imagination.

The twist is as inevitable in the narrative, as it is outcrying in the film's message: from (an ordinary, hence any kind of) oppression, you get to have an uncontrollable result. Alfred Hitchcock employed birds in his eponymous film<sup>38</sup> as what they are, ordinary birds, to show them as a menace precisely because, until they attack, they are a part of the landscape; almost inanimate in our previous understanding as non-threatening. The difference that the birds, unlike the aliens, are not provoked by humans or that their aggression is not justified or comprehended in any way, doesn't hide their similarity in showcasing the particular threat that always lurks in a (supposedly) regulated environment: instability. As far as story-telling is concerned, and along goes the understanding of society, world, universal laws, reality is analysed into a set of objects and notions that form relations of causality. Following Deleuze, as long as a term “refers back to other terms in a customary series”, in a balance of mutual interpretations, it is called *mark*, and at the moment that such a term breaks free from the mechanism that holds all terms together into a functioning whole, thus rendering itself toxic or paradoxical, it is called *demark*. Deleuze continues in *Cinema I*, “it is [...] very important that the terms should be completely

---

38 *The Birds*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, (Universal Pictures, 1963).



ordinary, in order that one of them, first of all, can detach itself from the series.”<sup>39</sup> In a genre that is mature enough to allow itself liberty in employing the fantastic while bypassing its novelty, the ordinary term of the *alien*, which used to be the *demark* of a sealed human world, can now surprise precisely due to it having already evolved into a *mark*.

Besides these obvious *marks*, the film is characterised by some notions that may pass as conceptual details. The depiction in the background of one of the beginning scenes of numerous posters for what appear to be small abortion home clinics gives a subtle remark on the problematic family planning, but what is really setting a particular tone in the movie is how the family relations follow stereotypical lines that confer an almost caricature character to the human family. Wikus's childish adoration for his wife and her modest pleasure in having managed to collect and arrange her husband's office equipment as a memento are bordering on the ridiculous. When in the course of the plot Wikus's father-in-law, who, as a high executive of the MNU, has unashamedly shown nepotism to his son-in-law by promoting him, later on orders his life to be taken so that his body can be examined, and goes as far as to console his daughter, who doesn't know anything, a critical undertone of the hollowness of family relations is demonstrated. Through the demythologisation of the family, the criticism of society, the organism that is comprised of family cells, is beginning from its very basis: it becomes a criticism of the inherently sick human society.

On the other hand, it is made apparent that the alien society is one without families. The reproduction of the aliens, unlike the quasi-magical process of the human pregnancy and birth, resembles the taking care of larvae. While working his way around serving eviction notices, Wikus discovers a shabby shack where eggs are placed and a mechanism is set up for providing them nutrients. It consists of a decomposing cow that is hanged

---

39 Gilles Deleuze. 1986. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press). p. 203.

upside down, with tubes gathering the nutrients and channelling them to the eggs. The masterfully constructed but purely technical function of the reproduction mechanism, together with the appalling state of the shack where it is located, negates the understanding of alien life as worth to preserve. Therefore, when Wikus calls for the “population control” team, that is not much more than a soldier armed with a flamethrower, and when in the fire the eggs crack open with repetitive loud sounds, he observes what is obviously a genocidal act with a humorous remark of the destruction of the eggs, as they “pop like popcorn”. Reminiscent of Said's description of the western attitudes towards the supposedly endless and mindless reproduction of Arabs,<sup>40</sup> this ruthless approach to the reproduction process is coined with allegations that the biggest problem in District 9 is its incessant population growth, that leads to “children everywhere”. Curiously, we don't see those children anywhere, and the same goes for the human society. Furthermore, the allegedly uncontrolled growth rate of the alien population, as it reaches 2.5 million 27 years after their arrival is comparable to the human growth rate worldwide. And it is within this society without families that the father and son relationship between Christopher and the child stirs an additional sympathy. Ironically, however, it is again through human principles that such a sympathy can be realised.

---

40 Edward Said. 1979. *Orientalism*, (Vintage).

## The camp; dragging the distinction to its ruin

The supreme goal of all totalitarian states, is not only the freely admitted, long-ranging ambition to global rule, but also the never admitted and immediately realized attempt at total domination. The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination, for human nature being what it is, this goal can be achieved only under the extreme circumstances of human made hell.<sup>41</sup>

Hannah Arendt

If the concept of camp is generally understood as a temporary tool for the exertion of authority, the Boer camps are one of the first and most significant examples due to both their extent and their purpose, namely to cut off the supplying link between the population and the guerillas. The fact, however, that during the second Boer war black Africans were rounded up in concentration camps as well, and for no apparent reason, along with the little interest of the Fawcett Commission to investigate and ameliorate the conditions in the black African camps confirm Agamben's argument that the concentration and extermination camps were large scale attempts to “decide between the human and the inhuman, [...] dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin.”<sup>42</sup> In *District 9* the entire arriving population is taken into custody, its major crime being their alien and non-assimilating nature. For all their physical prowess and technological advantage, the aliens are completely subjugated by the utter degradation of their life, the collapse of their society and their incessant manipulation both by the MNU and the Nigerians.

Agamben suggests that the concentration camp is the absolute space of exception, in other words, that the territory where localization is enforced becomes non-territory, in that it severs its ties with the physical and juridico-political outside. He says, “this is shown, among other things, by the fact that while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the

---

41 Quoted in Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 120.

42 Giorgio Agamben. 2004. *The Open; Man and Animal* (Stanford University Press), p. 22.

camp is [...] martial law and the state of siege.”<sup>43</sup> District 9 fits this concept of camp as a black hole, beyond the walls of which what happens is invisible to the subjects of authority that remain outside. The forces that create the ghetto into which they exile the unlocalisable remain outside, exerting no power other than the consolidation of the ghetto's mass and its secure detachment from the society's territory. The camp as an enclave is in the same time part of the native territory and a foreign body, engaging in a covert relationship. Or, as Coetzee described the camp at Jakkalsdrif in *The Life and Times of Michael K*, the enclave is “a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back.”<sup>44</sup> The parasitic nature of the localized excluded leads to a counter-entrapment, the gated communities that contain the outer society as a place to visit and interact but avert any organic continuum with it.

Agamben reminds us of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that problematised sovereignty in its capability of interiorizing, namely defining what stays inside, by the rationale behind the exclusion of the rest. In the case of apartheid, where instead of institutions that internalise the excluded, most of the territory represented, in fact, the space where the oppressed were contained, we see what Maurice Blanchot describes as the society's attempt to “confine the outside.”<sup>45</sup> District 10 is the name given to the settlement built for the aliens 200 miles away from Johannesburg, in the middle of nowhere, seen by nobody – the close surveillance by the MNU notwithstanding. District 10, as well as District 9, echo the real District 6, whence more than 60,000 people were forcibly removed some 15 miles away to the Cape Flats, while their houses were bulldozed.<sup>46</sup> The invisibility of the aliens is perhaps as good as it can be for the humans, as the success in exterminating two million beings of superhuman strength is unlikely. Still, there doesn't seem to be

---

43 Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 20.

44 J. M. Coetzee. 1983. *The Life and Times of Michael K*. (New York: Viking Press), p. 116.

45 Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 18.

46 <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/> – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

provision for the enormous spacecraft as its immobility renders it and the irony is complete with the notion that the problematic presence of beings that travelled a distance beyond human conception is supposed to be remedied by a tiny 200 mile correction. It is therefore possible to see the need for distance as a emotional response of the city as an organism; city being whatever can be called human civilization.

## Metamorphosis or wholly shifting sides

Man is irrevocably a stranger to dawn. It needed our colonial way of thinking to believe that man could have remained faithful to his beginnings and that there was any place in the world where he could encounter the essence of the 'primitive'.<sup>47</sup>

Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*

Christopher is a kind of repulsive noble savage, as his background and intentions are still somewhat enigmatic, while his integrity and intrinsic superiority lead to an eventual triumph. His nature, as it is contained in the vial with the biotechnological fluid, infects the human, causing an initial puzzlement, but turning out to be necessary for the resistance to oppression. The dull human becomes the centre of the action, the bridge between the two worlds and the archetypal anti-hero. His adventure becomes the proof that a system that has the capacity (especially the proven one) to turn against either people at the outside or the people it represents or takes care of, is a system that can turn against anyone. A bureaucrat that is deeply involved in the system he or she serves – and in Wikus' case there is even a family connection – is the last person that one would expect to see as the objective of the sovereign's oppression. Hence the deep impact of his exile. The exception produced from within the agents of the oppressive system and the outcasts as representations/ dramatizations of the social processes are offering in this way a vehicle for the questioning of sovereignty. Or, as Agamben states: "The exception is more interesting than the regular case. The latter proves nothing; the exception proves everything. The exception does not only confirm the rule; the rule as such lives off the exception alone."<sup>48</sup>

There is the grey area in between the two sides, before the shift has completed. Wikus tries to get rid of his hand that has already turned alien, but finds that he is already

---

47 Michel Foucault. 1994. 'Veilleur de la nuit des hommes' (trans. Clare O'Farrell), *Dits et écrits* (Gallimard), p. 232.

48 Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 16.

connected to it in a way that it is not a foreign body taking over his mind and body, but an integral part of himself. Like Seth Brundle in David Cronenberg's *The Fly*,<sup>49</sup> Wikus turns into an insectoid (his falling fingernails being one of the first symptoms, exactly as with Brundle) and within the agony of transformation, real communication is possible between him and Christopher. The grey area is where the exploitation by his former society begins and along with it, the painstaking realization that he might never be able to return. In the end he completely renounces his corrupt society and shows a glimmer of hope from within his new nature of alien-become-familiar, when he smiles to Christopher's success in departing with the spaceship and prepares flowers out of tin for his distant wife.

---

49 *The Fly*, dir. by David Cronenberg, (Brooksfilms, 1986).

## Giving back the voice. Can the alien speak?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the “true” subaltern group as the one that is defined precisely by the fact that it inevitably escapes inclusion.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to *Alien Nation*,<sup>51</sup> where the aliens were more or less incorporated into the native social fabric, *District 9* has the aliens similar enough to humans (comparable structure and dimensions) to physically fit the human urban environment, but too repulsive to become a constituent part of a harmonious new society. Adding to that, according to the human account of the relations with the aliens, there is no hint that the aliens ever expressed any intention to assimilate. As for an alien account, the director takes care not to give one. The film is a human account of a situation that is addressed only by human logic and principles. Furthermore, the absence of a representative or any kind of collective voice on the aliens' part exacerbates an already problematic coexistence. On the other hand, it could very well be that such a voice was never requested by the other side, either. And this is exactly where the silence is paradoxical. In the nearly 30 years that have passed since the arrival of the aliens, no official or unofficial body has been set up to represent them politically, even in a human fashion. What is pointed out here is what Spivak maintains, that the “unrepresentable subaltern subject”, that supposedly doesn't know how to speak on its own, has no hope of being faithfully represented. The insectoid aliens offer no “object of seduction to the representing intellectual”<sup>52</sup> and there is only one individual voice among the aliens, that of Christopher, that seems to subtly crack the collective muteness, as when he argues, for example, that the eviction notice he is being given is not lawful and that he has the right to choose not to leave his home.

---

50 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* p. 80. [www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can\\_the\\_subaltern\\_speak.pdf](http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf) – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

51 *Alien Nation*, dir. by Graham Baker.

52 Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* p. 80.



The alien language in *District 9* is totally unintelligible, even though the characters of the movie seem to fare pretty well with it. Its exotic character, with clicking sounds and soft groans, is suitable for a species of a dramatically distinct nature. Unlike a Creole (mis)appropriation of the colonizer's tongue that finds a middle ground between the opposing people and even serves as a novel and young language of an emancipated nation (that wasn't necessarily in existence as such before the colonization), the intelligibility of a sonically incompatible language underlines a postcolonial approach by the director that neutralizes the discourse-laden method of communication, to get to the point of the communicated intercourse of power. The employment of subtitles instead of a universal use of English – or any other language – leaves no doubt that no compromise was made for the comfort of the spectator or the colonist characters. Language is to be addressed as an expression of authority as well as a bridge for contact but the actual use of language becomes redundant as it doesn't affect the plot or the characters' constitution. Hence the species in *District 9* understand each other but never utter one word from the other's language. The victorious comprehension of the alien language as an outright amiable conquest, as seen in James Cameron's *Avatar*<sup>53</sup> or Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*,<sup>54</sup> or the automated translation device that confirms either the human or the alien technological advancement is absent and the unexplained ability of mutual understanding invites the spectator to ignore the modes and picture, instead, the scene. In contrast to the traditional translation fantasy that claims to leave nothing significant from the original message lost, the symbolism of muteness as the depiction of the oppression and deliverance by the same agent, as employed by Coetzee in the mute and amputee woman that the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*<sup>55</sup> becomes obsessed with, or the mute Friday in *Foe*,<sup>56</sup> whose

---

53 *Avatar*, dir. by James Cameron, (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2009).

54 *Dances with Wolves*, dir. by Kevin Costner, (Tig Productions, 1990).

55 J. M. Coetzee. 1980. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, (Penguin Books).

56 J. M. Coetzee. 1988. *Foe*, (Penguin Books).

account Susan Barton wants to write down, giving him a voice she can understand, can be comprehended as symbolism for the unreachable distance between linguistically defined worlds. In the same sense that Coetzee maintains that “the deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life,”<sup>57</sup> the collective muteness of the aliens in *District 9* is made evident, but only through the reality in which the story unfolds, as their voice is articulate, can be listened to, yet their dialogue with society is always futile; their actual voice and aspect is irremediably foreign.

---

57 J. M. Coetzee, David Atwell. 1992. *Doubling the point: essays and interviews*, (Harvard University Press), p. 98.

## Action and Mockumentary

Talking about the tears of Abraham Bomba, a survivor of the Treblinka concentration camp, in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*,<sup>58</sup> Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator*, mentions the intolerance of “more than one critic” of the alleged system that forces the victim to exhibit painful memories as a spectacle to sate the masses' appetite for any kind of catastrophe or “romantic fiction”.<sup>59</sup> The audience is purported to be desensitized by the incessant shovelling down of images that the agents of this image-manufacturing machine ruthlessly produce. “The critique of the spectacle has identified it with Plato's denunciation of the deceptiveness of appearances and the passivity of the spectator”<sup>60</sup> says Rancière and defends the image for it has more to offer than an effortless pleasure. The images are no less worthy of means to convey the message and commence the discourse than the words. Along these words, the spectacular representation of the story is not always demoting the narrative into a fantastic show or a massive brawl, precisely when the dramatic turn engulfs emotional climaxes that inevitably become visually impressive, as when Wikus's shifts from cowardice to vengeful rage occur when he is getting hold of alien weapons, or when he is clad with the *mech*.

Anger is for Wikus the device to break free, for as he is dehumanized, he can only resort to violence and it is only violence that gives him back his dignity. The difference with the “de-alienized” aliens that tear the villain to pieces, is that they are like the bandits who, indefinitely banned as they are from the city, have nowhere else to resort than outside of it, in an empty space where no laws apply. Whereas Wikus is a stranger trying to find his way back home, the aliens are stranded forever in “a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion: [the bandit]

<sup>58</sup> *Shoah*, dir. by Claude Lanzmann, (New Yorker Films, 1985).

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Rancière. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*; (Verso), p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither<sup>61</sup>”, as Agamben states.

Violence in *District 9* undoubtedly plays the additional role of spectacle as such, further enhanced by an engaging storyline. As John Rieder suggests, “[m]et[ing] out violent retributive ‘justice’ to a criminalised or vilified individual or group has been a typical and enduring feature of much mass cinema, as in the shootouts that have brought closure to so many Westerns and crime and police dramas over the decades.”<sup>62</sup> But Christopher becomes an exception in brutal reaction where for 20 years he is committed to a difficult task that involves high intellectual capacity and tactical acts. Fuelled by the emotional distress of his companions' misery, he takes decisive action, possibly with vengeance as an ultimate goal, but still after that psychological turn, he acts more “civilized” than anyone in the film. What comes out of the film is neither an outcry against violence nor a celebration of its spectacular effect, but rather a storyline that dares to include violence as what it is: an inextricable and raw phenomenon within an oppressive structure.

The proximity of violence is enhanced by blood spattering on the camera, the use of hand-held camera and the documentary style that “captures” violence as it occurs. The reality effect of surveillance camera footage, TV reports that beyond explaining the background of the story, keep covering it as it unfolds, the so-called breaking of the fourth wall, or having the actors look at the camera and address the audience directly, contribute to a cinematography that, together with the notion of an alternative but concurrent history, blurs the distinction between fiction and reality. As the most crucial questions, namely the origin and the future plans of the aliens remain unanswered, and even explicitly asked by one of the experts, further enhance the fragility of the web of power over the aliens and puts the viewer in the unfamiliar position of knowing only as much as the characters. Thus,

---

61 Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 105.

62 John Rieder, 'Race and revenge fantasies in Avatar, District 9 and Inglourious Basterds', *Science Fiction Film and Television* (4.1 (2011)), p. 41.

the wealth that the open ending offers to speculation, makes the threat even more imminent. As Blomkamp says: “I really wanted the film to feel as real as possible, but I think if you spoon-feed people every piece of detail, it makes it less real. It just feels like a Hollywood spoon-feeding festival, as opposed to if you throw the audience into the middle of it, so they’re kind of trying to figure out what’s going on.”<sup>63</sup>

But what is the most striking element for the illusion of reality is the actual footage that Blomkamp personally collected and used and the reality of the scenery. Neither is stated as real in the film, for it would undermine the entire effort for this illusion, where, as a mockumentary, everything depicted is “real”. Blomkamp went around Johannesburg himself researching and as he says, “I was asking black South Africans about black Nigerians and Zimbabweans. [...] I asked 'What do you feel about Zimbabwean Africans living here?' And those answers — they weren't actors, those are real answers...”<sup>64</sup>

“They are spending so much money to keep them here, when they could be spending it on other things, but at least, at least they are keeping them separate from us.”

“They must just go, I don't know where, just go”

“They can pull sneakers directly off from your legs. They will look through a company and will take things. They can select all of everything. Mobile telephones, anything. And then they will take you and kill you.”

*District 9*

Most of the filming was done in a suburb of Soweto, in a real slum, the view of which was barely modified. The residents of the area were being moved by the government to RDP housing, some of them willingly, some of them by force. As the conditions depicted are the conditions of an actual human settlement and as the distrust or outright hate expressed for the supposed extraterrestrials are, in fact, real sentiments towards more familiar aliens, the atemporal and unlocalisable character of *District 9* is made additionally

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Neil Blomkamp, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/district-9-director-neill-blomkamp,31606/> – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

<sup>64</sup> *Five things you didn't know about District 9*, <http://io9.com/5341120/5-things-you-didn%27t-know-about-district-9> – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

concrete.

## Conclusion

Apartheid – May that remain the name from now on, the unique appellation for the ultimate racism of the world, the last of many.<sup>65</sup>

Jacques Derrida, *Racism's Last Word*

As the same word stands in French both for “last” and “worst”, Derrida's wordplay echoes his claim that racism doesn't exist without language. Racism has always existed and what has been changing over time is its name and along with its linguistic definition, its territorial, temporal and any other defining factors have been modified. The fact that the same Afrikaans word is used in all languages shouldn't therefore invite an interpretation of apartheid as a local phenomenon. It rather seems that languages, as constituent elements of distinct systems, have secured a linguistic distance from this extreme racism as if it were an exotic phenomenon.<sup>66</sup> In other words, following Laura Chrisman, South Africa becomes “the fetishistic status of racial allegory.”<sup>67</sup>

On the basis of Foucault's argument that the discourse of race struggle is operating by many centers and through a bidirectional dynamic exchange, Shane Moran argues that “it is critical to trace the various switches and relays that are still in operation.”<sup>68</sup> If we prefer not to see our times as post-apartheid or post-colonial, maybe it is time to think in terms of what they might be preceding. Hence the novelty of science fiction in inventing crises that couldn't possibly have been dealt with, enemies that are unknown and forever mysterious. Science fiction sheds light on human fallibility that is neatly hidden by the fog of our contemporary discourses of threat. *District 9* cries out that apartheid was never over and

---

65 Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf. 'Racism's Last Word', *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference, Autumn, 1985), p. 291.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

67 Shane Moran. 'South Africa and the Colonial Intellectual', *Research in African Literatures*, (Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer 2009), p. 110.

68 Shane Moran. 'South Africa and the Colonial Intellectual', *Research in African Literatures*, (Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer 2009), p. 110.

more so, that it was never constrained to the South African reality. As a system of racial hierarchisation, it is irrational in whatever case it is applied, even one so radical as the symbiosis with another species with intentions and potential unknown. In altering history, science fiction prophesies as much criticises.

Because prophesy needs malady and the remedy tends to be apocalyptic or miraculous, nothing remains mundane in most of science fiction. The originality of *District 9* is that the shift of focus is from the spectacular otherworldly fantasia to the usual contemporary plights: xenophobia, repression, segregation. The drive for the choice of such a realm for conflict is not only the ingenuity of introducing a contemporary and thus sterile landscape and a set of archetypal and dull characters as a tactic to magnify surprise, when action takes the place of mockumentary. It is the particular city, its history and the more-or-less failed experiment of human emancipation as an unmistakable metaphor that gives the story its content, and not only context. As the director states: “[O]nce I put the science fiction in there, which happened to be aliens arriving to Earth, which is a totally clichéd, normal piece of sci-fi that’s been around for a hundred years, all of these other much more serious topics that I was aware of consciously and subconsciously started to work their way into the film.”<sup>69</sup> According to Theodor Adorno, for a work of art to convey a message, this message first should be understood within the work itself. Only then can the message be relevant to the society where the work belongs and argues that “art should provide a 'negative image' of society – one which stands in dialectical contradiction to society – as its critique.”<sup>70</sup> In *District 9*, the technological fantasizing of the previous decades of science fiction, after having rendered itself menacing through the depiction of technological, ecological and sociopolitical dystopias, is transformed into a loathing of the pathology of

---

69 Interview with Neil Blomkamp, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/district-9-director-neill-blomkamp,31606/> – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

70 Quoted in Samuel Durrant, 'Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J. M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning', *Contemporary Literature*, (Vol. 40, No. 3, Autumn, 1999), p. 433.



humanity. The collective guilt that sometimes supports charity and sometimes resorts to silence is seeking satisfaction through phantasies of utter human cruelty that brings about its own destruction, like the imminent – if not wished for – retribution by an alien fleet for the crimes of Johannesburg. But still in the destruction fantasy, there is, usually, the hope that even though humanity deserves to be punished, something pure and better will remain of it and give humanity a second chance. As Blomkamp imagines the future, “[T]here will be a massive redefining of what it means to be human when we start merging with technology, but that’s going to be like this phoenix that rises out of the ashes of billions of starving people.”<sup>71</sup>

The most impressive and eloquent image of the film is the derelict spacecraft that has no hope of becoming an integral part of the cityscape; forever hanging as a gloomy stranger. Echoing the police officer from Blomkamp's short film *Alive in Joburg*,<sup>72</sup> where the stranded spaceships are referred to as illegal vehicles, the wreck in *District 9* can be understood as a degradation of the machine to a fixture of the landscape and as such a materialised reflection of the marooned city-machine underneath. As the residents live under it with no apparent alarm, so do they carry on their lives nonchalant to their own society's downfall. Apartheid never seems to have actually finished – only faded by the emergent/submerged aliens and the blacks, very few of them occupying a position of prestige, exhaust their discontent to the class beneath them. South Africa itself as a failed endeavour is reflected both on land, in the form of an enormous slum and on air, or otherwise out in the open and as a looming future, in the form of a dormant mass. The machine is threatening as a pile of metal, not a killing machine. The machine has failed, but it still dominates the vision and mind, for the wreck, as long as it is not dissected and

---

71 Interview, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/district-9-director-neill-blomkamp,31606/> – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

72 *Alive in Joburg*, dir. by Neill Blomkamp, (Spy Films, 2006).

comprehended, is always a machine-to-be. The mere starting up of its engines is enough to cause a ripple that rattles the landed landscape, and the glass walls of the human towers shatter.

## Bibliography:

- Achebe, Chinua. 1989. *Arrow of God*, (Anchor).
- 1994. *Things Fall Apart*, (Anchor).
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *The Coming Community*, (University of Minnesota Press).
- 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford University Press).
- 2004. *The Open; Man and Animal*, (Stanford University Press).
- 2005. *State of Exception*, (University of Chicago Press).
- 2006. *The man without content* (Stanford University Press).
- Ashcroft, Bill. 2001. *On Post-Colonial Futures; Transformations of Colonial Culture*, (Continuum).
- Asimov, Isaac. 1984. *Nightfall & other stories*, (Del Rey).
- 1991. *Caves of Steel*, (Spectra).
- 2004. *I, Robot*, (New York: Bantam Books).
- 2008. *Foundation and Empire*, (Spectra).
- Atwood, Margaret. 2006. *The Handmaid's Tale*, (Everyman's Library).
- Barnard, Rita. 2007. *Apartheid and Beyond; South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, (Oxford University Press).
- Barron, Neil, ed. 2004. *Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction*, (Libraries Unlimited).
- Berger, Iris. 2009. *South Africa in World History*, (Oxford University Press).
- Blanchot Maurice. 1995. *The Writing of the Disaster*, (University of Nebraska Press).
- 2006. *The unavowable Community*, (Station Hill Press).
- Bradbury, Ray. 2011. *The Illustrated Man*, (Harper Perennial Modern Classics).
- Carroll, Noel. 2008. *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, (Blackwell).

- Clark, Arthur C. 1968. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, (New American Library).
- Coetzee, J. M. 1980. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, (Penguin Books).
- 1982. *In the Heart of the Country*, (Penguin).
- 1983. *The Life and Times of Michael K.* (New York: Viking Press).
- 1985. *Dusklands*, (Penguin).
- 1988. *Foe*, (Penguin Books).
- 1998. *Age of Iron*, (Penguin).
- 2000. *Disgrace*, (Penguin).
- 2009. *Summertime*, (Penguin).
- Coetzee, J. M., David Atwell. 1992. *Doubling the point: essays and interviews*, (Harvard University Press).
- Danta, Chris. "Like a dog . . . like a lamb": Becoming Sacrificial Animal in Kafka and Coetzee', *New Literary History* (Volume 38, Number 4, Autumn 2007), pp. 721-737.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1986. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press).
- Derrida, Jacques and Peggy Kamuf. 'Racism's Last Word', *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference, Autumn, 1985), pp. 290-299.
- Durrant, Samuel. 'Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J. M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning', *Contemporary Literature* (Vol. 40, No. 3, Autumn, 1999), pp. 430-463.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1994. *Toward the African Revolution*, (Grove Press).
- 1994. *A Dying Colonialism*, (Grove Press).
- 2005. *The Wretched of the Earth*, (Grove Press).
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish. The birth of the prison.* (Penguin Books).
- 1990. *History of Sexuality*, (Vintage).
- 1994. *'Veilleur de la nuit des hommes', Dits et Ecrits* (Gallimard).
- 2006. *History of madness* (New York: Routledge).

- Gerhart, Gail M. 1979. *Black Power in South Africa, The Evolution of an Ideology*, (University of California Press).
- Gordimer, Nadine. 1982. *July's People*, (Penguin).
- 2002. *The Pickup*, (Penguin).
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (International Publishers).
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Jibree. (New York: Dover Publications).
- Herbert, Frank. 1965. *Dune*, (Chilton Books).
- Hollingsworth, Christopher. 2001. *Poetics of the Hive; Insect metaphor in literature*, (University of Iowa Press).
- Jameson, Fredric. 2005. *Archaeologies of the Future: This Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, (Verso).
- Jewsiewicki B. and François Manchuelle. 'The Archaeology of Invention: Mudimbe and Postcolonialism', *Callaloo* (Vol. 14, No. 4, Autumn, 1991), pp. 961-968.
- Kafka, Franz. 1971. *The Complete Stories*, (New York: Schocken).
- King, Stephen and others. 2011. *Alien Contact*, (Night Shade Books).
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (Columbia University Press).
- Le Guin, Ursula K. and others. 2011. *Brave New Worlds: Dystopian Stories*, (Night Shade Books).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1980. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (Springer).
- 2003. *Humanism of the Other*, (University of Illinois Press).
- Lucian of Samosata. 1982. *Alithini Istoría (True History)*, (Ypsilon books).
- Mathuray, Mark. 2009. *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds*, (Palgrave Macmillan).

- Meljac, Eric Paul. 'The Poetics of Dwelling: A Consideration of Heidegger, Kafka, and Michael K', *Journal of Modern Literature* (Volume 32, Number 1), pp. 69-76.
- Melzer, Patricia. 2006. *Alien Constructions; Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* (University of Texas Press).
- Mitchell, Kaye. 'Bodies That Matter: Science Fiction, Technoculture, and the Gendered Body', *Science Fiction Studies* (Vol. 33, No. 1, Technoculture and Science Fiction, Mar., 2006), pp.109-128.
- Moran, Shane. 'South Africa and the Colonial Intellectual', *Research in African Literatures* (Volume 40, Number 2, Summer 2009), pp. 109-124.
- Morisson, Toni. 2006. *Beloved*. (Everyman's Library).
- Pordzik, Ralph. 'Nationalism, Cross-Culturalism, and Utopian Vision in South African Utopian and Dystopian Writing 1972-92', *Research in African Literatures* (Volume 32, Number 3, Fall 2001), pp. 177-197.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*, (Verso).
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1986. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, (Columbia University Press).
- Rieder, John. 'Race and revenge fantasies in Avatar, District 9 and Inglourious Basterds', *Science Fiction Film and Television* (Vol. 4.1, 2011), pp. 41–56.
- Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*, (Vintage).
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2010. *Nationalism and the Imagination*, (Seagull Books).
- Vatter, Miguel. 'In Odradek's World Bare Life and Historical Materialism in Agamben and Benjamin', *diacritics* (Volume 38, Number 3, Fall 2008), pp. 45-70.
- Welsh, David. 2010. *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, (University of Virginia Press).
- Wells, H. G. 1993. *War of the Worlds*, (Aerie Publishing).
- 2005. *The Time Machine*, (New York: Penguin Books).

**Filmography:**

*Alien Nation*, dir. by Graham Baker, (American Entertainment Partners II L.P., 1988).

*Alien: Resurrection*, dir. by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, (Brandywine Productions, 1997).

*Alive in Joburg*, dir. by Neill Blomkamp, (Spy Films, 2006).

*Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard, (Athos Films, 1965).

*Avatar*, dir. by James Cameron, (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2009).

*Dances with Wolves*, dir. by Kevin Costner, (Tig Productions, 1990).

*District 9*, dir. by Neill Blomkamp, (TriStar Pictures, 2009).

*Gattaca*, dir. by Andrew Niccol, (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1997).

*Metropolis*, dir. by Fritz Lang, (Universum Film, 1927).

*Shoah*, dir. by Claude Lanzmann, (New Yorker Films, 1985).

*Star Wars*, dir. by George Lucas, (Lucasfilm, 1977).

*The Abyss*, dir. by James Cameron, (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1989).

*The Birds*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, (Universal Pictures, 1963).

*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, dir. by Robert Wise, (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1951).

*The Fly*, dir. by David Cronenberg, (Brooksfilms, 1986).

**Internet sources:**

District 9 and the politics of xenophobia and racism, <http://mhambi.com/2009/08/district-9-and-the-politics-of-xenophobia-and-racism/> - Retrieved 20-Aug-2011

Five things you didn't know about District 9, <http://io9.com/5341120/5-things-you-didn-%27t-know-about-district-9> – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak? p. 80. [www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can\\_the\\_subaltern\\_speak.pdf](http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf) – Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

Interview with director Neil Blomkamp, by Tasha Robinson, August 12, 2009  
<http://www.avclub.com/articles/district-9-director-neill-blomkamp,31606/> –  
Retrieved 20-Aug-2011.

You are not welcome here, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/> - Retrieved 20-August-2011