

Hold the Prawns

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In the cities of the global South elites are often desperate to repress the reality of the shack settlement. Maps are printed in which shack settlements appear as blank spaces, laws are passed that assume that everyone can afford to live formally and, in the name of order and development, the poor are beaten out of the cities. The great elite fantasy is the creation of 'world class cities' – shiny, securitised nowhereilles in which the poor understand that their place is to live in some peripheral ghetto and only come into the city as menial workers. But from *City of God* to *Slum Dog Millionaire* and now *District 9* cinema has put the shack settlement in the mall and at the heart of how Rio, Bombay and Johannesburg feature in the global imagination.

In *District 9* the shacks in Jo'burg are inhabited by extraterrestrials which humans call prawns. Science fiction can, to borrow from the lexicon that the film's hero Wikus van de (sic) Merwe has taken to the world, just be a load of kak. But, like all forms of fantasy, it can also be a dream of the present illuminating it with more power than the ordinary categories through which we see the world. When it can illuminate aspects of reality hidden by ordinary ways of seeing it can reveal those ways of seeing to be the real fantasy.

District 9 is set in something very near to contemporary South Africa – Mahendra Raghunath reads the television news, the red ants swarm through the shacks with their crowbars and the human rights activists demonstrating outside the shacks are vastly less effective than the xenophobic mobs. But the film also evokes the past. Apartheid is everywhere from the ubiquity of white and male power to the peculiar type of nerd that Wikus van de Merwe's character parodies. *District 9* also reaches into a vision of the future. Van de Merwe works for a multinational corporation rather than the state. Multinationals, like Group 4 Securicor, are already in the business of beating the poor into their place but they take instruction from the state. Here, in a staple of nightmare visions of the future, the state seems to be a junior partner to the multinational.

By weaving past, present and future into one cinematic vision *District 9* steps out of the all too easy distinction between an absolute break between bad apartheid and good democracy to look at how some processes of exclusion endure or mutate as we move from one political system to another. Some reviewers, referring to their experience of apartheid evictions, have written about how the eviction scenes have a strangely hyper real feel despite the fact that the evicted are fantastical aliens. But these scenes are also a hyper real description of contemporary evictions. The bureaucrat who is 'here to assist you' by destroying your home, the clipboards, the helicopters, the red ants, the casual and contemptuous exercise of arbitrary violence, the assumption that the shack settlement is a zone outside of the ordinary rules of society and the relentless presumption of criminality are all very real aspects of our society right now.

Shacks in Johannesburg have always housed aliens. Apartheid turned most black South Africans into aliens in their own country. In democratic South Africa we turned Mozambicans and Zimbabweans into aliens. The obvious value of turning the shack dweller into a real alien is that the film can deal with the continuities in the processes by which we turn people into aliens, contain them, criminalise them, beat them and then evict them 'for their own good'. District 9 confronts these continuities head on and so although it is a fantasy it contains more reality than we're likely to find in many of the spaces that produce, circulate and authorise the official consensus. It shows contemporary development-speak in which the only real issue is the 'pace of delivery' to be a fantasy as ridiculous as it is perverse.

After all, we tell ourselves that the new order has made a decisive break with the essential logic of apartheid as we are driving shack dwellers and street traders out of our cities at gun point. We tell ourselves that we have a new order founded on human rights and protected by the best constitution in the world as we exclude migrants and the poor from that order. We tell ourselves that building stadiums and 'eradicating' street traders and shack settlements will bring us into a new era of prosperity while we are actively and often violently making the poor poorer.

The reality is that we have, at all levels of society, colluded to exclude some people from those who count as real citizens. This exclusion is often built into our speech. Some of us call others Makwerekwere. The state conflates 'illegal immigrant's with 'criminals'. It conflates the theft of electricity cables to sell the copper with 'illegal electricity connections.' Exclusion is also being actively built into the structures of our cities. Shack dwellers are removed, often at gun point, to peripheral ghettos. The reality is that some people and some spaces are treated as if they are outside of the law. The state, whether wielded by the DA or the ANC, engages in openly criminal behaviour towards the poor.

People who cannot afford to live their lives according to the rules of a society that assumes that everyone can be a consumer are usually understood in two ways by elites. They are either dangerous criminals who need to be repressed or childlike incompetents who need to be placed under some form of tutelage. District 9 makes a welcome break from this consensus, which is another elite fantasy, when it shows that the aliens have a weapon. In contemporary South Africa those weapons are the road blockade, the vote strike and the land occupation.

But just as our move from apartheid to post-apartheid changed who we turn into aliens but didn't put aside the assumption that we should construct our society against the alien this film has its own aliens. In District 9 the Nigerians are, as in *Jerusalema*, another recent film about Jo'burg, presented through the basest racist stereotype. The depiction of the Nigerians is so extreme that many reviewers have concluded that it was intended to illustrate that as one alien is humanised another is created. But the film maker's comments don't lend much weight to this interpretation. It seems that the film has inadvertently reproduced exactly what it set out to overcome. Perhaps this is its key lesson. As we humanise one alien we create another.

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