

District 9

(Neil Bloomkamp, 2009)

Component 2: Global Film: Narrative, Representation and Film Style

Focus Area: Narrative

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1 - Introduction (00:00 - 00:08:14)

Sequence 2 - Finding the fluid (00:19:40 - 00:24:01)

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- In one particular scene, Wikus tries to reason with an alien he is attempting to evict. The 'shantytown' shacks are far from the advanced technology we would expect of an alien race, and show the lack of power and status the 'Prawns' have on Earth. Despite the alien's size, his body language is defensive and his only weapon is a shovel (in contrast with the alien weaponry the humans fear and want for themselves). His skeletal body also suggests vulnerability rather than power. Wikus, though carrying a clipboard (symbolising his authority in the situation), is attempting to explain the situation rather than threatening the alien with a gun. This shows he has a more humane and less aggressive approach to the job of 'resettling' the aliens. However, an MNU helicopter hovers in the background, backing up Wikus with force if necessary.
- Sequence 1: The camera style in this section is like a collage of different *reportage* (i.e. non-fiction) styles. It begins with the form of a corporate video. This is Wikus' introduction - which also establishes him as dedicated to his job, if a little too bumbling to be a conventional hero. The style then swaps between expert/eyewitness 'pieces to camera', 'found footage' (of the entry to the alien ship), news clips, amateur shots of the ship, and 'vox pops' with civilians. These serve to fill in the back-story and establish the 'alternate history' that the film

is set in. The clips of interviews with Wikus' family and colleagues also create 'enigmas' about what will befall him later (see Narrative).

- Sequence 2: As we are introduced to the alien characters - Christopher and his son - the camerawork changes. Instead of 'mockumentary', the cinematography becomes the more familiar style of 'narrative drama' featuring MS, CU and POV shots that encourage us to empathise with them. However, the 'human' perspective is still shot using handheld or security footage at this point, symbolising Wikus' allegiance to MNU. As the film - and his mutation - progresses, his scenes are increasingly shot the same way as the aliens in this sequence. The 'documentary' feel is further enhanced by Wikus' spittle and the hand placed over the lens. This 'lens splatter' effect is also used later during battle scenes to intensify the immersive quality of these action sequences.

Mise-en-scène

- Sequence 1: The mise-en-scène, combined with shooting style and dialogue, creates a range of different emotional reactions. We begin with the bland corporate set of Wikus' office and backdrops of the experts that establish their jobs (TV screens, academic book shelf), but then shift to the spectacular (the saucer hovering Johannesburg). From there the 'look' of the film shifts to the increasingly squalid. The interior of the ship is familiar from other sci-fi films - particularly *Aliens* (1986): darkness punctured by the beams of human torches, alien symbols, slime - and this creates a sense of threat. However, when they appear, the beings themselves are not scary but pathetic, diseased and vulnerable. We then see them in the aid camps - drifting smoke, barbed wire, makeshift tents - and our emotions shift from pity to disgust (images of them squabbling, hacking at cow meat etc.) Following on, there are a series of 'Humans Only' signs, showing how the public opinion has shifted against the 'Prawns'. These images link to South Africa's past (see Historical Context). They also

have contemporary resonance, being reminiscent of the refugee camps in Europe we see on news items about the ongoing migration crisis.

- Sequence 2: The squalid conditions of the camp take on a different dimension in this sequence. Christopher, with his son and friend, is rummaging in a pile of trash; but rather than desperately searching for food, they are in fact looking for valuable technology. The fluid they find represents the narrative convention of 'the Elixir': a potion or object with magical properties that can aid the hero or repair the 'disruption' to normal life. Ironically, the fluid in the canister, though literally able to repair the mothership, is also the catalyst for the disruption in Wikus' story: he is infected and begins to mutate into a 'Prawn' himself.

Editing

- Sequence 1: A number of features are used to establish the film as a 'mockumentary': the MNU logo in the corner (which also establishes that the corporation has their own version of events, different to Wikus' experience later in the film), the 'by-lines' for the experts. All the different film formats are assembled as if this is a documentary that has been made after the events in the plot, and manage to both efficiently orient the viewer and create verisimilitude (the feeling of 'truth').
- Sequence 2: In this sequence we cut between the 'mockumentary' and 'narrative drama' styles to show us the alien and human perspective on events. As Wikus transforms, there are more and more scenes shot in the latter style, but there are still 'mockumentary' elements intercut to show the 'official' (i.e. MNU) version of events.

Sound

- Sequence 1: During this opening sequence, African chanting is mixed with heavy percussion. This establishes both the location (South Africa) and genre (sci-fi/action film). The dialogue serves to explain about the arrival of the aliens, and to introduce the discrimination they face from the humans. Again, this has parallels with the current migrant crisis ("We spend a lot of money on them...", "Why don't they just go home?"). The questions about why the spaceship stopped are also introduced, as well as the theory that a 'command module' fell to earth, which sets up events for later in the film.
- Sequence 2: Wikus' direct-to-camera dialogue shows that though he isn't a typical hero, he

is dedicated to his job. He may be prejudiced against the 'Prawns' but he is knowledgeable about their behaviour and can understand their language. There is very quiet music during the scenes focusing on the aliens, which encourages us to empathise with them. In addition, when Wikus is sprayed with the fluid, there is a high-pitched whine that initially sounds like feedback on the 'documentary' camera following him - but which later intensifies each time his mutation progresses.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

Representation of the Other

- The basis of many science fiction (and other genre) films is the conflict between the 'self' and 'other'. Most early sci-fi/horror films have very simplistic narratives in which humans fight an alien 'other', identifiable by its strange appearance, behaviour or values. Usually the humans defeat the 'other' and reassert the 'self' that the audience can identify with. *District 9* problematizes this relationship. Though at first the 'Prawns' do seem completely alien in their appearance, with disgusting habits and incomprehensible language, we are soon encouraged to empathise with Christopher and his son (see Sequence 2). After Wikus is infected, he begins to literally turn into the 'other'. Aliens infecting and transforming a human is staple of the horror genre - see John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982). Yet, as an audience, we don't fear him- instead, despite his mutated appearance, he becomes our point of identification and an unlikely hero. In fact, as his transformation continues, he becomes *more* heroic: first he escapes the lab, and then he bravely joins Christopher in an assault on MNU, and finally sacrifices himself so that Christopher and his son can escape. At the same time, the other humans become more and more *inhumane*: the revelation of the labs where they experiment on the aliens and the single-minded pursuit of Wikus by Venter are good examples.

Historical

- The treatment of the aliens is an obvious metaphor for the South African 'apartheid' system that functioned between 1948 and 1991. This was a system of racial segregation and discrimination that treated black Africans

as a lower class and prevented them from mixing with white South Africans socially or publicly. It also prevented black people from accessing housing, employment or educational opportunities. Between 1960 and 1983 over 3.5 million non-white South Africans were forced to leave their homes and were 'resettled' in segregated neighbourhoods where poverty and crime were rife. One of the most famous was the 'resettlement' of 60,000 non-white people from the Sophiatown area of Johannesburg (where *District 9* is set). In the early hours of Feb 9th 1955, heavily armed police began forcibly evicting people, bulldozing their homes and moving their belongings 19km away to what would later become the township of Soweto. It is this event that the start of the film is heavily referencing. One of the first legal acts of apartheid was to forbid marriage between black and white South Africans, and sexual contact between them was considered a taboo - this is referenced in the smear campaign accusing Wikus of contracting his infection from sex with the aliens. The name *District 9* is also a reference to an area called District 6 near Cape Town that was also the scene of a mass 'resettlement' in the 1960s. One of the main languages of those dwelling there was Xhosa, which incorporates many vocal 'clicks', similar to the aliens in the film. The 'Humans Only' signs used to promote the film are also a reference to the 'Whites Only' signs from the apartheid era.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - NARRATIVE

Enigmas

- These are narrative devices used to raise questions in the audience's mind and compel them to continue watching the film. Many enigmas are created at the start of the film during Sequence 1. Firstly, there is mystery surrounding the aliens' arrival: why did the ship stop over Johannesburg? Why did it stop at all? If these are the 'drones' then what happened to the leadership class? What was the module seen falling from the ship? By the end of the film some of these have been answered - significantly, the module is the shuttle beneath Christopher's shack - but many have not: we still don't know how or why the ship broke down and where the pilots are. This - from a commercial perspective - leaves the film open for a sequel.

- Other enigmas are created regarding Wikus. Towards the end of Sequence 1, we see the family talking about him as if he is dead or vanished, his mother breaking down into tears. What has happened to him? His wife also refers to all his equipment being confiscated. Who by? And why? As the narrative progresses, these questions are answered, but more are raised: is the mutation reversible? Will Christopher return to help Wikus?

Propp

- Vladimir Propp tried to identify a common structure that underlies all stories. He found 31 'narratemes' (narrative units) that are common in most narratives, from Russian folk tales to Hollywood blockbusters. The plot of *District 9* features many of these. For example, the start of the film features the following:
 - '*absentation*' (something or someone goes missing) - the 'command module' that falls off the ship;
 - '*interdiction*' (hero is warned) - Wikus is told to be careful during the resettlement, for both his own safety and MNU's reputation;
 - '*violation of the interdiction*' (warning is ignored) - many MNU employees and aliens are killed, Wikus is infected;
 - '*villain's reconnaissance*' (the bad guys search for something) - MNU's search for alien weaponry and for something that will enable them to use it;
 - '*delivery*' (the villains gain what they are looking for) - they find the mutating Wikus and the canister of fluid in the hospital;
 - '*complicity*' (the hero is tricked or forced into helping the villain) - Wikus is made to use the alien weapons and even kills an unfortunate 'Prawn'.

Look at the rest of Propp's narratemes and see if you can identify how the rest of the film fulfils these typical narrative events.

Full list at: <https://goo.gl/yhxlkV>