

DISTRICT 9 (Neil Blomkamp 2009)
Knowledge Organiser

| Institutional information | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Director: | Neil Blomkamp |
| Release: | 2009 (UK) |
| Production company: | Wingnut Films, TriStar, Sony Pictures |
| Country of production: | South Africa, US |
| Starring: | Shalto Copley; Jason Cope; Nathalie Boltz; David James; Louis Minnaar; |
| Genres: | Sci-fi; comedy; action; horror. |
| Other information: | Produced by Peter Jackson; written by Neil Blomkamp with his wife Terri Tatchell; feature-film directing debut; adapted from 2006 short film called ALIVE IN JO'BURG. |
| Award nominations: | BAFTA nominated: outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director or Producer |

Links to technology timeline:

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Soundtrack | Featuring a Dolby Digital soundtrack which features dialogue, a score and makes wide use of digital sound production. |
| Colour | Mostly in colour but some black & white to imitate style of cheap CCTV footage. |
| Widescreen, not 3D | Shot and presented in 1.85:1 widescreen aspect ratio. |
| CGI: | Used to create new objects & characters as well as used to enhance action. |
| Steadicam: | Steadicam is used in many action scenes but also NOT used at times to create found-footage style. |

Narrative Theorists

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Aristotle: | Greek philosopher. 3 Act structure; beginning, middle and end. Later developed to be a 5 Act structure. Can be applied to many films including D9. |
| Tzvetan Todorov: | French-Bulgarian critic. Suggested that the narrative of all films go through 5 main stages: Equilibrium, Disruption, Recognition/Quest, Repair & New equilibrium. |
| Vladimir Propp: | Russian scholar. Analysed the basic plot components of Russian Folk tales to identify the most 'repeatable' narrative elements. Identified 31 functions of narrative and 7 typical characters. |
| Claude Levi-Strauss | French anthropologist who proposed a theory of 'binary opposites' which suggested that the majority of narratives in media forms such as books and film contain opposing main characters. These binary opposites help to thicken the plot and further the narrative; and introduce contrast. |

| Characters | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Wikus van der Mewe: | Protagonist: Wikus is the first character we see on screen & is the character who we experience the narrative with. He is a sympathetic if somewhat selfish character to begin with. 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: aka CJ, is the alien character who acts as both a sidekick, a mentor & a scientist. 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' started goals of becoming 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 serene 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 direct result of Piet's decisions. |
| Koobus: | Antagonist: The most obvious example of a protagonist is Koobus. As the leader of the MNU 'military force', his character is firmly established when we first meet him when he aggressively talks to Wikus and then pushes the cameraman filming the events for MNU. |
| Obesandjo: | Antagonist: His story and Wikus' crosses when Wikus goes to him seeking to buy weapons established earlier in the narrative. He is the character who wants to transform in the way that Wikus does and who has the power to capture Wikus when he escapes. In this way, he is also an antagonist seeking to capture Wikus. |
| Sarah Livingston: | Narrator: One of the talking heads in the film who provide backstory to the aliens' arrival, MNU and other details. Her monologues to camera help provide important detail and shape to the overall narrative. |

Narrative

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Narrative structures: | Linear narrative, 3 and 5 act structure.; |
| Narrative viewpoint: | We align with Wikus helping to provide a restricted viewpoint. Some of the other characters such as Sarah have an omniscient viewpoint however. |
| Ellipsis: | Used to show 72 hours in just 2 via techniques such as montage; editing transitions like fade to black are also used. |
| Binary oppositions: | Create conflict. Key oppositions are aliens vs. humans, Wikus vs. Piet and young particular minorities being oppressed by the white people in power. |
| Exposition: | Talking heads; improvised dialogue; dialogue; news footage. |
| Foreshadowing/ Chekov's Gun: | Key moments involving props like alien weaponry and locations such as the Nigerian gang's 'shop' is set up early on. |
| Framing device: | The talking heads & found footage create an omniscient viewpoint. |
| Withholding & releasing | Used for tension, Wikus' fate is suggested but never revealed until late on. Similarly, the 'power' of the black liquid is not revealed until later on in the film. |
| Cause and effect: | Many moments in the opening 20 minutes of the film establish key plot points and moments that will have an effect later. For example, key characters involved in moments that cause changes to them & others. |

| Context: | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Social | Society structured in terms of class & privilege with the white men at MNU being the most 'power', whilst the refugee aliens having the least autonomy. |
| Political: | Political decisions drive 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 seen as outsiders & scavengers; they are segregated and demonised. The aliens idea of fun; derauling trains, starting fires & eating rubber, are all seen as savage in the same way that the Nigerian gangs once were. |
| Historical: | Film is allegorical & metaphorical examination of apartheid. 'White' & 'black' segregation and discrimination is broadly replaced with humans & 'prawns'. |
| Institutional: | Blomkamp was originally due to make a film adapting the Halo video game series, but instead was hired by Jackson to create a feature-length version of ALIVE IN JO'BURG. DISTRICT 9 was made for \$30m. |
| Technological: | CGI used throughout the film however, many practical effects were also used in creating props such as alien weaponry. |

| Themes/issues: | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Conflict: | Seen all the way through the film, conflict is key in driving the narrative. |
| Invasion: | Whilst the aliens are the most obvious example of 'invasion', this can also be seen via MNU 'invading' DISTRICT 9 and anyone 'invading' the Nigerian's shop. |
| Authority: | MNU are seen as bullies and bureaucrats who have no empathy for others. Wikus starts off as having authority and as a result, no empathy, but as he becomes less human his humanity for others increases. Authority is also seen in social class, as everyone who has more power or privilege, believes they have authority over someone they deem to be below them, for example, black South African's have authority over the alien refugees. |
| Segregation: | Segregation features heavily throughout the film as a narrative device to create conflict when one group enters an area designated for another group or when a group are forced into a specific area. Segregation is also used in the film as a metaphor to reflect real-life segregation in apartheid. |
| Xenophobia: | Xenophobia is the fear and distrust of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange. Often explained as the dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries, this would also apply to the distrust and dislike people have of the aliens. Of course, this is also something which is a metaphor for the xenophobic actions taken by the Government during apartheid. |
| Big-business: | MNU stands for Multi-National United. The film establishes them as a company who are going to move the aliens into District 10 but we later learn that they are also the world's second largest weapons manufacturer. This creates a conflict of interests in that what they are really seeking is a way to use the alien technology, rather than 'helping' the aliens. They are symbolic and representative of real-life 'big-business' companies who carry out work on behalf of Governments around the world, but often simply to make money, rather than help people. |

| Key scenes | |
|---|---|
| The Opening 3/10 mins: (http://bit.ly/D9clip1) (N.B: The opening 10 mins cannot be hosted on YT. Please use own copy of the film in regards to the first 10 minutes) | Film opens with a 'talking head' style interview with Wikus, our protagonist. He introduces himself and MNU briefly via a brief monologue that provides exposition in a montage style using ellipsis in the editing. We then have a voice over of Grey Bradnam who provides further exposition as we see images from Johannesburg before we see Grey on screen again as a talking head. We then have 'found footage' as a flashback of the time the humans met the aliens. Another talking head from Sarah Livingston helps to provide further exposition before we see more archive footage that helps to establish the first act. |
| The first evictions: (http://bit.ly/D9clip2) (N.B: I'd recommend watching a slightly longer version of this clip if possible- ideally from approximately 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 itself is like. This is presented in a montage style as we see key 'moments' from the morning in a variety of perspectives. We also discover key exposition about cat food and the aliens via the talking heads and voice overs. At this point, 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 (http://bit.ly/D9clip3) | This scene is the 3rd act of the 5th act depending on your narrative structure of choice. Either way, this denouement presents the finale to the main story of the film highlighting how it is a linear narrative structure. Throughout this scene, intercutting is used to show the different perspectives of the alien ship leaving and we get the framing device of the talking heads again explaining the possible fate of Wikus. On screen text provides further details and the omniscient viewpoint is shown through the use of many very high angle shots of the city and the population. The end of the scene provides a new equilibrium as we discover that Wikus has become an alien and has left a metal flower for his wife Tania. |
| Wikus and CJ break into MNU (http://bit.ly/D9clip4) | As with many other scenes, this features plenty of 'steadicam' movements to provide an intimate, 'found footage'/'documentary' style to the scene. It is also intercut with plenty of static images from a high angle in black and white that use the stereotypical visual cues of a CCTV camera. The scene is certainly part of the middle of the film and would fit into either the 2nd Act if you were to apply the 3 Act structure, or the 2nd and perhaps the 3rd act if applying the 5 Act structure. We see a 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 sacrifices himself (http://bit.ly/D9clip5) | We see a transformation in Wikus's character here as he ultimately decides to sacrifice himself for CJ. In a 5 Act structure you may refer to this as Wikus's narrative as a human reach a Climax. In the film overall, it is closer to fitting into a 4th Act; falling action. |