

I.1 - Institutional Information

Director: Neil Blomkamp **Release:** 2009 (UK)

Production company: Wingnut Films, TriStar, Sony Pictures

Country of production: South Africa, USA

Genres: Sci-fi/comedy/action/horror

Award nominations: 6 BAFTAs, 4 Oscars + 1 Golden Globe

Other info:

Produced by Peter Jackson; written by Neil Blomkamp with wife Terri Tatchell; adapted from 2006 short film called *ALIVE IN JO'BURG*.

I.2 - Links to film technology timeline

Soundtrack: Dolby Digital soundtrack featuring dialogue, a musical score and there is wide use of digital sound production.

Colour: Mostly colour with some black & white to imitate CCTV footage.

Wide-screen, NOT 3D: Shot/presented in 1.85:1 wide-screen aspect ratio.

CGI: used to creation of objects & characters as well as to enhance action

Steady-cam: used in many action scenes but specifically NOT used at times to create found-footage style

I.3 - Context

Social: Society structured in terms of class & privilege with the white men at MNU being the most 'powerful', whilst the refugee aliens have the least **autonomy**.

Political: Politics drives the narrative; those in power such as the Government, MNU & even Obesandjo seek to oppress & further their own causes by exploiting those who have no power.

Cultural: The film establishes a world where the aliens are outsiders & scavengers; **segregated** and demonised. The aliens idea of fun; de-railing trains, starting fires & eating rubber, are all seen as savage in the same way that the Nigerian gangs once were.

Historical: Allegorical & metaphorical examination of **apartheid**. 'White' & 'black' segregation and discrimination is broadly replaced with humans & 'prawns'.

Institutional: Blomkamp was due to make a film adaption of Halo video game series, but was hired by Jackson to create a feature-length version of *ALIVE IN JO'BURG* for \$30m.

Technological: CGI used throughout the film, however many practical effects were also used in creating props such as alien weaponry.

I.4 - Characters

Wikus van der Mewe (Protagonist): Wikus is the first character we see on screen and who we experience the narrative with. He is a sympathetic if somewhat selfish character to begin with, but as the film progresses he transforms from human to alien and in doing so, becomes less selfish and more empathetic as a character.

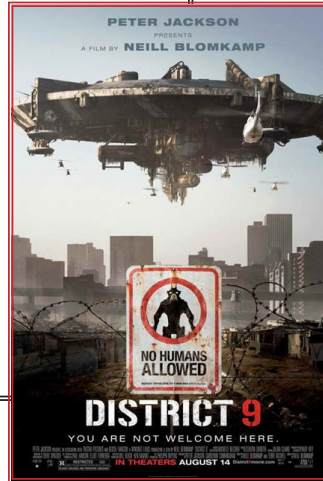
Christopher Johnson (Protagonist): CJ is an alien character who acts as a sidekick, mentor and a scientist within the narrative. Wikus knocking on his door is the **inciting incident** for CJ as he is bought into the main narrative and therefore his goal of trying to get the aliens home, becomes a key story which intertwines with Wikus' goals of returning to be a human - with both seeking the same black liquid.

Piet Smith (Antagonist): Piet is Wikus' father-in-law and the head of MNU. At the start of the film he is introduced as a person of power and promotes Wikus, seemingly out of **nepotism**. However, Piet soon begins to see Wikus as a **commodity** and is quite calm and collected when he condemns Wikus to death, lying to his daughter as he does! All of the negative aspects of Wikus' existence after the initial liquid accident are as a direct result of Piet's decisions.

Koobus (Antagonist): The most obvious example of an antagonist is Koobus. As the leader of the MNU 'military force', his character is firmly established when we first meet him and he aggressively talks to Wikus, pushing the cameraman filming the events for MNU.

Obesandjo (Antagonist): His story and Wikus' cross when Wikus goes to him seeking to buy weapons that are established earlier in the narrative. He is a character that wants to transform in the same way that Wikus does and who has the power to capture Wikus when he escapes. In this way, he is also an antagonist looking to capture Wikus.

Sarah Livingston (Narrator): One of the **talking heads** in the film who provide back-story to the aliens' arrival, MNU and other details. Her **monologues** to camera help provide important detail and shape the overall narrative.



1.6 - Narrative Themes/Issues

Conflict: Seen all the way through the film, conflict is key in driving the narrative.

Invasion: MNU are bullies and **bureaucrats** with no empathy for others. Wikus starts with authority and no empathy, but as he becomes *less human* his humanity for others increases.

Authority: Authority is seen through social class - everyone who has more power/privilege believes they have authority over those 'below' themselves, e.g. black S.African's believe they have authority over the alien refugees.

Segregation: Segregation features heavily as a narrative device to create conflict, i.e. when one group enters a designated area for another group, etc. Also a metaphor for apartheid.

Xenophobia: The fear and distrust of that perceived to be foreign/strange. Often explained as prejudice against people from other countries, this also applies to the distrust/dislike of aliens.

Big Business: MNU (Multi-National United) is the company responsible for moving the aliens into District 10 but they are also the world's second largest weapons manufacturer. It is unclear what they are really seeking - a way to use alien technology? Or are they 'helping' the aliens? They are symbolic and representative of real-life 'big-businesses' who carry out work on behalf of Governments around the world, but often simply to make money, rather than help people.

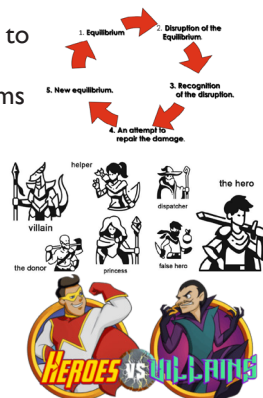
1.7 - Narrative Theorists

Aristotle: Greek philosopher - developed 3 Act structure; beginning, middle and end. Later developed to be a 5 Act structure. Can be applied to many films including D9.

Todorov: French-Bulgarian critic - suggested that the narrative of all films go through 5 main stages: **Equilibrium, Disruption, Recognition/Quest, Repair & New equilibrium.**

Propp: Russian scholar - Analysed basic plot components of Russian Folk tales to identify the most 'repeatable' narrative elements, i.e. character and events.

Levi-Strauss: French anthropologist - proposed a theory of 'binary opposites' which suggested that the majority of narratives in media forms such as books and films contain opposing main characters. These oppositions help to thicken the plot and further the narrative; and introduce contrast.



1.8 - Narrative Structures

Structures: Linear narrative, 3 and 5 act structure

Viewpoint: spectator is aligned with Wikus to provide a restricted viewpoint. Some of the other characters such as Sarah have a **omniscient viewpoint**.

Ellipsis: used to show 72 hrs in just 2 via montage and transitions i.e. fades to black.

Binary Oppositions: Create conflict - aliens vs. humans, Wikus vs. Piet, minorities being oppressed by the white people in power.

Exposition: Talking heads; improvised dialogue; dialogue; news footage.

Foreshadowing: props like alien weaponry and locations such as the Nigerian gang's 'shop' set up future events from early on in the film.

Withholding and releasing: Used for tension - Wikus' fate is suggested but not revealed until late on. Similarly, the 'power' of the black liquid is not revealed until later.

Cause and effect: opening 20 mins establish key plot points that will have an effect later, e.g. key characters involved in moments that cause changes to them & others.

1.9 - Key Scenes

The Opening: 3-10mins

- 'talking head' style interview with Wikus, who introduces himself and MNU via a monologue, providing exposition in a montage using ellipsis editing.
- VO of Grey Bradnam providing further exposition as we see images from Johannesburg before we see Grey on screen again as a talking head.
- 'found footage' used as flashback to the humans meeting the aliens.
- another talking head from Sarah Livingston provides further exposition before we see more archive footage that helps to establish the first act.

The first evictions:

00:10.17-00:15.12

- The rising action of this scene is still part of the first act as we learn how Wikus and MNU go about their jobs and how the aliens are treated. We also see what District 9 is like.
- presented in a montage style we see key 'moments' from a variety of perspectives and discover key exposition about cat food and the aliens via the talking heads and voiceovers.
- there is little being *withheld* in the narrative but plenty being established for cause and effect.
- some of Wikus' dialogue is likely to have been improvised here.

The final scene

- The 3rd/5th act depending on your structure of choice. This **denouement** presents the finale, highlighting how it is a linear narrative structure.
- **intercutting/cross-cutting** is used to show different perspectives of the ship leaving and the talking heads again explain the possible fate of Wikus.
- on screen text provides details and the omniscient viewpoint is shown through the use of many extreme high angle shots of the city and the population.
- new equilibrium established as Wikus has become an alien and has left a metal flower for his wife Tania.

Wikus and CJ break into MNU

- 'steadicam' movements to provide an intimate, 'found footage' documentary style.
- intercut with black + white, high angle static images connoting CCTV footage.
- the scene would fit into either the 2nd act (3 act structure) or 2nd/3rd (5 act structure).
- key plot point established using cause and effect; CJ notices the tortured aliens and therefore eventually decides that he has to leave Earth asap.

Wikus' sacrifice

- transformation in Wikus as he ultimately decides to sacrifice himself for CJ.
- 5 Act structure = Wikus as a human reaching a Climax - in the film overall, it is closer to fitting into a 4th Act; falling action.

Allegory

story, poem, or picture interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral/political one.

Apartheid

a policy or system of segregation on grounds of race

Autonomy

independence in one's thoughts or actions

Bureaucrats

government officials concerned with procedural correctness at the expense of people's needs.

Commodity

a product that can be bought and sold

Denouement

the final part of a narrative where the strands of the plot are drawn together, explained or resolved.

Ellipsis

omitting a part of the sequence of events, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps

Exposition

the background information on the characters and setting explained

Foreshadowing

a warning or indication of (a future event)

Inciting incident

an event that hooks the viewer into the story and sets everything else that happens into motion

Intercutting/crosscutting

editing technique used in films to establish action occurring at the same time.

Metaphor

an element of narrative expressed through the guise of something else

Monologues

an extended speech by one person

Nepotism

those with power or influence favouring relatives/friends by giving them jobs.

Omniscient viewpoint

a point of view that is all-seeing and all-knowing

Talking Heads

interview footage, where only the person's head and shoulders are visible to the camera