

## **Bodies and Communities in Transit: Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009)<sup>1</sup>**

Rocío Carrasco Carrasco (rocio.carrasco@dfing.uhu.es)

Cinta Mesa González (cinta.mesa@dfing.uhu.es)

Universidad de Huelva

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the many consequences of colonialism in South Africa as they are depicted in Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009). This contribution argues that this film is based on the principle that colonialism, like any kind of nationalism, has gone beyond all possible limits: geographical, physical, political, psychological or discursive. Taking into account the film's emphasis on the dangers and terrible consequences of transformation, mobility, and the crossing of frontiers, this paper seeks to defend that bodies, borders, communities and identities are not considered in *District 9* as fixed but discontinuous entities that threaten any established and constructed limit, for the very fact of being in transit. In this way, *District 9* demonstrates how the different body may become a border element that links communities. The borderless nature of this science fiction film is used as a means of subverting any totalitarian discourse, including the documentary one.

**Keywords:** colonialism, body, identity, border, science fiction.

### **Resumen**

Este ensayo estudia las múltiples consecuencias del colonialismo en Sudáfrica de la manera que son descritas en *District 9* de Neil Blomkamp (2009). Esta contribución mantiene que esta película está estructurada sobre el principio de que el colonialismo, como cualquier tipo de nacionalismo, ha superado todos los límites posibles: geográficos, físicos, políticos, psicológicos o discursivos. Al hacerlo, se ha construido la identidad del otro que puede ser controlado y se le ha localizado en guetos. Sin embargo, *District 9* demuestra cómo el cuerpo alien puede convertirse en un elemento fronterizo que une

comunidades. Para este propósito, la naturaleza de género sin fronteras que representa la ciencia ficción se utiliza como el mejor medio para subvertir cualquier discurso totalitario, incluido el documental.

**Palabras clave:** colonialismo, cuerpo, identidad, frontera, ciencia ficción.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will focus on the science fiction film *District 9* to show how the colonialist thoughts that once delimited, isolated and subdued communities and territories are beyond the control, the experimentation and the violence inflicted on the alien body. *District 9* is set in contemporary South Africa and looks at the dangers of crossing the line dividing civilization (represented by humans) and the extraterrestrial race that has been forced to live in a refugee camp (District 9) since its arrival in 1982. After a period of constant conflict between the aliens and the locals, the South African Government decides to hire private military company MNU to relocate the aliens to new internment quarters. Wikus van de Merwe (played by Sharlto Copley) is appointed by MNU to lead the relocation mission until he is infected, his body deteriorates and he becomes an alien. At this point Wikus discovers that his hybrid body is intended for human experimentation. He takes refuge in District 9, and his struggle for survival starts.

Taking into account the film's emphasis on the dangers and terrible consequences of transformation, mobility, and the crossing of frontiers, this paper contends that bodies, borders, communities and identities are not considered in *District 9* as fixed but as discontinuous entities that threaten any established and constructed limit, because they are in transit. Moreover, these entities are interrelated in such ways that the process of transition affects all of them equally, hence posing a threat to the Western viewpoint. The paper will open with a brief discussion on the consequences of colonialism in South Africa to provide the context for the analysis of the film. It will then refer to the way science fiction has traditionally engaged with the topic of alien invasion, and how this has normally been interpreted as an attack on normativity. The paper then goes on to discuss issues of identity

and bodily experimentation in the film to illustrate how the notion of the alien has been constructed as the other that can be controlled. The paper concludes with a reflection of the use of science fiction to retell what are deemed as true accounts of official events.

Set in Johannesburg, the film's socio-historical context becomes essential for any deconstructionist approach toward colonialism. A colonized territory is a place divided in two by a constructed frontier where the colonized subject's identities are fabricated according to a totalitarian discourse, largely contributing to determine people's perception of themselves. This delimited territory is controlled in a violent manner so as to maintain an artificial order that does not destabilize the apparent physical and ideological immunity. The world is divided according to "races," cultures, religious practices, physical features, political ideas or country of origin. In other words, differences are placed as metaphorical borders to separate those in power from the dangerous and savage others. In this sense, Frantz Fanon argues that colonization is not simply a matter of domination, but involves occupying a territory and controlling untamed nature (2004: 182), fencing a territory, denying citizenship or the status of humanity to the colonized people. In this respect, by featuring alien characters in the film, *District 9* criticizes the inhumanity of the colonization process.

Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community" is evoked in many science fiction films, in which alternative places and identities are depicted within the discourse of "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 1972). Binary oppositions are often engaged with and/or transgressed in science fiction cinema. Oppositions are essential for creating images of the other but are also crucial for defining the one. The most striking opposition is that between the familiar and the other, the latter normally being an alien, a cyborg, a mutant or a computer.

Interestingly, science fiction also provides the perfect backdrop for the breaking of boundaries. Indeed, the consequences of the integration of sameness with otherness are explored in many science fiction films, as will be discussed in this paper. Likewise, the binary model has been used to set in place (and occasionally to denounce)

the subordination of non-Western values. Along those lines, Jonathan Rutherford affirms: “in the hierarchical language of the West, what is alien represents otherness, the site of difference and the repository of our fears and anxieties” (1990: 10). In a similar vein, the idea of border crossing implies threat and disruption in many colonial and postcolonial discourses. The very notion of the border has been defined as follows:

Arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural, and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is the fear of the self; places where claims to ownership—claims to ‘mine’, ‘yours’ and ‘theirs’—are stated out, contested, defended, and fought over. (Lewis and Mills 2003: 625)

In this sense, the alien presence can be used to define Western civilization as we know it. Hierarchical divisions with the white American male hero occupying dominant positions are to be found in many mainstream science fiction films set in outer space, such as *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. The binary allegory is crucial for creating the “right” image of the one. The hybrid, which in colonial discourses was a matter of abuse and agony, has the possibility of becoming a positive instance of resistance in contemporary science fiction. Rutherford recognizes that hybridity acts as a focus for the fears, anxieties, confusions and arguments that accompany change, but it also functions as an approach to cultural politics that can help us make sense of what is happening. It can be a departure point for assembling new practices and languages, pulling together a diversity of theories, politics, cultural experiences and identities into new alliances and movements. (1990: 11)

In other words, the margin resists and (re)discovers its own words, it decenters the dominant and transforms its meaning. It invades the center with its difference and it is open to internal differences. Thus, Rutherford’s proposal of otherness as a site of difference and resistance can be used for the analysis of many contemporary science

fiction films in which difference ceases to threaten, or to signify, power relations.

In relation to this issue, postcolonial critic Achille Mbembe posits three points that can be of use for the analysis not only of colonialism in South Africa but also of *District 9*: firstly, “colonial occupation itself is a matter of acquisition, delimitation and getting physical and geographical control over a physical geographical area” (2003: 25). Secondly, being a slave implies losing both home and bodily rights (31). Thirdly, uncivilized life, according to the Western viewpoint, is compared to animal life (40). *District 9* uses these same premises to criticize the many consequences of colonialism in South Africa, especially in reference to the treatment of slaves and *apartheid*. Hence, the film fulfills a double function: on the one hand, it foregrounds the need for South African communities to free themselves from the consequences derived from oppression based on a discourse rooted in brutality; on the other, it helps audiences understand South African intricate and hidden histories, offering a new account against the official history, which is the primary way of getting to know about one’s past. The image of the hybrid plays a crucial role in the film’s social critique as it destabilizes the traditional dichotomy between the one and the other.

*District 9* ultimately suggests that colonization itself becomes science fiction: the creation of delimited spaces where people are located and relocated, and bodily experimentation and exposure determine South African fate. The idea of colonial occupation is significantly reversed in the film: the newcomers are regarded from the Western perspective as the other that can challenge stability and not the colonial power that can bring under control the savage chaos. If alien beings can be feared as the main challenge to stability imposed by the established order, the film offers a more friendly perspective of them by highlighting that the real threat to humanity are Western economic and political forces. There is no comparable threat to European colonization, whose impact goes beyond the limits of imagination. Therefore, European colonialism, shaped by economic corruption is depicted as the main cause of the present situation in South Africa. In this sense, as suggested before, the hybrid—embodied by the film’s protagonist—can be understood as an element of resistance.

## 2. DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITIES IN TRANSIT

*District 9* fosters debate so that audiences adopt a critical perspective toward the depiction of difference in an imperialist context, especially in relation to South Africa. In our view, the analysis of colonialism should not be restricted to a historical perspective, but to the way that border and identity interact with difference and gain meaning from them. This study must include, then, difference as a central aspect not only to segregation and control, but also to the formation of communities. Contrary to other studies based on the differences that construct communities, it is our contention that differences should be regarded as the specific feature that either an individual or a community can offer to the world in general, something that unites rather than separates communities. Our analysis engages with Joana Sabadell-Nieto and Marta Segarra's ideas exposed in their edited collection of essays *Differences in Common. Gender, Vulnerability and Community* (2014). Here, they maintain that whereas the idea of community is wrongly based on an attempt to minimize the differences between individuals in order to create an ideal society founded on the basis of a common essence, the formation of communities should be rethought through the lens of difference. Likewise, Anderson posits that communities are imagined because they are founded on the basis of a common feature shared by people who have never met, implying that the origins and continuation of any community are based on a nationalist discourse, either their own or the imposed colonialist discourse that highlights homogeneity and separation in order to maintain an apparent national immunity (1991: 6). Roberto Esposito, in his work *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (2010), makes reference to the etymological origins of the term "community" to defend that what brings any group of people together as a community is not just the element that they share, but the element that they lack (4). Therefore, it is possible to establish a metaphorical border inside communities themselves. It is not just the fact of being aware of their own fragility that makes people fear the other. According to Esposito, each community is opened by a "wound" (119) by which any contagious disease or ideology can destabilize the said fictional immunity.

In line with these ideas, the question that the audience should ask when watching *District 9* is where the border actually is: is it

between the human and the alien communities? Or is it within the human community itself?<sup>2</sup> Significantly, the protagonist, Wikus van de Merwe, is regarded as weak and vulnerable within the company he works for, that is, the dominant community, although he is supposed to share certain features with it: he has to be white, healthy and aggressive, and he has to be able to control both his natural impulses and the task the company has asked him to perform. Nevertheless, he becomes his community's feared wound and the element that reminds his people of their own inner differences and their outer similitude. Therefore, not only communities but also Wikus's different nature can be understood as an element of union between the marginal and the dominant cultures.

Colonialism, like any other kind of nationalism, constructs an exclusionist discourse based on homogeneity instead of heterogeneity in an attempt to control differences. Therefore, the group of people regarded as different is construed as the other, the alien, regardless of their in/human nature that destabilizes the apparent colonialist immunity through nationalistic ideas, bodily exposure or contagion. It is just a matter of a discursive suppression of the heterogeneity and the setting of boundaries that separate not only people but also identities. As Arjun Appadurai asserts, the first step toward addressing why the weak, in so many ethnonationalist settings, are feared is to go back to the "we/they" question in elementary sociological theory. In this theory the creation of collective others, or "them", is a requirement, through the dynamics of stereotyping and identity contrast, for helping to set boundaries and mark off the dynamics of the "we" (2006: 50).

The colonial violence based on the manipulation of the different bodies has supported the construction of ghettos, a third zone where people are placed in a position in-between power and objectification, creating a kind of identity that is prone to domination. As Zygmunt Bauman and Benedetto Vecchi posit, "'identity' will not occur to people as long as 'belonging' remains their fate, a condition with no alternative'" (2004: 12). Thus, both location and identity are interconnected in such a way that oppressed people do not find their own identity as long as they are assessed from the oppressor's perspective. Actually, District 9 is a ghetto where the "creatures" are

located. The European inhabitants in South Africa want to relocate them further away in a more controlled location, arguing that they have become dangerous for human beings. Thus, their imprisonment is justified by a discursive manipulation: the fact of naming them “creatures,” as if they were animals because they eat rubbish, becomes the perfect excuse to confine them. The identity of the Others is indissolubly bound to the regimes that imprison them.

However, identity itself is, from the very beginning of the film, in a process of transition. Stuart Hall considers identity as “a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall 1990: 392). As a production, identity can be regarded as a social and, in this particular case, as a colonialist construction that is always in transit. Identity, therefore, becomes a subjective fictional account that both defines an individual or group of people and determines the other’s perception toward a specific community. In *District 9*, the first depiction of the alien “creature” that the audience receives is based on the perception that the people who work for MNU—the Western eye—have constructed. However, once the audience watches the prawns through different lenses (for example, the director’s or Wikus’s), one can see another kind of identity that is constrained by two key elements: the fact that these “creatures” are forced to inhabit a fenced territory, and that different audiences perceive them as different. Wikus’s identity is in transition from the very beginning of the film until his final physical transformation for two main reasons: he is asked to fulfill the task of expelling the inhabitants of District 9, and to assume the role of the leader, a task that does not fit with his weak personality and which leads to his contagion. Wikus’s identity is constructed by his former colleagues’ negative depictions.

Wikus has real problems when the transition happens as an uncontrolled process, as we will see in section 3. In relation to this issue, Edward Said defends how crossing borders and nations “provoke[s] and challenge[s] the fundamentally static notion of *identity* that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism” (1994: xxv) since, as the critic contends, “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic”



(xxv). Hence, the identity in transit begins to disclose the controlled truth that has been hiding under homogenizing discourses, that is, that all cultures assume more foreign elements than they exclude.

### 3. BODIES AND BORDERS IN TRANSIT

In *District 9*, the idea of the body in transit is clearly evoked by the physical and psychological changes experimented by the main character, Wikus van de Merwe, as we will attempt to illustrate in this section. His transformation and final immersion into what is initially considered the other is meaningful for the purposes of this essay, since his body in transit opens new ways to understand power relations. Wikus's changing body allows for a deconstruction of established rules, while he stands as an icon of social criticism.

The topic of the confrontation of the main character with difference is not new but it has worked at large in many science fiction movies along the history of the genre. Indeed, issues of national identity, cultural specificities and sexuality are suggested in films that picture hostile alien invasions, monsters or mutants. In these films, the main (normally male) character is disoriented and disturbed, and hegemonic white patriarchy is frequently threatened by the cultural metaphor of the alien and/or monster. In films following this pattern, the unfamiliar can take different forms. Aggressive alien colonizers can be read "as metaphors for a range of perceived threats to humanity, or particular groups, ranging from 1950s communism to the AIDS virus and contemporary 'illegal aliens' of human origin" (King and Krzywinska 2000: 31-2). This fear becomes more evident in films where the alien adopts a human form, as is the case of Wikus in *District 9*.

Blackness is normally depicted as unfamiliar, especially in films that picture alien invasions, which accounts for Robin Wood's theory that these films establish clear boundaries between "us" and "them." As Adam Roberts argues, representing blackness is not simply a question of casting black characters or protagonists but involves an encounter with difference. Thus, such representations need to be contextualized politically (2000: 121). For example, in Emmerich's

*Independence Day* (1996) the source of threat is the extraterrestrial other, which is considered evil and dangerous. The film seems to suggest that the annihilation of outsiders is necessary for the whole world to survive and for US supremacy to remain intact. In this sense, and taking into account the 1990s Gulf War crisis over American political and social integrity, and the general unease towards illegal immigration, the radical other might be associated with the negative concept of blackness. In a similar way, and taking into account the context of the 1980s backlash against feminism and other minority groups in the USA, the savage hunter in John McTiernan's *Predator* (1987) can be interpreted as a stereotypical signifier of blackness, since it "inhabits the jungle, preying violently and barbarically on the "Western" colonizers, be they American, 'Dutch' or Hispanic" (Roberts 2000: 119-20). The construction of the other in colonial discourse relies, then, on stereotypes. Hence black Africans were considered bestial by the European travellers "both because of the medieval and religious associations of blackness with filth and dirt, and also because this provided a justification for colonising and enslaving them" (Loomba 1998: 71).<sup>3</sup> *Predator* seems to deal with this racial stereotyping of blackness, and the alien hunter becomes an image of barbarism. The threat of difference is resolved in many American blockbusters by portraying hypermuscular male heroes, a typical device in action films of the 1980s. From the beginning of the movie, the physical supremacy of Dutch (played by Schwarzenegger) is emphasized and his tough manners are highlighted. Likewise, the rest of the militia that go on the mission share his courage and toughness. They are all equipped with massive weapons that can be recalled as phallic symbols and their bare muscular chests are constantly framed.

However, a rather different vision of blackness is suggested in *District 9*, especially if we take into account the convulsive socio-political context in which the film is set. The protagonist lacks the physical supremacy and tough manners that the character performed by Schwarzenegger showed in *Predator*. It is only after Wikus becomes infested with the alien fluid in one of the relocation missions that the assumed "healthy" values of the West become really threatened. The alien force literally transgresses the limits of the human body and Wikus starts a process of change and deterioration. In this sense, his

infected body can be linked to the abject as described by Julia Kristeva, since it disturbs identity and order, and does not respect borders, positions and rules (1982: 4). For Kristeva, not only filthiness and lack of cleanliness cause abjection but also the in-between, the ambiguous or the composite. According to Kristeva, marginalized groups are labeled abject since they threaten contagion from the “outside.” The film recreates images where the aliens are associated to dirt, rubbish and the loathsome. Wikus’s body has become hybrid, ambiguous and composite, it is an abject body, a body in transit and, as such, it is dangerous for healthy “civilization.”

Yet, the film uses the image of the body in transit or hybrid to offer an alternative way of representing the other. Wikus’s body becomes different and alien, a body that is losing its members and that is in constant transformation. In this sense, his body can be read as a body without organs, as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004).<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari use the term to refer to an organless body that can take many different manifestations and that is composed of unstable matter, of a set of flows moving in all directions at various speeds, going beyond any opposition between the one and the multiple (2004: 170).<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Wikus’s body can be analyzed as a challenge to the traditional concept of the human body.

The issue of body transformation and the Manichean allegory “one” and “other” is also present in many science fiction films in which the main protagonist suffers a painful process of metamorphosis. Yet, Wikus undergoes a critical process as a consequence of his transformation. One way to counteract this crisis is by showing a rather aggressive behavior, which is initially linked to his evil, animal side. However, his behavior is not aggressive if we compare it with the reaction of the members of the “healthy” and privileged society once they find out about Wikus’s infestation. Hybridity and the crossing of boundaries provoke a more desperate attempt to manipulate and control the alien other in an even more violent way, which is subtly denounced in film. Indeed, Wikus’ “transformation” into the “other” has a terrible consequence: both he and the audience discover the horrible truth about the experimentation and violence inflicted on the alien “other,” which ultimately produces an identity crisis. This crisis

is provoked by his need to redefine himself into a “non-normative” position, which echoes the dangers of crossing boundaries between one/self, but especially by finding out the manipulative world where he originally belongs.

Having a hybrid body grants Wikus the possibility of being in transit, of crossing physical and psychological frontiers that show not only the fragility of fixed identities but also the fluidity of constructed borders. For many oppressed cultures, the idea of a borderland has a rather different connotation. It means transition, a place or an element where differences merge:

The border may imply separations, divisions, and culturally discreet boundaries on the one hand, but on the other it negates the possibility of separation and affirms a fluidity of movement. The border is an area that stands geographically, as well as politically and culturally, as figure and metaphor for the transition between nations. (McKenna 1997: 105)

In a similar manner, the film shows the fragility of setting a boundary to separate communities since the border is itself another element of transition. Still, the fact of becoming one of them, an alien, does not imply that Wikus becomes a full member of the new culture. As Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson argue,

Culture and identity [...] do not disappear among the people who make the crossing. They simply change: they change within their home communities because of the loss entailed in their goings as well as the new political and economic context in which they find themselves and they change in the communities who are now host to the border crossing. (1990: 114-115)

Against Wikus's individualistic attitude toward the new community he is becoming part, simply being in contact with this alien community implies Wikus's awareness that the group is more important than a single individual being. The alien fluid stands as Wikus's remedy for becoming a human again, but it is also the key to

free the alien community from colonial oppression. It is one more hint that shows how Wikus's identity is in process since he abandons his individualism on behalf of the other's community. Although he is not an alien yet, he can decide to become part of this community. It is worth noting how the alien fluid functions as an exposure spray, as a remedy, and as the key to set out on a journey back home. Consequently, this fluid becomes a kind of borderland element that is able to cross all the imposed boundaries. It gives free and peaceful access to the ghetto, it unites the mythic "home" and the temporary location, and it grants hybridity and transition.

Finally, the impossibility of reconciling opposites is suggested by the film's open ending, which suggests that colonization and alienation are still present in South Africa. According to Frantz Fanon, "the "thing" colonized becomes a man though the very process of liberation" (2004: 2). For that reason, after the process of physical transformation depicted in the movie, Wikus's body becomes alien and remains so as long as a decolonial remedy is found. For this decolonial remedy to work, people have to understand the meaning of home, they have to break physical boundaries and accept their differences as the basis of their identity.

Wikus's body in transit has, then, an effect on his identity. As Susan Stanford Friedman affirms, "roots and routes are, in other words, two sides of the same coin: roots, signifying identity based on stable cores and continuities; routes, suggesting identity based on travel, change, and disruption" (1998: 153). The identity that he assumed as fixed began a process of transition toward an identity en route and discontinuous just as his body.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting how in *District 9* difference is a linking point between two apparent groups of beings: the human beings and the aliens. Both of them are in progress.

#### **4. BORDERLESS DISCOURSES: SCIENCE FICTION AND DOCUMENTARIES**

The alien community depicted in *District 9* is formed mainly by the creation of dichotomous power and object relationships, whereby the foreign aliens are regarded, as commented before, as "creatures" or

“prawns.” The film suggests the kind of outsider view that determines the construction of the alien’s identity. From the very beginning of the film, we are presented with a neurotic world that confronts “us” (the human race) *versus* “them” (alien invaders). This idea is reinforced by the film’s use of a documentary style that leaves little space for the questioning of power structures, since spectators are provided with an apparently objective account about the dangerous nature of the alien visitors and their imminent threat to a healthy and civilized society, a fact that will result in irony as the movie develops, as we have suggested above. Helped by the use of the voiceover, the interview format and subjective shots that show real images and testimonies accounting the aliens’ aggressive and unhealthy manners, the film’s opening sequence establishes, then, what belongs to the one and what to the other. Indeed, *District 9* is defined as a “place of secrets” where the prawns inhabit. At this initial point, the film suggests the need to keep borders static and fixed in order to re-establish order and health to the population.

Yet, as the film develops, the director provides an insightful approach to the main issues that have been treated by many fictional works in different postcolonial settings, attesting to the far-reaching impact of colonialism around the world. Particularly interesting about the present debate about the many consequences of colonialism is the use of science fiction to counteract the colonialist discourse. Appadurai defines documentaries as just one form of distributing what he has called “Mediascape,” that is, a set of controlled images distributed to a national or international audience (1996: 35), constructing a fictional narrative of the “other” (36). Due to the complexity of this interconnected set of images, the “lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds” (35). Even though documentaries are deemed as objective accounts of reality, they are just another form of cinematographic narrative that manipulates reality to maintain a fictional stability based on homogeneity. In a similar way, the science fiction film is a category difficult to define. As Vivian Sobchack argues, science fiction keeps the genre vital to our culture. Sobchack argues that science fiction films do not have a specific iconography (1987: 66-7), but that offer

instead many variations to keep their novelty in our culture, becoming one of the most flexible—and borderless—popular genres, suggesting socio-cultural worries.

If there are people that live in what Anderson defines as “imagined communities” (1991: 6) or Appadurai calls “imagined worlds” (1996: 33), the limits between fiction and reality dissolve, justifying the creation of a subaltern’s fiction such as the one depicted in *District 9*, where human and alien communities coexist. In the same way that documentaries have been deployed to oppress the “other” in countries with colonial histories, science fiction films can be used to reclaim and redefine territory and identity, as Neil Blomkamp does by claiming the hidden truths and the brutality in South Africa. *District 9* suggests that science fiction offers a wealth of parallels for the challenges faced by colonial South Africa. It also suggests that the experimentation and oppression undergone by these “creatures” provides many useful metaphors for colonized people in Johannesburg.

By interweaving documentary and science fiction, the film director provides the audience with a new insight of South African postcolonial reality, that is, the absurdity of employing differences as an element of separation and isolation. Once again, the notion of “transit” that has been used throughout this paper seems to work in a positive sense.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Colonialism does not usually foster the oppressed perspective or the consequences that power may inflict on the oppressed body, such as, for example, the experimentation on the different bodies or the relocation of the population to achieve political and economic purposes. However, decolonial narratives such as the one used in this film imagines realities and depicts identities that are more closely related to the oppressed and silenced people.

By using the same elements that the colonial forces used to oppress communities and territories, the director shows how it is

possible to reverse such a situation and free people and territories. Identities and bodies become fluid elements vulnerable to each other's influence and contagion through the many wounds opened on the border between territories and communities. Therefore, any established colonial structure can be subverted from the perspective of the oppressed showing the fragility of any totalitarian system and the impossibility of imposing binary oppositions that differentiate people, bodies and territories. Differences, then, become a matter of hybridity that demonstrate how the different can become members of the other's community and, even, to move in between both communities at ease. This fact contributes to destabilize the many attempts to separate the different aspects that conform people's lives: their identity, their bodies and their histories.

As has been argued, *District 9* subverts colonial history from the subaltern's perspective. The director employs the same techniques used in documentaries to show the manipulative power of the so-called true accounts of reality. Thus, the director subtly denounces how totalitarian discourses and the many devices that they employ to control population define people, territories and identities. For this reason, the true accounts can be substituted by the fictional narratives, even the more fantastic ones, contributing to the ongoing debate about the veracity of these types of discourses. By doing so, the director shows how colonialism has lost its limits and the best way to represent the colonial consequences is by means of science fiction.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> In relation to this issue, Franco contends that the border becomes the place where the outsider comes into contact with the insider: "the border, like a skin, is the inside's contact zone with the outside, but it also folds the outside in" (Franco 2000: 129).

<sup>3</sup> As Loomba notes, stereotyping "involves a reduction of images and ideas to a simple and manageable form; rather than simply



ignorance or lack of ‘real’ knowledge, it is a method of processing information” (1998: 60). It should be taken into account that racial stereotyping is not the product of colonialism from the modern period onwards alone but it goes back to Greek and Roman periods which provide models for later European images of outsiders (105).

<sup>4</sup> Wikus’s hybrid body can be also regarded as a posthuman body, as it reshapes and challenges the traditional concept of the human subject. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston define posthuman bodies as “a technology, a screen, a projected image; it is a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body; (...) a queer body” (1995: 3).

<sup>5</sup> Deleuze and Guattari eventually differentiate between three types of bodies: cancerous, empty, and full. In the empty body all flows pass through it freely, with no stopping, and no directing. The full body is healthy and productive, but not petrified in its organisation. The cancerous body is caught in a pattern of endless reproduction of the self-same pattern: “each instant, each second, a cell becomes cancerous, proliferates and loses its configuration, takes over everything” (2004: 163).

<sup>6</sup> Other examples of transformations can be found in the cycle of films that calls the Sci-Fi-Monster film. In them, the human being becomes a monster —normally as a consequence of scientific experiments— and, although he/she may go mad at the end of the movie, also shows instances of rationality (1980: 50). This kind of movies were especially popular during the 1950s and they have also been categorized as “atmospheric Monster films” that show the struggle between good and evil, or as films that use the “Contamination-Mutation theme” to stress the isolation of the protagonist/antagonist. The message of these films, Sobchack recalls, seems to be more anti-Faustian than antiscience (Sobchack 1980: 51-2). They recall late gothic literature in the manner of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and films of gothic horror that stress the Manichaeism of good/evil within us. The isolation of the main character is the focus of terror in these texts.

<sup>7</sup> Another key aspect that needs to be taken into account when dealing with identity in transition is the way the ideas of home and community are constructed in the film, since their representations shape the main character’s consciousness and attitudes towards the community. In this sense Friedman posits: “Routes are pathways

between here and there, two points of rootedness. Identity often requires some form of displacement—literal or figurative—to come to consciousness. Leaving home brings into being the idea of “home,” the perceptions of its identity as distinct from elsewhere (1998: 151).

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