

District 6 In District 9: The Metaphoric Menagerie

By JK Fowler

Gone
Buried
Covered by the dust of defeat—
Or so the conquerors believed
But there is nothing that can
Be hidden from the mind.
Nothing that memory cannot
Reach or touch or call back.

-Don Mattera, 1987¹

Introduction

A red sun silhouettes rows of shacks, a black woman in mismatched clothes with an African accent tells of missing people and increased security whilst pictures of UN-esque tanks are shown and an unknown white woman in a business suit says, “The government noticed that they were moving into new areas. That’s when things started to get out of hand”, while a panning shot of township shacks rolls past in the background. This is the beginning sequence in a new film entitled *District 9*, produced by Peter Jackson (*Lord of the Rings*, *King Kong*) with Sony Pictures and directed by Neill Blomkamp (a white South African director) based largely on Blomkamp’s short entitled *Alive in Jo’Burg* (2005) which takes place in a 1990’s apartheid South Africa. The metaphor within Blomkamp’s short as well as *District 9* is clear to those even slightly familiar with South African history: aliens are representative of the blacks and colored’s forced removals and segregation from whites under the Group Areas acts of the apartheid regime. The metaphor is so clear in fact that one wonders whether Blomkamp is referencing perhaps one of the most famous forcible removals of over 60,000 people from District 6 in the Western Cape to the dusty Cape Flats some 25 kilometers away. But then again, how clear *is* this metaphor and how would people unfamiliar with South African history read movies such as *Alive in Jo’Burg* or *District 9*? This paper is first and foremost an interrogative paper, asking many more questions than offering solutions in the face of the complexities surrounding interpretations of metaphor. Within this article, I will attempt to accomplish three things: explore Blomkamp’s approach to *Alive in Jo’Burg*, *District 9* (as well as the film’s vast viral marketing campaign), outline a brief history of the District 6 removal, and lastly, attempt to carve out some of the problematics that arise when treating race with metaphor within the medium of film and hopefully raise some pertinent questions for filmmakers and consumers to consider. While it is sometimes effective to use metaphor in opening a dialogue about race, does such a use of metaphor as is used in Blomkamp’s work actually do more to solidify pre-conceived notions of immigrants, non-whites and Africa?

¹ <http://www.districtsix.co.za/>

Alive in Jo'Burg

Alive in Jo'Burg (2005) opens on a township road, car overturned, with alien spacecraft hovering overhead (see *Independence Day*) as a white police officer stands to the right of the camera. It quickly cuts to an 'alien', encased in a "really fantastic bio-suit", and then to a balding white man (authority figure) who speaks of the apartheid government's mounting fears as the 'aliens' are moving into new areas. It is a short film (only slightly over 6 minutes), directed by Neil Blomkamp and shot in a handheld documentary style (see *Blair Witch Project*, *Cloverfield*) that is set in a 1990's apartheid South Africa mixing live action with CGI. Multi-National United (MNU and clear metaphor for the apartheid government) is immediately cast as the antagonist that violently reacts to the movements of the 'alien' population: "And this is when the government started to get tough. This is when things started to get out of hand." Two suited officers begin shooting at the 'alien', an 'alien' standing amidst a deserted township setting seemingly doing no harm whatsoever. And then, about a minute and a half in, something very interesting happens. A black screen with "Southern Africa: 1990" comes up and we are taken back to the balding white man who says, "They were captive labor... They were living in conditions that really were... not good." The metaphor for blacks and coloreds living under the apartheid regime, if not clear yet, becomes overwhelmingly apparent. The film cuts to the aliens describing their appalling conditions and the fact that, "this place doesn't want us" (subtitles make sense of their 'alien' language for us). With protruding tendrils surrounding their 'mouths', the 'aliens' huddle around an oil-barrel fire dressed eerily like many of the characters in *Tsotsi*, the 2005 film about the Jo'Burg township misfit that finds redemption through parenting the child of one of his carjacking victims. And in perhaps one of the most interesting turns, the camera cuts from the 'aliens' to a black man (cargo container in the background), explaining that, "They make people uncomfortable... we don't know how they think... they're going to make us unsafe". He is speaking English and yet subtitles are used. In fact, throughout the entire film, the only time that subtitles are used are for non-whites and aliens even though the Afrikaans accent used by many of the white actors is arguably more difficult to make sense of. An interesting question arises: what does it mean for this black man (and later, others) to speak against his metaphorical self? From the concerned black township resident, the film cuts to Constable Bongai Zulu, a black policeman (whose English is also subtitled) and we see him and another white policeman gunning down the 'aliens' without any particular reasoning that is made clear to the viewer. The camera cuts once again to the balding white man who explains that because of the Afrikaans minority, the apartheid government overly reacted to any perceived threat. The premise (and the metaphor) is established three minutes into the film.

From minute three to the end of the film, Blomkamp merely reinforces his metaphoric storyline with testimonials from black shopkeepers, drivers and white policemen. 'Aliens' with blurred out faces demand electricity and running water (common reasons for protest in apartheid South Africa), are illegally stopped in their cars, pulled out and beaten in Rodney King fashion, and in one of the most telling ties to non-whites under the apartheid regime, are admonished for running cables into preexisting sources of electricity and 'stealing' it (this 'free-rider' narrative is reinforced by stories of 'aliens'

catching free rides on the top of trains). The film ends on a less-than-promising note as a group of township residents march against the aliens and Jo'Burg is seen in flames. The last telling scene before cutting to the credits is of an older black woman with a purple beret lifting her fist in the black power salute as an angry mob of blacks runs past her. This is the short film that the new *District 9* film is largely based on, slated to be released on August 14th of this year. Before delving into some of the major questions that arise in Blomkamp's short, *Alive in Jo'Burg*, I wish to briefly explore the *District 9* trailer and the viral marketing campaign that has been taking place.

District 9: Trailer and Viral Marketing Campaign

Similar strains to those found within *Alive in Jo'Burg* abound within the trailer of *District 9*. A black screen with the words, "They are not welcome" is followed by testimonials by a white Afrikaans woman ("They don't belong here") and a young black girl ("They're spending so much money to keep them here when they could be spending it on other things. At least they're keeping them separate from us"). Two black screens follow: "They are not accepted", and with a rising musical score in the background, "They are not human". The black screen abruptly opens up to a CGI shot of the alien spacecraft hovering above the township shacks, military helicopters avidly circling. The picture is crisp, the feeling of the handheld documentary is slightly lost and there are no subtitles for black characters or aliens. This is seemingly a less problematic take on Blomkamp's short that ends with the words, "I just want everyone that is watching right now to learn from what has happened". What are we to learn? From whom (questions which will apparently be answered in the full-length feature)? The trailer itself leaves little material behind with which to explore but the viral marketing campaign that has been taking place has been extensive. There are three main sites connected to the film that are elaborate to say the least and are very much worth looking at: the District 9 (D-9), Multinational United, and MNU Spreads Lies sites.

The main thrust of the District 9 (D-9) site is to offer humans the chance to "live long, prosperous lives" and "deal with non-humans". It offers an interactive satellite image of the physical location of District 9, a community watch program, continuous news feeds and revealing behavioral recommendation pop-ups for interacting with non-humans: "Drawing pictures and using simple sign language can be an effective way of communicating with non-humans", "Learning the non-human language can be a useful job skill", "Entering District 9 without an MNU chaperone is discouraged", "Non-humans must be treated with respect. Actions deemed abusive will be dealt with by the MNU or *animal safety* branch [my italics]", "Please refrain from using non-human drinking fountains to prevent the spread of disease", "Please avoid giving money to non-human beggars", "Refrain from the manufacturing and distribution of items that may glorify non-human culture", and my personal favorite, "Speaking clearly and loudly to a non-human will help it learn English more quickly". What work do these "behavioral recommendations" do in light of the fact that Blomkamp seems very intent on metaphorically equating non-whites under the apartheid regime with 'aliens'? Are they blatant forms of racism or allowable metaphoric prodding? Who is it prodding and who are such 'recommendations' working for? Do they truly and effectively draw our

attention to the injustices enacted on non-whites under apartheid or do they operate within the already demarcated freeways of racism that operate within ourselves and our society, merely reinforcing preconceived notions of race? These and other questions will be dealt with later in the paper.

The site also offers visitors the chance to click on ‘MNU News Update’ dots which alert humans to nefarious non-human deeds and gives them the chance to join the ‘MNU Community Watch’ program which emails participants, “news and updates concerning Multi-National United (MNU) including, without limitation, information about human and non-human job opportunities at MNU, the community watch program, and District 9”. Visitors can also download various badges (i.e. MNU support materials) to don the mark of the oppressive MNU in safeguarding their ‘communities’. On the right hand side of the screen, an extensive list of rules and regulations can be downloaded (9 pages) which outline anything from surveillance rules to hygienic conduct (Act 3, Section 1.2 under sexual relations states that, “sexual relationships between humans and non-humans are prohibited”). This is only the ‘human’ section of the site. Sony Pictures has gone to great lengths and created an entirely separate section of the site for ‘aliens’. Non-human visitors must click the ‘alien’ button to enter this section, under which is written the following: “Look for blue sound icons to hear text translated in English. Spoken English is required for inter-species assimilation”. Upon entering, one notices something strange immediately: the entire MNU news-feed, rules, regulations and behavior recommendations are in the ‘alien’ language but upon closer inspection, the characters are curiously similar to Chinese characters. Consulting a friend fluent in written Mandarin as well as Cantonese, he was perplexed to find that in fact the characters *were* Chinese characters, merely elongated and slightly bastardized. As the behavior recommendations pop up on the bottom left hand corner of the screen, the visitor not fluent in ‘alien’ must click on the audio button to have the ‘alien’ language read aloud...in English. And the behavior recommendations are potent: “Always speak in soft tones when speaking with humans to avoid confrontation”, “Always speak English in public. Spoken English is required for interspecies assimilation”, “Please keep creative expression private. Art, photography, and other crafts found in public will be destroyed”, “Non-human chants and music must only be performed indoors and only within the confines of District 9”, and “Always offer your seat to a standing human on a public bus or train”. The hyperbolic, performative aspect of the D-9 site plays in realistic ways to the realities of many living under the apartheid South Africa but (as will later be explored), *how* does it do so, what work does such performativity do and for whom?

Continues for 5 more pages. Please contact JK Fowler at roaminghills@gmail.com for the full piece.