

WHEN YOU CAN'T "PHONE HOME": SUBVERSIVE POLITICS OF THE FOREIGN  
OTHER IN *E.T.: THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL* AND *DISTRICT 9*

A Thesis  
By  
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## **Abstract**

### WHEN YOU CAN'T "PHONE HOME": SUBVERSIVE POLITICS OF THE FOREIGN OTHER IN *E.T.: THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL* AND *DISTRICT 9*

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This thesis takes a close look at the ways in which alien representations, especially in films, mirror the ways in which transnational and migrant individuals are viewed and treated by the majority populations of already established nations. By tracing the history of science fiction, the connotations that the genre makes and the ways in which extraterrestrial narratives comment on reality can be evaluated in detail. The subversive politics that are created by such narratives, both intentionally and unwittingly, contributes to the perceptions of the Other that are embraced by the oppressive masses and which perpetuate certain types of treatment. Steven Spielberg's 1982 film, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, is the first film that is evaluated and dissected. While it is a family-friendly film that captured the hearts of huge audiences, the plotline and visual representations are reminiscent of the struggles that millions go through in order to escape violence and persecution. The alien in this picture is cute and slightly anthropomorphized, allowing it to be accepted and embraced. However, while it displays a welcoming, nurturing nation, the ending subverts this message and enforces the attitude that happy endings are only possible when the Other returns to where

they came from. By discussing José Antonio Vargas' autobiographical account of living as an undocumented immigrant in the United States of America, the troubling politics and insinuations made by the film are contrasted with the reality of being the Other in this nation.

Neill Blomkamp's 2009 film, *District 9*, goes about displaying these troubling politics in a much more discernible manner. The aliens, or "prawns," as they are called in the film, are not anthropomorphized and their relations with the human population are overtly troubled. Stranded in a post-apartheid Johannesburg, the prawns are forced into slums and eventually forcefully evicted. This mirrors the actual 1982 violent evictions of District 6 in Johannesburg. The implications that this has on time, and the ways in which identity is informed by memory, which is impacted by time, is teased out with the help of Jorge Luis Borges and two of his short stories.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my dogs, Nala Moose and Louie Tauga, without whose never failing adorations and enthusiasm for playing catch this project would have been completed in half the time. The saying is very true: I work hard so my dogs can have a better life.

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## Introduction

This thesis explores the representation of otherness in two popular science fiction movies: *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and *District 9* (2009). To begin this conversation on alien depictions and their signification, it would seem only logical to start with a working definition of science fiction, to understand what the genre entails and what qualifies certain narratives as participants. However, this is harder than it sounds: scholars and aficionados alike debate and disagree on a fixed classification. It may be more productive to begin by proposing a possible timeline for the genre and its progression in order to flesh out a working definition. Perhaps more importantly, the connections that science fiction narratives can make with the political realities they are placed in can be fleshed out by looking at the history of the genre. This is a necessary step in answering the question, what relationship does science fiction have with reality and how does that affect the genre as a whole? Yet finding an origin or “true” timeline for science fiction, or SF, as I will refer to it for the remainder of this project, is no easy feat either. Much like attempting to find a single definition of science fiction, experts and scholars continuously find themselves in a heated debate on the origins and function of the genre.

The introduction of the steam engine, the lightning rod, and other marvels during the Industrial Revolution allowed the imagination of writers and thinkers alike to expand beyond their former constraints, when writers “noticed that, for the first time in human experience, the world was changing, and being changed by, the mind of humanity. Science fiction was their reaction. If the world was changing, how would people respond to it?” (Gunn 130). New plots were perpetuated by the mysteries of these new inventions; the limits of this brand-new environment were unknown and, therefore, open to every interpretation and fictional possibility. Eric D. Smith’s *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science*

*Fiction: New Maps of Hope* mentions Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein* as a possible foundational text for science fiction, and quotes Carl Freedman's argument that it is "the first work in which the science-fictional tendency reaches a certain level of self-consciousness, thus enabling a line of fiction that, at least in retrospect, can be construed as the early history of science fiction proper" (Smith 6).

However, many others claim that the early history of the genre occurs much earlier than the Industrial Revolution. John J. Pierce, in his book *Foundations of Science Fiction: A Study in Imagination and Evolution*, goes as far back as 355 B.C. and 150 A.D. to find the origins, stating that "Two of the literary mutations most commonly seen as containing the seeds of science fiction, or even as representing its germination, are Plato's account of Atlantis and Lucian of Samosata's *True History*" (4). For Pierce, this utopian depiction of Atlantis becomes the first in what is cited as "the notion of science fiction as a 'literature of ideas'" (4). While Plato's descriptions of the utopian society in Atlantis does not include scientific interpretations or alien encounters, the imagination that led to the creation of a foreign, seemingly utopian society with elements so disparate from reality is seen as a crucial first step in the progress towards modern SF.

Pierce explains that Lucian's *True History* is more akin to the modern perception of SF, with plots that include scientific explanations of what occurs in the tale as well as some knowledge of the celestial makeup of the universe. This contributes to the history of SF as "it is the first known *interplanetary* tale," portraying "lunar warriors who ride to battle on 'cabbage fowl'...and fight with bean-shooters and garlic-throwers...[as well as] reproduction among the Dendrites [whose] children grow on trees, which spring from testicles planted in the ground," (4-5). Yet, *True History*, rather than functioning inside of the genre, acts as an antecedent to SF due to its satirical tones, according to scholars such as Pierce and Smith.

However, I think it is important to keep this work in mind due to the way that it places history and fiction in a metaphorical dance to create political satire. The fictional aspects of this other-worldly narrative opens up a different mode of engaging with reality. Rather than using allegorical examples involving scenarios extremely similar to the reality being commented on and therefore appearing obvious and blatant, undiscovered and imaginative circumstances can be used to to make the same statements on reality but in a less intrusive manner.

During the European Middle Ages, many, if not all, common beliefs were defined through the church and even time was recorded in accordance to Jesus Christ's life. Before this point, no breakthrough revolutionary enough to change the mentality or thought process of individuals, like the dramatic effect that electricity had on the populations at that time, had occurred in regard to scientific progress or discovery, according to SF aficionados and scholars like Pierce, Gomel, and Smith. The church controlled the rhetoric and any attempts to step outside of that spiritual reality manifested itself through narratives that upheld the faith, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Any narrative that stepped beyond the church's scope into uncharted territory, such as the existence of other life forms on a different planet, was then seen as heresy. While narratives akin to the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* would appear as possibilities for early examples of SF during this time period, the explanations for these otherworldly scenarios are explained through religion. Science did not have a role in the fiction of that time, and as Pierce points out, "Literary evolution, like its biological counterpart, is a response to the environment...Before there could be science fiction, there had to be an environment in which there was progressive change, and a consciousness of change," (7). While the belief that SF began as far back as Plato is embraced by some, this really depends on whether the genre is seen as a literature of ideas, a literature of speculative

realities (which can be seen as perhaps true for all literature), or as a literature that engages with speculations that are based on scientific events explained through postulation or discovery.

If the latter definition is to be embraced, it is at this point, following the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of science as a dominating force in day-to-day life, that SF takes a sharp turn from classic travel tales, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and utopian accounts, such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, to stories riddled with imagined worlds, occurrences, and beings constructed through possible scientific explanations. However, it was not only the Industrial Revolution's explosion of electricity and inventions that gave birth to the current state of SF.

New encounters between societies previously unconnected often trigger violence. One party sees the other's land or resources as desirable and, therefore, decides to attack and conquer. This is a theme that can be seen throughout SF. Coincidentally, with the acquisitions of Alaska and Hawaii, as well as the establishment of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the Pacific island of Guan as U.S. protectorates in the late 19 and early 20 century, imperialism was still thriving at this time. This period during the late 19 century that saw the "most fervid imperialist expansion," according to Smith, "coincides exactly with the rise of the genre" and thus inspired the "imperialist preoccupations of traditional SF." Smith also points out Csicsery-Ronay's observations of the juncture of three conditions that allowed for the rise of the genre: technology's swift expansion of imperialism's resolve to control, the ways that culture attempts to mediate the trauma of this imperial project at home, and, finally, the "pseudo-utopian imaginative projection of an 'achieved technoscientific Empire'" (6).

The practice of commenting on social injustices and critiquing political powers is not new, as shown through this very brief outline. The genre, when functioning within colonial discourse, “exaggerates and exploits its internal divisions’ such that the occlusions and occultations that subtend them are (however metaphorically or allegorically) rendered apparent and available for critique” (Smith 2). Through its ability to subvert the desired image of the ‘whole,’ or the preconceived notion of an unbending nationalism in a given society, by displaying differing factions at war with one another within this perceived homogenous community, the genre can be seen as a form of political reflection and critical theory.

From this perspective, the role that aliens play in SF narratives provides a fertile ground for a social, cultural, and political examination and analysis. The presence of aliens in SF dates all the way back to Lucian’s political parody *True History*, highlighting the ability that extraterrestrials in narratives can have to make statements on the reality being allegorized. In fact, as Gomel argues, the Alien is “SF’s most versatile metaphor, its signature trope.” This is not surprising when the etymology of the word “alien” is considered. According to the OED, it hails from the Latin “aliēnus,” which functions as an adjective and a noun, much like the word is used today to describe curious characteristics as well as unfamiliar individuals. As an adjective, aliēnus means, “belonging to others, unnatural, unusual...strange, unfriendly, unsympathetic, unfavorable, inappropriate, incompatible, distasteful, repugnant,” while, as a noun, it means, “person or slave belonging to another person, foreigner, stranger, outsider.”

The word has clearly maintained its disparaging qualities and implications, even when directed towards organisms from a different planet. Since aliens are “the Other” par excellence, the depictions of their physical and mental attributes convey perceptions and anxieties about (encounters with) the Other. The intent of this project isn’t to insinuate that

every racist and bigoted viewpoint consists of an objectification of the Other; as the history of colonization and slavery reveals, it is possible to acknowledge the humanity of the Other and still discriminate against and persecute them. This makes it even more important to understand how the process of Othering occurs. Science fiction can unflinchingly analyze this; the audience views a supposedly escapist narrative of encounters with the extreme foreign Other that interprets and comments upon those processes since it relies on their nuances. Much like the audience's obliviousness, this might not even be the intention unless it is interpreted and read correctly. As this project argues, the ways that aliens and alien encounters are presented in Science Fiction can be seen as allegorical representations for the transnational Other and their plights. Seen in this way, the genre becomes an outlet for critiques of the process of Othering, either within the cultural sphere or through legal framework (of citizenship, of nationalist imaginaries of identity, etc.).

While focusing on the marginalization of Latinos in the United States, Charles Ramírez Berg looks exclusively at the transnational aspect of extraterrestrial representation in his book *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*. In discussing the “Destructive Monster” version of the Other that he claims reigned over the 1950’s Golden Age of SF in films such as *Invaders of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *Invaders from Mars* (1953), he outlines the emergence of a different kind of Other: the “Sympathetic Alien.” Berg states that the “inversion of the clichéd Destructive Monster formula was firmly established by characters in the most successful SF films of all time: the Aliens in Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982)” (154). Distancing the aliens from the role of destroyers of civilizations, SF narratives began to show them in a friendlier light while also giving the aliens more anthropomorphic characteristics, allowing the audience to willingly make the association that human-like qualities can be

equated with goodness as well as, subversively, allowing humanity's own inadequacies to be observed out in the open in contrast to the "distasteful" Other.

Due to this increasingly anthropomorphized depiction of the SF Other, Berg makes the claim that "extraterrestrial films are a culturally unconscious means of working out the whole question of immigration as it has emerged in the last several decades" (155). While it might not always be obvious, each representation of the alien becomes a signifier for the presence of something uncanny in society, understood in the Freudian sense of an uncomfortable feeling of fear and dread aroused by certain situations and scenarios. In his essay "The Uncanny," Freud looks at the literal translation of *unheimlich*—the unhomely—and comes to the conclusion that familiarity becomes unsettling when the familiar is presented as recognizable yet foreign, simultaneously.

The internal configuration of the uncanny, where the *heimlich* is both familiar and foreign, gestures towards the unconscious desires which are intimately familiar but, due to their repression in our psyche, are also strange. The familiarity of migrant and transnational figures to the majority is obvious as they are humans as well; yet, this obvious connection also causes the extreme reaction as there are aspects of the Other that are unknown and unfamiliar. Rather than acknowledge the familiar aspects, the urge to repress the desire to know the unknown wins out and the resulting attitude is fear and inhibition. The ways in which migrants and transnational figures in general are viewed and received become reflected in the ways aliens are depicted as the unknown and mysterious Other. The aliens are the unfamiliar due to their celestial origins yet recognizable because of the indefensible treatment they receive from the established populations. Finally, the combination of these emotions makes the situations inadvertently attractive and curiously terrifying for the average audience.

In accordance with the law of the United States of America, alien is still a label given to the Other, naming the Otherness and categorizing it into legal distinctions: it is any individual in the country that does not have citizenship. A “legal alien” is anyone that is in the country legally, whether visiting or legal permanent residents. This label is broken down into two different sections: a “nonresident alien” is anyone visiting for travel, business, medical procedures, etc., and a “resident alien” is a noncitizen that has permanent residency status in the country. An “enemy alien” is a noncitizen coming from an enemy country and an “illegal alien” or “undocumented alien” is an individual who is in the country without the knowledge of the government, whether through illegal migration or having fallen out of status due to an expiration date, etc. pervasive

Marking a human being as an alien suggests that their differences from the majority, no matter how mundane or indecipherable, distinguishes them as the unfamiliar Other, which the major population then perceives as a fundamental, essential, and threatening difference. However, some, or even most, SF narratives depict aliens as more evolved, efficient, and in some cases, more humane than the humans themselves. This can invoke the uncanny attitude towards the aliens and allows for the possible understanding of the narrative, as well as the alien’s signification, as an observation on human societies rather than simply displaying a narrative unrelated to the audience’s reality. Prejudice towards the Other can either be cemented or shaken by understanding the allegorical potential of SF narratives. By putting certain political situations in an obscure landscape, the moral arguments can begin to override the initial bias.

A film depicting and supporting blatant prejudice would be problematic for any audience, including even those who themselves foster the same racist and ethnocentric views. Openly racist rhetoric is shamed and hushed by the mainstream media and population even though



currents of the same attitude flow strongly throughout the society. Attitudes of racially motivated hate and violence have become more prominent and publicly depicted in the United States since the rise of Donald Trump as a politician. However, that isn't to say that those sentiments didn't already exist, just that his election functions as a symptom of the explicitly xenophobic rhetoric's rise. According to *Observer* on December 5, 2016, "The [New York] police department revealed today that the city has witnessed a 115 percent increase in bias crimes since President-elect Donald Trump triumphed over Hillary Clinton" and that "hate crimes are up 35 percent for all of 2016 compared to the year prior" with the most intense increase being "in the weeks since November 8: 43 incidents, in contrast to 20 during the same period of 2015" (2016).

One man in the public eye with xenophobic rhetoric is enough to inspire public declarations of hidden, already established beliefs with widespread acts of hate, suggesting that little provocation is needed to inspire that mentality to feel substantiated and supported enough to bring their platform to the general public as a legitimate point of view. In order to remain politically correct, the swastikas and hate speech are not defended by any mainstream media, yet the symbols of racism and hatred continue to appear because that mentality is still alive and thriving within the country, now fostered by the rhetoric of POTUS. Trump has morphed the substantiated outrage towards Islamic terrorism groups into an excuse for prejudice against the Muslim populations in general; due to his position of inherent power, he has Otherized and dehumanized one specific religion as the faceless enemy. This has been accepted by part of the nation as well as inspired a passionate and disgusted response from the opposing party. This disparity in mentalities is portrayed side by side in SF without being overtly political if the trope of the alien is utilized. Rather than simply displaying the Earthly politics that the audience is already aware of and biased towards, those same dynamics can

be disguised under the guise of a celestial adventure without showing any blatant bias towards the situation. The extraterrestrial narrative can then be seen as an outlet as well as an exposé of certain sentiments; it is up to the audience and the critics to uncover these tensions and connotations.

Two films are discussed in this project: Steven Spielberg's 1982 smash hit *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* and Neill Blomkamp's 2009 successful film *District 9*. Both films contain narratives that relate certain aspects and attitudes that the immigrant, refugee, and other transnational figures experience. While each film functions as an allegory in and of itself, *E.T.* does so on a perhaps subconscious level as it is not a blatant depiction of the trials and tribulations that can plague the transnational individual but an in-depth look at the character of E.T. and his particularity; the alien figure functions in the family friendly narrative in such a way that elicits sympathy and subsequent joy at the culmination of the film while also making it possible to view the film in an apolitical fashion. *District 9*, however, is much more blatant and the politics of the city of Johannesburg and directly related through the dynamics of the alien "prawns" and the government's attempts to control and remove them. While they differ greatly from one another, both films make a statement on the treatment of the Other and the ways in which foreign entities are perceived and treated by the already established citizenry.

In the first chapter, I examine *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, which depicts an alien being accidentally deserted by his ship who then becomes attached to a young boy, Elliot. The two forge a strong connection while they try to find a way for E.T. to "phone home" and be rescued before the pursuing government force catches him. Upholding the standard, happy, crowd-pleasing ending, E.T. returns home while each of the characters watches with joy. He is shown to be amazingly similar to humans in his physical characteristics as well as mental,

even watching television, raiding the refrigerator and slowly picking up bits of the language to communicate, which is the only language the audience hears him utter. It is not a question of whether or not E.T. will assimilate into what is portrayed to be an upper class white culture, but if the culture will accept him once he is done. The United States of America has continuously tried to have the appearance of a welcoming, friendly nation towards immigrants and refugees alike; the Statue of Liberty alone says as much. However, this is not reality and the constant debates on borders, the strict immigration and citizenship laws, and the treatment given to refugees and immigrants make this blatantly clear. The so-called “Cuban Crime Wave” of the early 1980s and the stereotype then forced upon Cuban immigrants is a clear example of this inhospitable mentality. Regardless, it is the congenial and openhearted image of the nation that *E.T.* attempts to depict and be situated in.

E.T. first comes upon a single parent household that is still able to afford a large house as well as any commodity that the characters could desire. The American dream, while making a statement on upward mobility, is also mainly concerned with the acquisition of goods and egregious consumerism. The family the alien finds becomes a clear example of this widely depicted “goal” that inspires much of the immigration that occurs, yet in order to sustain their status as the successful American family, the foreign Other cannot stay. The ending leaves the mother of the family potentially finding a romantic connection to the man who was pursuing E.T. throughout the film, Elliot forms friendships and becomes accepted by his peers, and, most importantly, E.T. returns home with his own “kind” in the original ship that he arrived in. The happy ending is achieved through a re-normalization of the character’s landscape: the Other is returned to his kind and like individuals are left together. The trope of the alien displayed the disruption of the norm through a minority infiltration that is resolved

in the family-friendly fashion of living happily ever after, but only with others of the same make and model.

While this is a fictional account of an alien being constantly pursued by a faceless yet constantly antagonizing force due to his outsider status, it is important to consider the ways in which this occurs to individuals dealing with these types of anxieties in their real life. “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant,” published by *The New York Times Magazine* on June 22, 2011, follows the narrator from his teenage years up to his present adulthood while he navigates through a nation that doesn’t accept him but is still his only home. By analyzing the autobiographical account of Jose Antonio Vargas, important similarities to the film are highlighted while the sugar coated aspects are drawn out, and the dehumanization that occurs in the nation supposedly built by immigrants is spotlighted. His piece shows that, rather than having a home to return to in order to appease the citizens as well as the demands of the nation, many already find themselves living in the country they feel is their home yet they find themselves not accepted or wanted by that exact same nation.

Moving on from *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* to a film that was released close to thirty years later and set on a different continent, I examine the 2009 film *District 9* in the second chapter of this thesis. Similar sentiments towards the reception of the foreign Other and the degradation that occurs is depicted in the second film, showing that, not only have these mentalities and attitudes persisted over the decades, but they are also not limited to one specific region or people. Blomkamp’s *District 9* was released in 2009 and the history of a post-apartheid Johannesburg, and South Africa in general, is palpable in the picture and is pertinent to fully understanding the film. This connection between the two versions of Johannesburg necessitates questions of time and the way that memory and identity are

effected, which Jorge Luis Borges' short stories, "In Memoriam, J.F.K." and "The Other" elucidates on.

A large group of aliens, nicknamed "prawns" by the locals, end up stranded on their ship over a post-apartheid Johannesburg, where they are placed into cheap, slum-like living conditions. As tensions rise between the prawns and the humans living in the area, a governing agency decides to evict the prawns using whatever force is deemed necessary. The main character, Wikus, begins as one of the heads of this agency only to come into contact with a foreign liquid that causes his transformation into a prawn. The agency begins to hunt Wikus, eventually losing to him and his newfound prawn brethren. Keith Wagner, a Film Studies and Social Theory scholar, goes into the implications this makes on the history of Johannesburg in exhaustive detail, citing the forceful eviction that resulted in violence of the district 6 residents in 1982, the majority being made up of black and refugee individuals, as the inspiration for this analogous film. The attitude that was taken in post-apartheid Johannesburg towards the refugees and black citizens is mirrored in the treatment given to the prawns and their situation.

While *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* was formulated to be a lighthearted narrative for the enjoyment of the audience, *District 9* forces the problematic politics of immigration and segregation into the forefront of the narrative where it becomes impossible for the audience to avoid it. Instead of being extremely anthropomorphized with innocent intent and desire in order to be adored by the audience, the physical representation of the aliens is more insect, crustacean-like that then leads to the label of "prawn" that they are so ungraciously given, and at no point do they attempt to use the language of their oppressors. These stark contrasts as well as the mentality of the government and citizens towards the prawns make this film a more realistic representation of the ways in which refugees and minorities are treated in

certain societies throughout the globe. It is the transformation of Wikus, the main character, into a prawn, that facilitates the larger considerations of identity, inclusion, and the ethics of government-sanctioned violence on specific groups of individuals.

These different aspects are addressed in the film while continuously referencing, albeit inconspicuously, the events that took place in the city's history. The fictional narrative of aliens being forced to stay on Earth and treated as cumbersome objects rather than sentient beings is intermingled with certain nonfictional realities during the post-apartheid era of South Africa. As a way to interrogate the merging of fictional and nonfictional realities in *District 9*, I compare the representation of aliens in South Africa with some of the labyrinthine realities depicted in the fiction of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges—in particular, “The Other,” and “In Memoriam, J.F.K.” The legendary author often conflates fiction and nonfiction in his intricate narratives that often make broad statements on different characteristics and proclivities of humanity and time as a whole. As the film has such solid roots in the events that occurred in 1982, and through the documentary style that is used, time can be seen in a spiral formation rather than linear as the moments of the past are reiterated but through a slight veil of disparity that creates the allegorical representation. By bringing in the two Borges' short stories, this complicated formation of time can be postulated on and the repercussions this has on the formation of identity, and the ways that violent aesthetics and oppression contribute to that formation, are seen in more than one context.

While the two films are diverse in their approaches towards describing the experience of the foreign Other and the ways in which they are perceived and treated, both make it clear that issues of dehumanization and repressive mentalities are more apparent than perhaps previously thought by those privileged enough to not experience it. This is a conclusion drawn out of *E.T.* with this analysis and not necessarily anticipated by the creators as its own

ending subversively undermines the imagined inclusivity of the United States. Meanwhile, *District 9* makes it clear that its intent is to expose the inhumanity of these dynamics yet it still depicts a certain immigrant nationality in stereotypical and offensive ways. Both films are problematic in their own ways, destabilizing what can be seen as their original statement, yet this functions as a performance of the inherent difficulties and complications in attempting to change the ways in which foreign Others have been treated and perceived.

## Chapter 1

### **The Intricacies of Phoning Home: *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* and the American Dream**

Steven Spielberg's 1982 smash hit *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* is based on an alien becoming fast friends with a young boy and his siblings while he struggles to "phone home" and return to his native planet. While *E.T.* appears to be a lighthearted family film, its protagonist's experience recalls the harrowing journey faced by immigrants and refugees around the world. *E.T.* is a sentient being stranded in a foreign land, attempting on his own to assimilate to the local culture and learn an unfamiliar language and customs while constantly hounded by officials trying to oust and procure him. Furthermore, at various points in the film, E.T.'s status as a sentient being is questioned and, at times, denied. His situation is made worse by the fact that he doesn't fit into any existing category of sentience that the individuals in the film are aware of. Experiences of refugees, exiles, and other immigrants who also leave their native land, whether by force or choice, mirror E.T.'s journey. They cross national borders into what can seem like a different world: they quite literally become aliens on their own planet. Given this parallel, *E.T.* becomes a lens through which 1980s America's attitudes and anxieties regarding migrant Others become visible. While this is not to suggest that the film makes this correlation consciously, these attitudes can be read in the film by closely analyzing different aspects while considering nonfictional accounts of the migrant Other's experiences.

*E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* does not seem to be the only attempt to depict this trope of the immigrant Other in the 1980's through animals or alien life forms. In fact, it appears to have possibly inspired and paved the way for other narratives displaying this trope through a family friendly diegesis. *An American Tail*, an animated film released in 1986, utilizes the same anthropomorphic tactics as it follows Fievel Mousekewitz, a young Ukrainian-Jewish



mouse, as he and his family emigrate from Russia to The United States. However, the family is split up and Fievel is left on his own to traverse through the foreign land, meeting immigrant mice from other countries, while avoiding the cats who play the role of the immigration authority, constantly threatening and pursuing the immigrant mice. Depicting the undocumented immigrant narrative in a much more straightforward manner than *E.T.*, which perhaps accounts for the extreme success of *E.T.* as it doesn't make that aspect clear or, perhaps, is not even aware of it, the film still has the happy ending that allows it to be embraced by families and children.

Another example of an anthropomorphized Other narrative that takes a more realistic approach while still utilizing animal characters depicts an extremely sobering and horrific moment in humanity's past. Inspired by his own interviews with his father about his life during World War II, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* was released in 1991 but began as a serial that lasted throughout the 1980s. The novel depicts cats as the Nazi soldiers who hunted the Jewish populations, who are then personified in the narrative as mice. While focusing on the fascist and anti-Semitic regime, Spiegelman anthropomorphizes a common predator and prey relationship in order to depict the horrific reality of the Holocaust.

The show *ALF* was first broadcasted in 1986, four years after *E.T.* was released. Gordon Shumway is a friendly extraterrestrial that crash lands into the home of the middle-class, suburban Tanner family, who later accepts him as a member of the family and vulgarly nickname him ALF, an acronym for Alien Life Form. The similarities to *E.T.* are obvious, as both are extra-terrestrials hunted by an aggressive anti-alien agency and then given shelter by affluent and suburban Caucasian families. However, *ALF* does not have a happy ending; Gordon is arrested and captured by the agency who then presumably torture and murder him.

As problematic and abrupt as this ending is, as well as the behavior of the alien and the degrading ALF nickname used throughout, it can be seen as a more effective representation of the trials and tribulations that refugees and immigrants can be subjected to. This is not to say that a common ending for those individuals includes torture and murder, but that these aspects of the show invoke sympathy and understandable rage against the inhumane treatment often experienced by migrant Others. This differs from the narrative presented in *E.T.* where the Other returns home unharmed, therefore invoking the sigh of relief and reassuring the audience that happy endings are always achievable, especially in suburban America.

As discussed in the introduction, Berg notes that depictions of aliens consistently follow the “Destructive Monster” formula, where the extra-terrestrial Other is a negative force whose actions include, but are not limited to, murder, destruction, attempts to annihilate entire planets and species, etc. However, he makes the claim that Spielberg introduced a new alien depiction through *E.T.*: the “Sympathetic Alien” that allows the audience to sympathize and even like the celestial Other. *An American Tail* and *ALF* were then, perhaps, inspired by this new take on the Other, allowing the audience to feel emotionally connected to and eventually rooting for the welfare of the Other, disguised as a cute mouse or loveable alien. In contrast, *Scarface*, an iconic and highly successful gangster film from the same period, also documented immigrant narratives, but in destructive and brutally violent ways. The destructive mentality of Tony Montana, the main character, allows him to function as an anti-hero of sorts for young men via his problematic hyper masculinity, and therefore acting as a negative presentation of immigrants. This is a negative stereotype that was prevalent in the U.S. in the 1980s, as the increase of Cuban immigrants began what was called the Cuban crime wave. This film perpetuates those categorizations by showing the immigrant as a

ruthless criminal. Each of these popular examples, as well as the many other immigrant narratives of the 1980s, show a preoccupation with the trope during the 1980's and a possible response to the phenomenal success of *E.T.*

The 1982 classic film opens in a California forest where a group of aliens are shown collecting samples of plants to take back to their ship, which is filled with several samples of exotic flora unknown to Earth. The aliens leave one of their own behind when they are forced to quickly depart after government agents arrive. The film cuts to the suburban home of a ten year old boy, Elliot, trying to fit in and hang out with his older brother and his friends. Bullied into going outside to pick up the delivery pizza, he hears a noise coming from the tool shed. Thinking the noises are coming from his dog, he throws a ball into the shed only to have it quickly thrown back at him. Even though his family doesn't believe that Elliot actually saw an alien, he leaves a trail of Reese's Pieces into his house and ultimately lures the alien into his room using this tactic. He quickly realizes the alien means no harm as he begins to mimic Elliot's behavior. The young boy becomes so intrigued that he fakes an illness to stay home from school and be with the alien, showing him his toys and trying to explain his world and culture to his new friend.

When Michael and Gertie, his siblings, discover the alien, the kids all agree to keep it a secret and hide him from their mother. As they spend more time with the alien, they learn more about him while the connection between him and Elliot continues to strengthen. The next day at school, while the alien roams around his house and samples human food, including several Coors beers, Elliot begins to show signs of intoxication and frees the frogs from his science class that were meant for dissection in a dramatic scene, displaying the extreme psychic connection between the two. Through the constant proliferation of media and societal relics, such as the television shows, cartoons, and toys, the alien begins to utter

phrases in English, like “Phone home,” and Elliot eventually names him E.T. after the alien watches Gertie try to learn her ABC’s from an educational toy.

Elliot, his brothers, and the friends from the beginning of the film take E.T. out on Halloween with a makeshift phone that he uses, successfully, to phone home and make contact with his ship. However, Elliot wakes up sick and alone the next morning in the woods. His brother eventually finds E.T. who is also sick. The two lay together, essentially dying, when the children’s mother finds them. Her response is dramatic but cut short as government agents arrive at the house in search of the alien. The scientists set up a makeshift hospital at the house where Elliot begins to recover as it appears that E.T. passes away, only to make an unprecedented recovery. The crew of young boys helps E.T. escape from the agents and take him to the woods. As his ship appears in the woods to take him home, Elliot’s little sister, his mother, and a government agent who it is assumed becomes romantically involved with the single mother all arrive in time to watch Elliot and E.T. say goodbye. As the ship takes off, a rainbow appears in the sky and they all, presumably, live happily ever after.

*E.T.’s* plotline provides a certain narrative of relating to the Other that is compatible with the American national imaginary as the benevolent, welcoming world power. As such, it displays the treatment foreigners and immigrants receive in the country through rose-colored glasses. Inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, the iconic statue that has come to represent the United States of America, there is a plaque with a section of Emma Lazarus’ poem, “The New Colossus,” that reads, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” This is an embodiment of the relationship to immigrants that the country imagines itself as having: a welcoming nation made of “civilized” and peaceful immigrants who, through meaningful connections, can be assimilated and helped. The

“American Dream” is the iconic idea of starting out penniless, and through perseverance, hard work, and a dash of luck, being able to procure the white picket fence, the house, the cars, and the family, all of which signify success and happiness. As the national ethos of the U.S., the American Dream defines the country through consumerism, allowing the immigrants and citizens to “breathe free(ly)” (Lazarus) through upward mobility and the acquisitions of goods.

This is the United States that *E.T.* attempts to depict. Even though the family that fosters the alien is a single parent household, they still live very comfortably with every imagined commodity. Elliot and his whole family protect and accept E.T., fulfilling the sentiment on the Statue of Liberty’s plaque. However, the film also makes a realistic and sobering statement on the attitude towards the Other in the U.S.: while it is a morale boost to help and save the unfortunate Other, it is really best for everyone involved when they go back to where they came from. Immigration is consistently debated in government and politics, tedious and extensive laws are in place to make the citizenship process arduous and invasive, and large factions of the established citizenry view foreigners and refugees as subhuman and unworthy of living in *their* country. This is the reality that lurks behind *ET*’s palatable plot, most evident through the faceless agents hunting *ET*.

The reality that the film forefronts is idealistic and comforting to the audience, who came out in droves to see it, perhaps for this exact reason. The film became an instant success after its release on June 11, 1982. According to Box Office Mojo, it opened at number one, clearing \$11,000,000, and maintained that position for six weeks. Overall, the film stayed in the top ten for over seven months and grossed over \$350,000,000 during its theatrical run (Box Office Mojo). While E.T. can be seen as the immigrant experiencing understandable difficulties in a place of exile, his narrative is told through a lens of privilege and prosperity

that makes it easily digestible by audiences, unlike more “irksome” narratives of refugees’ experiences.

It is immediately clear that E.T. has found himself in an affluent, upper class neighborhood. He is seduced into a large suburban home with Reese’s Pieces, a candy that the child casually has access to, led up to the second floor into Elliot’s room that is complete with a large table for toys, shelves filled with commodities, and a walk in closet the size of the average hallway. However, it is not just the socioeconomic status of the children who assist E.T. that allows his narrative to be accepted and beloved by audiences; his appearance assists in distracting the audience from his very real position as the Other. About the size of an adolescent, the alien has two feet, two hands, two eyes, a red, beating heart, and, most importantly, Caucasian-toned skin – all features that are shared with the children who take him in as well as what can be seen as the targeted demographic, following an all too familiar convention of using whiteness as a marker of positive, benign attributes.

The fact that E.T. is a fictional species of alien that, ostensibly, the audience could never actually come into contact with provides a sense of security, but, had he been depicted in a much darker shaded skin-tone, he would start to resemble the *actual* Other pushed to the margins and stereotyped by this very audience. This would presumably shatter their sense of security in the fictitious world of *E.T.* Not only does E.T. land in an extremely fortunate situation that allows his transition to be cushioned in a suburban sanctuary, his anthropomorphized appearance is intrinsically privileged to ensure the comfort and acceptance of the audience. This inadvertent privilege reveals the lack of acceptance certain immigrants and refugees experience: their skin tone alone, even as humans, makes them the more feared and disliked Other when compared to a non-human being with white skin.

However anthropomorphic E.T.'s appearance is, the opening scene makes his status as the alien Other undeniable. The movie opens with the spaceship that houses E.T. and his comrades. The presence of the ship is given a domineering, eerie quality: the metal structure is studded with lights that flash and windows that showcase a flickering, mysterious light. It is slowly revealed behind the trees of the forest while the ominous soundtrack creates suspense. Revealing the ship slowly by panning the camera behind the forestation begins the distinction between foreign and native, allowing the vessel of the unfamiliar to only be seen through the gaps of the indigenous trees. The plants that are shown inside the cabin are uncanny: lamp size mushrooms glowing in the dark, small black cones emitting a lava-thick liquid, and what appears to be moss covered tree trunks expelling a frothy substance with all of this covered in a layer of thick fog. Each of these items look somewhat familiar to the average U.S. viewer but with a few alterations, allowing this audience the privilege of even the strange and unfamiliar being resembled after their own environment.

The audience is introduced to E.T. while he is on mission from the spacecraft trying to uproot a small tree while a rabbit, notoriously skittish in the wild, calmly watches within close proximity. The two exist in harmony, suggesting to the audience that E.T. is a peaceful, sympathetic being. Collecting samples of vegetation is the assumed goal of the visitors: world domination, genocide of the planet, and other heinous motivations are absent from the portrayal of the small, waddling beings. This differs from the "Destructive Monster" formula that Berg claims Spielberg, through his depiction of E.T., inverted to firmly establish the trope of the "Sympathetic Alien." Rather than coming to Earth in attempts to conquer the planet or destroy/enslave its inhabitants like the "Destructive Monster," E.T. is shown behaving peacefully and without malice, allowing the audience to feel compassion and connect with him as the "Sympathetic Alien."

However, while E.T. is the epitome of this alien formula for those well-versed in the discourses and experiences of colonialism, his desire to “peacefully study” Earth might still raise some red flags. After all, the pursuit of knowledge through objectification of foreign entities as something to be studied and tested has its own violent implications and histories. This same behavior and objective directed towards sentient beings, such as human beings or animals, easily transgresses and violates the rights of the individual. This can be seen as foreshadowing, as this gaze is shifted to E.T. when he is pursued and captured by the government agents. Nevertheless, in keeping with the family friendly tone of the film, the aliens’ objectives are posited as inherently civilized and peaceful.

If a destructive monster is seen in the film at all, it is in the form of the humans pursuing the alien. E.T. sees the skyline and looks out at it in a revered silence that is only interrupted by the loud approach of a pickup truck with blaring headlights. These “natural” inhabitants contradict the visitors in direct ways: the lights of their vehicles do not falter or flicker, imposing a false sun on the surroundings; their leather shoes trample through the woods and land loudly in puddles rather than calmly traversing the environment; and they are only depicted onscreen through their tool belts and other instruments, suggesting they do not rely on their own appendages for their work.

The newly arrived men are mainly depicted on the screen with close-up shots of their groins: one in particular is shown several times throughout the film with a thick leather belt and an intimidating set of keys gathered on a key ring hanging from his belt loop while he carries a flashlight or another piece of equipment that assists in the job of enforcing order. This constant focus is a direct infliction of attempted dominance in the diegesis of the film: in the world of this narrative, the anonymous troupe in constant search of the exotic visitor is given the role of the enforcer in the hierarchy. The men in the trucks are to be feared,



respected, and avoided at all costs. Their role is immediately apparent and throughout the film they serve as the constant reminder that there is unrest in the plot, that there is an authority that must be reckoned with and answered to, and that this authority does not view the visitor kindly. Their bright lights and environmental disregard facilitate their ability to stay anonymous for the large part of the film: no specific participant has his or her face revealed until the final episodes of the film and there is no dialogue up until that point either: they simply function as the constant imposing threat to E.T. and his mission.

In The United States, the term given to individuals in such a precarious state of existence is demeaning enough to reinforce the unwelcome attitude that is fostered by the authorities: aliens. As mentioned in the introduction, there are many different versions of this term and the way that they apply to the individual, but even the designation for those legally residing in the country is still a term that is also used to describe a specimen with origins off of this globe. Spielberg appears to take the alien designation literally, and the character on the run from aggressive forces is an actual, celestial alien. While E.T.'s rescuer, Elliot, does not realize he is on the run, he definitely realizes that his new acquaintance is much different from himself even before he successfully lures him into his bedroom. Before the figure of E.T. is made visible to any of the human characters in the narrative, Elliot alarms them to an outside presence when the ball gets rolled back to him from the shed. The altruistic, welcoming image that the nation wants for itself falls to pieces at this point: the first instinct of those inside is not to go out with food and water in an attempt to assist or help the new presence, but to grab knives and baseball bats to decimate any threat to their sense of security. This action introduces the attitude that this culture actually has towards outsiders: intolerance that is spawned by fear, ignorance, and ego.

Even Elliot is seen as an outsider in the perception of his brother and friends. Due to being younger than the other boys, he is chastised and left out of their games even though he asks multiple times to be included. He is seen as a subordinate, not quite fit enough to join in their revelry yet similar enough to where he feels he should be included. Promised a place in the game if he goes to pick up the pizza from the delivery boy, he goes outside and therefore crosses paths with E.T. and begins the plot of the film. Due to his inferior status, he is put in a situation that allows him access to the Other, who is then viewed even below him due to his initial lack of knowledge on the culture he has landed in and his status as a celestial alien, differing from the norm.

By landing in a suburban sanctuary that is akin to the stereotypical affluence expected of middle class Americans, what it means to be the Other in a westernized society is accentuated due to the dynamics of power and authority. The U.S. culture is defined in this film by the attainment of superfluous belongings, like the plethora of toys and figurines Elliot shows E.T. in his room, as well as the ability to exist under the guidelines given by the authoritative sector – for Elliot, this means obeying and meeting the social requirements of his brother and his friends, while for E.T., this means learning the language and customs in attempts to blend in and evade the pursuing authorities. This ability to coexist is contingent on finding some path to relate to those already existing within the hierarchy and power structure of the culture.

After being coerced out of the shed into Elliot's home with Reese's Pieces, E.T. is led by a candy trail to Elliot's gigantic room. Once inside, the relationship between the two begins to develop. Elliot immediately begins to realize that this mysterious "creature" is much more similar to himself than he first imagined, starting the psychic connection between the two. E.T. mimics Elliot's movements and Elliot stares in awe: Elliot scratches his head - E.T.

scratches his head, Elliot holds up his hand - E.T. holds up his hand: their sameness is being recognized, and this recognition begins to alleviate the anxiety that the young boy would otherwise feel about this clear representation of the Other. By seeing the capability of E.T. to perform functions just as Elliot does, he is able to see the potential of this foreign Other to assimilate: once this unfamiliar creature shows that he can comprehend movements and the action of mimicry, he shows that he can perform and act *just like* Elliot. The threat of the Other is still there, but the perceived peril begins to diminish through this telling act of appropriation.

This routine somehow instills a connection between the two that allows E.T.'s emotions to be portrayed through Elliot in what could be seen as a psychic connection. At the end of their mirror-like performance, a previously wide-awake Elliot begins to drowse off while standing at the same time that his new acquaintance begins to slowly close his eyes; this is the first sign of the somewhat supernatural connection between the two. As Elliot is a young boy that is first presented to the audience as an outsider, he is about the same size as the alien and maintains the same position as a character existing outside of social acceptance, making him the perfect support for E.T. Unable at first to communicate through the language of the inhabitants, E.T. finds an advocate in Elliot who already showed his willingness through the trail of candy and good intentions that led E.T. into his home. E.T.'s status as outsider puts him in a dangerous position, and it appears that he realizes that when he chooses a young, sensitive boy as his companion.

Elliot takes this role of advocate and caretaker on wholeheartedly, playing sick from school so he can take care and assess what he views as his new acquisition. Once freed from the closet, E.T.'s assimilation begins immediately as he is bombarded with a plethora of commodities and frivolous playthings that make up the majority of Elliot's room. He finds a

toy that looks like spilt Coke, “it’s a drink!” toy action figures that are listed off by name who “can even have wars,” a giant peanut that “holds money, it’s a piggy bank,” a Pez dispenser, and a fish bowl, where “fish eat the fish food, shark eats the fish, and no one eats the shark” (00:28:18-00:30:17). Already, without knowing it, Elliot is informing E.T. of the brutality of life on this planet and the distance that this suburban refuge has from that. He has candy sitting around for eating at his leisure, along with his own money that is put in a piggy bank. Material goods and monetary wealth are just more objects upon Elliot’s shelf for consumption. Rather than war being an actual concern, it is a game that is created for the enjoyment of the entitled boy. The food chain is explained through the guise of a toy shark that can catch the fish, but it is not a food chain that puts Elliot’s life in danger nor any sentient being that he recognizes as important. A concept as deadly as war is simply a game that he plays with his toy plastic soldiers, in contrast with the reality of war that millions on Earth experience. His entitlement and privilege shuts him off from the reality of what he portrays.

Rather than an introduction of Elliot followed by questions about E.T.’s situation, he first introduces E.T. to these cultural commodities. This is a depiction of what can be perceived as the American Dream; the young boy is surrounded by material goods that outline the world around him and is provided by his working parent. These commodities are, in a sense, meant to define Elliot and where he sees himself fitting, his imagined community. Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, in “Perspectives of Place, Exile, and Identity,” writes on imagined communities and the way that they develop. He states:

A person’s sentiment of collective identity tends to take shape during childhood and adolescence both in the home-space and through contact with public spheres. During this crucial period of life, when we do not control our environment (and lack

appropriate cognitive faculty to fully understand our surroundings), a person is presented a system of cultural symbols that are offered in such a way that they seem constant and perennial. The collective system of indicators creates an imaginary community of people who believe they share, among other things, experiences, beliefs, customs, histories, and sometimes ethnicity, religion, and language. (22)

Herlihy-Mera (2011) makes it clear that collective identity and the communities with which an individual identifies are shaped during childhood and adolescence, making the social and cultural relics obtained and perceived during this period some of the most important developmental tools for the individual. Referencing Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities (1983) and its effects on nationalism, the ability of these symbols to mark individuals as insiders or outsiders is apparent. Elliot attempts to replicate this process for the extra-terrestrial: he offers E.T. relics of his culture, or "cultural symbols," as a way to portray his identity. The individuals that those toys and candies were made for stretch across age brackets, races, and nationalities, but it takes a specific socioeconomic class to be able to afford them.

However, to Elliot, this plethora of commodities is simply how life is on Earth for everyone, and, in order to assimilate the alien and chip away at the disparity between the two, E.T. must become acquainted with them. These commodities are first on Elliot's list. It isn't until E.T. tries to eat the toy car that he realizes the visitor may have needs, such as hunger or thirst, that outweigh looking at his toys. If Herlihy-Mera is correct, this proclivity for showing off his toys in order to relate his world to the outsider makes sense. Elliot sees these symbols as the only way to "save" E.T.: rather than grabbing knives and bats like his brother's friends, he attempts to share these objects with E.T. so that they may culturally

share them, which would make E.T. part of his imagined community where threats are nonexistent. Much like the welcoming savior relationship with foreign individuals that the country desires to be known for, Elliot dangles the American Dream in front of E.T. in an attempt to conform him to the affluent culture's expectations.

Introducing E.T. to these relics requires Elliot to translate his world to E.T., both culturally and linguistically. As explained above, Elliot encounters the difficulties of intercultural translation when E.T begins to eat his toys, but language presents another challenge. Elliot attempts to introduce his world in the only language he knows - English. He tries to translate in the same way that many people do without realizing it – talking louder and slower in the same language with the hopes that it was only an issue of pitch and speed that was creating the language barrier. He continues to tell E.T. to “See. Do you see? See?” (00:27:32-00:30:17). Explaining through his own language isn't enough: as an unwitting member of the affluent middle class, he wants E.T. to not only hear his language, but see it through his entitled view of the world and what it has to offer, reinforcing that his way is better than any perceived alternative. Before E.T. is introduced to Elliot's brother, Elliot makes his older brother, Michael, swear that he has “absolute power,” over him and, possibly, over E.T. as well (00:32:00-00:33:20). In an attempt for upward mobility within his imagined community, a trait praised by the ideology of American success, Elliot uses his acquisition of the alien as a bargaining tool for more power and prestige. Elliot has finally moved up in the social structure since he has found a member of a class lower than him, an individual not from there and not accustomed to the lifestyle. The first chance he gets to show this to another in the system, he does and he does so with the intention of boosting his own self esteem.

One of the first things that Elliot tells his brother after bringing E.T. into view is, “I’m keeping him” (00:31:43-00:35:10). Just like one of the toy figurines lining Elliot’s shelves, E.T. turns into another commodity for his collection and gratification. Elliot disregards the revelation of the previous night, seeing E.T. mirror his own movements, and simply sees him as another possession to acquire. When his little sister sees E.T. and eventually overcomes her shock, she asks, “What is it? Is it a boy or girl? Does he wear clothes?” To make sense of this living being in front of her, she immediately tries to delegate and label him to fit him in to the social constructs of her culture. “Is he a bear? A pig?” (00:35:10-00:36:23). She cannot fathom any explanation that does not include and operate within her concept of reality. What could be written off as a child’s innocent ignorance also becomes an example of the subtle attitudes towards outsiders that subversively upholds the blissful diegesis of the film; unintended dehumanization is not only acceptable but a natural instinct in an attempt to order and understand the world. Unable to find a fitting designation for him within their system, he remains a mystery.

While the growing connection between the two is supposed to denote sympathy between the characters, it can be deconstructed and presented not as a form of communication but as an expression of assimilation. Throughout the movie, Elliot moves from claiming “I’m keeping him” (00:31:43-00:35:10), to asking E.T. to “stay. You can be happy here. We can grow old together”(1:10:13-1:11:05). This shift occurs throughout the movie, but most tellingly in a scene in the middle of the film. Elliot goes to school and E.T. stays at the house with the dog. E.T. begins to wander through his new surroundings and ends up in the kitchen. Opening the fridge, E.T. finds premade potato salad that he throws away in disgust. It could be assumed that he is showing signs of the privilege that he has landed in by deeming the food as unsuitable for him, but it is also critical to consider that, in E.T.’s native home, food

shortages could have not been an issue or substances resembling potato salad were simply inedible.

E.T. then finds a 6-pack of beer that is clearly labeled “Coors Banquet,” and begins to chug it, finishing one off and moving to the next. Meanwhile, Elliot is in a class where he is supposed to dissect a frog, but he begins to exhibit signs of drunkenness: belching and acting fatigued while also looking at an attractive female student and creepily leering. This sort of behavior is not uncommon after drinking alcohol, but it is not Elliot who drank the Coors, but E.T., who only slightly behaves a little off after consuming the alcohol. Elliot is still performing as E.T.’s human projection screen, translating his behavior in ways that are understandable in the culture where the narrative takes place. Even though the behavior isn’t exactly praised in boys of Elliot’s age, it is a sign of E.T.’s developing assimilation and is therefore depicted in a comical manner that seems to connote an approval of the situation from the narrative and the culture in general.

While drinking the beer that affects Elliot so dramatically, E.T. watches television and looks startled at the violence in cartoons but also sees cartoons of spacemen and their ships with dialogue of saving those in distress and going home. Back in Elliot’s class, the teacher informs the students that the first order of dissection is to “locate the heart. Notice that it is still beating”(00:45:24-00:45:52). He then puts a chloroform soaked cotton ball in a jar with the frog and instructs the students to watch the frogs “slowly go to sleep, they don’t feel anything, it doesn’t hurt,” and they are told to “look away if it bothers” them (00:46:50-00:47:24), at which point Elliot looks at his frog and sees the likeness of E.T. in the frantic frog’s eyes. This, and possibly the alcohol-induced stupor he felt, inspires him to run around and release all of the frogs in a frantic last minute decision while screaming, “Save him! Run! Run back to the forest! I wanna save you! I gotta let him go!”(00:48:50-00:49:25).



Suddenly, when looking at the frog, he views the helpless creatures as living, breathing, feeling specimens. E.T. inspires him to recognize what he once failed to see as anything but the faceless Other now as a sentient being that deserves more than a rudimentary execution and dissection. It appears that Elliot is embracing an idea of diversity that emulates the notion of the U.S. as a country of immigrants that function peacefully together.

The connection between the topic that E.T. was watching on the television and the sudden altruism of Elliot's actions is easy to see. E.T. sees the theme of people wanting to go home, to return to their original habitats, while Elliot sees frogs with eyes eerily similar to E.T. that are also away from their origins, stuck in jars that will presumably witness their last moments of existence. He has become attached to what originally elicited fear and anxiety due to its mysterious nature. What was once viewed as a foreign individual never to be understood has now crossed the line of Other and become an active participant in Elliot's life and emotions, emphasizing the redundancy and fallibility of the notion of the Other as something to be feared and avoided when even minor interactions indicate unavoidable similarities. The response that this conversion elicits from Elliot is a subversion of the status quo.

Another important aspect of this scene to evaluate is the usage of product placement present within the film. Newell, Salmon, and Chang, in their 2006 article, "The Hidden History of Product Placement," discuss how the obvious promotion of Hershey's Reese's Pieces in the film greatly increased the sales of the candy and how it started to be seen as a shining moment and restart of product placement in films. They assert, "Reese's Pieces was not the only brand appearing in the movie. E.T. drinks Coors beer, builds a space communicator using Reynolds Wrap, and is offered a Coke, while Skippy, Pizza Hut, Raid, and Fresca all make cameos" (589). V8 is also seen in the fridge when E.T. is reaching for

the beer. The film uses household items of American and western culture to allow for a setting that the audience is already familiar and comfortable with, making E.T.'s ability to transcend the boundary of Other appear to be easier if not certain.

The culmination of this attempted transcendence begins after Halloween and their journey to allow E.T. to "phone home." Elliot wakes up sick and without E.T., who is later discovered dying next to a drain in the outskirts of the forest by Michael, who brings him back to the house. E.T. and Elliot are both sick with a seemingly horrific yet unknown condition that is never explained, and it is assumed that they are dying while the pursuing force catches up with them. The manner in which the authority is introduced in this capacity is not without dramatics: a line of them is shot walking up a hill in the middle of the road with the sun setting behind them while what sounds like a doomsday soundtrack plays in the background. The men in the space suits breathe just like Darth Vader and their movements are restricted and uncomfortable. This depiction has the same effect on the audience as the previous faceless yet imposing portrayals of the agents did, immediately making them appear to be the enemy and the cause of underlying sentiments of anxiety over being discovered.

When the agents force the family to leave E.T., he wails and cries for his friends to not leave him alone. One man in a space suit walks towards a sick and dying E.T. who then heartbreakingly reaches towards him and whimpers, "home," because of the cartoon he had seen earlier. The sympathy felt by the audience for the suffering alien reaches its pinnacle as they want to tell the imposing characters that he's not *that kind* of alien, proving his assimilation to be complete in the eyes of the audience as they uphold the distinction between aliens to love and aliens to kick out, similar to the distinctions that are made about certain factions of immigrants and transnational individuals. By playing into the way media portrays spacemen, E.T. fell for the gimmick of the helpful spaceman only to be quarantined and

nursed to what appears to be his death. E.T.'s health continues to falter while Elliot's health rapidly recovers; making it appear that E.T. sacrificed himself for the boy to live. This surrender by the Other only continues to play into the hierarchical power structure previously discussed, where E.T.'s existence raises Elliot to a higher level of importance and decreases his status as the outsider since he's not as different as the alien is.

However, what can be seen as E.T.'s surrender for Elliot's sake does not end up being permanent. Elliot tells E.T., with no small amount of melodrama, "you must be dead, because I don't know how to feel. I can't feel anything anymore" (1:32:19-1:33:51). The connection between the two has dissipated and the loss of the joined emotions leaves Elliot no longer feeling comfortable in the status he used to have. Continuing to talk to the supposedly dead E.T., Elliot tells him that he loves him. At this point, E.T.'s chest begins to glow red and he miraculously wakes up and starts chanting, "Phone home! Phone home! Phone, phone, phone, phone"(1:34:00-1:35:13), to the point of almost being discovered again. However, he escapes with the help of Elliot, his brother, and his friends but with the agency close on their tails.

Once they arrive at the correct spot in the forest, E.T. says his goodbyes as the main man from the agency actually arrives before E.T. boards his space ship. At this point, however, the agent has nothing else to say: he simply watches as E.T. prepares to leave. True to the immigration agency comparison, the man does not have any issue with the outsider anymore now that he is getting ready to leave. The red glowing orb in his chest continues through all of this and right before he begins to say goodbye to Elliot, his chest is zoomed in on and the glowing orb is very clearly a bright, red heart beating. The red glowing of the chest was present in the beginning of the film; however it was a blurry glow that lightened the chest but did not have real distinction. If one considers the line from the dissection scene where the

teacher instructed the students to “notice the heart is still beating” (00:45:24-00:45:52), this image takes on a deeper meaning. The beating heart is no longer a victimized and pursued specimen that is about to be “cut up,” like Elliot worries the men will do after it appears E.T. has died; the heart belongs to a sentient, feeling being that has the capacity to love and feel loss. While those gathered, including the relieved pseudo-immigration officer, watch E.T. go up the ramp to his ship, the last image of the little guy is his beating heart as the door slowly closes in front of him while he takes one last look at the planet he was forced to endure.

Following the Hollywood formula for a Blockbuster hit, the film ends with the bow tied and all parties finding absolution in the end: E.T. goes home and Elliot feels content knowing he did the right thing in helping him. While E.T. does end up taking a plant with him onto the ship and therefore, from what we can assume, accomplishes his original goal, there is still nothing told of where E.T.’s home is; there is no knowledge of why the extra-terrestrials were on Earth collecting plant samples and his background remains a mystery. More importantly, the happy ending that comforted the audience is the departure of the alien Other, heading back to where he came from and no longer causing disruption in the Californian setting. This makes a problematic statement on immigration and the love for the Other. E.T. is depicted as a cute, innocent alien that is eventually beloved by the children, yet it appears that this love for the Other is contingent on his ability to return to where he came from. What would have occurred if E.T. hadn’t been able to communicate with his ship and orchestrate his departure and was forced to stay with Elliot? Would he become another sibling or would he become a servant of sorts, resorting back to the object/commodity that Elliot initially saw him as, available for possession and exploitation by the consumerist society he found himself in?

The simple ability to return to a home makes E.T.'s narrative a privileged account that pacifies the audience. But non-fictional accounts that answer the above question present a much less appealing narrative, quite different from the film's heartwarming and sentimental *mise-en-scène*. The film overlooks these accounts, since these less palatable narratives wouldn't have allowed the film to be such a monumental success, widely accepted and positively critiqued. By giving E.T. the luxury of a young boy's assistance who has an endless supply of food and shelter, as well as a celebrated return home, the film takes the experience of migrant Others and sugar coats it for the consumption of the culture it attempts to represent. The shameless product placement in the film alone bolstered companies and increased profits, contributing to the actual American Dream built on exploitation and blind greed, while avoiding the problematic humanistic implications in order to appease the masses with a light hearted narrative that does not challenge their own mentalities or perspectives.

The unresolved issues that *E.T.* strategically omits to address become manifest when contrasted to cases that recreate the scenario of the alien stranded in our world, but lack the providential spacecraft that comes to the rescue. Here, I'd like to propose one such example: the 2011 *New York Times Magazine* article "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant," by José Antonio Vargas. This article is a first hand account of his experiences as the foreign Other, and can be seen as the nonfictional account of E.T.'s fictional "welcoming" narrative. Vargas' autobiographical account appears much trickier in his case as it was not formulated with specific intent and cinematic effect in mind. Yet, it has important similarities to the film that are essential to consider. In 2011, *The New York Times Magazine* published Vargas' article that outlines his struggle to make a place for himself and prove his "worthiness" in the U.S. This is all while battling anxiety of being found out and deported after he illegally immigrated to the United States in 1993 when he was 12 years old. By publishing the

account of his life-long anxiety over citizenship in a well known magazine, he essentially ousts himself in order to make the public aware of the trials and tribulations of a population that is often simply deemed “illegal” and, therefore, hated.

He begins the piece by detailing the complicated steps that were taken to get him into the country because his “mother wanted to give [him] a better life, so she sent [him] thousands of miles away to live with her parents in America” (para. 2), and all of this at such a young age that he did not understand the implications of what was going on. He finds himself unsuspectingly exiled in a foreign land through no fault or choice of his own. Living in California with his grandparents, he started the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and quickly began to love his “new home, family, and culture” (para. 2), blissfully unaware of the reality of his situation. Vargas was not conscious of his illegal status until he attempted to get his driver’s permit at the DMV at the age of 16. When he handed the clerk his “green card as proof of U.S. residency, she flipped it around, examining it. ‘This is fake,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t come back here again’” (para. 3). Understandably, he left the DMV “(c)onfused and scared” (para. 4), an emotional state that he appears to maintain throughout his life. Just as the images of the men pursuing E.T. instates an underlying theme of anxiety and suspense in the film, the realization of his status as an undocumented and illegal resident essentially motivates every decision Vargas makes.

He wants to lose his accent so he obsessively watches TV and movies in order to learn the American accent as well as reading everything he can get his hands on so that he can assimilate. He attempts to blend in and subvert/become the norm by consuming the massive amount of commodities that the culture not only prides itself on but also defines itself through. Vargas did all of this with one objective in mind: “From the moment I wrote my first article for the student paper, I convinced myself that having my name in print – writing

in English, interviewing Americans – validated my presence here” (para. 10). As a young man in high school, instead of participating in extra-curricular activities for his own enjoyment and self-validation, he participates and perfects a skill in order to guarantee that those around him believe that he belongs. “After [his] encounter at the D.M.V. in 1997, [he] grew more aware of anti-immigrant sentiments and stereotypes: *they don’t want to assimilate, they are a drain on society*. They’re not talking about me, [he] would tell [himself]. [He had] something to contribute” (para. 11). While E.T. learns bits of the language in order to simply communicate in his suburban bubble, the reality for the immigrant and refugee Other is much more complex and necessitates the quick and complete assimilation in order to function and participate in the American society. Vargas does this out of fear of being detected and reported, of being caught by the ever pursuing, oppressive immigration agency. Even as a teenager, every decision he makes is based off of a desperate mentality of self-preservation as an undocumented immigrant in a nation that deceitfully claims to be welcoming to immigrants all the while creating legal obstacles and barriers that make every day existence a crucible of anxiety and apprehension.

Due to the legal obstacles put in place to catch and deport any unwanted individuals, Vargas was forced to use the forged legal documents supplied to him by his Lolo, the Filipino word for Grandfather. Never without a job, each application and tax form forced him to lie, and “this deceit never got easier. The more [he] did it, the more [he] felt like an imposter, the more guilt [he] carried – and the more [he] worried that [he] would get caught. But [he] kept doing it. [He] needed to live and survive on [his] own, and [he] decided this was the way” (para. 20). The politics and disparaging attitudes towards the foreign Other, and the practice of labeling human beings as “illegal” becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy; in order to be the productive citizen that the nation claims it welcomes with open arms

regardless of the arduous and sometimes impossible process of gaining citizenship, the immigrant Other is forced to break laws and commit illegal acts that then cause a whirlwind of internal guilt and paranoia. This is an integral and dehumanizing aspect of the foreign Other that *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* thought would be convenient to leave out of their welcoming narrative.

However, much like the role played by Elliot and his friends in the film, certain individuals with the privilege of an accepted presence in the society took a particular interest in Vargas as he slowly informed certain trusted individuals in authoritative roles of his immigration status which allowed him to make it through and graduate from high school. After this graduation he looked forward to his future knowing he didn't want to "work the kind of low-paying jobs that undocumented people often take" (para. 17), the jobs that his Lolo always imagined he would work. However, due to his lack of a social security number or credible documents authorizing his presence, he couldn't apply for financial aid or student loans.

The superintendent, Rich Fischer, and the principal of his high school, Pat Hyland, were both well acquainted with him due to his constant participation in extra-curricular activities and Vargas claims they became his "mentors, and over time, almost surrogate parents" (para. 21), going as far as trying to adopt him in order to give him citizenship. When he needed a driver's license to obtain an internship, they "sent letters to [him] at the address" needed in order for him to claim residency and "taught [him] how to do three-point turns in a parking lot" (para. 38). These two individuals, rather than being appalled and treating Vargas as the Other, stepped up and supported him in order for him to be successful. Knowing him before he revealed his immigration status, they were already aware of who he was; they didn't have the chance to turn him into the faceless illegal immigrant that the news and popular media



vilified. Reflected in these two characters is the welcoming and accepting image that the United States claims to embody, and however problematic certain aspects of the relationship between E.T. and Elliot, the young boy becomes the personification of that acceptance as well. Note that it is not the overwhelming majority of the nation or even the laws of the nation that assist them, but one or two specific individuals that hold out a helping hand to the suffering foreigner.

Due to Rich and Pat, Vargas was able to graduate college and “built a career as a journalist, interviewing some of the most famous people in the country” (para. 6). On the surface, he appeared to have a life many would envy. However, he was still an undocumented immigrant, “and that means living a different kind of reality” (para. 7), where he exists every day in constant fear of being found out. This mentality is akin to the images of a powerful and dangerous pursuer and a fearful prey motivated by the instinct to survive that is portrayed in the opening scene of *E.T.* which then becomes a poignant way of recognizing what is represented throughout the film: the plight of the refugee and undocumented immigrant that struggles without the help of willing native citizens. While the film is focused on a fictional extra-terrestrial, Vargas’ autobiographical essay portrays the same sense of continual anxiety of being discovered and punished as an undocumented immigrant. Vargas explains that this anxiety “means going about [his] day in fear of being found out(...) relying on a sort of 21-century underground railroad of supporters, people who took an interest in [his] future and took risks for [him]” (para. 7). Being an intelligent and capable man in his own right was insufficient, and without the “underground railroad of supporters,” he would not have been able to achieve any of his accomplishments. In this sense, Vargas’ narrative, in an uncharacteristic fashion, is able to access a privileged space due to this help. Many undocumented immigrants end up, through necessity, working the

low-income jobs that Vargas denied. Most do not have access to resources like Pat and Rich, just like most don't conveniently find themselves involved in a heartwarming narrative based in a suburban sanctuary that then concludes with them returning to their home and everyone living happily ever after.

The autobiographical narrative written by Vargas was not written with the intent of making money and capitalizing on his struggle. He describes his career in D.C. as “an odd sort of dance: I was trying to stand out in a highly competitive newsroom, yet I was terrified that if I stood out too much, I'd invite unwanted scrutiny” (para. 51). Even as a successful journalist and writer, he cannot fully embrace his accomplishments due to the constant angst and apprehension that comes with that type of uncertainty of self. In outlining the obstacles he faced and the laws that he had to break in order to reach this point, he risks facing the consequences of what he had done, regardless of the context of these actions that show that each instance was necessary and regretfully taken. Towards the end of his piece, he addresses the vulnerable position he put himself in by writing his story:

I'm done running. I'm exhausted. I don't want that life anymore. So I've decided to come forward, own up to what I've done, and tell my story to the best of my recollection. I've reached out to former bosses and employers and apologized for misleading them – a mix of humiliation and liberation coming with each disclosure. All the people mentioned in this article gave me permission to use their names. I've also talked to family and friends about my situation and am working with legal counsel to review my options. I don't know what the consequences will be of telling my story. (para. 61-62)

Living his entire life in constant fear and anxiety has caught up to him. While publishing this account could very well cause him legal issues or even deportation, he wrote it in order to raise awareness of what undocumented immigrants, especially children, experience in a country whose government and politicians are constantly debating immigration, fostering hatred and fear in the general population. This is not the fairytale, family-friendly happy ending that is found in *E.T.* The immigrant does not end up going back to his native home or being accepted in the community that he finds himself in because, most of the time, the immigrant does not have a home to return to. In the case of Vargas, as well as many others, they already are home: "I grew up here. This is my home. Yet even though I think of myself as an American and consider America my country, my country doesn't think of me as one of its own" (para. 11), and because of this attitude, Vargas' future is up in the air after revealing himself as an undocumented immigrant. Unlike the sugar coated ending of *E.T.*, the essay ends in a state of limbo and uncertainty, a reflection of the man's entire life.

Making *E.T.* an extra-terrestrial, the struggle can be seen as pure fiction so that no amount of empathy would then be bestowed upon any marginalized group and the motion picture could remain light hearted and fun. In this way, it is the perfect representation of the American stance on the refugee experience; while it sure must be tough to have to leave your homeland, not knowing if you will ever make it home, it can't be that bad because, hey, there will always be more Reese's Pieces at the end of the trail. However, for millions, there are no Reese's Pieces and there is no happy ending where they find their own ship and go back home because, in many cases, their home is completely destroyed or is so entirely different from what it previously was that the possibility of discrimination and persecution in a new, foreign land is still better than what one might expect to find at home. This Hollywood

ending's blissful ignorance makes *E.T.* the perfect example of an Americanized transnational wanderer, struggling but only enough to create a good plot.

## Chapter 2

### **Allegorical Histories and Forgotten Identities in *District 9***

When *District 9* was released in 2009, its director and co-writer, Neill Blomkamp, was essentially unknown as this was his first feature film production. Producer Peter Jackson had initially gotten in touch with Blomkamp to direct an adaptation of the *Halo* videogames into a feature length film, but when this fell through, Jackson decided to produce *District 9*. While Blomkamp had mainly worked with animation up to this point, his first feature length film would be more personal for the director. Blomkamp was born and raised in Johannesburg, where apartheid was still in practice for the first 12 years of his life. Experiencing the institutionalized racial segregation had an obvious effect on the director as his earlier 2006 short film, *Alive in Joburg*, was a six-minute documentary style film that explored themes of apartheid in a fictional Johannesburg inundated with aliens who the residents, both black and white, no longer wanted around. This short film provided the inspiration for *District 9*. Themes of xenophobia and immigration were also included in his 2013 science fiction film *Elysium* that Blomkamp went on to direct, where the ravaged Earth is left for the poor while a spacious, fertile habitat Elysium was in space and reserved for the wealthy. While this film does not include extra-terrestrials, it maintains and upholds the moral groundwork presented in *District 9*. Harsh and violent landscapes seem to follow the director, allowing him to make statements on the politics that allow for inhumane treatment and perceptions of any unfamiliar Other present in a given societal structure.

*District 9*, being his first attempt at displaying these themes to the general public, magnifies the connections between the alien trope in science fiction and political Others. Set in a dystopian Johannesburg that is inundated with unwanted alien refugees who have been labeled as “prawns,” the film uses this plot to construct an intricate allusion to apartheid in

South Africa. Mirroring the history of apartheid politics in the city specifically, a section of the government begins to illegally evict the prawns from District 9 under the recently appointed leadership of Wikus van de Merwe. As the film progresses, Wikus begins to slowly transform into a prawn after coming into contact with an alien substance during one of the evictions: identity is physically and internally transformed, causing the hunter to become the hunted. His transformation also necessitates considerations of the distinct categories: when the individual begins to mutate into the Other that they previously objectified and persecuted, the strict categories of difference become questionable and even arbitrary.

The way the film introduces these elements causes the timeline to appear much more condensed than the linear progression of time, emphasizing the pattern of related occurrences. The film is set up as a mockumentary; functioning much like a documentary film, the extraterrestrial situations appear as reality and are introduced with several cuts to flashbacks of the arrival, interviews with government employees, interviews with a sociology professor as well as a professional correspondent, and images depicting the previous and current state of existence for prawns in the district. This presentation allows each of these aspects to be portrayed as grimly realistic and absorbing for the audience, as some of the segments have the appearance of home videos and footage simply found rather than directed. The film's "visual texture points to an intersection of temporalities that superimpose a dystopian view of the present – as opposed to the image of a possible future that is advancing upon us" (Frassinelli 301): set in 2010, approximately 30 years after the ship originally came to park over the city, the film presents the reality of that historic time in Johannesburg, a city still grappling with the lingering effects of apartheid, but with distinct differences due to the alien's presence. This verifies that the film's narrative is occurring in an alternate reality

rather than a future account of Johannesburg. The continuous cuts, flashbacks, and flash-forwards present this alternate reality while also undermining simple chronology by presenting time almost in a tight spiral rather than circular or linear.

The question of time and how it functions is critical in this consideration of the film. A spiral function of time is not commonly discussed, but in consideration of this film, it is critical to draw this idea out. Consider the analysis of the painting *Angelus Novus* by Klee that Walter Benjamin proposes in his essay “On the Concept of History”:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257-258)

Benjamin’s examination of the gaze of the angel complicates the traditional view of linear history. Significant occurrences are not independent but conditioned and reliant on one another. However, unlike the domino effect, the angel sees the progressive and chaotic accumulation of dominoes; they combine to be the “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” rather than being conveniently mapped out on a horizontal timeline. Not having the time to attempt to make sense of the documented events, “progress”

catapults the angel forward while the original pile of “wreckage” increases without the angel’s foresight or design. Each piece of debris, each event, is related and part of a larger entity, one that evades him as he cannot “make whole what has been smashed.” Antiquity’s issues are not left to reside, stagnant, in the past, but linger in the present and are echoed in the chaotic trip towards the future that only continues to add more of the same wreckage to the celestial stack. Rather than history only sprinting forward into constantly new territory or simply chasing after itself in a hamster wheel of violence, it incorporates a bit of both trajectories, continuing forward with the potential for originality that is hampered by the analogous past that surrounds and influences the path of the present.

The historical allusions that *District 9* makes combined with the constant cutting to interviews that perpetuate the non-chronological syuzhet, as well as the mockumentary style of the film, necessitates a closer look at the way that time functions and the implications then made in order to fully understand the role of the alien in Blomkamp’s film. While not typically described as an author of SF, Jorge Luis Borges was a reader of the genre and many of his works portray the format of time that has been proposed in a manner that lends itself to this analysis. An Argentinian writer, Borges is seen as a key figure of world literature whose work functions much in the same way as Berg’s earlier observations on science fiction as allegory: representations of life and scenarios can seem like nonfiction until something occurs and the narrative reaches fantastical and almost supernatural heights in order to make an overarching assertion about the culture existing in the audience’s reality. Borges appears to do exactly this in his story “The Other,” where the main character is described as and named after Borges himself, insinuating the piece as a nonfictional account, yet the plot takes the scenario into fictional realms, effectively blending and blurring the line of reality, in order to make statements on the function of time and its effect on formations of identity.



While Borges does not use the trope of extraterrestrial landings or interactions, he uses each situation to relate a profound statement on humanity and the intricacies of identity: whether the reader takes each example as an ironic statement or a straightforward message is up to them. However, much like the film, his narratives can be seen as simply entertaining but to ignore the intricacies and allegorical allusions would be to miss the point of the work entirely. His short story, “The Other” describes a situation where an elder Borges comes into contact with a Borges 51 years his junior. The elder Borges then attempts to make assumptions about identity while acknowledging the circular function of time. Another short story by Borges, “In Memoriam, J.F.K.,” describes, through the question of identity, the ways in which the nature of time can be perceived as violently circular as well as mankind’s reaction to what is termed as life. In fact, time, its potentials, its limits and traps are concerns that haunt most of Borges’ stories. As discussed through an analysis of these two works, Borges’ notion of time also illuminates *District 9*’s approach to the connection between time and, through identity, how the perception of the Other is then effected.

David E. Johnson discusses Borges’s wrestling with this topic in “Time for Borges.” He makes the claim that, “For Borges, the most compelling problem is ‘the contradiction of time that passes and the identity that endures’” (209). The notion of an identity, albeit defined through violence, that endures throughout time speaks directly to an interpretation of “In Memoriam, J.F.K.” In this short story, “the stone that Cain hurled at Abel” is the same as “the dark nails that pierced the flesh of the Redeemer,” and “the triangular blade that slit the queen’s throat.” “Lincoln had been murdered by that same ball, by the criminal or magical hand of an actor transformed by the words of Shakespeare into Marcus Brutus, Caesar’s murderer,” which then went on to kill J.F.K: “This bullet is an old one.” The bullet existed, while in many different forms, throughout what is initially seen as a linear progression of

time that continues beyond our grasp: “in the future it shall be many things that we cannot even imagine today, but that will be able to put an end to men and their wondrous, fragile life,” (326). The physical sequence that is presented for this artifact, the bullet, follows the evolution of time that is accepted as the past, previous to the “now” but also beyond, towards the future. Recall the image of the angel in Benjamin’s essay, watching the interconnected events of humanity pile upon one another even as he is catapulted into the future.

Every occurrence that the vessel, or bullet, is described as being a part of is an instance of homicide: man killing man in the search for power, political gain, or simply the drive to cause destruction. This same action resulting in the same outcome is repeated throughout this presentation of time, with full confidence that it will occur again in the future. The linear progression of time is what is most easily digestible because it has been the principal function of time used in order to have a neat understanding of progress, as well as to track progress. This ability to measure progress is far from benign: it forms the basis of many relations of domination, including but not limited to colonialism. Borges challenges this chronology and urges the reader take a deeper look and consider a different understanding of time. This emphasizes the importance of connecting the plot of the film with the historical occurrences that are being mirrored. By repeating the same incident with the same outcome, although through a slight veil of difference, throughout the documented histories of different civilizations, he is insinuating that, rather than advancing in a straight, direct manner, time functions in what appears to be a cyclical fashion. The same events that took place in the long-gone past have since been repeated and are fully expected to be repeated again, forming a cyclical recurrence of time where events are doubled and time can be regarded as the infinite present.

This pattern of occurrences is one of the most noticeable features of *District 9* when the historical aspects are taken into account. It is also important to keep in mind that with each instance described in the Borges piece, violence is the thread that holds the separate moments together: this is also the case with *District 9*. Historical legal actions, such as the Urban Areas Act of 1955, allowed for the removal of black communities who were living in what was claimed to be white areas. The residue of this legal separation of black inhabitants and the resulting gentrification can be seen in the film: spatial and social inequality is a major theme throughout. The forceful removal of black South Africans from District 6 began in 1901 and lasted for close to a century. Keith B. Wagner discusses the historical and political aspects of Neill Blomkamp's film and the way that this is then incorporated allegorically:

By 1982, the most aggressive removal stage began, as black residents were forcibly removed from their homes, which triggered much violence. The registers of social strife in images of squatters clinging to scraps of debris and garbage, resonate allegorically in District 9's mise-en-scène. Blomkamp's film articulates the nuances of class and economic stasis for its black (and alien) characters... this insurrectionary reality becomes a historical trope in District 9, a text that engages with memory work and history retelling the African past and looking at the present in the past from diverse subject positions. (Wagner 47)

The legal precedent that caused the citizens to be evicted in 1982 is mirrored in the film by the MNU's office of Alien Affairs and their decision to evict the prawns from District 9. The "diverse subject positions" refer to the aliens being put in the role that the black residents played in the historical event; the abject landscape of the district and the social status of the aliens is a reiteration of the strife and struggle of those individuals in Johannesburg in the

early 1980s. However, set in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, the film places this archival echo in modern times but in a differing reality, where the aliens can be viewed as potentially empathetic for the South African audience. This becomes the first evidence of a cyclical presentation of time within the film, seeing as what had previously occurred in Johannesburg returned and occurred again but with different personifications. The decision to number the prawn's district as 9 is another mirror of historical events, 9 being the inverse of 6, the actual district that was evicted in Johannesburg. Much like "the stone that Cain hurled at Abel," that was also "the dark nails that pierced the flesh of the Redeemer," the ostracism depicted in this film transcends the diegesis of the film into the realm of reality.

Continuing to look at the historical recurrences in the film, it is hard to avoid the trope that is played by the black citizens in Johannesburg. They receive the prawns with interest and intrigue but it slowly turns to disgust as they feel they are below them due to their appearance and seemingly foreign behavior. The scenes showing crowds watching the giant spaceship arrive are made up primarily of black individuals who are in awe of the UFO. Thirty years later, they are rioting in disgust of the aliens and all that they believe they stand for. If this film were set in a later point in time, or a potential future, rather than an alternate reality, which we can assume *District 9* is set in due to the overlap in times as well as the depiction of 2010 Johannesburg directly after the depiction of 1982 Johannesburg, these scenes could have been interpreted as a failure to remember their own marginalization.

However, since the film is set in an alternate reality, this behavior is yet another mirror to the reality of Johannesburg; a faction of similar individuals unites behind a message of hatred and persecution of another group that doesn't share their genealogy. It is also interesting to note that the only black individuals that are presented in the slums of District 9 along with the prawns are Nigerian thugs, problematizing the politics of the film. While it is making a

statement on the unjust and cruel treatment received by these same immigrants in 1982 Johannesburg, it still ends up supporting the type of rhetoric that perpetuated the racism responsible for the evictions. By looking for another villain to push the narrative of the story, the film begins to subvert its own political message.

The Nigerians in the slum differ from the masses watching the UFO or the same masses later rioting at the aliens: they are presented as “thugs,” who are seen as the oppressive forces in District 9. Much like the military that is sent in to evict the prawns, the Nigerians are depicted as coldhearted and brutal. They are the only individuals other than government officials to interact with the prawns, albeit in a devious and crude way; swindling the aliens out of their technologically advanced weapons, the Nigerians either pay the prawns in meager quantities of cat food or simply kill them in cold blood in order to consume and digest their meat. This action aligns the Nigerians with the government: just like the gangsters who consume the aliens through a desire to use their technologically advanced weapons, which can only be utilized by individuals having the alien DNA, the government performs experiments on the aliens and later sees Wikus as the most valuable piece of biotechnology due to his successful transformation and acquisition of alien DNA. They intend to harvest and weaponize his compromised biological makeup.

In the film, black communities, who have been the victim of centuries long oppression and marginalization, take on the role of the oppressive mob, and a specific nationality that was directly exploited and persecuted in District 6 becomes the aggressors and exploiters of the new minority, the prawns. As Opondo argues in “Bicolonial and Racial Entanglements,” “The circuits of abandonment and predation in *District 9* reveal the cynegetic entanglements that maintain racial, capitalist, and nativist categories in post apartheid South Africa where political power takes the form of a manhunt” (117). In essence, the way that the many

victims of apartheid are depicted in the film makes the film's representations appear as flawed reflections. The victim becomes the victimizer, an inversion of the past behind a smoke screen, in order to show the possible motivations behind oppression and apartheid in the first place. While this film sets out to be subversive to discriminatory politics, it still unknowingly perpetuates those same ideals, which then reveals, if nothing else, their insidiousness.

The ways in which the film is presented, including details that are reminiscent of the historical inspirations, also exacerbates the presence of this inter-connection that Borges and his writings often address: small details that may not seem consequential come back around and frame the narrative, like the image of time that is detailed in the beginning of "The Other" that goes on to be the basis of the story. This can be seen in the beginning of the film as the unmolested Wikus, beginning his day at the Multi-National United (MNU) headquarters, discusses the Alien Affairs Department and their purpose. The "MNU" logo with the time stamp and "12-6-02" date is located at the bottom right corner of the video, staying there only in the sections that are filmed by the company before the as yet unknown scandal occurs. It then cuts to a video without the logo, a recording of the original appearance of the ship with a narrator describing the scene. It cuts again to a "UKNR Chief Correspondent" being interviewed about the first appearance of the ship. This audio is then layered over a video of humans physically cutting into the suspended ship, revealing close to a million emaciated and sickly aliens living in cramped and abject quarters, with the time stamp and "1982/06/01" date, 1982 being the same year that District 6 was violently evicted, proving once again that the film takes place in an alternate reality that is subconsciously aware of its origins in this reality.

The videos taken within the ship, showing the withered aliens, as well as the videos showing humans bringing them down to Earth for “aid,” are shown with occasional cuts back to the interview with the correspondent as well as an interview with a sociologist from a nearby university. Both of these interviews are presumably done in the present, as they discuss the history of the aliens and what transpired. An altruistic charity drive with volunteers organizing fresh food and supplies, seemingly motivated by goodwill reminiscent of the Girl Scouts, depicts the efforts to help the aliens in their transition and poor health. However, the film shows the quick devolution of this mentality. Right after the scene with the volunteers, the sociologist states, “We didn’t have a plan. There was a million of them. So what was a temporary holding zone soon became fenced, became militarized, and before we knew it, it was a slum” (00:02:57-00:03:09). The film then immediately cuts to an alien hacking away at a skinned, bloody cow’s head, exemplifying the harsh conditions in District 9 and the levels of violence required to function in this environment.

In this introduction of the film’s diegesis, the presentation of time is not linear and there is a constant swapping of which period in the narrative is being portrayed. After the audience sees the cow head being mutilated, there are interviews discussing what Wikus had done, his “betrayal” that the audience has yet to witness. Time then shifts from the beginning of Wikus’ narrative, where he is still in good standing with the government, to the arrival of the aliens 30 years previously, before Wikus was even a character to consider. It then flashes to what is accepted as current time (after Wikus’ narrative has completed), back to the arrival 30 years previously, and then forwards again to the present time. This constant switching continues throughout the entire introduction segment. The mockumentary style of the film suggests that these different aspects and timeframes need to be considered, even though the natives of the city might consider them common knowledge; this is a significant portion of

their history, after all. At times, the mockumentary appears as a means to educate and catch the foreign audience up: us. The narrative cannot be set up without this type of syuzhet; the lack of a chronological presentation in this overview emphasizes the role that history and repetition plays in this situation.

As Wagner previously pointed out, the aggressive stage of the evacuations of black residents from District 6 began in 1982, which is the year that the film shows the ship arriving and becoming stagnant in the sky over Johannesburg. In true Borgesian fashion, as the author tends to include artifacts from reality in his fictional tales, this allows for an alternate history to be written while still maintaining certain relics of the historical episodes regardless of temporal and factual accuracy. The violent and discriminatory aesthetics in the film, such as the long takes portraying the abject cityscape and quick shots showing scenes like the prawn hacking at the skull, sustain the harrowing message of the previous ferocious episode in the city's past. The reality of 1982 Johannesburg is given a reprieve and displayed as the calm before the storm. Widespread riots and violence between the aliens and Johannesburg citizens, while slowly intensifying, do not reach their climax and "necessitate" governmental actions for three decades. The way that the film introduces these components, in a seemingly haphazard manner, makes the timeline appear compressed, allowing for a design that emphasizes the connections between occurrences. This allows time to be seen in the spiral formation previously discussed: history does not chase after itself in a hamster wheel of violence, nor does it sprint forward into constantly new territory, but, once again, incorporates a bit of both trajectories.

While the introduction and historical background for this film are connected through this spiral of time, the pattern of repetition is continued throughout the film and its main plot as well; violent and menacing actions perpetrated towards a victim are then enacted towards the



previous perpetrator, repeatedly. Wikus is promoted to lead the extraction, a position that he then performs with relish, using unlawful tactics to evict the prawns and aborting prawn fetuses while joking, “Do you hear that? That’s a popping sound that you’re hearing! It’s almost like a popcorn!” (00:17:35-00:17:58) while the fetuses explode in the fire. Later, with his slow but sure transformation into a prawn, he then becomes a victim of the military’s cruel experiments as well as their number one target to be dissected and murdered for profit. His previous actions come full circle as he becomes the target of his own former greed and insensitivity in the form of government-sanctioned violence in the pursuit of scientific progress and materialistic gain in this laissez-faire economy. He has become the invaluable fetus that the military agents desire to abort above all, to make pop “like a popcorn.” This circle of violence is, perhaps, the most extreme way of forcing the main character to contend with the sentience and mortality of the prawns, two characteristics he ignored in order to deprive them of any sort of personal agency or rights. The resonance of these plot formations within the model of the corkscrew of time previously discussed is apparent; actions occur and are opposed, only to occur again and be opposed but in a slightly different manner, whether that be on a personal or societal level.

Borges’ short story “The Other” situates itself in just this coiled formation of time. In “The Other,” an older Borges encounters a younger version of himself while sitting on a bench. He exhaustively tries to convince the younger that they are, in fact, the same person, by spouting off family history, literature, etc., only to be met with doubt and apprehension by the younger. This causes the elder to wonder if he is not a figment of the younger’s imagination: “The other man dreamed me, but did not dream me *rigorously*” (417). In the introduction, the older character of Borges remarks, “Large chunks of ice were floating down the gray current. Inevitably, the river made me think of time...Heraclitus’ ancient image”

(411). Heraclitus espoused the idea that change was constant throughout perceived time and the universe. The chunks of ice, moving and melting, their physical properties diminishing and changing, give a picturesque portrayal of this idea. In this continuity of adjustment, time can be seen as an infinite present. Cristina Percoco discusses the idea of the infinite present and how it functions in this narrative:

The image of Heraclitus is a metaphor of life's constantly changing nature with the passage of time. Time is not portrayed as linear since the young and old Borges are engaged in a dialogue with a fifty-one year temporal gap. In addition, the notion of an infinite present represents an aspect of the existential crisis of the narrator that deals with the false nature of human personality. Since memory is unreliable and fragmented, man's identity can only be defined through his own perception of himself. The passage of time does nothing to reveal to us a sense of self and undermines the belief that man gains a deeper understanding of himself with age.

(112-113)

The interaction between the younger and the older Borges creates the cyclical function of time but it is played out with awkwardness and discomfort on the part of both characters, showing an anxiety about time in respect to its influence on identity. "The belief that man gains a deeper understanding of himself with age" is challenged as the passage of time undermines the specifics of memory. Since memory cannot be trusted as fact and the individual's perception of their present self constantly changes and moves, much like the chunks of ice floating down the river, the specifics and actuality of identity for the individual becomes, perhaps, inconsequential in a constantly evolving scenario with no beginning or end, i.e. the infinite present.

The short story emphasizes time from the beginning. The narrator mentions time in regards to his current act of writing: “Now, in 1972, it strikes me that if I do write about what happened, people will read it as a story and in time I, too, may be able to see it as one” (411). The passage of time distances him from the incident and allows for the loss of accurate memory and subsequently the fictionalization of personal history. This creates a sense of the present as infinite, as the subject is conjecturing on the action he is currently taking and the way it will be perceived in a seemingly endless shift in points of reference, with no perceived beginning or end, much like the idiom, “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” The narrator’s question of “*if*” he decides to write about the incident becomes the signifier; his readers can attest to the fact that he already did, in fact, write the narrative, which he would be aware of as he wrote that sentence.

Although he tries to hypothesize, his “future” and current actions become one and the same, a feat that is not possible in a linear version of time. Also, through the ambivalent attitude towards losing the memory of his participation in the event, making it a “story,” his knowledge of self diminishes and the fully realized “I,” or his self assured identity, becomes more elusive as specifics are abandoned. This can be seen in the figure of Wikus the further he gets into his transformation. Once the tables have been turned and, rather than him hunting for the prawns, he becomes the hunted, he begins to try to forge bonds with two prawns he meets in order to save himself, but to do this he has to attempt to forget, or have them forget, his past and the ways he treated them. As he attempts to let the details of his past go, he begins to lose his identity, which seemed fixed at the beginning of the film.

The elder Borges in “The Other” begins searching for the identity of the man on the bench, the younger Borges. He comes to the conclusion about this quickly using name, place, and location, which Percoco claims is utilized in order to “remind us of man’s comforting

belief that such information defines human identity” (114-115). Throughout their dialogue, the older Borges does not remember many facts, such as certain books that the younger is claiming to have read, causing him to ask the narrator, “If you have been me, how can you explain the fact that you’ve forgotten that you once encountered an elderly gentleman who in 1918 told you that he, too was Borges?” (415). This causes the narrator to begin taking more drastic measures to prove himself because he “hadn’t thought of that difficulty” (415). When confronted with his loss of memories, he then becomes preoccupied trying to prove that he is in fact who he claims to be and hasn’t lost his identity through his loss of memories.

Jumping to the end of the narrative, a convoluted realization puts the entire story in a different light. Borges reveals that both were a figment of imagination by finalizing the narrator’s reputation as unreliable:

I believe I have discovered the key to it. The encounter was real, but the other man spoke to me in a dream, which was why he could forget me; I spoke to him while I was awake and so I am still tormented by the memory. The other man dreamed me, but did not dream me *rigorously*—he dreamed, I now realize, the impossible date on that dollar bill. (417)

This line of thinking contradicts itself twice: he doesn’t remember meeting his older self because the younger Borges was dreaming while our narrator was in his youth, but now that he has experienced it as the elder, he was awake, therefore not dreaming. Providing a possible counterpoint to Descartes’ famous statement, “I think, therefore I am” and the Cartesian certainty of the Self, the elder Borges makes the claim that the younger dreamt him, which would then, in turn, make him a figment of the younger Borges’s imagination.

This idea of the entire scenario being an imagined occurrence coincides with the details of the narrative: no details about the narrator or the younger Borges are revealed. The reader

is left in the dark as to how the younger individual looks, almost as if he stays behind a curtain, unavailable to outsider's prying eyes. Another way to look at this is biographical: Borges slowly lost his ability to see as he got older and had a very strong bias against mirrors. In portraying the scene in this way, Borges's unease with himself becomes personified in these two characters modeled after himself: unable to clearly see either individual, they remain a mystery. This is much like the unease that Wikus begins to feel as he gets to know the prawns, seeing his former human self and his current prawn self as two separate entities. If you consider the idea that an individual's identity comes from internalized projections from outside sources, Borges is putting Borges in the role of self as well as in the role of the other. The entire episode can be viewed as a haze of internalized anxiety about his own identity or as an ironic satire on this type of anxiety.

Feelings of anxiety also spawn questions of identity in the film *District 9*. Wikus van der Merwe is the clumsy main character chosen by his manipulative father-in-law to head the relocation of the prawns. In attempts to prove his worth, as an employee and as a son-in-law, he belies his amicable, sweet nature that his wife describes in order to take on this managerial role. The audience never witnesses this nature, however, and Wikus' true character remains a mystery until he is acted upon – much like Borges' attempt to keep his characters a mystery in order to portray identity anxiety. Wikus nervously handles a foreign tool that then sprays him in the face with the alien liquid that would later allow the prawns to leave, causing him to transform into a prawn, almost get dissected for military experiments, become the military's most wanted fugitive and the victim of a massive smear campaign, all while lacking the vindication and tenacity to bring about his own salvation: the internalized projections from outside sources inspire each action in attempts to reclaim his former identity, an identity he never fully realized and that is seen through a haze of ambiguity. This

anxiety over every identity he assumes causes the conflicts that perpetuate the film, much like the elder Borges attempting to solidify his own identity because of the conflicts that arise with his younger counterpoint. The elder, extra-terrestrial Wikus only comes close to a realized identity through his defiance of the government he once was a part of.

The extra-terrestrials are depicted as being savage and destitute, obsessed with cat food and blind to reason, living in District 9 which functions as a slum and black-market center. The implications of the nickname they are given, “prawn,” is reminiscent of the “alien” classification of noncitizens living in a country foreign to their origins. The sociologist who is interviewed in the beginning of the film explains, “The derogatory term ‘prawn’ is used for the alien and obviously it implies something that is a bottom feeder, that scavenges the leftovers” (00:05:14-00:05:23), which becomes a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the film as the aliens are left with no form of sustenance and are forced to scavenge. This is followed up by a police officer being interviewed who entreats, “I mean you can’t say they don’t look like that. That’s what they look like, right? They look like prawns” (00:05:24-00:05:29). The rationalization the officer uses is strictly off of their appearance due to the hard exoskeleton that causes the aliens to have some similarity to the small sea animal. This mirrors the inspiration for most racial slurs; nicknames from unflattering comparisons based on the Other’s physical appearance.

While a prawn, the shrimp-like animal the aliens were nicknamed after, isn’t the most respected of Earth’s creatures, it is still a creature that exists in our reality: differing from the title of “alien” given to refugees and immigrants, the nickname “prawn” becomes their desensitizing term and is another example of the intentional relation between the aliens in *District 9* and the citizens that suffered in post apartheid South Africa. However, much like the dehumanization that does occur when an individual is labeled as “alien,” the nickname

“prawn” removes any capability for the aliens to register feelings, physically or emotionally, in a way that humans can recognize. While this assumption is quickly proven wrong in the film, those in charge of their wellbeing decide to stay ignorant of their emotional capabilities; if they were aware that their victims were sentient, their own basic “goodness” might be questioned, creating an anxiety around the identities of not only the aliens and the individuals in charge, but also of the entire societal structure that allows for such treatment to occur unchecked.

Wikus, the man who is shown in the beginning as a member of the domineering military force who harbored disgust for the sick, refugee prawns, joins up with a prawn named Christopher and his unnamed son in order to survive and hide from the military after his transformation begins. While the father and son duo show obvious signs of human-like emotional connections and responses, this does little to change Wikus and his perception of the aliens. His motives vary in their morality; after saving the father prawn’s life, Wikus then attempts to steal the spaceship from the young family who are set on fixing their vessel to take their people home, which Wikus then crashes barely a minute after taking off. Ignoring the desires of the father and son, as well as their whole race, he focuses on himself and this selfishness does not pay off. His physical transformation intensifies slowly throughout the movie, but it is at this point, after crashing the ship and deciding to fight the military agents on the side of the prawns that the transformation accelerates to his eyes, initiating also a mental transformation. His perception of self, of his own identity, drastically changes through the opening of his figurative eyes while the physical alterations of his body cause violent reactions from those he previously trusted.

The ways in which Wikus’s perception of his own identity morphs throughout the film raises many questions. When he initially begins to feel ill after being sprayed with the foreign

substance, he doesn't once consider the liquid to be the culprit of his sickness that is progressing at an extreme rate. He conveniently chooses to ignore the changes, and in this sense, ignoring appears as a form of forced forgetfulness. His loss of memory is self-induced, causing him to intentionally distance himself from the self-identified "I" that allows the self to even consider an individual identity.

After his initial escape from the military, he attempts to get food at the local fast-food joint that the audience saw him get food from earlier in the film. He desperately wants to forget the transformation his body is going through and still wants to identify himself with the wider public, with the role he used to play before he became compromised. When his face is plastered on the TV screens throughout the restaurant, he begins to yell, "That isn't me! You have to feed me!" (00:47:15-00:47:54), before running out of the restaurant in search of a place to hide. This proliferation of Wikus' image forces him to acknowledge his present situation, which he does by yelling at himself as well as at the customers and workers inside the restaurant, that the stranger on the screen isn't him, that he still holds value and still deserves sustenance, an argument that he himself would have found questionable had it been from a prawn while he was in his previous role as oppressor. As his own reactions reveal, acknowledgement does not necessitate acceptance.

However, it is not just the images that cause Wikus to recognize his situation; he is no longer being treated as equal by the general population or government agencies, but as a lower life that he himself, in his previous form, would have deemed as deserving of discrimination. The treatment he receives from others, as well as the proliferation of his own image, appropriates his agency and necessitates his total emotional metamorphosis. Wikus becomes an example of an individual who found his own self-identity through internalized projections of outside sources: rather than stop and consider what is happening to his own



body, he continues to try and function in the mainstream society that is shunning him for becoming the Other that he so passionately despised when in his original, human form. It takes the almost complete transformation of his body, as well as the overwhelming military force hunting him, to cause him to accept his new self. The way that memory performs throughout the remainder of the movie concerning Wikus's transformation begins to depict what some call the "white savior" complex, where the white man comes in and saves the minority Other while righting all their wrongs, but what is more accurately described in this situation is the salvation *of* the white man, not *by* the white man. After crashing the plane, he gets into a robot-machine that allows him to fight off the intruding military in order to allow Christopher and his son safe passage to the ship. When this occurs, one of his eyes changes into the form of a prawn eye and he suddenly decides to become a selfless soldier in the battle against the harsh, bloodthirsty military.

In this instance, memory becomes a peculiar tool in the acquisition of a fully realized identity. It appears that Wikus forgets his past with the military and becomes a member of the prawn identity; he is even accepted into what one could call a brotherhood at the end of the film when he is protected by groups of prawns, individuals he has never met before but whom he now finds himself connected to, from the rogue military officer set on murdering him due to past grudges. The final scene of the film shows a prawn that is assumed to be Wikus in the middle of a landfill making flowers out of scrap metal, echoing a sentiment from his wife that he would always make his presents to her because "he always said that showed they meant more" (00:07:53-00:08:00). In the short, fleeting scene, Wikus, now fully transformed into a prawn, looks as if he is at peace in his space yet still longing for his human attachments.

It was not until Wikus gave up his selfish and rushed commitment to return to his human form that he was able to grow. Understanding that Christopher and his son needed to save their people more than he needed to be cured, he stayed and sacrificed himself, showing bravery and selflessness that is otherwise absent from his character in the film. He was unable to reach his full humanity until he realized the lack of humanity in the corporations and individuals he used to work with. In choosing to “forget” his attachment to his human body, he was able to reach a more fully realized self.

I use forget in quotation marks because the act of choosing negates the ability to forget, and also because Wikus does not actually forget his human form. Leaving the flower with his wife, he acknowledges his past and his continued connections to those relationships, even a possible hope of one day returning. This differs from the conclusions we drew from Borges’s writings. While both lose parts of their memory, one is intentional and the other is the product of age. The Borges pieces seem to make the claim that the loss of memory insinuates the loss of identity, since the inability to remember past instances remove past versions of oneself, making any knowledge of the self incomplete and therefore inaccurate. An audience member can see this functioning in *District 9* as well though, except the lost memory of past prejudices works in favor of the character rather than against it, which is extremely convenient for the character. When this lapse in memory is applied to the discourse of perceptions of the Other, it supports a “white-washing” of history where the transgressions of the oppressors are opportunely forgotten in attempts to rewrite history and place them in any light other than their despotic and violent role of the past.

The corruption of the authenticity of one’s own identity, the individual or the larger faction, would allow a false identity with false intentions to be shown as truth. When the unfavorable past is one that affects millions of individuals, like apartheid in South Africa and

the widespread practice of cruelty, discrimination, and segregation, an identity attempted without those practices acknowledged and rectified would be an incomplete identity: South Africa would never be able to have a fully realized self. While it might seem odd to apply this theory to an entire country, the film, through this spiral of time and the allegorical representation of aliens as the minorities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa, presents a narrative that demands a consideration of past atrocities and their echo in the present, in an effort to stave off tragedies of a similar nature.

## Conclusion

For those unfamiliar with science fiction, it is easy to view the genre simply as a form of escapism for the audience as they immerse themselves in worlds and interspecies dynamics that are unfamiliar to life on Earth. While this may be true for some individuals and some pieces, *District 9* and *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* both act as evidence in making the case that SF is actually an astute and fertile ground for critical theory and political postulation through the use of the alien trope. What the statements being made by each film are, however, depends on the narrative as a whole as well as the critical details included in the diegesis. Aspects of the film that may not seem significant can inadvertently destabilize the moral of the story, as seen with both of these films.

*E.T.* attempts to depict the United States as the welcoming nation that fosters positive relationships with immigrants and refugees alike through the suburban safe haven that the anthropomorphized alien figure finds himself exiled in. While constantly pursued by a faceless, antagonistic force bent on his capture, the alien's young, human companion along with his siblings and friends, attempt to save him from an unknown fate while introducing him to their consumerist culture. Spielberg's Blockbuster hit, however, is accepted as a family friendly film with a lighthearted and happy ending despite these themes that become harrowing when confronted in real life. Making the precarious journey of the migrant Other into a somewhat cheerful affair upholds the idea that the U.S. receives immigrants with open arms and makes their transitions as easy as possible due to the success of the American dream. Yet, in this narrative the foreign Other does not stay and achieve this dream; it is reserved for the white, native populous. In fact, the happy ending only occurs when E.T.'s ship returns and collects him, taking him away from Earth yet not necessarily back to his home. This essentially enforces the idea that all is better when like is with like and anything

that differs simply leaves. Whether it's a return to home or continuing the journey into other foreign lands is inconsequential; as long as the Other is no longer decipherable, the characters can continue to enjoy their suburban privilege in peace.

If the audience were aware of the connotations made by the film, it would cause the individual to consider their own attitudes on the subject of immigration and, therefore, because of the anthropomorphized E.T. functioning as the sympathetic alien, their own morals would be put into question. This makes a disturbing statement on the perception of the immigrant in the U.S. that the film, perhaps, did not mean to make but, nevertheless, did; an alien depicted in humanized ways with white-toned skin is able to illicit more emotion and sympathy than other human beings simply because of their skin tone and status. The film successfully subverts itself in its attempts to show the U.S. as a sanctuary for the Other.

Meanwhile, *District 9* accepted and embraced the subversive aspects of its narrative from the beginning. Depicting the politics of 1982 post-apartheid Johannesburg and the violent evacuations of refugees and black citizens from district 6 through the allegorical evacuations of the aliens from district 9, any intent other than making a politicized statement on the systemic process of Otherizing individuals and the subsequent treatment they receive would be hard to argue. While attempting to disprove this assertion in the film is not this project's intent, the ways in which the Nigerian thugs are depicted prove that the attitudes the film attempts to subvert are so insidious that even a clear challenge to that mindset cannot help but uphold those discriminatory practices. The formation of time combined with the formation of identity contingent on memory that Borges presents also problematizes the film. The further Wikus progresses in his transformation, the more he begins to see the prawn as a sentient being rather than the objectified "problem" that he attempted to resolve in his purely

human form. This attitude he previously fostered is never addressed and it appears that he decides to forget that aspect of his existence.

And it appears that the character gets away with this convenient lapse in memory as he is protected by a gang of prawns and then depicted as somewhat content in his prawn form at the end of the film. This convenient ability to forget the past or claim no responsibility for previous wrongdoings without any consequences speaks towards the histories kept by nations in general. As time passes, memory can unintentionally forsake reality, but when that disownment is done deliberately in order to “white-wash” problematic histories, it can be assumed that the persecutions and dehumanization of the foreign and migrant Other would be the first recollections to leave the national and even human consciousness.

This type of historical lapse in memory is not a hypothetical postulation on what could occur; the United States is currently dealing with a president that opportunely exempts historical instances of inhumane treatment of the Other in order to push his own xenophobic agenda. As referenced in the introduction, Donald Trump’s flagrantly hateful rhetoric towards the Islamic faith as well as individual Muslims has inspired a resurgence of hate crimes not only directed towards followers of that specific faith but all minorities in general. Even though the film was released before Trump’s campaign and election, *District 9* can be seen as a signifier of intellectual attempts to appeal to the general public’s humanity and morality when dealing with any foreign Other, an attempt that does not seem to be calming down as time passes.

While the existence of narratives capitalizing on the desire to remain blissfully ignorant and unconscious of exclusive politics continue, even family films are beginning to blatantly depict the necessity of inclusion and transcultural understandings, such as the *Finding Nemo* franchise, where strangers in the ocean of widely disparate species band together to help one

another. Alien narratives of a more realistic and, at times, violent nature that still depict the depravity and malignancy of mindsets supporting segregation and inclusivity are on the rise as well and show no signs of slowing down, especially when the political climate has created such a fertile environment for not only critical theory and postulation but also articulated and passionate appeals to the audience's logos and pathos. While each SF and alien narrative run the risk of unconsciously subverting their own message, the extremist attitudes of hate and superiority that the United States community is beginning to fully experience, as well as the similar attitudes that international communities have been experiencing already, call for the unbridled and ruthless critical analysis that can be found in extra-terrestrial narratives of this kind. This constantly developing aesthetic of fear mongering and "alternative facts" stand to make science fiction, and more specifically alien narratives, a critical outlet for the developing and indispensable resistance to spread their message and perhaps inspire the next champion of human rights.

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## **Vita**

Samantha Gene Harvey was born in Alexandria, Virginia, to Michael and Valerie Harvey. She graduated from Turner Ashby High School in Bridgewater, Virginia, in June 2008. The following autumn, she entered Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University to study English, and in December 2012 she was awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree. In the fall of 2015, she accepted a research assistantship in English at Appalachian State University and began study toward a Master of Arts degree. She accepted an assistantship teaching sophomore and freshman Rhetoric and Composition classes at Appalachian State University in the fall of 2016. The M.A. was awarded in August 2017.

Miss Harvey lives in Boone, North Carolina, with her fiancé and two German Shepherds. She plans to work in the nonprofit sector.