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Mahmut M. Osler
Bilkent University

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A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE: REPORTAGE STYLE IN DISTRICT 9 (2009)

MAHMUT M. ORSLER, BILKENT UNIVERSITY
MENTOR: COLLEEN KENNEDY-KARPAT

Abstract

District 9 (2009) demonstrates an intriguing exemplar of contemporary science-fiction filmmaking by drawing on interesting aesthetic strategies, also extended to the narrative. This essay explores the allegory and its broader resonance in *District 9*, which uses remediation and a subcategory of intertextuality to unfold its meanings. These aesthetic strategies unpack the use of reportage rhetoric that critiques specific news media practices connected to a societal illness: racism. The strategies reflected in the narrative also play an essential role in the film's marking of an ideologically significant departure from the convention in the genre. The aesthetic strategies and its extension thus constitute the essence of this discussion of *District 9*.

Key words: film, genre, science fiction, news media

“Realities of working-class life are reorganized, reconstructed and reshaped by the way they are represented.”

—Stuart Hall, *Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'*

As a genre, science fiction generally contains a significant degree of movie spectacles, producing films appreciated for both their immersive stories and their spectacular images. They also depict their own metaphorical “world” whose logic points to social criticism. *District 9* (2009) is an example of this sci-fi social criticism, creating an allegory where humans live on Earth alongside an alien population in ways that echo a persistent social issue: racism. Set in South Africa, known for its history of extreme systemic racism called apartheid, the film figures its aliens as stand-ins for people of color. What is unique about *District 9*, however, is less its use of science fiction to critique a social ill than the fact that it achieves

this by drawing on the aesthetics of documentary or, rather, mockumentary at key points in the narrative. This essay will discuss how reportage style makes meaning in *District 9* and, in this sense, the relationship between its use and the film's marking of an ideologically significant departure from established convention in the genre.

Reportage Style: Aim and Perspective

Reportage style complicates narration and even the foundational notion of diegesis. Do these handheld-camera movements, voice-overs, and graphic elements resembling a news broadcast function as fiction within the diegesis of the film, or might they be used to present "facts" that are (also) true outside it? Reportage style appears many times throughout the film; however, the reports in the first five minutes of the film offer key exposition to introduce main characters, conflict, and setting. The tone of the reportage from the beginning serves a dual purpose: it helps create the film's xenophobic atmosphere, and it increases the verisimilitude of science fiction by drawing on mockumentary aesthetics. For Cynthia Miller (2012, p. 16), mockumentaries create nuanced narratives in which rueful humor coexists with subtle sociocultural critique about mundane reality. In other words, discomfort is the mockumentary's central tool for confronting the conventions of everyday life. In the filmic world of *District 9*, reportage style critically comments on how mass media presents a distorted reality to its audience.

Reportage style represents the world of the diegesis both to spectators of the film and to the characters within its fictional world. In this regard, it is representation twice over, reframing a diegesis to emphasize its own presumed facts, and manipulating the truth using its own formal conventions for both characters and spectators. This multilayered mediation works as if the "mass-mediated" perspective of characters overlaps with the perspective of spectators. Thus, due to the doubling, spectators of the film are simultaneously exposed to the same represented perspective of the characters.

The film's first act mocks the news media by exaggerating how the news media mediates the facts around it. In this regard, it is not new to link the news with the portrayals of ideological biases, which are even occasionally prioritized. The reportage sequences ironically resemble daily news in their content and use of visual convention, thus enhancing the verisimilitude. This reportage style in *District 9* can be defined characteristically as remediation, which is "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 45). The conventional form of televised news is ultimately incorporated into the narrative

film. Even more specifically, this use of pseudo-intertextual references can be called mendacious intertextuality, where an intertext—in this case, the news reportage—is crafted to resemble a separate text but exists only within the framework of the supertext and has no separate existence of its own (Harries, 2000, p. 28). Remediation thus allies with intertextual influences to make a social commentary on the specific real-life issue of ideological news.

Mass-communication scholar Teun A. van Dijk argues that the news is a prominent avenue for “convey[ing], enact[ing] and confirm[ing]” racism, and *District 9* uses the reportage style to underscore and critique this aspect of the news media (in Ballesteros, 2015, p. 11). The reportages are embellished with the bulletin crawl and logos in the style of cable TV news channels, a formal construction of verisimilitude. The first reportage within the first act [04:29–04:35] has its spot: “alien weapons caches seized” with the subtitle “alien crime rises” (Figure 1). The tone reveals anti-alien bias, showing two aliens putting their hands up without any trouble, while the news insists on referring to the aliens as career criminals. While a policeman treats one of them harshly, the newscaster implies that *District 9*, where the aliens of the city reside, is a troublesome place. That is, here, being an alien is directly associated with being a troublemaker or even a criminal. This sort of presupposed association indicates how the news can discriminate. Racism in the remediated intertext shows how the news can be ideologically biased; hence, the film critically comments on the xenophobic tune of news media, especially when the matter is political.



Figure 1. The news treats two aliens as convicted criminals, despite no convincing criminal evidence (Jackson & Blomkamp, 2009).

From a more political-economy perspective, all media, including journalism, is embedded in power relations. Here, the film's fictional, government-linked technology firm Multi-National United, abbreviated MNU, illustrates its operations within the film world of *District 9*. The MNU is officially responsible for evicting aliens from their homes. Its resemblance to corporate operations reflects its economic power, while its armed security forces indicate its military power; the MNU thus stands for the confluence of economic and governmental racism. Van Dijk (1995, p. 10) claims that to comprehend news media messages, one should also consider the role of these other social institutions; that is, despite some supposedly common moral values of the society, news media professionals may do their jobs in accordance with certain political/ideological beliefs of such institutional powers. In *District 9*, MNU serves this purpose, and the reportages in the first act demonstrate the same racism and xenophobia that MNU does. In this sense, *District 9* illustrates how the news can echo the biased ideology held by powerful social institutions beyond the news media itself.

Two more reportage sequences in the first act further indicate how the news aligns ideologically with MNU. They show aliens attacking humans and brutally screaming. While these very short clips are shown, a reporter voices over that "the residents of the city are trying to 'remove' all the aliens from their township." The racism here frames human residents as heroic and the aliens as invaders to be removed. These reportages show the aliens inflicting violence on the human environment, but they strike a clearly ironic tone; while a reporter implies that one bystander has been hurt because of aliens, a policeman fires his gun at an alien without any warning. And the xenophobic stand that the reportages take remains the same. Because these reportages do not show or dwell on enough information for the facts of these events to be analyzed with any certainty, they raise more questions than answers as to which side is actually the provocateur. These examples acknowledge that only views in accordance with MNU's ideology are conveyed through the news media and that a selective kind of reporting shapes facts to that ideology.

In the film's second act, what the reportages communicate highlights how news media can side with political power in a more immoral way. The reportages falsely accuse Wikus—the only one whose genetics successfully fuse with alien DNA, and who is thus chased by MNU—of having a sexual relationship with an alien and publish a fake photo. The news bulletin furthers the accusations by claiming that Wikus carries a contagious virus that can turn everyone into "monsters." Because a free Wikus is strictly opposed to MNU's economic interests,

related to its plans for extreme experiments with the only alien hybrid, Wikus is targeted by these reports. By aiming to humiliate and isolate Wikus, the news media works for the benefit of a powerful social institution. Although Wikus has not been involved in any major crime, as he flees MNU and voices opposition to it, the news calls everyone to phone a special “Wikus-crime-report-line.” In this regard, the news media takes their side in line with political power. Consequently, the reportages underscore the ideological news; it is mocked, through aesthetic choice.

The main purpose of using mockumentary aesthetics, which opens up a particular critique of the news, is discussed. The rest of the reportages suggest that the double logic of remediation is still at work, aligning with intertexts. Mendacious intertextuality here relies on fake yet familiar use of newsreels, as Harries (2000, p. 28) mentions. In this regard, the ironic content of reportage style is visually made to resemble televised news, and the combination of unreal content with verisimilar visual style underscores the ideological critique. *District 9* thus questions how the news media promotes xenophobia with fearmongering and selective reporting, most evidently in the reportage sequences that frame events as terror attacks (Figure 2). Although violence is executed by Wikus and Christopher, to call it terrorism is certainly an exaggeration. Their aim is not to use a sort of systematic violence against anyone; they agree not to shoot anyone unless the other shoots first. Their goal is to retrieve from MNU what belongs to Christopher. In this sense, reportage style appeals to people’s fears by labeling the violence unjustly as terrorism. In other words, fearmongering here can easily be connected to a deliberate effort to influence people’s ideas and beliefs; hence, it is the way public attention is misdirected, which will be elaborated upon more below.



Figure 2. Although the explosion does indeed give Wikus and Christopher a chance to escape from MNU forces, the news labels it as a terrorist action against a respected social institution (Jackson & Blomkamp, 2009).

Reportages such as these function in tune with a deceptive aspect of the news. It is not new to associate news media with fearmongering in terms of how the news media manipulates people’s opinions; by using fearmongering, news media aims to grab the public’s attention. *District 9* stresses and critiques it by using reportage style. Fearmongering is presented as a technique of persuasion, deliberately and manipulatively promoting fear to influence public opinion. Barry Glassner (2004, p. 823) claims that fearmongering relies mainly on three attributes: repetition, treating rare events as trends, and misdirection. That is, fearmongering helps set the “agenda” for the public so they see things according to how the news media wants them to be perceived. All three of these aspects shape the reportages in *District 9*, although mockumentary aesthetics introduce enough irony to question this practice.

The reportages later in the film particularly use aesthetics to mock fearmongering in the news media. In addition to the reportage illustrated above [1:14:04–1:14:09], another reportage just after this one continues to comment on the attack as a terrorist attack. This sort of continuity of news insisting on terrorism demonstrates the repetition inherent to fearmongering. It also uses testimony from an MNU executive, who persists in claiming a defeated terrorist attack, reflecting the close relationship between misdirection and fearmongering. There is also a live broadcast of a conflict between the MNU and the ship that Wikus controls, as if the chaos is caused only by Wikus. This live broadcast of violent conflict between a

declared terrorist and the legal armed forces also contributes to the fearmongering aspect of the news.

Terrorism news bears a perceptible degree of relationship with fearmongering. It is worth mentioning here Barry Glassner's ideas in that regard. According to Glassner (2004, p. 823), the narrative of terrorism easily declares a [chaotic] decline of the society/civilization where villains are domestic, and only a few heroes fight against them. That is, fearmongering rapidly writes a dystopian scenario such as the one used to describe the conflict between Wikus and the armed forces; it relegates both parties to good and evil in simple terms. With fear and tension aroused, the public agenda is directed to think of what is shown as an increasing trend, and the rhetoric used in these live reportages targets emotional response. The newscaster's voice over the live broadcast resembles commentary on a sports competition rather than combat; in this way, both events are treated as a spectacle, as entertainment. The speaker's voice sporadically shows extra excitement when anticipating an extraordinary act such as a clash, working to maintain enough attention to redirect the public agenda toward a disorder. The remediated intertext thus conveys the idea that nothing is under control, which ironically resembles the fearmongering techniques of the news media as Glassner considers. As well as exaggerated bulletins and subtitles with "fear words" connoting the extreme deadliness of the district, fearmongering portrays a social life and its components, individuals, and places, as well as their interactions, as increasingly hostile to one another. With the reportages in Acts I and II, *District 9* critiques this kind of fearmongering by using a reportage style that highlights the mechanisms at work in its ideological biases.

A Departure from the Genre-Monster and Reportage Style

In *District 9*, reportage rhetoric directly extends into one of the main elements of the diegesis, the protagonist; in other words, it frames Wikus in specific ways. Hence, the faux-reportage style can be further explored if the film's challenge to the science-fiction genre is particularly focused because *District 9* rethinks the "monsters" that the audience expects. Enmeshed in conventions of broad sci-fi along with the subgenres of alien invasion and monster films, cinematic monsters have always been the focal points of spectacle. The film attempts to critically question this and plays with our perception of the established genre monster. *District 9* calls for engagement with Wikus's internal world; in contrast, a conventional movie monster has no interior psyche to explore, yet the repeated appearance of reportage style of *District 9* aims to block this identificatory process.

To illustrate this distinction, this paper will briefly compare the monster in *District 9*—that is, Wikus himself—to how the monster figure emerges in *Star Trek* (2009), released the same year as Blomkamp’s film. This comparison will lead to a discussion regarding the specific relation between reportage rhetoric and Wikus, which contributes to the allegory in a certain way.

Within the discourses of race in sci-fi, Christine Cornea (2007, p. 176) regards the image of an alien monster as a visual code of otherness, associated with such notions as fear and anxiety. That is, the monster serves as a visually striking element of mise-en-scene that also acts as an unmotivated (or flimsily motivated) agent of disruption. Although the monster causes chaos that can build up tension or excitement, spectators of the movie are not invited to engage with its internal aspects or changes. This is, for example, the case for *Star Trek*. As a long-running and well-rooted sci-fi franchise, *Star Trek* has long created monsters, and one of the newest—Hengraugg (Figure 3)—may be the most gigantic. Hengraugg is not a protagonist. Its limited appearance condenses its narrative function into creating tension and advancing the protagonist onto the next phase of the plot. Hengraugg’s huge size, reddish color, extremely brutal movements, and scary-deep voice define its spectacle, but it has no character development. Spectators are invited to engage with its destruction, but not with its internal world.



Figure 3. Hengraugg pursues its enemies (Abrams & Lindelof, 2009).

Regarding alien-invasion films, Jay Telotte (2001, p. 36), falling into line with Cornea, recognizes a historical connotation of the alien monster as a physical

threat to humanity according to long-standing genre conventions. Major narrative conflict thus implies and reinforces a dichotomy between humans and the alien monster, yet one of the key points distinguishing *District 9* from other alien-invasion films is the eliminated division between human and alien monster. To frame this using Altman's dual concept of film genre, the semantic elements such as alien characters and mothership setting in *District 9* are coded in parallel with the genre-specific conventions; however, the syntactic signals that point to the human-alien hybrid monster demonstrate innovation. This hybridity confounds distinction; the racial (or even arguably racist) division between human and alien monster is ultimately damaged. Despite this antiracist subtext, how the ironically contrary tone of reportage style frames the human-alien hybrid will be discussed further below.

Contrary to *Star Trek*, *District 9* frames the genre monster differently, by linking the concept to the protagonist himself. In the beginning, Wikus (Figure 4) is neither a "monster" nor a sympathetic character. After the inciting incident in which he is poisoned, Wikus physically becomes a monster by undergoing such external changes as losing fingernails and finally developing a monster arm. Although these transform Wikus physically, however, they also invite sympathy. Such changes are shown as an orderly life falling into catastrophe: as a result of the changes, Wikus must leave his home and family, and he is isolated from society and unfairly labeled as an outlaw.

Jonathan Crane (in Fischhoff, Dimopoulos, Nguyen, & Gordon, 2003, p. 4) discusses how a spectator can identify with a monster, claiming that monsters that are misunderstood outcasts are generally pitied and are even occasionally found attractive. Wikus comes to fall into this category; he invites engagement with his internal world as he faces his own transfiguration and the resulting isolation, betrayal, and abuse. Also, in terms of internal changes, character development indicates an ideological change to parallel the physical process. Wikus' gradual transfiguration might seem fearsome, but his path to antiracist hero creates positive space for the viewer to identify with Wikus. To exemplify both the point and Wikus's character development, in the climax of the structure, Wikus as old-xenophobic/racist, or at least a brutal figure, fights for his alien-partner Christopher against MNU. This is basically where the spectators take side with Wikus, identifying with him in his heroic battle alone, despite Wikus's increasingly alien appearance. The monster of *District 9* in this sense claims a departure from the conventional monster.



Figure 4. Wikus gradually transforms into an alien monster (Jackson & Blomkamp, 2009).

After a challenge by *District 9* to the conventional genre monster is considered, its depiction through mockumentary aesthetics can be more confidently revisited. The relationship between reportage rhetoric and the monster makes a valuable contribution to the allegory, in which the news media is the instrument of ideological bias, by placing the protagonist in a racist frame. In contrast to the main narrative arc, Wikus is a conventional genre monster for the reportages; how they frame Wikus is incapable of commanding identification. As with the eliminated dichotomy between human and alien, the racial distinction, concealed, is subtly revealed using remediation signals and intertextual influences.

In line with the evident bias and fearmongering aspects brought forth in the reportage style, Wikus is also depicted in the reportage, which emphasizes his external condition over his inner thoughts and feelings. That is, the reportages resist identifying with Wikus and even work against engagement with him. The formal aspects of these footages are not compatible with identification. Graphical elements such as bulletins and titles, creating an extra-diegesis, zoom-ins/outs and bird's-eye shots that distort how the human eye would view the subject, are additional barriers for such a process. Authoritative voice-overs with the voice of another person instead of with the subject's, along with lack of non-diegetic sound, are not consonant with identification here. This is especially valid for the sound, because of the potential quality of non-diegetic sound to create a more dramatic atmosphere and reinforce key themes.

The reportages do not simply allow for the subjective-internal sound, which would have been a potential invitation for the inside of Wikus's mind. Thus, a possible engagement via auditory means is also blocked by the reportages. These elements therefore emphasize the monster's external qualities rather than give a chance to the monster's internal word. Consequently, in line with fearmongering and racism, mentioned above, the genre-challenging aspects of Wikus are not depicted by the reportages, especially because of the way formal elements are used. By framing the monster in specific ways, reportage rhetoric plays an important part in the allegory in which the relationship between racism and the news media is underscored.

Conclusions

The reportage style in *District 9* resembles everyday news that people encounter through TV news channels. This verisimilar reportage style, its remediation underscoring the ideological bias and fearmongering in screen news media, is ironic and satirical. These two controversial aspects are mocked as they have direct or indirect connections with racism. This makes a significant contribution to the meaning-making of the apartheid allegory in that ideological news and fearmongering are as dangerous and socially damaging as racism precisely because they are themselves racist. Simultaneously, a departure from the genre contributes to the antiracist subtext of the apartheid allegory. The genre-challenging protagonist whose internal aspects the spectators are at least potentially invited to engage with is ultimately an alien, but his transformation, which provokes this engagement by turning the protagonist into an "antiracist hero" with whom spectators identify, is blocked by the reportages; hence, reportage rhetoric contributes to making sense of the allegory in which the news media is a tool of systematic racism. Reportage style and its relationship with the departure from the genre marks an important juncture and innovatively contributes to contemporary sci-fi filmmaking.

Author Note

M. Mert Orsler currently studies in Turkey at the Department of Communication and Design of Bilkent University. Mert is a third-year undergraduate student expected to receive his bachelor's degree in June 2020.

One of his recent scholarly works, which relates Eddie Brock/Venom to the Deleuze-Guattarian formulation of becoming-other, was presented at the 3rd Bilkent Undergraduate Philosophy Conference on 20 April 2019.

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Correspondence concerning this essay should be addressed to M. Mert Orsler, Department of Communication and Design, Bilkent University Main Campus, Bilkent ANKARA, 06800, Turkey, or to mertorsler.1995@gmail.com.

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