

Alienated

The extra-terrestrials rise up

DISTRICT 9: Directed by Neill Blomkamp. Written by Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell. Cinematography, Trent Opaloch. Music, Clinton Shorter. Starring Sharlto Copley, Simon Hansen and Shanon Worley. TriStar Pictures, 2009. R. 112 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

I found it revealing that Wickus, the feeble hero of *District 9*, phonetically recalls the Biggus Dickus sketch from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, for Wickus is an ignoramus at the outset of the film. As tweedy as Mr Rogers and naïve as David Brent, Wickus (Sharlto Copley) is a fidgety but well-intentioned bureaucrat who commands the respect of no one. But the chuckles don't last for long. An employee of Multi-National United (MNU), Wickus is charged with relocating a colony of aliens from a Johannesburg slum to the outskirts of the city. As MNU vehicles enter the District 9 camp, three things become clear. One is that the formerly passive aliens — insultingly referred to as “prawns” — have, after 20 years of imprisonment, grown sick of the abuse at the hands of their captors. Two, given the amount of weaponry in the slum, things are likely to get bloody. And finally, if not most disturbingly, Wickus is referred to in the *past tense* during brief interviews with his parents. Something wicked, it would seem, this way comes for Wickus.

Shot documentary style, with short testimonials, security camera feeds and “found footage” (think *The Blair Witch Project*), the first 45 minutes of *District 9* are perhaps as good as science fiction gets. *District 9* works as a pure sci-fi thriller as well an allegory for large-scale human rights violations, from the Tuskegee airmen to Guantanamo Bay. Director Neill Blomkamp, a South African filming in South Africa, wisely resists the temptation to draw overt parallels to apartheid, largely because he doesn't need to: District 9 is already a thin cover for



District 9

District Six, the Cape Town neighborhood declared “whites only” in 1966. Why use a hammer when you want to turn a screw?

During the relocation process, Wickus suffers a horrible accident. He is immediately quarantined by the MNU conglomerate, which treats him like a priceless science project, referring to Wickus, in fully dressed hyperbole, as the “most valuable artifact on earth.” At this point, in order to save himself, Wickus makes an unexpected alliance, one which will cause him to re-evaluate his former disdain for alien life. Unfortunately, *District 9* becomes one-dimensional for a long interval, during which time Wickus makes for a fairly conventional fugitive, albeit with a few unusual unconventional friends. As a pursuit thriller, *District 9* is perhaps too swift; I can accept the impossible in the sci-fi genre — the recent *Star Trek*, while terrific, is the logical equivalent of a sack of donuts — but I can't accept being yanked through a film, especially one which begins so promisingly.

Still, the final showdown in *District 9* is both emotional and expertly shot, with some of the best effects in a film already admired for its stunning imagery. For the light of heart, if not the faint of stomach, beware: while *District 9* is intelligent and even gentle of spirit, like a *Fly Away Home* with scarier wildlife; while it has a soaring, even beautiful soundtrack, it's still *E.T.* with a bloodbath finale, when stunning amounts of bone and brain blow every which way. At least, you could argue, there were brains to begin with. **ew**



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