

THE FUTURE ABOUT THE PAST



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Summary

The Future About the Past is an examination and discussion of non-traditional ways of engaging with a difficult past. In this case the past in question is South Africa's and its difficult memories of racism. Specifically it is an analysis of the 2009 science-fiction film *District 9*, directed by the South African Neill Blomkamp.

In the project the idea of depicting history on film is discussed, especially inspired by the thoughts of the historian Robert A. Rosenstone. He argues that film can be depictions of the past – and therefore history in its own right and should not be judged on the same scale as written history. From that starting point, I go on to discuss historiography in a South African context and include thoughts on depictions of South Africa on film and cinematographic examples as such. I attempt to analyse *District 9* from a historical point of view, especially focusing on what role the film can play in engaging with a difficult past and what it may say about the white, Afrikaans speaking minority's view of their past. I conclude that the film has its merits as a way of depicting history, but has an underlying problematic view of history that includes racist stereotyping. The analysis leads to a discussion of the possibility of using film when engaging with a painful past. In this case I use examples from the discussion of depictions of Holocaust and argue that alternative films, for example science fiction, have the possibility of engaging with a difficult past in a better way than mainstream cinema and possibly written history.

Abstract

The Future About The Past er en undersøgelse og diskussion af utraditionelle måder at beskæftige sig

med en problematisk fortid. Specifikt handler projektet om Sydafrikas fortid og vanskelige minder om racisme og overgreb. Jeg analyserer i den forbindelse science-fiction filmen *District 9* fra 2009, der er instrueret af Sydafrikaneren Neill Blomkamp.

Jeg diskuterer film som en måde at skrive og formidle historie på inspireret af historikeren Robert A. Rosenstones ideer om emnet. Han argumenterer for, at film, som historie, skal bedømmes på egne vilkår og dermed ikke på samme vilkår som historie på skrift. Jeg fortsætter med en diskussion af historiografi i en Sydafrikansk kontekst, der indeholder tanker om filmiske fremstillinger af Sydafrika og eksempler fra filmhistorien som sådan. Jeg forsøger at analysere *District 9* fra et historisk perspektiv og fokuserer især på, hvilken rolle filmen kan spille som fremstilling og bearbejdelse af en smertefuld fortid. Desuden forsøger jeg at udlede, hvad filmen kan sige om den hvide, afrikaanstalende minoritets forståelse af deres egen historie. Jeg konkluderer, at filmen har visse styrker som historieformidler, men at den har et underliggende problematisk syn på historien, der indeholder racistiske stereotyper. Efter analysen diskuterer jeg filmmediets mulighed for at bearbejde og fremstille en smertefuld fortid. I denne diskussion anvender jeg eksempler fra debatten om fremstilling af Holocaust. Jeg argumenterer for, at alternative film, eksempelvis science-fiction film, har mulighed for bedre at bearbejde og fremstille en smertefuld fortid end mainstream film og muligvis historie på skrift.

The project amounts to 27 official pages.

Introduction

The starting point of this project is a discussion and examination of a non-traditional way of engaging with a difficult and relatively recent past, specifically the recent history of South Africa. As a means of doing that, I will attempt to conduct a historical analysis of the film *District 9* (2009),¹ a science fiction film directed by Neill Blomkamp that takes place in Johannesburg in South Africa.

Before I will discuss my choice of subject and film, a short plot summary is in order:

Plot summary

In 1982 a space ship comes to a halt and hovers in the air over downtown Johannesburg. Instead of being an attempted invasion, the aliens on board the ship turn out to be quite the opposite of a threat when, after three months, the army opens the ship. The aliens on board are sick and in need of help, which they get from the South African authorities, who also evacuates them to the area underneath the ship. Twenty years later the ‘prawns’ – as the aliens are condescendingly called – are living in shacks in District 9. Aside from their already dire living conditions, they are facing eviction to a tent camp far from the city in an operation that is going to be undertaken by an international corporation known as Multinational United (MNU). Prior to the relocation illegal eviction notices are handed out to the aliens and the operation is led by the less than impressive Afrikaner bureaucrat, Wikus van de Merwe. He only got the job because his father-in-law is a company executive. During the operation, van de Merwe accidentally touches an alien fluid that gradually turns him into an alien. Desperate to get the ability to use the aliens' biotechnological weapons, MNU has been conducting experiments on the aliens. When they find out van de Merwe is becoming one, a manhunt begins. Aided by the alien Christopher, van de Merwe attempts to get to the mother ship, still hovering over District 9, where Christopher claims he can save not only van de Merwe, but all the aliens.

¹ Blomkamp, Neill, *District 9*, Tristar Productions, South Africa 2009

Memories of Racism

Depicting history on film as well as discussing history on the basis of film can be - and have often been criticised. Only in recent decades has the field been explored more deeply by historians, one being the American Robert A. Rosenstone who has contributed to this exploration by taking film as a historical medium seriously while insisting on being a Historian (with a capital H). His latest book *History on Film – Film on History*² summarizes his thinking and research in the field.

Personally I was first exposed to his writing when I took classes in film and history at the University of Cape Town in 2009. Probably not at least because of the place I was, history seemed alive and important, and I realized the complexity of trying to make sense of the past, which – to me at least – is a major reason for doing history at all. Especially in South Africa, this complexity can be overwhelming. The past here is complicated, painful for most, incredibly influential over memories, present-day politics and everyday life.

When considering this, the idea of taking science fiction films seriously as a historical medium might seem odd. I do, on the contrary, find that the troubled past of South Africa especially calls for both traditional and non-traditional ways of representing the past and thus my engagement with film and history in a South African context.

Since the memories of racism and oppression are relatively recent and incredibly painful and people, who were fighting or oppressing each other, still live in the same country, anybody dealing with the past in South Africa is walking a fine line. The question at the core of this and thus my research

2 Rosenstone, Robert A, *History on Film/Film on History*, Pearson Education Limited, Great Britain 2006.

question is:

'How is it possible to engage with memories of racism?'

In the following I will attempt to describe my point of departure when discussing *District 9* as a way of doing apartheid history. In order to do so, I will touch upon South African history and historiography as well as cinematic history.

Film, History and South Africa – Thoughts on methodology and Context

When I lived in Cape Town just below Table Mountain, I would sometimes go running on its slopes. Aside from a beautiful view of 'the fairest cape in all the world' as Sir Francis Drake – according to popular legend – called the Cape peninsula, the mountain also offered a many-layered historical view. The Group Areas Act of 1950 and similar legislation in the subsequent years effectively removed all who happened not to be white from the beautiful slopes of the mountain, where mansions and homes for the white upper and middle classes still largely dominate today. Further out the coloured³ townships mark the beginning of the Cape Flats, a huge desolate area east of the city. Beyond the coloured townships, the black Africans were moved even further out on the plains to the huge, crime-ridden township of Khayelitsha. Near downtown Cape Town, overlooking the city and facing the Atlantic, one area holds a specific symbolic importance: An illogically empty spot, where the bustling District Six used to be. It was originally a lively, bustling and largely coloured neighbourhood and had been that from at least the late nineteenth century,⁴ but in 1966 the area was proclaimed white, and the people of the district were evicted. Then the bulldozers moved in and a complete demolition destroyed the neighbourhood. Due to the unsolved ownership status, the district remains empty today although it must be an incredibly valuable piece of real estate. A very popular museum in downtown Cape Town is dedicated to the district and its former inhabitants, many of whom participate in running it. It seems fair to suggest that District Six has become somewhat of a ground zero, or a memorial for the segregation, in Cape Town and South Africa.

In other words, I realised in Cape Town that even though apartheid ended almost 20 years ago, the

3 Coloured is the term used in South Africa for anybody who is neither black African, Indian or white

4 Thompson, Leonard, A History of South Africa, Jonathan Ball Publishers, (Johannesburg and Cape Town 2006) pp 188-189

geographic layout of the city to a large degree still corresponds to the history of the place and affects its inhabitants deeply. That is only one example of the living history of country.

Intrinsically part of geography, memory, economics, and close to everything else, the question is not if, but how, South Africa must deal with its racially oppressive past. Obviously traditional academic history is a necessary part of the process, but also oral history, as used in the establishment of the District Six Museum, not to mention the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu . Literary approaches are part of the process too, and, of these, dramatic film plays a significant part. The medium does not only hold importance as a way of reaching the masses, but also, as Robert Rosenstone argues, *'If dramatic film can successfully meditate upon, integrate and analyze the past . . . then surely it plays part of the role we assign to traditional History'*.⁵

Vivian Bickford-Smith, historian from the University of Cape Town, has written an article about Rosenstone's work in an African context in which she follows his argument and goes on to say that dramatic film may even be a better entry point to history for students from a complex society such as South Africa's, where ethnic, social, and national divides play such an important part of the past and present.⁶

'No discontent' – Construction of history during apartheid

For many years the white elite and the apartheid government largely defined the construction of the history of the country. Not only the history as it was understood – through for example the great trek

5 Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* p-164

6 Bickford-Smith, Vivian, Rosenstone on Film, Rosenstone on History: An African Perspective, *Rethinking History Vol. 11*, No. 4, December, pp. 531 – 545, 2007 p-542

and other Afrikaner myths – but also through strict control of all shapes of culture and the press, resulting in the creation of history and society as it happened. One example can be found in the book *Beyond The Miracle: Inside the New South Africa*, where veteran editor, journalist, and reporter Allister Sparks explains how the press - during the South African invasion of Angola in 1975 - was instructed by the government to withhold information about the invasion from the public. The press was supposed to inform the public that only a handful of soldiers were protecting a dam near Namibia,⁷ where in reality there was a large-scale invasion, complete with many casualties and wounded conscripts.⁸ In that way the government did not only support the mythical Afrikaner history, but also contributed to the continuous and deliberate construction of historical consciousness in South Africa. According to Sparks the government's brainwashing of people was so efficient that a survey in 1982 showed that 80% of the white population believed the government's claim that communism, rather than black discontent, was the greatest threat to South Africa's future, and that a frightening 71% believed that the black population basically was content and had no reason to try to overthrow the apartheid government. Of course things changed significantly during the 1980s and 1990s, also when it came to historical consciousness among the white population, but, as the numbers suggest, the deliberate propaganda had a huge impact. As well, of course, for the black, Indian and coloured populations, who were at least as misinformed by the apartheid government as the whites. After all, the government was in complete control of the education system as well as media and history as such.

Not only a political system, but also a system of ideas, myths, and history has now been abandoned, leaving the people formerly under apartheid with – at the very least – ambivalent concepts and ideas of history and truth.

7 Namibia was then called South West Africa and was under South African control.

8 Sparks, Allister, *Beyond the Miracle: Inside The New South Africa*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa 2003 p-66

As Bickford-Smith points out, echoed in my own experience, it is mostly students from abroad who attend the traditional courses on apartheid history at the University of Cape Town. At this point it is not my objective to discuss why South African students are not interested in the historiography of the country,⁹ but instead to discuss how film engages with the very same history.

Why District 9?

The film I have chosen does not claim to be historic or portray any real historic events. Since there are several films that explicitly claim to be and do just that, my choice may seem even stranger. Why not choose a classic, such as *Cry Freedom*,¹⁰ the 1987 production describing the friendship between the editor Donald Woods and black consciousness activist Steve Biko? The film tells the story of the death of Biko in police custody in 1977, and Woods' later escape to England with a banned book about Biko. Politically motivated, the film explicitly claims to portray real events, as does the 2009 Hollywood production by Clint Eastwood, *Invictus*.¹¹ It is set around the first post-apartheid rugby world cup that ends up being a national reconciliatory event largely due to the efforts of Nelson Mandela. For various reasons, which will be discussed further, I have specifically chosen not to do so, but especially *Cry Freedom*¹² will remain a reference point because of its historic claims.

I have several reasons for choosing *District 9* instead; its origins, its impact in South Africa, its obvious historical references and also, paradoxically, its otherworldly nature.

When it comes to origins, the director is Neill Blomkamp, who was born in 1977 in Johannesburg and grew up in South Africa. He is Afrikaans speaking and therefore – regardless of his current residence in

9 Bickford-Smith, *Rosenstone on Film, Rosenstone on History: An African Perspective*. Pp – 541-542

10 Attenborough, Richard, *Cry Freedom*, Universal Pictures, England, 1987

11 Eastwood, Clint, *Invictus*, Spyglass Entertainment, USA, 2009

12 Attenborough, *Cry Freedom*, 1987

Canada – has a privileged access to the language and culture of the former oppressors. Leading actor – Sharlto Copley – is also born and raised in Johannesburg, and generally the cast is South African. This gives the film credibility and an insight few of the foreign productions have. As for impact, the popular film earned more than two million South African Rand in its opening weekend in South Africa, which are the highest earnings for a film with age restriction since 2004.¹³ The popularity of the film, in other words, has meant that its potential impact when it comes to creating public debate has been substantial. Aside from its cultural credibility, one could argue that it still is about aliens and should be dismissed as history on that basis. However, the references to South African history are substantial: Thematically, it places itself in a very well known South African context. Forcible removals and evictions have shaped and affected the country deeply and continue to do so today. Consider, for example, again District Six – the reference here is obvious – or more recent evictions in connection with the world cup in 2010.¹⁴

Still, one could argue, both the genre and content of the film is otherworldly and clearly fiction. How is it possible – the question could be – to argue that aliens and spaceships can teach us anything about the past? In an article about American science fiction film and race, Adilifu Nama, starts out by quoting J.G. Ballard saying: *'The future is a better key to the present than the past'*.¹⁵

But what happens if we take the statement one step further – or rather backwards – and say that the future potentially could be an alternative key to the past itself? By following the history of black representation in American sci-fi cinema, Nama concludes that *'there is an unstated hegemonic affinity*

13 News24, *District 9 Tops Box Office*, 2009

<http://www.news24.com/Entertainment/SouthAfrica/District-9-tops-SA-box-office-20090901>

14 Washington Post, *In preparation for World Cup, the poor in Cape Town are being relocated*, 2010

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/10/AR2010061002060.html>

15 Nama, Adilifu. R Is for Race Not Rocket: Black Representation In American Science Fiction Cinema, *Quarterly Review of Film And Video*, 26: 155-166, 2009 p-155

*between the legacy of American race relations and American sci-fi cinema.*¹⁶ His analysis is convincing and inspires me to try to look at *District 9* from a historical point of view. This perspective, I believe, is not necessarily the most giving when applied to the genre as such, but, in the case of *District 9*, I believe the references are so obvious that the idea is justifiable. This is especially the case because the film is not only science fiction, but also can be placed in the cinematographic tradition of portraying Africa and African history.

In a paper about Rosenstone's *History on Film, Film on History*, Leen Engelen suggests something similar. She claims that film with a dubious relation to history does not traditionally interest historians, but that they perhaps should; not necessarily for the history they portray, but more for what they can say about history. With that idea she places the discussion in the larger context of historiography. After the initial post-modernism related fear of killing history, few historians would deny that fictional elements and narratives play a part in telling history in any shape. Additionally, as Engelen suggests, fiction films mirror the uncertainties that lie near the core in historiography today, regardless of its quality as history.¹⁷

Considering *District 9* from this point of view, the film can say several things. Given the fact that Neill Blomkamp is white and Afrikaans speaking, he becomes a representative of what used to be the ruling minority. Now, more than twenty years after the end of apartheid, the film can suggest how themes in South African history are manifested in popular culture and consciousness especially from the point of view of the whites and in particular the Afrikaners.

16 Nama, R Is for Race Not Rocket, p-165

17 Engelen, Leen, Back to the Future, Ahead to the Past, Film and History; A Status Questionis, Rethinking History Vol. 11, No. 4, December 2007, pp. 555 – 563

It is therefore my objective to analyse the film from a historical point of view. I will examine the film's references to history and its attempt to discuss the complexity of South Africa's past and present, not only from a South African perspective, but also from the perspective of an Afrikaner. In order to do so, I will be using tools from film studies as well as history and draw on the ideas from Robert Rosenstone and others, examples from science fiction classics, depictions of Africa on film and South African history as such. My goal is to examine how *District 9* engages with South African history and to discuss the role of film as a historic medium, especially when in relation to the difficulties of engaging with painful memories such as racism.

Analysis

In this section I will attempt to analyse the film by examining selected clips, general themes, use of language and imagery and references to both cinematographic history, South African history as well as both historiographic and cinematic theory. I will start from the beginning, but only stick to the chronology when it serves my purpose. Through these means, it is my object to examine how *District 9* is engaged with the past by representing and discussing elements of apartheid, stereotypes of the past and present ideas of history.

Between Sci-fi and Africa – Cinematic relations and genre

From the beginning, *District 9* invokes the style and language of a documentary. The hand-held cameras, TV News footage – or what appears to be – and the expert talking heads. These are all aspects of on-screen language that suggests we are watching an attempt to show reality. Simultaneously, the content of what we see is unreal; talk of prawns and alien affairs suggests that what we are witnessing on the screen is not exactly our ordinary Wednesday night TV-documentary.

Immediately, we meet our hero, the main character, Wikus van de Merwe. He introduces himself and his job at the MNU Department of Alien Affairs. With the dry, impersonalised language characterising totalitarian bureaucracies, apartheid South Africa's included, he explains the role of the department: '*What we do here at the department is to try to engage with the prawn on behalf of MNU and on behalf of humans*'. Behind him we see a characteristic, ordinary office with white cubical walls that suggests normality, and even dreariness. An environment that could have been any workplace, which underlines the average nature – almost banality – of the situation.

At this point the contradictions are already apparent. By using the audio-visual language of the documentary on a clearly fictional story, Blomkamp sets a paradoxical agenda that challenges the perception of his audience. In this way, the film's contradictory style is already set and it becomes apparent that what we are about to see will engage with our concepts of reality and genre. Exactly because the language and style of documentaries are familiar, Blomkamp manages to question the genre of his film, and documentary as such, and in that way state his own claim of a broader view of reality than what we normally expect from a documentary. A discussion highlighted by the challenge of the genre as such, both by experimental documentaries such as the animated *Waltz With Bashir* (2008)¹⁸ or so called *Mockumentaries* like *I'm Still Here* (2010).¹⁹

In the next scene we see the massive spaceship that has come to a halt over Johannesburg, leaving parts of the city in its shade. It invokes a reference to *Independence Day*,²⁰ where a similar type of massive spaceship creates suspense by casting its shade over major global cities. But as the narrator says, also with a reference to the 90-ies sci-fi blockbuster, the ship did not come to halt over Los Angeles, Manhattan, or Washington, D.C. Instead the events are firmly placed in Johannesburg, South Africa. The action, or rather the suspense at this point, is set in the African metropolis, a city that does not hold the importance of the American cities, but none the less has plenty of tension in its own right.

Also, contrary to most other science fiction films, the aliens in *District 9* are not trying to conquer the earth. Instead, as it turns out, they are aimless creatures in need of help, and, as the world is watching they are relocated to a tent camp below the ship. In time the aliens lose the interest of the world – like

18 Folman, Ari, *Waltz With Bashir*, Sony Pictures Classics, Israel 2008

19 Affleck, Casey, *I'm Still Here*, Magnolia Pictures, USA 2010

20 Emmerich, Roland, *Independence Day*, 20th Century Fox, USA 1996

any news event in Africa – and the camp develops into a slum. Various news clips show the growing tensions between humans and aliens. Riots break out in the township and in 'man on the street' interviews, humans express their anger at the 'prawns'. Emphasising their 'Otherness' they demand that the prawns leave. Statements like '*...at least they are keeping them separate...*' and '*... they must go home...*' sets the stage for a separatist and racial conflict.

In other words, the film's opening scenes play with paradoxes and references. The documentary-style shooting suggests authenticity and reality, but the subject matter is literally alien. The attitudes towards the 'prawns' are either openly hostile or dehumanised bureaucratic and reminds us of apartheid rhetoric and attitudes.

As the convoy of military MNU vehicles move into District 9, van de Merwe explains: '*The prawn does not really understand the concept of ownership or property, so we have to go in there and explain: This is our land, please will you go.*' Again the vocabulary is obviously – and almost mockingly – apartheid, but also the visuals show the relation. Heavily armoured trucks with paramilitary troops or police officers moving into townships and informal settlements were a part of apartheid evictions.²¹ Furthermore, the scene also suggests a kinship to cinematic history. Here the film places itself in the context of films portraying Africa and South Africa in particular. The demolition and the evictions of the people in the informal settlement Crossroads in Cape Town in 1975 is portrayed vividly in the opening scenes of Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom*.²² Like in the opening scenes of *District 9*, the background music in *Cry Freedom* is distinctively African and places us in a clear African context as we watch the township quietly awaken, before the armoured trucks move in and paramilitary forces

21 Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, p-189

22 Attenborough, *Cry Freedom*, 1987

spill out into the streets unleashing chaos on the defenceless inhabitants.

In that way *District 9* cinematically shows a relationship to depictions of apartheid South Africa, much like it shows a genre relationship to science-fiction films like *Independence Day*.²³

Not seafood, but neither human – 'Prawn' as a fictional derogatory term

At this point I will linger shortly on something as strange as cat food. For some reason, the aliens in *District 9* have developed an addiction to cat food and both criminal dealers and authorities take advantage of that. The dealers – it is worth noting – are Nigerians and the film was actually banned in Nigeria because of the portrayals of Nigerians as criminals, prostitutes and even cannibals.²⁴ As a side comment, the name of the Nigerian gangster leader is Obesandjo, which is very close to the former Nigerian president Obasanjo.

In the film, however, the preferred alien drug has a meaning of its own. It is not alcohol, cocaine or hash, but cat food. In that way it is insinuated that the aliens are closer to an animalistic stage than humans are, which I will discuss further in the following.

When the aliens in *District 9* are called prawns, it is reminiscent of derogatory terms that have been discursively used within any system of oppression. Without listing them, apartheid South Africa had its own terms that live on today as part of the collective memory. For an international audience, however, it is the universal nature of oppressive slurs that explains why the term 'prawn' in *District 9* is instantly familiar and more so, of course, in a South African context that still is an extremely racialised society. When a police officer in an interview says '*... you can't say they don't look like that. That's what they*

23 Emmerich, *Independence Day*, 1996

24 Los Angeles Examiner, '*District 9*' banned in Nigeria? 2009
<http://www.examiner.com/pop-culture-in-los-angeles/district-9-banned-nigeria>

look like...' it further reminds us how foreign looks, habits, and intelligence (or the lack of) have been described as determining features of a 'less developed' race and used as a means of 'othering'. A familiar justification for slave trade was that people of colour were not made in the image of God, which also is a theme of the 2006 Nigerian film *The Amazing Grace*.²⁵ But race theory like that remained part of the popular and even scientific discourse way up in the 20th century. For example, the renowned Stanford psychologist, Lewis Madison Terman, wrote in 1916 about Hispanics and African Americans in the American South that: *'Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. ... Children of this group should be segregated into separate classes. ... They cannot master abstractions but they can often be made into efficient workers ... from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding.'*²⁶

Fortunately science proved him wrong and this kind of attitude slowly died away from academic institutions and politics as decolonisation began after World War II. But not in South Africa, where apartheid did not even officially start until 1949. The 'architect' behind apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd said about the education of the Black Africans that *'...If the native in South Africa in any kind of school in existence is being taught to expect that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a big mistake ... There is no place for him ... above the level of certain forms of labour.'*²⁷

With the government's extreme control over media and education²⁸ such views became widely spread among white South Africans, which Blomkamp portrays. By using similar language and codes, he comments on the history of widespread and institutionalised racism. A benefit of his choice of genre is

25 Amata, Jeta, *The Amazing Grace*, Jeta Amata Concepts, Nigeria 2006

26 Terman, Lewis M. *The Measurement of Intelligence*, Houghton Mifflin, 1916, pp 91-92

27 Thompson, *A History of South Africa* p-191

28 Sparks, Allister, *Beyond the Miracle* p-66

that by making the oppressed race aliens instead of humans he furthermore ridicules the language and attitudes of apartheid. For people with knowledge of South African history, it is apparent how insane the apartheid rhetoric sounds when amplified by being said to – and about – aliens.

Once the historical references are in place, Blomkamp takes the story one step further. In my opinion, the most horrifying scene in the film is what I will call the abortion scene. Van de Merwe finds a sort of breeding shack, where alien children are nurturing on a kind of breeding machine attached to a cow carcass. Nonchalantly, he explains how everything works and then he pulls the plug out on several of the babies. Pulling out a plug he hands it to his assistant: '*... You can keep as a souvenir. For you first abortion...*' A sound like a distorted, but never the less obvious, version of children crying starts and continues as they use a flame thrower to burn down the breeding shack. Van de Merwe tells his assistant not to wear his mask since only sissies do, while the alien babies disappears in black smoke under the competent handling of the '*...population management...*'.

This scene is central to my reading of the film as an attempt to depict apartheid. Generally the film's somewhat uneasy humoristic tone, mostly mocking van de Merwe, is a comic relief to its horrific scenes and imagery. His awkward movements and comments do not provide relief, but only underlines the ignorant cruelty that is the basis of racism.

Vivian Bickford-Smith says about Jamie Bartlett, another South African, playing a former security policeman in the film *Red Dust*: '*Bartlett has a South African actor's insider knowledge to convey menace combined with banality more convincing...*²⁹', which is a claim that goes for Sharlto Copley's Wikus van de Merwe, as well. In this case, he ends up committing atrocities and think of it as any ordinary work experience.

29 Bickford-Smith, *Rosenstone on Film, Rosenstone on History; An African Perspective*, p-538

Horrible, but not unheard of in an apartheid context, where for example Allister Sparks describes a scene from the confessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission trials: A group of special branch police officers describes burning the body of a political activist next to an idyllic river and having a barbecue while waiting for the body to turn to ashes. They even had to continuously turn the body, in order to make sure the outcome was as desired. These were people were not criminal crazies, but government officials doing their job.³⁰

While later searching a shack, van de Merwe is exposed to an alien liquid, which in fact is some sort of spaceship fuel that the alien Christopher has gathered through 20 years of trying to make the ship fly again and save his people. Because of the exposure, van de Merwe gradually turns into an alien, complete with the ability to use the aliens' weapons, which has been a great desire for the MNU for a long time. They start experimenting on him in the MNU hospital and research facility, for example, by making him shoot pigs and finally an alien. At this point van de Merwe begs his guardians to let him shoot a pig, but not an alien which is a symbolic decisive moment: For van de Merwe, the aliens have become humanised and he does not wish to kill them. These objections comes from the same man, who earlier that day facilitated mass abortions.

As van de Merwe ventures deeper and deeper into District 9, he is caught in a racial limbo. Not alien, but not quite human either, he is living a deep identity crisis. He starts craving cat food, but when he eats it his human side gets the better of him and he hurls it away in disgust.

As he is transforming he is also transcending the border that formerly enabled him to kill alien babies without emotion, but his transformation is painful and full of self hatred and disgust. The film circles

30 Sparks, Allister, *Beyond the Miracle: Inside the New South Africa*, p-163

around these lapses of loyalty and the identity crisis van de Merwe is experiencing in both mind and body. He is helpless on his own, but with the help of Christopher, the alien, he attempts to 'fix himself'. He desperately wants to return to his former, fully human state, but the return proves to be difficult and, as we later learn, probably impossible.

In equally desperate circumstances, Christopher and van de Merwe realise they need each other's help, and *District 9* turns into a film about two characters transcending a racial gap in order to overcome desperate circumstances.

The Buddy Film – Depictions of Africa

In this way Blomkamp ends up writing himself into the tradition of Eurocentric perspectives on Africa. Not unlike *Cry Freedom*, *District 9* ends up as a 'buddy-film' about Africa. Atavistic, Vivian Bickford Smith, calls the genre of films that has a white protagonist (or at least main character), often a male journalist, who ventures into the deepest darkest Africa or other 'exotic' places. In this way, she proposes that the dreadfully complicated and horrible third world politics become exciting and manageable.³¹ The list of films doing just that is long: Consider *Cry Freedom*, *The Killing Fields*,³² *The Year of Living Dangerously*,³³ or *Salvador*.³⁴ Wikus van de Merwe becomes our protagonist and introducer who, from the perspective of a very human, white male, enters the dark alien world. As in other films, he meets an alien (African, black etc.) of ethical and moral integrity – and often with well articulated Western language and ideas – who helps him change his ways. By the end of the film, van de Merwe is faced with the ultimate choice of sacrificing himself for the aliens. He makes the right decision and fights the oppressors of whom he only days ago were a part. In that way *District 9* ends

31 Bickford-Smith, *Rosenstone on Film, Rosenstone on History: An African Perspective*, p-540

32 Joffé, Roland, *The Killing Fields*, Warner Bros. United Kingdom 1984

33 Weir, Peter, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, MGM, Australia 1982

34 Stone, Oliver, *Salvador*, Hemdale Film Corporation, USA, 1986

up as a redemption movie of sorts, where the white man introduces us to the moral integrity of the native and redeems himself by saving the native. The alien Christopher shows van de Merwe the suffering of his people with his very human emotions and ethics, and, as van de Merwe becomes less human – since he is transforming into an alien – he actually becomes more humane.

Bickford-Smith wisely decides not to go into receptive theory and the like, but quote people who disagrees with the belief that white protagonists necessarily is such a bad thing. The ends – conveying difficult third world history to Western audience – justifies the means. But she reflects further on the nature of the implicit division in many historical narratives. Division and categories become starting points and as Bickford-Smith writes: '*... Historiography in constructing (inventing) intelligible narratives about the past employs such categories, even when seeking to understand the roots of such division, willy-nilly in the process, these narratives can at least implicitly suggest—and help maintain their presence in the present in which they are written—boundaries between social groups as hard and fast (even as primordial and essentialised) as those ever dreamt of in apartheid philosophy.*'³⁵

In South Africa, she claims, division is often the underlying meta narrative of historiography, and – as such – a challenge for any historical narrative –it being a film or a five volume academic history.

In written history as well as film, competing discourses or historiographic genres are available. Liberal, post-modernist or radical narratives can describe the same events in very different ways and come to different conclusions and historical films are equally diverse. I have earlier mentioned the Nigerian film *Amazing Grace*,³⁶ which is a dramatic depiction of the history of the slave trade and thus Africa,

35 Bickford-Smith, *Rosenstone on Film, Rosenstone on History: An African Perspective*, p-541

36 Amata, *The Amazing Grace*

but from an African perspective. A classic, historical drama and technically well produced, there are striking differences between this film and your average historical drama from Hollywood. Without going into a deep analysis, I will reveal that this film is also redemptive in a way, but here the white man is given his life from the local king and does not save anybody but himself. The film is a classical narrative, but from an African perspective.

Evil White Men – Apartheid Stereotypes

When discussing *District 9* as a historical film – and in that way Neill Blomkamp as a creator of a narrative that relates to history – his characters must be central. Not specifically in the way that certain characters are in fact historical persons, but rather in the way that they represent types, or perhaps stereotypes, and thus representing the past and the way that the present remembers – or imagines – certain people in the past.

In his choice of van de Merwe as a main character and (anti) hero, Blomkamp paints the picture of the less than smart or heroic Afrikaner: He is a bureaucrat, who only rises in the ranks because of his family relations. Affirmative action was a cornerstone of apartheid and pre-apartheid segregationist legislation that lifted the Afrikaners away from the bottom of society, through, for example, the use of colour bars.³⁷

Another stereotype is his father-in-law and MNU executive Pieter Smit, who is the greedy old, white man in power. Not only is he malicious enough to experiment on the aliens, but even his own son-in-law. He embodies the stereotype of the old, powerful men in suits who keep their hands clean, but in fact are responsible.

A third type is the men forming the army branch of the MNU. They remind us of the notorious

³⁷ Thompson, *A History of South Africa* p-151

apartheid special branch police officers and special units who were known for assassinations, torture, terror and for killing political prisoners in their custody.³⁸ A famous case was the killing of Steve Biko, the 70s Black Consciousness activist, also portrayed in *Cry Freedom*. As an additional point MNU – Multinational United – is an obvious reference to the private organisations working, sometimes as regular mercenaries, in Afghanistan and Iraq on behalf of western governments, especially USA, such as Blackwater.

These stereotypes paint a picture of the people in power during apartheid as either dehumanised and ignorant bureaucrats or cruel, inhuman security forces, all led by greedy, arrogant, old white men. What unifies these types is that they were all part of a racist system that resulted in a wall of bureaucratic ignorance, cruelty, and greed that made it possible to treat people of colour as something akin to animals and unworthy of all empathy.

Discarding Apartheid – a New Generation of Afrikaners and Their History

In this way Blomkamp represents the new generation of white South Africans who discard the system of their parents and rid themselves of any relation to the old regime, which they regard as ignorant and cruel.

That the new generation among white South Africans think of the former generations as ridiculous fanatics is probably not all that surprising. After all, they remember the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where some of the atrocities of apartheid were exposed. The commission as well as the educational system, new museums, films both from home and especially abroad and other cultural

38 Sparks, *Beyond the Miracle* pp 147-154

products have been reshaping collective memory in the country for almost 20 years and continue to do so. This break with the past among the young, white South Africans manifests itself in many ways. Another prolific example is the hugely successful punk band Fokofpolisiekar – meaning Fuck off Police Car in Afrikaans. The band consists of young Afrikaners whose cause – if cause is not a paradox when talking about punk music – is discarding their parent’s strict Calvinist religion and ridding themselves of apartheid guilt. Like a South African version of the Rolling Stones, they draw huge crowds of kids who all go without permission from their parents.³⁹

As old systems, memories, attitudes and discourses are being discarded and ridiculed new ones take their place. In the case of *District 9*, what is especially interesting to me is what view of history is expressed as an alternative to the apartheid version.

As the opposition to the racist whites and the oppressive system, the aliens – or ‘prawns’ – are worth returning to. The connection between them and black Africans in the townships during apartheid is obvious. For one, they are the obvious counterpart to the Afrikaners. Secondly, the naming of the district, the signs explaining '*humans only*' or '*no alien loitering*' are all revived apartheid naming and symbolism that live on in popular history and national memory. The overwhelming presence of these semiotic keys signify the allegoric nature of the film and in turn means that what is actually being said about the aliens is being said about black Africans in townships and informal settlements during apartheid.

The 'talking head', UKNR correspondent Grey Bradnam, says about the aliens that '*... what for them*

³⁹ Little, Brian: *Fokofpolisiekar: Forgive Them For They Know Not What They Do*, Fly on The Wall Productions, South Africa, 2009

might be seen as something recreational such as setting fire to a truck or derailing a train is for us obviously extremely disruptive action.' And thus the tone is set for imagery of aliens walking the streets with bloody carcasses, eating the cat food they are addicted to, vomiting in the streets and generally behaving like animals. In that way the 'otherness' and inferiority of the aliens is emphasised. Returning to the cat food, I will point to the drug and alcohol problems in the townships during apartheid in South Africa. It is true that they were significant, but they were not – as addictive tendencies never are – related to a biological race. That is none the less what is insinuated by Blomkamp: As van de Merwe gradually turns into an alien, the cat food addiction is part of the transformation. In that way, what of course is a social problem is depicted as a racial problem.

While Blomkamp is trying to point out the fallacies of South Africa's apartheid past, he – perhaps unintentionally – reveals his own subconscious racism. In the film the name 'prawn', described in the film as a derogatory term, suggests bottom feeders and otherness, but the images do in fact tell us a similar thing. Yes, the institutionalised racism during apartheid was awful, and the macho Afrikaners were cruel and ridiculous, but the 'prawns' were disgusting, violent creatures living in dirt. In that way racial stereotypes are underlying in spite of the break with the past, and it suggests a historical view of township-dwellers and black Africans as different, inferior, and more inclined to abuse drugs or alcohol.

If we measure *District 9* on the scale of Adilifu Nama, who claims that '*... both institutionalised racism and sci-fi films, rely on the acceptance of fiction of the highest order in order to achieve their respective ends.*'⁴⁰ the film portrays a less than positive view of younger white South Africans' perception of history and race today.

40 Nama, *R is For Race not Rocket* p-165

The future about the past

In the introduction to this project my research question was: *'How is it possible to engage with memories of racism?'* By asking this question, I ventured into a historiographic discussion of representation and historical narratives. I argued that science-fiction cinema might be a valid historical narrative, and in that way I stated the paradoxical claim that the future might be better at explaining the past than the past itself. In *District 9* I saw an attempt of an Afrikaner to make a break with his own history and past and in that way engaging with the memory of racism in the recent past. Although Neill Blomkamp's film conveys a still problematic view of history and racial stereotypes, the idea of portraying painful memories in an untraditional media, such as science-fiction cinema, has its benefits.

The History/Film debate – Depicting Holocaust

The comparison that I am somewhat reluctant to make, but do so because of its significance within the history/film debate, is the discussion of representing Holocaust. In this discussion the two films *Schindler's List*⁴¹ and *Shoah*⁴² have long been at the centre of the debate. With *Schindler's List*, the director Steven Spielberg probably became the most influential historian of his generation if the creation of popular historical consciousness is the scale to measure impact on. With world-wide gross earnings of USD 317,100,000⁴³ so many people have seen the film that Spielberg's representation of the Holocaust speaks for itself when it comes to impact. The historical drama is a tear inducing re-enactment of a part of Holocaust, but it clearly bears the mark of Spielberg with its strong mainstream appeal and a somewhat happy ending – at least when compared to Holocaust as such.

41 Spielberg, Stephen, *Schindler's List*, Universal Pictures, USA, 1993

42 Lanzmann, Claude, *Shoah*, New Yorker Films, France, 1985

43 *Schindler's List* 1993 – imdb
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/>

On the other end of the scale is Claude Lanzmann's more than nine hour long documentary *Shoah*. Lanzmann's purist account of the Holocaust does not include any footage from the time or re-enactment of the events of the past. He claims that it is impossible to do so without trivialising the Holocaust so that must not be done. It is partly Lanzmann's harsh critique of exactly *Schindler's list* that has placed these two films at the centre of the debate. However, it is not only within film, Lanzmann is critical of the representation of the Holocaust. According to Elisabeth R. Friedman '... *Lanzmann rejects the rules of historical knowledge, seeking instead to blur the boundary between history and art, and between the past and the present, in his desire to bear witness to what has been repressed in history.*'⁴⁴ It is indeed the difficulty of the subject that makes Lanzmann discard both representation in history and in film like *Schindler's List*. Since any re-enactment will be unable to communicate the deep horrors of what happened, and thus, in a way, possibly contribute to a continuous repression. According to Lanzmann, academic history also falls short of communicating what actually happened, so his solution is *Shoah*, consisting mostly of interviews with survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders as well as footage on locations.

Through this debate other ways of representing traumatic historical events are being explored. Independent and experimental film, both documentary and feature, are attempting this in different ways. *Shoah* is only one among many, like *Waltz With Bashir*,⁴⁵ *The Thin Red Line*,⁴⁶ *Lebanon*,⁴⁷ and, I will argue, *District 9*. Of these three are dramatic feature films and one, *Waltz With Bashir*, is both animated and a documentary. In other words, other ways than the traditional historical drama is being explored for the benefit of both cinema and history. As is always the case with experimental forms of

44 Elisabeth R. Friedmann, The Anti-Archive? Claude Lanzmann's Shoah and The Dilemma of Holocaust Representation, *English Language Notes* 45,1 Spring/Summer 2007. p 114.

45 Folman, Ari, *Waltz With Bashir*

46 Malick, Terrence, *The Thin Red Line*, 20th Century Fox, USA, 1998

47 Maoz, Samuel, *Lebanon*, Sony Pictures Classics, Israel 2009

representation, genres are explored and developed, and there is always a spill over effect to mainstream cinema and culture, perhaps not unlike the spill over from academic, written history to the general realms of popular history within society.

To illustrate what a film like *District 9* can do differently than the traditional historical drama, I will return briefly to the comparison with *Cry Freedom*. Within this comparison lies the debate over representation. In *Cry Freedom* Steve Biko is tortured and beaten to death by the South African police, but the actual torture and beating is not being shown, a cop out, one might call it. Whether because of the film's ambition of being mainstream and garnering a big audience, or out of consideration for the families of the involved, I do not know; but the fact remains that *Cry Freedom* refrains from being as brutal as reality suggests it could (or should) have been. On a smaller scale – or less debated scale, perhaps, – but none the less, not unlike *Schindler's List*. By following Lanzmann's argumentation, the representation of Steve Biko's murder as less brutal than reality suggests, the film might end up contributing to a watering down of history – or popular memory at least – that will not make apartheid seem like a rosy, golden past, but surely make it look less horrifying than it actually was. It becomes a film about a white man who redeems himself and escapes to tell the world the untold stories of apartheid, but, apartheid does not end when, in the film, Donald Woods escapes to Lesotho and is reunited with his family. It only gets worse and political and racial violence increases. Because of that the film – regardless of its good intentions – can help pave the way for portrayals of apartheid and racism that does even less justice to the real events. Again, Schindler's list comes to mind. It is an instant cinematic success with a dramatic storyline, good acting, and a devastating message conveyed to an audience who sobs in tune with impressive classical music. Regardless of that, the fact remains that this story largely is a story about people who survive and again a man who redeems himself. The Holocaust, however, is not a redemption story about survivors. Although I am reluctant to judge the

film on this criticism alone, the Holocaust is a difficult subject that certainly is hard to translate into mainstream cinema. The same goes for apartheid and memories of racism. I will not go as far as condemning mainstream drama about traumatic historical events as such, but I will argue that more experimental and films independent of Hollywood and mainstream Western tradition certainly should have their place within both film and history – including History with a capital H.

In *Film on History/History on Film* Rosenstone describes the relationship between old Buddhist paintings such as the Mandala and old Buddhist text.⁴⁸ The images were originally produced to make Buddhism alive and available to an illiterate population, but since then, they acquired a life of their own and became beautiful and well-recognised as Buddhist mediums. Today some believe they more genuinely represents the true meaning of the religion than the old texts do. This, he argues, is a very precise way of relating written history and history on film, since the fact that remains is that the two are different ways of representing what Rosenstone calls '*... the stuff of the past.*' History on film, as he claims, should not be treated like history on text, since the two simply are not the same thing. The rules of engagement are different, but one is not superior to another *per se*. There is more to history than what we can possibly write as there is more to life than what we read in the paper. Film simply cannot be judged on the terms of written history, as it '*... changes the rules of the game and creates its own sort of truth, creates a multi-level past that has so little to do with language that it is difficult to describe adequately in words.*'⁴⁹

What science-fiction then can do, is to pick up a historical problem or theme and, free of the strains of claiming reality – or the kind of reality we expect from written history – explore this deeper. There are

48 Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* pp 154-155

49 Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* p-160

no survivors to take into account when portraying an alien invasion.

Regardless of the somewhat mocking tone in *District 9*, there are some scenes of amplified cruelty that would have been extremely difficult to show in a realistic film with a hope of becoming a somewhat popular success. The infamous abortion scene, where Wikus van de Merwe 'pops' the alien babies from their 'breeding machine' and nonchalantly kills a bunch of children comes to mind. Cruelty hidden behind bureaucratic racism is the theme that is powerfully shown without getting the movie banned or refraining from showing the extent of what has actually been happening. Although this might fall short of being the perfect depiction, I will argue that it comes closer than many 'traditional' historical films as well as written history. Essentially I want to argue that this scene – cruel and incomprehensible, almost absurd as it is – probably is better at communicating what the racism of apartheid meant and what racism still means.

Within the Holocaust films another example comes to mind; *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*⁵⁰ from 2007. It is a heart-breaking tale of two boys that start a friendship on each side of the fence of a concentration camp. One is the son of the commander of the camp and the other is a Jewish boy on the inside. The film attempts to describe evil from the point of view of children and through that evil during Holocaust as such. The naïve melancholic tone of the film is beautiful, but I will argue that it fails because of its setting. By attempting realism while making the plot unbelievable (I seriously doubt the possibility of a friendship between an Auschwitz inmate and the camp commander's son) the message becomes lost in the form. Again, it is important to note, that the film is not without merit, but in my opinion it actually fails somewhat both as film and history because of its specific claim of realism. It explores evil in a clever, refined, and heartbreaking way, but the setting calls for so much more.

50 Herman, Mark, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, Miramax Films, United Kingdom, 2007

Using Lanzmann's purist view of making film about history significantly limits the way a filmmaker can engage with history, both when it comes to documentaries and feature film. His point, however, is noteworthy, because of its serious nature. Theodor Adorno supposedly said that it would be barbaric to write poetry after the Holocaust, but not only has that happened, Holocaust itself has been the subject for much art and *the Holocaust film* has become a sub-genre in itself. Only between 1945 and 1999, 782 dramatic feature films have been made about the Holocaust.⁵¹ The impact on public historical consciousness has been massive, and Adorno must have seen the barbaric hordes coming already before his death. History, in other words, is inevitably affected by film and vice versa. If we accept the idea that the purist position is too limiting, does that mean that the traditional historical drama is the way to go? As I have argued, it can be difficult for the traditional feature film to, for example, engage with racism and a history of racial oppression to an extent that does the subject justice. Perhaps the problems of both purists and mainstream drama can be circumnavigated as new ways of portraying history on film are being explored. As mentioned earlier, *Waltz With Bashir*, *Lebanon*, *Hunger* or *The Thin Red Line* are such films and so is *District 9*. The latter was instantly a success, and it is unfortunate for the film as history that it comes short of fulfilling its potential because of prejudice and subconscious racism as well as it is unfortunate for the film as a film that it ends up a boring 'shoot 'em up' action film when it starts out so boldly.

51 Rosenstone, *Film on History/History on Film* 2006 pp 135-137

Conclusion

In my project, *The Future About the Past*, I have attempted to explore the possibility of engaging with a painful history. The outcome of this question was a historiographic discussion about film as history and especially untraditional film genres – in this case science-fiction. As an example I chose *District 9*. In the analysis of the film I argued that the film marked a break with the past by the younger generation of white – especially Afrikaans speaking – South Africans. Somewhat paradoxically I found that the film conveyed a possibly subconscious, but still problematic, view of the past. Its racist stereotypes are even more problematic, since a racial oppressive past was exactly what director, Neill Blomkamp, was trying to break with.

However, I found, that *District 9*, because of its untraditional genre, was an example of a way of dealing with the past that potentially could overcome many of the obstacles history on the page, as well as traditional historical feature films, and documentary, often are facing. The well known debate of depictions of Holocaust came to mind; since science-fiction – when done well – might in fact be able to engage with a painful past without choosing either a mainstream – and therefore less accurate – or a purist – and therefore too limiting – position.

My claim, in other words, is that certain types of films can engage with certain themes in history in a way that surpasses the possibilities of written history. History could, with benefit, widen its scope as an academic field and seriously engage with other ways of dealing with the past.

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Attachments

Formidlingsovervejelser

Mit projekt handler grundlæggende om formidling og historiografi. Derfor er mine formidlingsovervejelser nærmest implicite i projektet. Dermed ville en videre formidling af projektet være relevant for mennesker der beskæftiger sig med historisk formidling og muligvis med film. Emnet kunne derfor potentielt blive behandlet i et historisk tidsskrift eller muligvis i et tidsskrift om film- og medievidenskab. Dette kunne eventuelt være i form af en filmanmeldelse.

Studieforløbsbeskrivelse

I første semester deltog jeg i de obligatoriske grundkurser i Historie og Kultur samt Subjektivitet og Læring. I dette semester skrev jeg projektet; *Konstruktionen af Tyrkiets Nationalidentitet*, der var forankret i historie samt kultur og sprogødestudier. Andet semester bød på flere grundkurser i form af Tekst og Tegn samt Filosofi og Videnskabsteori. I dette semester skrev jeg projektet *Det videnskabelige selv*, med baggrund i Lauren Daston og Peter Galisons bog *Objectivity*. Dette var et videnskabsteoretisk projekt, forankret i filosofi og videnskabsteori.

I tredje semester var jeg på udveksling ved University of Cape Town i Sydafrika, og havde der kurser i henholdsvis Medier, magt og samfund, Det sydlige Afrikas historie i det 20. århundrede og Film og Historie.

På fjerde semester skrev jeg om filmen *Hunger*. Projektet var forankret i tekst og tegn og opfyldte projektkravene til filosofi og journalistik. Derudover gennemgik jeg specialkurset i journalistik og senere specialkurset i filosofi.

På femte semester er jeg begyndt på overbygningen i historie og fortsætter i sjette på journalistik.