

A Freak Show in *District 9*: The Construction of a Freak Amongst Aliens

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Aliens have descended on Johannesburg, and they now live in slums; this would be a fairly accurate summary of Neill Blomkamp's 2009 film, *District 9*. It is a gritty science fiction film that combines the prejudice and violence of South Africa's Apartheid with the existential fears inspired by extraterrestrial life. Filmed partially in a quasi-documentary style, the movie portrays the downfall and transformation of Wikus van de Merwe, a rather boring white man who has been put in charge of the city's alien population through nepotism. As such, *District 9* has been called a "violent, racialized revenge fantasy" (Rieder 41), and many commentators are divided on its merits. But Wikus's transformation acts as more than just a vehicle to escalate the film's racial tensions; Wikus comes to occupy the role of the freak in the movie as his physical body becomes feared, revered, and commodified. Through the positioning of Wikus as a freak, the human population is forced to address the socially constructed and arbitrary divide between alien and human.

Is there room for a freak in a film about aliens? Yes, but do not make the mistake of believing aliens and freaks to be entirely separate entities. The two categories are closely related, and they spring up from the same source, the mysterious other. In her book about the archetype of the alien in science fiction, *Alien Theory*, Patricia Monk gives a comprehensive history of the other, which she describes as an unknowable and outside presence

Abstract

In *District 9*, the body of the main character, Wikus van de Merwe, becomes a battleground for the competing cultures of human and alien. But while it is widely recognized that the film is a science fiction metaphor for the Apartheid, less discussed are the parallels between Wikus's story and that of the historical freak. This essay looks at the way in which Wikus's transformation and clashing identities make him the star of Johannesburg's own alien freak show.

to ourselves (3). Freaks are other when measured against the normative standards of society; they are individuals who have experiences and appearances outside the understanding of someone classified as normate. Aliens in science fiction are other as well, though they are considered unknowable to all of humanity instead of one society, culture, or social group.

In this way, the normate is defined by the non-normate. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, a prominent scholar in the field of disability studies, describes this usage of opposing categories as part of the “cultural work” of the historical freak show. Audiences of the freak show could reaffirm their own understandings of the normate by viewing someone displayed as a freak and subsequently be reassured that they were themselves normates (64-65). As such, these opposing categories each define the other, the normate versus the non-normate. In *District 9*, this opposition is demonstrated by contrasting the alien Prawns with the normate humans, where the category of alien works similarly to the category of freak in the historical freak show.

Furthermore, aliens and freaks are both constructed categories within society. Jeffrey Weinstock points out that anyone can become a freak or an alien in theory because there is no single identifier or individual characteristic which defines these categories (329). Instead, the forms of alien and freak are defined against the normate of a society so that they embody the other. Both aliens and freaks occupy the same liminal space between wonder and logic, which can be seen in the presentation of historical freak show acts. The people being exhibited were displayed and sensationalized with exaggerated origin stories, but at the same time, medical examiners and scientists would be brought in to explain the physical differences these individuals demonstrated and validate public interest in their bodies. The idea of aliens operates similarly, exciting existential and wondrous fantasies while that same attention is given credence by scientific inquiry.

The alien and the freak then erupt from this intersection of the awe-inspiring and the scientific. Prior to the first buddings of modern science, there existed a category of otherness which Monk labels “the supernatural Other” (7). This is a class of the unknowable that operates without explanation and beyond the limits of physical laws, most often in folklore

and theological contexts – for example spirits, demons, or angels. These creatures were believed to exist without the need to be proven or studied, and they often induced awe, wonder, or terror in the cultures from which they had sprung. But with the birth of the sciences came the need to study and classify the world, both known and unknown.

This begins, as Warren Smith notes, in 1832 with teratology – the study of abnormalities in the development of living beings (180). Careful observation took away the wonder of earlier belief, replacing it with an interest in clinical pathology that would shape modern medical science. But, though deviation from the normate could be observed and described to the satisfaction of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century researchers, explanations and “cures” continued to evade their grasp. Individuals with physiological differences were left to become medical specimens on public display in freak shows, figures deserving pity for their differences that science could now classify but not truly “fix.”

The supernatural other was being pushed out of belief, not fitting within the framework of evolution and biological study (Monk 8). This was to be the era of the freak show and, slightly later, the extraterrestrial other. After all, the Golden Age of science fiction falls amongst the trailing ends of the freak show’s heyday in the 1940s and with good reason: societal change made freak shows problematic and unpalatable to most consumers (Weinstock 328). It was no longer acceptable to so openly trade in the display of human bodies as freaks, who were now sad figures inspiring pity and sympathy for their unfortunate circumstances.

As such, aliens arose to do the cultural work that human freaks could no longer do. The alien, inherently a fictional creation of an author’s mind, can act as an extension of the freak, a new descriptive container for the racist and xenophobic positions of a society that avoids the criticism garnered by the display of an actual human (Weinstock 330). Aliens can be publically ogled, dissected, and studied. They can be explained through scientific reasoning in a way that the supernatural other cannot, but they are far enough outside the boundaries of accepted reality so as to not evoke sympathy or pity like a freak, a human other.

Weinstock perhaps best explains the relative positions of the human freak and the extraterrestrial other by constructing a continuum from completely human to completely nonhuman. Instead of trying to create

separate categories, he recognizes the overlapping boundaries of the freak, the alien, and the monster as he writes:

on a continuum stretching from human to nonhuman, from a mythical conception of a unified, bounded self to an equally mythical notion of an absolute other, the freak remains contiguous with the human, while the monster exists at a farther remove, at a point approaching the unknowable. A gap exists between the monster and the human, a gap problematically occupied by the freak. (328)

He places the alien within this gap between human and monster as well, but with far more mobility to move along the continuum than the freak, who must always be at least partially human. The alien can be more human, such as the Vulcan people of *Star Trek*, or less human, like the creeping Xenomorph of the *Alien* franchise. To Weinstock, the contemporary alien is the new freak, a figure of otherness that does the same categorical work but with greater flexibility and lacking enough humanity to prevent moral squeamishness.

So where in all of this does *District 9* reside? Humans are easily recognizable as the normates of the film because the film and the quasi-documentary being shown within the film are both shot from the human perspective, calling upon human academics, civilians, and witnesses for interviews. Wikus himself, as the main character, embodies the true normate at the beginning – a straight white male in a happy marriage, a desk worker who seems to possess no extraordinary characteristics for good or bad. Thomson describes this as the “unmarked norm,” a figure who holds power by being completely unremarkable and seemingly neutral in appearance (40). But, on the other hand, there are the extraterrestrial inhabitants of District 9.

The Prawns – as they are negatively called in the film – occupy the extreme on the opposite end of the continuum, approaching entirely nonhuman. They are bipedal and recognizably sentient, which gives them some aspect of familiar humanity, but their design is meant to be distinctly other and separate from the humans of the film. Blomkamp, the film’s director, is quoted as stating, “The creatures should have tentacled faces and hands, designed with practical creature-suit-wearing human performers in mind, distorting the recognizable human form wherever possible” (Hart).

The aliens are a distinctly and visibly separate category from the humans.

Then Wikus begins his horrifically vivid transformation from human to alien, sliding from one extreme to the other. For a majority of the film's action, Wikus occupies a middle ground between human and alien, the space given to the freak.

The boundaries between human and alien are important within the film *District 9*, however. Labels help clearly organize and quickly sort the information that the mind must process into neat bundles. The edges of these categories define the expectations of society for an individual within that category (Thomson 65). A person possesses an expectation for how others will behave based upon their categorization, and they themselves can know the expectations placed on them by others. In *District 9*, the humans know that they are expected to live in the city or around it, that they should have jobs and families and friends. At the same time, aliens should live in District 9 and bow to the authority of Multi-National United (MNU), the shadowy mercenary organization that polices the alien refugees. But such strong, clearly defined borders between social groups allows for alienation.

Alienation is defined by Smith as “the signification of distance or separation between two or more objects” (178). He also calls it a formative part of the human experience, “man’s eternal condition,” and it has existed for as long as people have been labelling and demarcating themselves, their societies, and the surrounding world. This demarcation and alienation is plentiful in *District 9*, which takes its own title from the physical representation of alienation between the humans and the Prawns – District 9, the barricaded and walled-in slums where the Prawns live entirely separate from human infrastructure, culture, and society. The social groups of Prawn and human are equally demarcated so that there can be no confusion between the two; there are vast differences in culture, appearance, and even language between them. There is no point in *District 9* when a human speaks the language of the Prawn or when a Prawn speaks any human language.

This space of alienation, both physical and conceptual, allows for the Prawns to be treated as they are. The Prawns live in revolting conditions, surrounded entirely by trash in ramshackle huts cobbled together from sheets of ragged metal. They have no governing or agricultural power, and they seem to live almost entirely as scavengers even though they occupy

a large area in the heart of the city of Johannesburg. But the Prawns are not people, and people do not enter District 9. The terrible conditions are allowed to continue because those with the power and resources to make a change, the normate human population, do not view the Prawns as sympathetic or familiar creatures at all.

For example, one unnamed civilian shown in the documentary portion of the film states that things would be different if the Prawns had been humans - that he would care if they were members of another race but not if they are just aliens. MNU's own shoot-first tactics reflect this alienated perspective as well. They don't shy away from treating the Prawns with cruelty and crass indifference, often killing indiscriminately or taking pleasure in the death and torment of the Prawns. Koobus Venter, arguably the villain of the film and part of the normate population as well, is one who delights not only in killing Prawns but in hunting Wikus in particular.

However, even as alienation allows for this lack of sympathy and identification, there also comes a desire to embody the differences of the excluded group. Again, this ties back to the cultural work of identification in the historical freak show as described by Thomson. Historical freak show performers were not just freaks that defied the norms of society, but they were also held up as revered celebrities (66). For Americans of the time period, this was largely due to the social value of individuality. Belonging to the normate group made a person comfortable, but part of being normate included having a sense of personal uniqueness. There was nothing more unique and still human than the human freak show performer.

In *District 9*, there is a longing for the otherness of the Prawns at play. The few humans who willingly enter into the District are from a social group known only as the "Nigerians." It is not made clear where this name comes from or if the group members are even Nigerian at all. They are merely identifiable because they have a demonstrated willingness to enter District 9 and barter with the alien population there. However, they not only interact with the Prawns but take part in some aspects of the Prawns' culture – specifically, their military technology and physical capabilities. The Prawns, though they do not demonstrate a particular willingness to use the power at their hands, possess a scattered cache of advanced military weaponry, and the Nigerians often attempt to barter for and possess this technology themselves. The Nigerians also view the Prawns as being

biologically superior, physically stronger and capable of healing from greater damage, traits of which the Nigerians are similarly envious.

In the middle of these alienated social groups, however, lies Wikus. Starting as human, Wikus begins an unintended and reluctant transformation towards the “monster” end of Weinstock’s continuum. This transformation is comparable to the character of the cyborg as described by Warren Smith, wherein two different, alienated social identities compete within one physical body, challenging the accepted limits of the bounded groups (178-179). With this, some might originally see Wikus as a possible utopian bridge between two distinctive cultures. After all, the hybrid nature of Wikus’s own body demonstrates that humans and Prawns are not as dissimilar as the film had originally portrayed them to be. Wikus could be able to unify these groups in a new and universally shared trans-human identity

But, instead, like Smith’s cyborg, these competing identities drive the hybrid character to seek one over the other. Most often, this leads to a non-human or trans-human character trying to be more human – for example, Spock from *Star Trek* learning to embrace the emotions of his human identity over the rational logic of his Vulcan identity. In *District 9*, Wikus violently rejects his transformation and the physical changes it brings when he decides to amputate the arm that has become Prawn-like. Wikus cannot come to terms with being the freak in between, or perhaps transcending these two identities, and instead tries to fit himself into one category through extreme and grotesque measures.

Wikus’s transformation also inspires a similarly violent rejection from the other human characters. In absorbing the otherness of the Prawns – literally embodying the alienation of the film’s society – Wikus forces the people around him to consider the normality of their own natures. Smith talks about this in the context of his cyborg, quoting Michael Beehler’s “Border Patrols”:

This then is the alien as freak. A figure which always “positions itself somewhere between pure familiarity and pure otherness... Taking its positions on the border between identity and difference, it makes that border, articulating it while at the same time disarticulating and confusing the distinctions the border stands for.” (183)

The MNU employees who are aware of what has happened to Wikus are unsympathetic, even willing to sacrifice Wikus in a gruesome manner for the sake of scientific inquiry and capitalist success. The rest of the human population, made marginally aware of Wikus's transformation through a media smear campaign, are repulsed even without seeing his mutated body. The one attempt Wikus makes to live anonymously amongst the human population of Johannesburg is the best example of this.

In the middle portion of the film, Wikus is forced to flee from MNU's interests after it becomes apparent that they wish to dissect his body. He cannot go home, as the company has already positioned forces there, so Wikus robes himself in large clothes and wraps a blanket tightly over his chest to disguise his own mutated arm. This scene is set in a fast-food restaurant shown earlier in the film; the establishment is consistently crowded with customers, and Wikus shuffles in as just another person in the mass. But, while he is in the eatery, a television displays a message calling for his capture.

The report states that Wikus has had sexual interactions with a Prawn and is subsequently suffering from some kind of disease. The crowd around him immediately begins to pull away, despite Wikus's protests and before they even have any evidence of his "diseased" state. The mere accusation of such intergroup contact, a violation of accepted social boundaries, is enough to drive them to reject Wikus as a freak. The actual and inevitable reveal of his extraterrestrial arm sends the crowd into a panicked frenzy, and many flee the restaurant. Wikus himself is forced to leave as MNU's attention is drawn to the area by this commotion.

This scene illustrates Wikus's ostracization from human society, but it also highlights one way that the film *District 9* uses the physical body of the human freak to illustrate the conceptual idea of a breakdown in identity. The city of Johannesburg itself shows this divide in the clearly defined borders of District 9, which separate it from the human areas of the city. But while the physical boundaries of the city might create the illusion of equally distinct social boundaries, Wikus's presence rejects that notion. Van Veuren writes about the role of the physical body in "Tooth and Nail: Anxious Bodies in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*," saying, "Once Wikus becomes infected with alien DNA, he falls outside of this scheme of classification and his body poses a threat to its very order" (576).

Unlike the Prawns or the humans, there is no physical space for Wikus to occupy. And because it is the human which is normate – more importantly, because the human normate must be unmarked to give it power – the physically marked and trans-human Wikus cannot reside in human spaces. The “loss” of Wikus’s humanity coincides with his removal from the physical infrastructure of human life. One scholarly commentator says this in regard to Wikus’s exile:

The entire world was watching him. He was on every radio station – every image on television. Anything you could find, it had his face on it. So he had nowhere else to go. He ended up hiding in the one place he knew no one would ever come looking for him. (*District 9*)

So Wikus ends up in District 9, a decidedly non-human space, and finds his only ally in Christopher Johnson, the extraterrestrial whose attempts to change the fortune of his people started Wikus’s transformative process.

Part of the danger that Wikus poses to the human population of the film is related to the fear that he inspires in people, the fear that “this could be me.” A similar fear was often evoked by the historical freak show – audiences would flock to see the exhibition of human beings, both fascinated by the pageantry and fearful that they themselves could be so displayed. In *District 9*, Wikus was a human and part of the normate culture, but that changes rather easily over the course of the film. By the end, he has been exiled to an extraterrestrial space, one that is not up to the human standards of living. The poor treatment of the Prawns can be justified because they are not human, but that conviction does not hold when Wikus is violating the boundaries between human and alien. In being forced by Wikus’s hybrid nature to confront the immaterial reality of their own identities, the human population is forced to address the socially constructed and arbitrary divide between Prawn and human. This raises the fear that they might themselves violate the limits of these groups, therein becoming freaks and subsequently forced into a widely despised social class and poorer living conditions.

All of these things contribute to the freakish aspects of Wikus’s circumstances in the movie, but no less important is the value placed on Wikus’s body as a commercial product. The historical freak show commodified human difference, allowing people to control and profit off of

these non-normate bodies, often with a lessened regard for the individuals themselves. Their bodies were of monetary importance more so than their lives, often resulting in many being autopsied and displayed after their deaths, such as in the case of Julia Pastrana and Saartjie Baartman. Similar commercial value is assigned to the bodies of the Prawns and to Wikus in particular.

The most subtle yet pervasive example of this commodification is that the Prawns are branded by MNU. Many throughout the film display the blocky white letters of MNU on their bodies. No explanation is ever given in the film for this branding, but it is present and persistent nonetheless. This draws direct parallels to the idea of branding cattle, marking the Prawns as the lawful property of MNU, despite the fact that they are living creatures and demonstrably sentient ones at that. It also detracts from the idea of Prawns as individual beings by marking them uniformly under one label. MNU also controls the boundaries of District 9 and acts as the only governing force within the District. They are, in practice, a corporate overlord to the Prawn population.

Much like historical freak show performers as well, value is assigned to the bodies of the Prawns instead of their lives. In fact, the Prawns are seen as far more valuable after their deaths than before. The Nigerians and MNU both demonstrate this; the Nigerians actually consume the Prawns as folk remedies, hoping to absorb their physical prowess, while MNU runs an underground laboratory for the dissection of the Prawns. This is in contrast to the living Prawns, who are largely described as a drain on the resources of the government which has poured millions of dollars into refugee efforts. The Prawns are also seen as pests to citizens who accuse the Prawns of rampant theft and point to them as the cause of an outbreak of riots.

Some of this value comes from the alien technology, coded to only work while being handled by an individual with Prawn DNA. MNU hopes to use the bodies of the Prawns to access their technology, and they approach the situation with clinical and detached interest. The Nigerians approach this same problem more holistically by killing and then eating the bodies of the Prawns. It is also reported by unnamed civilians in the documentary scenes of *District 9* that one can eat different portions of the Prawn body to achieve different healing effects. Notably, such consumption is viewed with slight distaste, but it does not bear the same stigma as the act of cannibalism

would – again reinforcing that the Prawns are not human in the eyes of society. These same values are then assigned to Wikus as well.

But while the Prawns are numerous, present in more than enough numbers to satisfy the Nigerians' hunger and MNU's interest, Wikus is entirely unique. This drives up the value placed on his body, as he is not just another Prawn and he is not just another human. His freak status enables him to become a priceless resource to both groups, and they engage in a climactic battle in District 9 as Wikus tries to aid Christopher Johnson in his escape at the end of the film. However, this uniqueness is not the only facet of his increased value. Wikus, in enacting his transformation from human to Prawn, inadvertently accomplishes what both the Nigerians and MNU are hoping to achieve: successful combination of human and Prawn features. Because of this, Wikus is able to use the alien technology and weaponry while other humans cannot, and the value of his physical body is further increased.

Perhaps most interesting in this is that while Wikus's body is ascribed higher and higher commercial value, he loses his social power as one of the normates. In the beginning of the film, as a member of the unmarked normate, Wikus has a good social and economic standing – he is even put in charge of MNU's efforts to relocate the Prawns. But, as Wikus is transformed, thereby becoming a marked and non-normate figure, he loses this power even as he is assigned worth as a specimen. With this loss of power comes a loss of agency; Wikus loses his ability to move freely in his home city, and his actions are restricted by the fear and desire of the normate. It is a compelling exchange of power that follows Wikus from his high-profile corporate position to the obscurity of the Prawns' slums, where he loses most of his identity except for one remaining 'human' trait – the desire to make small crafts for the wife he has been forced to leave behind.

In many ways, then, Wikus's story in *District 9* mirrors the living situations and treatment of many historical freakshow performers. But many critics and viewers of the film are left to question what message *District 9* is trying to impart. Though the film deliberately parallels the South African Apartheid, it is still accused of racist characterization and stereotypical display of both the Prawns and the Nigerians (van Veuren 573). However, the quasi-documentary film style allows for an additional level of self-awareness within the film as commentators can look back on

the story of Wikus and draw attention to the ways in which his treatment was damaging and negative. *District 9* also draws attention to the desperate and desolate living conditions of the subjugated Prawns, pushing the uncomfortable story of racial segregation to the forefront unlike other “going native” stories such as James Cameron’s *Avatar* (Rieder 49).

Ultimately, while neither flawless nor without problems in its portrayal of non-normate figures, *District 9* manages to construct a new breed of science fiction sideshow performer in Wikus van de Merwe, and the story of his transformation has had a definite impact on audiences. Though about aliens, *District 9* is inescapably a freak show in and of itself, featuring clashing identities, horrific transformation, and the commodification of physical bodies. It is just as Smith concludes in his article, “Identification with the alien as freak is always present if, sometimes, sensed only obliquely. This figure exists in a semi-defined space between fear and attraction” (187). The freak show is there in Johannesburg with Wikus as its star performer, forever immortalized in this film.

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