* **darkmatter Journal - http://www.darkmatter101.org/site -**

‘You are not welcome here’: post-apartheid negrophobia & real aliens in Blomkamp’s District 9

Henriette Gunkel and Christiane König | Journal: [General Issue [7]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/category/issues/7-general-issue/) | [Issues](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/category/issues/) | Feb 2010

When *District 9* (*D9*) was released in August 2009, the film was an immediate box office hit in several countries. This was much to the surprise of critics, reviewers and bloggers, who seemed astonished by the fact that a science fiction film with this impact could originate from South Africa. Internet forum discussions and an E-Symposium emerged as a response to the film, which continues to be the subject of controversial discussion.[[1]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_1) While many celebrate the film in relation to the ‘generic’ genre of Science Fiction as a promising representative of a thriving African Cinema, others reject the film on the basis of its socio-political message, as yet another racist movie about Africa – with reference to the depiction of both ‘the Nigerians’ and the aliens.[[2]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_2) In this article, we would like to move beyond a crudely metaphorical reading of representation (‘the aliens stand for X in reality’), and explore the degree to which the film foregrounds its own mediality. This focus moves us beyond a polarizing position that immediately rejects the film as racist, and allows us to engage with a complex and original text unlike so many other films that take ‘Africa’ as their subject.

From its first image, *D9* is hyper-reflective on its own status as a medium. As viewers, we are confronted with a flamboyant play of remediation, as sketched out by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin.[[3]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_3) There, the two strategies of *immediacy* (a medium makes itself transparent on the referent: ‘looking through’) and *hypermediacy* (a medium reflects on itself by differentiating itself from another: ‘looking at’) struggle in manifold ways to constitute a complexity not only of the narrative and its semiotic significance but also the overall status of the depicted. In *D9*, documentaries from the 1980s are used to depict the arrival of the aliens in South Africa. TV-reports are added, which not only show the (militant) conflicts between the local population and the aliens but also the struggles of the aliens with the local police over the following years. In interwoven faux documentaries ‘experts’ express their opinion concerning all social and political issues that the film raises within its course, culminating in a fictitious TV-report with a well-known news anchor man from the SABC network. Visual and aesthetic strategies from Hollywood movies, surveillance cameras and computer games complement and complicate this overloaded genre play.

This form of hypermediacy not only references surveillance societies and 24-hours news cycles but characterizes the film from its beginning as hybrid. As a hybrid the film systematically denies the viewer easy access to the authenticity of what is portrayed. By doing so the film unsettles dichotomies such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ as well as understandings of difference and identity. This needs to be understood as a strategy of subversion but more importantly as the productivity of the film itself. The reality that the film pretends to represent is in fact only produced through the film. In this way it becomes clear that the authenticity or putative origin of any identity (and therefore of any social reality depicted in the film) did not exist beforehand but is rather the effect of its positioning through media. Accordingly, it is important to look closely at the media strategies that are initiated through the film at particular moments and examine their purpose to either authenticate referents or to display their constructedness. We will return to these strategies throughout this article.

Just as the film resists any dichotomous reading of ‘the real’ and ‘the fictional/fictitious’, it resists any clear cut genre classification by being all at once: Science Fiction, social drama, cop-thriller, you name it.[[4]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_4) *D9* is the pure artefact of a pop culture that no longer pays attention to the local and social background of its consumers. Any attempt to classify the film as representing *the* African Cinema is in our view rather reductionist. Yet at the same time *D9* is directed by a South African director, Neill Blomkamp. It is produced in South Africa and deals with current key issues concerning the postcolonial project of the country. When you purchase the DVD of *D9* in South Africa, it has a big ‘proudly South African’ sticker on it, an established brand for ‘home brewed’. We’d suggest that the global success of the film could be rooted in this aesthetic queerness.

In this article we offer a reading of the film as the portrayal of postcoloniality and staging of postcolonial subject positions while keeping in mind mediality as the constituting element of these very subject positions. By doing so we aim to challenge a socio-political analysis of the film that is at ease with combining questions of identity and difference, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within society with technologies of ‘Othering’. Instead, we promote a different mode of ‘Othering’ – an ‘Othering’ that is rooted in a different kind of agency, namely *becoming*. The article reflects on a particular form of resistance that has been largely unconsidered in reviews of the film and can be conceptualized through the concept of *becoming*, of becoming-alien as in becoming-imperceptible in a Deleuze and Guattarian sense.

We therefore first highlight the production of the socio-political context through *D9*’s strategies of mediation. We then point to the importance of time – the cinematic time structures or rather the chronological plot lines – and their implications for this socio-political context. We then turn to the possibilities that affectively/effectively emerge from this reading: the possibility of reading processes of ‘Othering’ as processes of ‘becoming-minoritarian’ that, at the same time, point to the gaps/limitations within the postcolonial project of the South African society. Finally we set out the argument that the film’s criticism of the postcolonial nation-state is contextualized historically by providing references to South Africa’s specific history of colonialism and apartheid as well as to contemporary global politics. At the same time this article points to the limitations of this criticism while highlighting the markers where the film fails to consequently implement/translate this criticism.

**Becoming-alien – aliens, migration and politics of the post-apartheid nation-state**

In *D9* aliens from outer space have landed in Johannesburg, South Africa; for real. Real in the sense that the event is depicted via different news clips on local and international TV stations. As the story progresses we learn that the aliens cannot leave the planet, specifically the city of Johannesburg, due to a technical fault on their mother-ship: a commander module has detached itself and mysteriously disappeared. For the last twenty years the aliens have been forced to stay. On this layer of facts – the landing and the subsequent ghettoisation and relocation of the alien community – the drama of the film unfolds. The plot line is tied to a narrative that discloses, in retrospect, the secret behind the ‘disappearance’ (and ‘betrayal’) of Wikus van de Merwe. Wikus, a proper middle-class Afrikaner, becomes a fugitive soon after he returns from an operation he takes part in as an employee of Multi-National United (MNU), a private corporation authorized by the South African government to execute the relocation of the aliens from D9 to D10.

The film structure mediates the fact of Wikus’s disappearance initially in form of interviews with colleagues and family members captured and documented through a TV camera. What can broadly be considered as the background story provides the socio-political setting of the film. It seems to represent a South African liberal post-apartheid society: the CEO of MNU is black, as are some of the colleagues that execute the relocation together with Wikus. At the same time the film clearly hints at the survival of a norm that has supposedly retreated into the background in contemporary South Africa: a white, heterosexual, Christian-religious, middle-class.

The internal story reveals to the viewers that Wikus has been contaminated with an unknown substance while searching a D9-shack, probably Alien DNA. This results in a (almost) complete transformation of his body. In the last scene of the film we see him – now ‘completely’ alien – sitting on a trash heap in D9, shaping a flower out of tin plate for his wife. But before it gets to this point, Wikus teams up with Christopher Johnson,[[5]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_5) a rational, intelligent and individualized alien. Christopher, as we learn in the second third of the film, has been secretly repairing the missing commander module underneath his shack, aiming to return to the mother-ship in order to eventually rescue the rest of his species. The two buddies succeed in this enterprise after a brutal fight with hi-tech weapons between the South African army and MNU units. The mother-ship leaves the airspace over Johannesburg with Christopher and his son on board – and with the cheerful approval of Johannesburg’s population.

*D9* unfolds on three time layers that are broadly linked to the different plot lines: the past of the 1980s when the aliens arrive; the present set out by the interviews that frame the movie; and the main story around Wikus’s disappearance in the most recent past. Each of these plot lines is depicted through a specific media strategy, a visual code or a narrative style. The first half of the film is dominated by aesthetic strategies which authenticate the depicted insofar as almost every image sequence seems to be transmitted through TV cameras: from the arrival of the aliens that we witness through live TV recordings only, via the questioning of the people in the streets of Johannesburg who express their resentments towards the aliens (or the Nigerians?), to the MNU cameras that document the operation that Wikus is in charge of – and that remind us of the embedded journalism seen most recently in Iraq. This approach does not only accentuate documentary as a media strategy but, in effect, authenticates the depicted. This means that the arrival of the aliens is perceived as a fact: TV clips present *D9*’s cinema audience with a realist platform. This realism signals to the viewer that the plot will not turn towards an unexpected twist dissolving the aliens as a diagetic metaphor. The aliens are thus given an autonomous status through an ‘objective’ medium which is not disputed throughout the film. In this context it is important to note that we perceive the aliens *solely through the gaze of the medium* – at least in the first third of the film – which means through the pre-structured gaze of the technical apparatus. By doing so the medium itself constitutes the radical differentiation between aliens and humans. The message of the film could not be clearer: aliens exist, they are not humans, they are different, we only have access to them via/through our media. This way it becomes clear from the beginning that the film constitutes the alien mob as something radically different that ordinary South Africans are unable to read and that the ordinary media is incapable of decoding. In this logic, any intervention initiated by the government in order to deal with the aliens can, therefore, only be understood as processes of ‘Othering’.

These technologies of ‘Othering’ are visible, for example, in the dubbing of the aliens as ‘prawns’ by Johannesburg residents, apparently inspired by the aliens’ resemblance to the Parktown prawns.[[6]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_6) In their article ‘The Autonomy of Migration’*,* Dimitris Papadopoulous and Vassilis Tsianos argue that the use of animal names is not unusual in anti-migration discourses: helpers of migrants at the border between the USA and Mexico are called coyote in anti-trafficking discourse; British sailors call the helpers of stowaways sharks; at the Greek/Albanian border they are called ravens.[[7]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_7) The authors further call the strategy of voluntary ‘de-humanisation’, which they see in the disentanglement between the body and the name by the migrant him/herself (e.g. in the case of a conscious decision to burn the ID document before crossing the border) as a process of *becoming-imperceptible*, as becoming-animal in a Deleuze and Guattarian sense: ‘A body without a name is a non-human human being, an animal which runs’. And further: ‘non-human because it deliberately abandons the humanist regime of rights’.[[8]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_8)

While Papadopoulos and Tsianos understand the process of *becoming* as essential to mobility, the aliens in *D9* are prevented from this mobility as soon as they arrive in Johannesburg. The aliens are contained in D9 and are documented in the course of their relocation to D10: every household and its occupant are registered (for example through fingerprints); the aliens are given English names; new identities are constructed and the bodies of the aliens thus become legible. The media itself further highlights this legibility in that particular moment through the introduction of subtitles. The viewer can now understand the alien. Migration’s weapon of imperceptibility, as coined by Papadopoulos and Tsianos, is therefore juxtaposed by a classic approach to policing and surveillance within a nation-state – particularly in the first third of the film. In the rest of the film the anti-migration discourse is shaped by a search for alien DNA and is supported by so-called experts, who tend to give these strategies of intervention a humanitarian face: interview material with sociologist Sarah Livingston or aid worker Dr. Katrina McKenzie is, for example, interposed. They present us with the reasons behind the relocation – or rather forced removal – by referring more generally to the neglect and malnutrition of the aliens at the time of their arrival, their placing in D9, and the subsequent public health risk, the increase in crime-related incidents, the aliens’ lack of intention to integrate and the subsequent confrontation with the South African population. The experts describe how tensions have risen and have resulted in more militant forms of resistance on the side of the aliens but also in more militant protest against the aliens by Johannesburg’s population, particularly those of Tembisa Township. The government eventually intervenes by preparing the relocation of the aliens to a camp hundreds of kilometres outside of Johannesburg: D10 – a relocation that is eventually successful as we read in the end titles of the film.

Within the film’s classic anti-migration discourse aliens are thus treated like migrants in South Africa. And in fact the aliens enter South Africa – apartheid South Africa that is – at a time when the *Aliens Control Act* was still included in the *Immigration Law*.[[9]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_9) The likeness of aliens and migrants is further accentuated through statements made by people on the streets of Johannesburg (which are inserted in order to authenticate the information presented by the experts) as it is not clear whether they refer to the aliens exclusively or also refer to the Nigerians who are introduced as the third main social group in this film. Representing all African migrant groups in South Africa, the Nigerians have organized their life in D9, next to the aliens. The statements made could in fact refer to both groups: they have no understanding of ownership; they take away our wives; or, ‘[the government] is spending so much money to keep them here when they could be spending them on other things. At least they keep them separate from us’. As some reviewers of *D9* have pointed out, the film was inspired by the short film *Alive in Joburg* that Blomkamp shot in 2005, and in which he conducted interviews that asked black South Africans about Nigerians and Zimbabweans.[[10]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_10) But more importantly the statements harshly remind us of those made by citizens of Joburg in the context of the so-called xenophobic attacks that took place over a period of three weeks in May 2008, killing sixty-two people and displacing tens of thousands. Similarly, some of the TV-News images of South Africans hunting aliens in the movie are very similar to the images that we saw in May 2008 on South African television. The images that are supposedly fictitious could therefore be – at least in part – real images incorporated into the plot. So while in *D9* aliens are targeted, the aliens alongside the aliens – the Nigerians as representatives of any other African migrant group in South Africa – are the target of prejudice and discrimination.

While discussion of the attacks in May 2008 has typically dismissed them as exceptional cases, initiated by a so-called ‘third force’, they still continue, particularly against Somali shop owners throughout the Eastern and Western Cape. This time around, however, they are officially classiﬁed as armed robberies. This shows the unwillingness of South African government bodies to deal with and take responsibility for post-apartheid mechanisms of inclusive exclusion. In the logic of globalized capitalism the attacks in 2008 were directed against migrants from other African countries only, while people from Europe and the US, alternatively, continue to enjoy their neo-colonial, capitalist privileges of investment and the freedom of movement attached to it. Against this backdrop Andile Mngxitama talks about ‘negrophobic violence’ or ‘negrophobic xenophobic violence’.[[11]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_11) At least a third of the people killed in the 2008 attacks were South African citizens, which shows the arbitrariness and faultiness of the characterizations and markers set up to distinguish between (black) South Africans and black people from other African countries. While under apartheid citizenship was constituted through racialized categories, hence on the basis of race, the post-apartheid government deﬁnes citizenship through the politics of belonging, which is based on the ownership of the South African ID/passport. This new national identity process increasingly manifests itself in border management, including deportation prisons and, linked to that, xenophobia or ‘negrophobic xenophobic violence’ (violence that is often preceded by language tests in order to ‘distinguish’ those with a South African identity from foreigners).

*D9* makes this reference to contemporary South African politics through a brochure illustrating the new camp of tents that the aliens are offered as their new home after being relocated from D9 to D10 (also named ‘concentration camp’ in the film). Those tents can be easily mistaken for the campsites that the post-apartheid government offered displaced people after the so-called xenophobic attacks in May 2008. Like the news clips that show the uproar of the local population against the aliens and reference the actual documentary footage of the attacks in 2008, the boundaries between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ are blurred.

**Forced removals, resistance and the Nigerians**

The three time levels that structure the film refer to two different political systems, that is, apartheid South Africa (the state the aliens have to deal with when they are stranded in Johannesburg) and post-apartheid South Africa (in which at least part of the riots against the aliens take place and which forcibly removes the aliens eventually to Sanctuary Park, the Alien Relocation Camp (D10)). The film depicts a number of incidents that are not placeable in relation to time and hence to the reign of any particular government – such as the uproar of the aliens, the riots against the aliens in Tembisa or the police brutality in the context of the riots that leave people lying dead in the streets. This technology of indistinctness seems to medially underline one of the key messages of the film: while 1994 marked the official end of apartheid politics with the first democratic elections, it does not mark a radical break or politics of discontinuity. It is, however, clear that the first MNU operation in *D9* takes place in a South Africa after 1994, as the MNU cameras and the surveillance cameras have the date set as the 08.09.2010. This way the film points to specific colonial continuities in the post-apartheid nation-state, i.e. the concept of forced removals or police brutality. At the same time this strategy of the film affectively complicates the question around violence as a legitimate form of resistance – a question that seems worth looking into more closely as it informs our reading of the aliens as well as the Nigerians.

The fact is that the aliens arrive in Johannesburg in 1980, only four years after the massacre in Soweto. This massacre followed the student uprising of 1976, an uprising that fought against the implementation of Bantu Education which, among other things, forced schools to use Afrikaans as the language of instruction, the language (together with English) of the ruling white minority that is still very visible in the post-apartheid nation-state of *D9*. The Soweto student uprising is widely considered the turning point in South Africa’s apartheid history. It marked the beginning of new militancy in the struggle against apartheid in which the youth took centre stage. The 1980s in South African townships were a time of heightened resistance, violence, fear and tension, when the apartheid government declared and sustained a State of Emergency. Thousands of people were detained without trial by the end of 1986 and numerous activists were murdered. Forced removals and ghettoisation, as experienced by the aliens upon their arrival in Johannesburg, were thus central elements of apartheid’s spatial segregation and therefore represent a strong analogy to apartheid politics as reflected in the film title with its clear reference to the history of District Six: in 1966 (some fourteen years before the aliens came to Johannesburg) District Six, the sixth Municipal District of Cape Town, was declared whites-only under the *Group Areas Act* in 1966, with removals starting in 1968.[[12]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_12) Building on the *Population Registration Act*, the *Group Areas Act* geographically separated the different classiﬁed groups. As a result black South Africans were forcibly removed into so-called homelands and townships and were often further sub-classiﬁed according to ethnicity. The apartheid system thus, to a certain extent, successfully implemented what Foucault calls ‘fragmenting the ﬁeld of the biological that power controls’,[[13]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_13) i.e. to subdivide the population along racial and ethnic lines in order to control it. By 1982 more than 60,000 people had been forcibly removed from District Six to the Cape Flats some 25 km away, and their houses were bulldozed.[[14]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_14) Resistance formed against these forced removals.

In *D9* references to this (historical) resistance against spatial segregation are made by showing how the aliens arm themselves against the human population and how they develop more militant forms of resistance, the derailing of trains, for example. This form of resistance is usually widely neglected in the reviews of and responses to *D9* or, if included, then read (surprisingly) negatively. This might be primarily due to the fact that this resistance is placed into the post-apartheid context (although this is not explicit, as mentioned before) and that it is understood as a given that a post-colonial nation-state should have restored to it the monopoly on the (legitimate) use of physical force (in the film the state’s structures are freshened up with private contractors, in this case a multinational company).[[15]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_15) It could also be due to the fact that the reviews silently/unconsciously reproduce one central phantasm of a post-apartheid society: the fact that the aliens resist with armed forces makes them even more antipathetic, more unwilling to adapt, more unreasonable and therefore more strange. However, by placing the events of *D9* in the ambiguous historical context of post/apartheid South Africa, their resistance is also contextualized, and politicized. As the film authenticates the aliens as radically different, the concept of resistance refuses to reduce them to either the status of victims or to a clueless/unsystematic and violent crowd. More specifically, a particular form of (political) agency is ascribed to the aliens. There is rationality, communication, tactical thinking and solidarity evident amongst the aliens that the humans do not understand – and are probably not supposed to. The film deals with this issue productively as it accepts and does not judge this ‘Otherness’, which the population can only read as aggression, threat and lack of integration. The aliens possess an agency that does not dissolve into habits of cooperation, compromise or assimilation.

There is one exception to this attribution of agency related to the aliens in *D9*. To tell the story of Christopher and his son, the film changes media strategy from TV documentary realism to classical Hollywood narrative style. In the classical Hollywood narrative the individual hero has to overcome obstacles until in the end he saves the world and gets the waiting girl. The whole structure of the narrative sustains the activity of a (male) hero, the meaning of which is sutured in the end by serving as the solution to a problem. For this kind of narrative it is characteristic that large-scale problems of a socially important kind are treated and solved by one single individual in his actions and relationships with others. In *D9* it is Christopher, the intelligent, sophisticated alien, who manages to repair the alien mother-ship and return to his presumed home planet with the help of his friend Wikus. This classical narrative strategy begins at the point in the film when the internal plot has taken up Wikus’s disappearance. It is linked to a change of the overall angle of the movie from South African population, experts, interviewees, family, and so on to the personal perspective of one single alien: Christopher, who is – not surprisingly – *individualized* by some very human features. He is a rational, intelligent creature complete with good manners, intensive fatherly feelings and a high moral code. Christopher thus enters at first a partnership of convenience with the infected Wikus (as Wikus brings him into the MNU building, in which his painstakingly collected fuel is kept), that transforms via betrayal (Wikus puts Christopher out of action in order to get to the mother-ship on his own) into friendship (after his own mission fails Wikus supports Christopher’s escape to the mother-ship by putting his own life at risk). In the context of this individual relationship the concept of mutual assimilation is negotiated in the sense that ‘great men’, living in the tradition of humanism, can only dream: one remains faithful, stands by your side, fights for and with you for a good cause while putting all differences aside.

At the same time as this concession to classic Hollywood narrative form, the media-based strategy of the film needs to be understood as an intended ambivalence: on the one hand the film thematically critiques not only the concept of mutual assimilation per se but also mutual assimilation that is achieved through mutual acceptance and comprehension (which is an overt product of an idealizing western thought that displaces the asymmetry that is its own structuring principle). On the other, this narrative thread strategically strengthens the hybrid character of the film, which refuses to be classified as either derivative African Cinema or Hollywood knock-off. In light of *D9*’s hybridity something else becomes clear: Wikus’s transformation cannot be mistaken for becoming-alien in the sense of *becoming* (as discussed in the previous section in the context of the anti-migration discourse). Even after his completed transformation, Wikus still mourns his human life with his wife for whom he handicrafts a macramé flower. The camera zooms in on Wikus, he therefore becomes identifiable for us as an individual amongst the two million non-identifiable aliens. And it is because the transformation is narratively staged in Hollywood style and thematically in the context of the question of assimilation it needs to be understood as the last alien-stage that Wikus as a former male Afrikaner and South African will ever enter. He will therefore never be radically different, indecipherable, never becoming-imperceptible.

Interestingly the moment Wikus escapes into *D9*, the largely untroubled coexistence between aliens and Nigerians is threatened. The Nigerians – as mentioned earlier – have arranged and organized themselves amongst the aliens. In this, the Nigerians succeed in what the South Africans have failed to do. The question that seems to arise here is whether they are possibly the only group to which we could ascribe to the concept of becoming-*alien* in a real sense. Like the aliens, the Nigerians refuse to be fenced off by the South African government and population. This is arguably also due to the fact that the Nigerians as a group are the main target within the anti-migration discourse in South Africa, a discourse which is also visible in the responses to the film which often read, ‘but this is how they are’,[[16]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_16) easily translating the Nigerians into the symbol of criminality and violence.[[17]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_17) This is why the derogative statements by the people on the streets of Johannesburg are possibly targeting not only the aliens but the Nigerians too. As Ato Quayson highlighted in relation to the phenomena of scamming (and in fact there is a reference to scamming in the film, in this case the ‘catfood scam’), ‘stereotypes and ideas are the elements that cement a community historicity both in their own minds and in the minds of others’.[[18]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_18)

The depiction of the Nigerians in *D9* accords not only with colonial images of Africans that are continuously updated in post-colonial Hollywood cinema *about* Africa (see for example the depiction of the armed gangs in *Shooting Dogs*, 2005 and *Blood Diamond*, 2006), but also on the streets of Johannesburg in relation to other African communities, in particular the Nigerian. This is a forceful approach, and it is very painful to watch. It is therefore not very surprising that the depiction of the Nigerians is widely considered racist, as the images emanate from a racist discourse, even when analyzed through a more open approach. We would like to propose an alternative reading that refuses to join in the slating reviews on the basis of the Nigerians’ racist depiction. By doing so we focus on how the Nigerians respond to and position themselves in such discourses. To be more specific, we concentrate here on the processes of *becoming*, on becoming-alien. We focus on the possibility of reading the behaviour of the Nigerians as defying assimilation into a society that rejects them. As such, the Nigerians are working against occupying a ‘profitable and valuable/useful’ position within society. They even resist the core morality of contemporary South African society – a morality that seems quite similar to that of the apartheid regime and to which Wikus as well as other decolonized South Africans and even reviewers of the film still refer positively – by having sex with aliens and, on top of that, commercial sex.[[19]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_19) The Nigerians in the film follow their own interests and do not take up a subordinate role in relation to the aliens (although they are able to adapt) and where necessary they work against them. While in our view a more open reading of the depiction of the Nigerians is possible, the non-development of the Nigerian characters as well as black characters in general is in line with the tradition of colonial filmmaking and impossible to ignore.

**Conclusion: colonial continuity in postcolonial filmmaking**

While Daniel Magaziner concludes his analysis by arguing that ‘District 9 thus is less about apartheid and South African history, than about how South African history is packaged and sold, to both the international and domestic markets’[[20]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_20) we conclude, rather, as follows: in its portrait of contemporary South African society the film criticises the lacking postcoloniality of the nation-state. We understand this as the progressive statement which, in its clarity, is rather rare within African Cinema. This criticism is formulated without losing sight of the specific history of colonialism and apartheid in the country as well as contemporary global politics, as reflected, for example, in issues around multinational companies, border management, migration, war, terrorism and xenophobia.

On many levels this post-colonial society inevitably comes across very poorly – a society that continues to be shaped by whites, although key positions are occupied by blacks. The society is marked by apartheid continuities and a concomitant inability to develop a coexistence with the aliens; a society that does not shy away from neo-liberal technologies of normalization, as evident, for example, in the disciplining of sexual relationships between aliens and human beings. Social (and disjunctive) technologies of exclusion which work on the basis of belonging seem to point to continuities rather than a radical break with coloniality. No single group within South African society is presented in a sympathetic way, neither the MNU people or the military, nor the people on the streets or the ‘experts’ interviewed.[[21]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/" \l "foot_21) And still many reviews understand inclusion in this society as the pre-condition for a possible reading of individual characters or entire groups (such as the aliens or the Nigerians) as positive. The fact that the majority of responses to *D9* read the disorder, the non-legibility and the destructiveness that mark the aliens as negative does raise several questions. It points to an inability to understand the (partially militant) resistance by the aliens as a legitimate action against permanent repression and regulation. This inability needs to be analyzed as the interpretation of the aliens as categorically ‘Other’, an interpretation reinforced by reviewers who are not prepared to distinguish between what the aliens ‘are’ and what they turn into in the context of the conflict with the humans. Responses of such kind in fact (re-)affirm technologies of ‘Othering’ that the film sets out through various media-strategies to disrupt.

**Acknowledgement:**

the authors want to thank Max Annas, Laura Dowson and Ross Truscott for comments on earlier versions of this paper.  
featured District 9 image: [Daniel Y. Go](http://www.flickr.com/photos/danielygo/)

**Notes**

1. See, for example, ‘[Nigerians Offended By District 9](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=265942795001&ref=search&sid=724480464.685713802..1)’  and ‘[District 9 Hates Nigerians](http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=104082514556&topic=10924)’. The E-Symposium, initiated by ‘The Zeleza Post. Informed News and Commentary on the Pan African World’ can be found [here](http://www.zeleza.com/symposium-current). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_1)

2. Carina Ray, the editor of the E-Symposium, argues that‚ ‘Hollywood’s fascination with Africa is not new’ (<http://www.zeleza.com/symposium/949>), while Laura Murphy suggests that‚ ‘We have seen this movie before. It’s called *Blood Diamond*. It’s called *Rosewood*. There are probably ten other movies I have refused to see which adopt the same story line’ (<http://www.zeleza.com/symposium/954>). Both scholars suggest that *D9* is yet another (racist) Hollywood film about a somehow standardized and simplified ‘Africa’. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_2)

3. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_3)

4. Though many reviewers argue that *D9* is the first African Sci-Fi (see, for example, Carina Ray 2009: <http://www.zeleza.com/symposium/949>), this is to neglect *Les Saignantes* (2005) by Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Bekolo. Usually classified as ‘African Cinema’, *Les Saignates* tends not to have been discussed as a Sci-Fi film. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_4)

5. The fact that the alien’s name is an anglicized one points to one of the many apartheid analogies the film produces. The apartheid government forced an English name on every South African citizen. Kopano Ratele, for example, argues in relation to its broader institution: ‘Apartheid was aimed at determining what Bantus did at school and how far they went with it. If it did not entirely decide whom and how you loved, apartheid made sure from which ‘population group’ your friends were likely to come and from what group you would marry awfully. Apartheid, or those who worked for it, gave many African individuals not just the same names such as Johannes and Andries they carried in their passes. Apartheid, as popular language aptly has it, got under their skin, in their heads and hearts, and wrote its meaning there’ (Kopano Ratele, The Sexualisation of Apartheid, (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape 2001), 28). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_5)

6. Images of these rather ‘un-cuddly’ companion species are available on [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parktown_prawn). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_6)

7. Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos, *The Autonomy of Migration. The Animals of Undocumented Mobility*, <http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/02/papadopoulostsianos-strands01en#redir> (September 2008). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_7)

8. Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2008). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_8)

9. The *Aliens Control Act* builds on the *Aliens Act* of 1937 which was introduced primarily to limit migration of Jews from Nazi-Germany to South Africa but was geared to refuse permits for the entry and permanent residence status of any immigrant who was not a citizen of a commonwealth country or the Republic of Ireland. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_9)

10. ‘I was asking black South Africans about black Nigerians and Zimbabweans. That’s actually where the idea came from was there are aliens in South Africa, I asked, “What do you feel about Zimbabwean Africans living here?” And those answers-they weren’t actors, those are real names’. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_10)

11. Andile Mngxitama, ‘We Are Not All Like That: Race, Class and Nation after Apartheid’, in *Go Home Or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobiaand the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa*, ed. Shireen Hassim, Tawana Kupe and Eric Worby (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008): 189-205. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_11)

12. The fact that the Aliens are forcibly removed from D9 into D10 implies an existence of D7 and D8 without being specified where and when they exist(ed). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_12)

13. Michel Foucault, *“Society Must Be Defended”. Lectures at the College de France, 1975-7*, (London: Penguin, 2004), 255. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_13)

14. For more information on the history of the district see the website of the Museum of District Six: [http://www.districtsix.co.za](http://www.districtsix.co.za/). This politics of racial segregation within the city spaces can be found in any other city of South Africa. The (resistance against the) removal of Sophiatown in Johannesburg, for example, is another well-known part of South African history that has been recorded on film, such as *Come back Africa,* 1959 and *Drum*, 2004. In Sophiatown removals began in 1955. The district was eventually bulldozed by the end of 1963 and turned into Triomf thereafter. While the history of forced removals is more commonly analysed in relation to city spaces increasingly more work is being done in relation to the effects of forced removals in rural areas, known as betterment. See for example <http://brc21.co.za>. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_14)

15. The reference to global politics in D9 is established through MNU, a heavily armed private contractor that the South African government assigned to control and forcibly remove the aliens into D10. In his response to the film Tenju Cole draws an analogy between MNU and the Multi-National Force’ which invaded Iraq in 2003. The wars in Iraq in particular highlighted the shady and extralegal role of private security companies in war zones. In *D9* this private company, MNU has more options and more agency than the national military and aims to further strengthen its position of power by activating the powerful alien weapons via the alien DNA. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_15)

16. See, for example, the discussion goups on facebook: ‘Nigerians Offended By District 9’ (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=265942795001&ref=search&sid=724480464.685713802..1>); or ‘District 9 Hates Nigerians’ (<http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=104082514556&topic=10924>). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_16)

17. This national(ist) framing of Nigerian identity is challenged, for example, in December 2005 in the journal Chimurenga which entitled its 8th print issue *We are all Nigerians.* See<http://www.chimurenga.co.za/printissue-8.html>. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_17)

18. One of the most known scams that are linked to Nigeria – the so-called 419 scam phenomena that many of us have found in form of an email in our inboxes at one point – has been widely incorporated as a topic in South African popular culture, and parodied by Nigerians themselves – see for example the song *419 state of mind pt.2* by the Nigerian rapper Modenine (you can listen to the song [here](http://www.outhere.de/outhere/?p=678).) [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_18)

19. From the beginning the apartheid regime focused on sexuality as a regulatory factor of the race regime. This focus is highlighted by a series of acts the apartheid government introduced over the ﬁrst ten years of its existence: in 1949 it introduced the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act*, No.55; in 1950 the *Immorality Act*; and in 1957 the *Sexual Offences Act*. As the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act* of 1949 reveals, Afrikaner nationalists linked the purity of the white race, from the very early stages of the apartheid regime, to sexuality and reproduction (Henriette Gunkel, *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa*, [London and New York: Routledge]). This law prohibited interracial marriages even before the apartheid system officially deﬁned bodies, or in fact interraciality, through the *Population Registration Act* of 1950. The main objective of the law was to prevent marriages between ‘Europeans’ and ‘non-Europeans’. The apartheid government was concerned with the white race only; it was not interested in the other racially constructed communities. Interracial heterosexuality is thus perceived as threatening the power of whiteness because, as Dyer argues, ‘it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body’ (Richard Dyer, *White*, [London and New York: Routledge, 1997], 25). In *D9* this reference to interracial sexuality is linked to the sexual encounters between aliens and humans – when Wikus begins to transform into an Alien and escapes the MNU unit that undertakes laboratory experiments with Aliens in order to decode their DNA, Wikus was publicly accused of having had a sexual relationship with Alien prostitutes resulting in an unpure human body. The South African society in the film seems to be only able to envision this sexual act as one in which Wikus takes an alien from behind – which is understood as so disturbing that the alien’s face has been blurred in the images in order to protect his identity. This seems to indicate that the post-apartheid society, which was the first country in the world to incorporate gay rights in their Bill of Rights, is still inherently homophobic. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_19)

20. [Daniel Magaziner, *Hollywoodland: District 9 and the ‘Old’ South Africa*](http://www.zeleza.com/symposium/953). [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_20)

21. Special exceptions are made for individuals, namely Wikus and Fundiswa Mhlanga who exposed MNU’s illegal genetic research programme and so ended up in a prison of the postcolonial nation-state. [[↑]](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#foot_src_21)

Article printed from darkmatter Journal: **http://www.darkmatter101.org/site**

URL to article: **http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/**

Click [here](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/02/07/you-are-not-welcome-here/print/#Print) to print.