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District 9

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District 9

Abstract

This is a review of *District 9* (2009).

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District 9 takes place in Johannesburg, South Africa. Directed by Neill Blomkamp and based on his short-film *Alive in Joburg*, it is a science-fiction film about an alien race that landed on earth in Johannesburg back in 1982 because their ship broke down, and has been sequestered in squalid living conditions for 25 years under oppressive human rule. The aliens are referred to derogatorily as “prawns” because of their resemblance to the earth’s sea creatures.

The film is a thinly-disguised allegory for the Apartheid regime that ruled in South Africa from 1948 to 1994: it was a system of forced racial segregation, where non-whites were relegated to second class citizenry and whites dominated the country, running the government and getting the best jobs and land. The title refers to District Six, a section of Cape Town, South Africa, where 60,000 non-whites were forcibly removed from their home under the 1966 Group Areas Act, a legislative document that was born out of the apartheid policy. This was a system sponsored by religion no less. Dutch Reformed Church leaders, believing that people of color were a threat to Afrikaner heritage, intertwined discrimination with their theology. By 1990, their church was the only one in the nation that was not predominantly black, as they had supported apartheid and forced segregation for years. The Christian League of South Africa also believed that apartheid was religiously justifiable.

The aliens themselves do not seem to have a particular purpose on earth, rather they are simply locked in a struggle for survival in an unfriendly environment. Humanity, once curious about their existence, now has no use for them and keeps them alive in abysmal conditions because they covet the aliens’ powerful weaponry, which they have yet

to procure. Inside District 9, human gangs rip off the aliens for food and try to steal their weapons. The South African Government decides to relocate the aliens to a supposedly better camp, and forcibly evacuate them from District 9. However, the operation is botched and the leader of it, Wilkus van der Merwe, gets exposed to an alien liquid. He becomes sick and soon begins to take the form of a prawn. Wilkus escapes an attempt to harvest his body for weaponry and hides in District 9. There he meets an alien given the name Christopher, who is trying to reactivate the disabled spaceship still hovering over Johannesburg.

Wilkus' metamorphosis from human into alien is karmic in nature. In Hinduism, Karma means "deed" or "act," and because humans have total free will, what they have done or thought will eventually come back to either reward or punish them in subsequent reincarnations. Wilkus, who led the forced evictions of District 9, is inadvertently harmed by this liquid and reincarnated into the very thing he loathes, a prawn. The Karmic cycle is supposed to determine future events, and at the end of the movie, it is implied that Wilkus, who helped Christopher escape on his ship to return to his planet for aid, is fully a prawn and is waiting for the ship so he can be restored as a human.

The aliens living away from their planet in diaspora (a word for people who have settled away from their native homeland) is not unlike the Babylonians forcing the Judeans into exile from Judah. While the aliens came to earth because they had no other option, they are still living there against their own free will. Unlike the Jews however, their symbolic temple, the spaceship, was not destroyed, yet they cannot use it.

Christian writer Richard John Neuhaus once said: "Politics is chiefly a function of culture, at the heart of culture is morality, and at the heart of morality is religion." With the immoral ways that the aliens are treated, from living conditions, to unjust executions, to bizarre experiments, humanity is using their fear and ignorance as a religious justification for oppression. The same can be said of similar historical injustices. The most glaring is the Jews in the Holocaust. But even in the past decade, be it with the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, the exile of non-Serbian Muslims in Kosovo, or the recent persecution of Baha'is in Iran, religion has often been used as a tool for justifying one groups superiority over the other.

District 9 uses the familiar theme of aliens to show an evil that resides in all of humanity. The aliens do not ride in as conquerors, blasting everything in their path, but rather as wearied souls lost from their homeland with nowhere else to go. Human in everything except appearance and appetite, they are exploited, humiliated, and shamed. Neill Blomkamp, an Afrikaner himself, grew up witnessing the vagaries of apartheid and uses this science fiction piece in mainstream cinema as a tool of social commentary