Research article

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Questions of Space in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema

Abstract: Spatial fixing was an integral part of maintaining imperial power structures throughout the colonial period, and like other discourses, it later found itself reproduced in cinema. As such, the physical and mental use of space has become key to the dissemination of ideological messages in many films. Confronting this tendency, this study applies theories of postcolonialism to selected examples of contemporary Hollywood film to examine how far it reconstructs traditional binaries of space. This investigation finds that despite attempts to disseminate more culturally sensitive and globally-minded portrayals of the Other, space remains particularly problematic. It also remains vital to storytelling narratives of race, gender, class and society in consideration of the film cases analysed in this study. While Fanonian notions of space continue to permeate cinema—with *Total Recall* and *Avatar* in particular drawing upon stereotypical motifs, it is possible to observe developments upon these discourses. *Elysium* and *District 9* exemplify this, with each feature employing space to address increased questioning of US cultural superiority since the failed Iraq and Afghanistan invasions and the 2008 global economic crash.

Keywords: space, film, postcolonialism

In *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, John McLeod highlights four central matters with which postcolonial scholars should concern themselves when analysing literature and film case studies (1f.). The first relates to the economic and material realities of colonialism, or in other words, the wholesale exploitation of resources and people—a practice that brought enormous wealth to European entrepreneurs and businessmen at the expense of the native population (Loomba, Wilson). The next element regards the invented dialectic differences between the coloniser and the colonised (Memmi), a recurring motif that invariably locates the latter in intellectual, rational and cultural inferiority to the former (see Hall, Rings *Throwing Off the Shackles of Colonialism?*). The third involves the historical and cultural outcomes of colonialism, chiefly investigating and seeking out evidence of a link between the development of the colonial practice and contemporary debates on globalisation (Hardt and Negri, Quijano, Mignolo).

The fourth issue remains the least interrogated and is the topic of enquiry in this study. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon observed the systematic division of the colonial settlement into a space for the coloniser and a ghetto for the colonised (30). Later, in *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said discussed a similar construct discernible in colonial-era British literature:

> In British culture, one may discover a consistency of concern in Spenser, Shakespeare, Defoe and Austen that fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England or Europe and connects it by design, motive, and development to distant or peripheral worlds, conceived of as desirable but still subordinate. And with these meticulously maintained references come attitudes—about rule, control, profit and enchantment (52).

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In these extracts, the authors are drawing our attention to the demographic and geographical consequences of colonialism, a critically important component of postcolonial studies (see Mills). Said elaborates upon Fanon's idea of physical demarcation by articulating an equally important notion of space as mental, consisting of both a "metropolitan" and a "colonial" aspect. Within this paradigm, metropolitan space is occupied by the coloniser and is denoted by what Said describes as "socially desirable, empowered space" (*Culture and Imperialism* 61). This is inimical to colonial space—fundamentally the domain of the colonised. It is important to stress once more that space in this postcolonial framework can be both physical and mental: physical concerning the tangible configuration of the colonial township, and mental in that a binary division exists in the psychological constructs and attitudes of the people involved in the colonial process. Carter discusses space and its association with the "notion of authority or the idea of control" (210), emphasizing its importance to the process of imperial domination. McLeod argues that space eventually paves the way for the production of other discourses that necessitate colonialism: "the divisive territorial consequences of colonialism express and underwrite other kinds of distinctions and discriminations which often mark out colonised people" (2).

For Foucault, this invariable partition is the outcome of a process in which space itself has evolved to constitute a central mediator of human relations (23). He argues that on one hand we strive to achieve utopia in our formulation of space; however, this will always remain impossible because utopia exists only as an image or fantasy. To facilitate this, "heterotopias" function to support our utopian ambition. They exist in the very real form of places like the hospital, the museum and the cemetery, wherein a deeper meaning or context with regard to human behaviour is present. Foucault outlines six principles of heterotopia, the last of which relates to colonialism—in particular the configuration of the colony itself: "[the heterotopia's] role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed, and jumbled" (27). As Ponzanesi elaborates in this regard, the colony is a place where "regimes of otherness are organised and enforced, creating a laboratory for what the perfected society at home should be, far away from the centre but imprinted with its model of inclusion and exclusion" (678f.).

Spatial fixing was an integral part of maintaining imperial power structures throughout the colonial period and, like other discourses, it later found itself reproduced in other mediums of culture. In literature, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Farrell's *The Singapore Grip* provide relevant cases (Rings *Throwing Off the Shackles of Colonialism?* McLeod); in the same way, Moebuis' *Upon A Star* offers an example from the comic book genre (Horton). However, for its ability to relay colonial tropes to mass audiences, cinema is infinitely more influential than other works in its role as a visual epistemological mediator between the spectator and cultural discourses.

More so than other national film industries, Hollywood has been the primary vessel through which stereotypical portrayals of non-western locations, territories and ethnicities have been transmitted to global audiences (Burnstein and Studlar, Weaver-Hightower and Hulme). Richardson discusses Hollywood as an industry leader in terms of impact and potential to reach a worldwide audience and believes that "no institution has been more successful at binding together economic and cultural dominance on a world stage" (1)—a contention that Cornea, Belton, and Riegler agree with. This study would also concur, and add that, more than any other domestic industry in the US, Hollywood is unique in formulating and transmitting self-representations of epistemological Americanness.

In this colonial framework, shifting discourses on race, gender, class and society mean that, while older films like John Rawlin's Oscar-nominated classic *Arabian Nights*, Lander's *Jungle Jim in the Forbidden Land* and Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* are more explicit in their Fanonian portrayals of space, contemporary Hollywood films operating under the influence of increased cultural interconnectedness and greater public awareness of the US and Europe's role in formulating historical narratives, consciously endeavour to present audiences with decidedly more self-reflective, self-critical and objective approaches to cinematic storytelling. However, as Rings reminds us: "directors, scriptwriters, and actors are not fully resistant to well-established cultural hierarchies and neocolonial perspectives that continue to shape contemporary forms of neoliberalism" (*The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema* 1), indicating that, despite the best of intentions, many films are often unable to go beyond traditional narratives and tropes, and frequently revert to colonial dichotomies. Merten and Kramer also agree, asserting that even explicit attempts to move

away from Orientalist imagery and stereotypes in film regularly "hark back to a unified Oriental worldview" (32).

From the perspective of space, David Lean's Academy Award-winning classic *A Passage to India* provides a prominent example of this—primarily evident in the heterotopian partition of the "rationally ordered, sterile life of the civil station" (Colmer 14) from the urban squalor of Indian Chandrapore. Indeed, the station is quiet, clean, with tree-lined, Romanesque straight roads and well-kept, clean-cut gardens; whereas Mrs Moore (Peggy Ashcroft) and Adela Quested's (Judy Davis) arrival to Chandrapore presents a different environment. In this case, the *mise-en-scène* of the crowded marketplace is juxtaposed with loitering locals, snake charmers and exotic foodstuffs—all crucial details that work to contrast the city with the more "familiar" civil station. Similar spatial dichotomies were fundamental aspects of older colonial film and are also observable in other works such as Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* and Attenborough's *Ghandi*.

Taking this into account, this investigation proposes to apply theories of postcolonialism (Said *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*, Fanon) to contemporary Hollywood film with the objective of examining how far it reconstructs traditional binaries of space. It will explore examples of Hollywood films that draw the audiences' awareness to the issue of what Ponzanesi calls the "colonial unconscious" (675); that is, the inclusion of subject-matter that confronts the legacy and impact of European empires and American imperialism. Edward Zwick's *The Last Samurai*, James Cameron's *Avatar*, Len Wiseman's *Total Recall*, Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* and *Elysium* have all been selected for this reason, as well as their commercial popularity. This study regards income to be the strongest indicator for popularity as it can be used as the most evident measure for potential impact on worldwide audiences. In this respect, all of the selected films were successful in their own right, and therefore each warrants analysis in this spatial framework.

Total Recall grossed close to $200 million and was particularly popular with East Asian audiences (see *Internet Movie Database*), its take is only slightly less than *District 9*, which earned $210 million (Nel 548) in ticket receipts. Blomkamp's follow-up *Elysium* was not as well-received critically as *District 9* but was certainly more profitable financially; raking in some $286 million at the box office, it was among 2013's top 30 top-grossing films. *The Last Samurai* was a blockbuster hit, recouping over $457 million globally, and last but not least, Avatar held the number one position as highest-grossing feature ever made (box office sales of $2.8 billion worldwide) for almost 10 years (see Box Office Mojo). Linking these substantial financial figures to the notion that films both reflect and shape the epistemological hopes, fears, apprehensions and anxieties of the population audience, the five features chosen for analysis here can all be claimed to have made a significant cinematic impact in terms of popularity. Once again, in its investigation of spatial representation, this study will fulfil a significant gap in knowledge regarding the extent to which the demographic and geographical consequences of colonialism are manifest in twenty-first century Hollywood.

Hollywood and Space: A Changing Discourse?

Total Recall has been generally overlooked by postcolonial and film scholars[1] despite the attention it gave to contemporary issues of wealth inequality, resource distribution and socio-economic marginality. This in addition to the film's explicit reconstruction of colonial tropes in its depiction of the economic dominance that the "United Federation of Britain" (UFB) has over the poorer, underdeveloped "Colony". Although it was not well-received by critics, the clear distinction that *Total Recall* makes concerning these two territories warrants further scrutiny in the framework of this article. Taking into account the above point regarding Hollywood's evolving tendency to disseminate socio-cultural awareness in its casting and storytelling, it is interesting to note that up until late in *Total Recall*'s production stage, the Colony was tentatively entitled "New Asia", and the giant gravity elevator named "the Fall", was to be known as the

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1 See Fernández-Menicucci and O'Hehir for analyses on the movie.

"China Fall". However, in an on-set interview director Wiseman revealed that this was vetoed by Columbia Pictures at the production stage because the studio wanted the Colony to encompass a more multicultural atmosphere:

> It was one of the concerns of the studio about being so specific about... it was slanting too much to where we were saying that was the entire culture, and it's not. It's meant to be a melting pot of an entire society... it's two surviving zones and the working class is a combination, a melting pot, of many different races and cultures and such. It also informs why the architecture is a mix and blend of everything. And it seemed like it was too specific (Eisenberg and Rich).

The comments do indicate attempts by the studio to address potential criticism of a politically incorrect agenda, supporting the point made earlier concerning increased cultural sensitivity in Hollywood. It is also possible that the issue here could be one of marketability, with studio bosses concerned about potentially offending Chinese audiences—a key market for Hollywood in terms of box office receipts from the mid-2000s onwards. Regardless, *Total Recall* introduces a territorial scenario familiar to contemporary Hollywood sci-fi cinema plotlines: an environmentally-ravaged, divided Earth, of which 80% of the planet's habitat has been destroyed by "chemical warfare". On one hand, we have the UFB, ostensibly symbolising an ironic repetition of history *vis-à-vis* the restoration of the British Empire to the position of a leading world power. The UFB is an economically thriving, cosmopolitan city-state; it is certainly more aesthetically familiar to many viewers in the manner in which, as a bustling business centre, is it reminiscent of the present-day City of London. In contrast, the Colony physically consists of elements typical to conventional representations of the colonial ghetto, comprised as it is with maze-like winding narrow alleyways, exotic food stalls and overcrowded, bustling market places. The Orientalisation of the Colony is principally present however in the less-than-conspicuous references to Asian culture (despite the directed scripting changes) and the majority Asian population.

To accentuate this binary, in the scenes where Quaid wanders the Colony's red-light district (in itself a symbolic reference to the "open and unrestrained" sexuality of the East) contemplating whether or not to visit Rekall, the *mise-en-scène* overwhelms the viewer with a cacophony of generic, inaudible dialects, foreign-language signboards and market stalls selling peculiar products. Moreover, the designation of English as a minority language within the Colony (or at most a lingua franca) as opposed to its native tongue, validates its formulation as a domain fundamentally belonging to the Other. Focusing upon the Rekall facility itself, a link to Homi Bhabha's typical Oriental encapsulations of "the stereotype....and the mysterious" (73) is observable in the scriptwriters' decision to also Orientalise the brand. Contrasting with Verhoeven's depiction of Rekall as a typical US workplace setting synonymous with corporate America, the facility in the 2012 version has been revamped to resemble a futuristic version of a Chinese opium den. The exterior of the building comprises Asian roof architecture, features hanging red Chinese lanterns, and has the Rekall logo transitioning between Arabic, Chinese and Japanese above the main door. The interior is highly exoticised; dimly-lit with scented candles and Buddhist-themed décor. Edward Said's comments on the Orient as a place of "remarkable experiences" (*Orientalism* 2) can also be acknowledged in the fact that Rekall, the symbolised embodiment of this construct, literally offers remarkable experiences to its clients.

In this way, the images of the UFB as more familiar to the contemporary capitalist metropolis versus the Colony as a stereotypical (fictional) Asian city reinforces the Orientalist construct of the non-European city consisting of "labyrinthine spatial structures indicative of decay and a descent into urban squalor" that "contrasts with the orderly and rational form of both Roman and European cities" as Horton discusses (9). Such a trope indicates a strong continuity with colonial discourses of space in *Total Recall* despite attempts by the studio to move away from such representations in their re-framing of the Colony.

Released a year after *Total Recall*, Neill Blomkamp's sci-fi feature *Elysium* tells the story of a polluted, overpopulated and environmentally-ravaged Earth. By 2154, it has been abandoned by the minority of its most privileged residents, who have fled to live in relative comfort and luxury on a giant, orbiting space habitat. Produced only five years after the 2008 financial crash, *Elysium* plays upon negative economic potentialities of the global recession through the depiction of a dystopian Los Angeles as part of a wider, economically shattered Earth devoid of almost all infrastructure. Offering a similar divided setting to *Total*

Recall, Blomkamp has said of *Elysium*: "the entire film is an allegory. I tend to think a lot about wealth discrepancy. People have asked me if I think this is what will happen in 140 years, but this isn't science fiction. This is today. This is now" (see Hiscock).

Through the director's attempt to tell this story, two clear binary spaces define the film. As *Elysium* opens, this can be discerned in the way the camera draws attention to the polluted, ghettoised state of Los Angeles. This is underscored with sounds of gunshot fire and police sirens.[2] In comparison to the alarming, anxiety-inducing nature of the LA introduction, the following visual taster to the Elysium space habitat is quite different: a musical *calando* followed by a subdued low-tempo melody accentuates the contrasting nature of the base. Visually, Elysium reconstructs Foucault's concept of heterotopia in its orderly and planned layout; stylistically it follows familiar images of the futuristic urban metropolis as seen in other Hollywood science fiction films like Buenos Aires in Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* and San Francisco in Abrams' and Lin's *Star Trek* series.

Where *Elysium* appears to break with typical colonial discourse is in its positioning of the Self. In contrast to Memmi's claim that the coloniser invariably assumes a "privileged" role (54), lead protagonist Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) cannot be classified in the same way. Peck discusses the introduction of Elysium and the method that the director employs in presenting the base as an object of enticement: "the minor glimpse that Blomkamp offers audiences...is also a rhetorical strategy, presenting Elysium as something foreign and unattainable, while strengthening audiences' views of Earth as something familiar" (7). Here an inversion of the traditional spatial discourse can be seen, with the Self and audience appearing to assume the role of colonised subject in the manner that they are compelled to comprehend Elysium as unfamiliar.

An explanation for this can in-part be contextualised by taking the epochal setting within which the film was produced into account. The film's heavy references to the 2008 market crash and subsequent occupy protests that followed means that Elysium and its inhabitants can be suggested to represent an allegorical manifestation of the so-called "super-rich". This assertion can be supported in how the film draws upon post-2008 negative media portrayals of the "1%" by depicting the Elysian elite as a malevolent, greedy, self-interested group of individuals, whose predominant intention is to preserve and expand upon their economic and political power at the expense of Earth's long-suffering 99%. The contemporary discourse concerning the super-rich and the unfamiliarity that their lifestyle and habits of consumption hold from the masses is discussed by Flynn-Vencat who states:

> The member's-only phenomenon is exploding into a new way of life, encompassing everything from private-banking coalitions to invitation-only health clinics. With security concerns growing and internet gossip capable of trashing global reputations in an instant, those with money are increasingly locking their entire lives behind closed doors. They dine privately, shop privately, view art privately; everything is private, private, private. Their contacts with the outside world are business and humanitarianism.

This segregationist narrative reveals itself further in the same way as *Total Recall* by the use of languages. The Elysians speak French—the traditional "language of the Elite" in seventeenth-century Europe, whereas Spanish is spoken among the residents of Los Angeles. In the case of the Elysians, this stylistic choice evokes a linkage to stereotypical connotations of a historical European "high culture", further reinforcing the 1% trope. While the decision to "Latinise" LA, on the other hand, is symbolically associated to contemporary negative right-wing media portrayals of mass Hispanic immigration to the United States and the discursive construction of the Latino Other as a second-class citizen—something Chavez elaborates upon. Despite Max Da Costa's ostensive Latino heritage, the part is played by white actor Matt Damon, and in this context, the character's daily struggle within the dysfunction and ruin of dystopian LA plays upon present-day apprehensions regarding the erosion of worker's rights and stagnant societal mobility. Da Costa as an assembly line worker (the factory itself being the apotheosis of capitalist production) supports *Uwire Text*'s

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2 Holiday asserts that the depiction of a dystopian Earth as one that is no longer fit for satisfactory human habitation, is indicative of a wider shift in Hollywood narratives, becoming "the common currency of contemporary science fiction cinema". He writes: "from *Twelve Monkeys* (Gilliam), *28 Days Later* (Boyle) and *I Am Legend* (Lawrence) to *The Book of Eli* (the Hughes Brothers), *After Earth* (Shyamalan), *World War Z* (Forster) and *Oblivion* (Kosinski), the number of films trading in the terminal destruction of humanity has proliferated" (433).

claim that *Elysium* primarily draws attention to "the ever-growing class gap, to healthcare, to worker's rights being taken away and/or being attacked" in the post-capitalist epoch (1). This study asserts that this points to evidence of a considered reaction to recent socio-political global events by the filmmakers, who have taken into account widespread public anxieties and fears about continuing neoliberal expansionism. The physical composition of space in *Elysium* enhances this, with the location of the Self within so-called colonised territory highlighting an evolution on spatial discourse.

Fanon's discussion of space is mainly focused upon the architectural design of the colonial town, however it is important to explore different representations of space to observe whether similar binaries are evident in a colonial context. Many years ago, George Orwell discussed a recurring feature pervasive to British literature:

> [In these novels] adventures only happen at the ends of the earth, in tropical forests, in Arctic wastes, in African deserts... everywhere, in fact, except the places where things really do happen (in Davidson 251).

This description can be correlated to Said's explanation of the Orient as a place of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (*Orientalism* 2); it also encapsulates the basis of the colonial storytelling trope, drawing a distinction between "home" or the "familiar", and the uncharted, unexplored locations that existed beyond the "known" world. In the same way, film examples of Orwell's assertion can be located in the exotic settings to high-grossing Hollywood features such as Marshall's *Congo*, Spielberg's *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* and the *Indiana Jones* series.[3]

Cameron's hugely popular *Avatar* warrants further scrutiny in this framework, not least because it remains the second highest-grossing film ever made (*Box Office Mojo c*), but also for the heavy criticism it received for reinforcing white saviour and colonial tropes (Veracini, Žižek, Gautam). The opening shot of the film begins with images of an exotic rainforest, overlaid with accompanying audio of stereotypical tribal singing and drumming, drawing instant comparisons to Orwell's remarks. The consequent narrative outcome confirms *Avatar*'s correlation to Orwell in the emancipatory adventure of lead protagonist Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), which is also faithful to conventional colonial discourse as others have concluded (Burgchardt and Ott, James and Ue).

Concerning territory, the human mining company—the "Resources Development Administration" (RDA)—have etched out a section of the rainforest to serve as their headquarters and base of operations. In this manner, they fulfil the role of superior bearers of scientific knowledge and modernity—emphasized primarily in their ability to travel light years through space. The base itself houses this hyper-advanced technology and, in line with the design of heterotopian colonial town, is neatly compartmentalised into different zones for leisure, accommodation, scientific activity, and military training. Contrastingly, outside the base the Pandoran jungle is wild, unpredictable and dangerous; full of terrifying creatures that want "to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes" according to mercenary Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang). Moreover, deep within the wilderness, the depiction of the Omaticaya's primitive village Hometree, with its hammocks, campfires, bamboo-laden dwellings, is comparable to the first contact-era artwork of Caspar Plautius and Giuliano Dati, something that further underlies colonial motifs in the film and reinforces the spatial dichotomy.

In his analysis of *Avatar*, Gautam contests that in contrast to notions of colonised space as urbanised, "imperial representations of the colony are always underwritten by the fantasy of the empty land" (90), a motif that aligns with Enlightenment concepts of knowledge production *vis-à-vis* the world as a chartable terrain that requires chronicling and mapping. Edward Zwick's Academy Award-winning historical drama *The Last Samurai* draws upon this symbolism. The film is set in the Meiji Restoration period in nineteenth-century Japan and tells the story of former US Army Captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise), who is offered the chance to go to Japan and train soldiers in the Japanese Imperial Army. The man who offers him this chance, Omura (Masato Harada), is a pro-Western politician who wishes to "civilise" Japan and remove

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3 Shohat and Stam discuss the *Indiana Jones* film series and how the images and landscapes presented in them are "synopsized as theme park clichés drawn from an Orientalist repertoire. India is all dreamy spirituality and Shanghai is all gongs and rickshaws" (124).

the "old ways" of the Samurai, who reject his reform policies because they are "concerned at the pace the country is modernising". The Samurai tribe, led by Lord Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe), symbolise the last stand against inevitable US-led modernity—as British translator Simon Graham (Timothy Spall) confirms: "twenty years ago this was a just a sleepy little town...in fact the ancient and the modern are at war with the soul of Japan..." The modern in this sense refers to the US and European colonisers, whereas the ancient is Katsumoto's samurai who require civilising within colonial discourse. As such, Katsumoto and his people find themselves located away from the port city of Yokohama—the principal urban space in the film—deep in the countryside of the old *Yushino* prefecture.[4]

Back in Yokohama, it is possible to observe something akin to what Said would deem metropolitan space: an urbanised city, which serves as a base to the colonising white US military. Upon his capture by Katsumoto's samurai clan, protagonist Algren's journey into "empty space" is illustrated by several overlapping panoramic scenes of the clan slowly moving through the countryside on horseback. The distance they have travelled is signified by the image of Mount Fuji moving further toward the horizon as the shots change. Upon arrival at Katsumoto's village, Algren's "adventure" in the typical white saviour paradigm begins, underlining Orwell's point and emphasizing *The Last Samurai*'s relationship to colonial discourse, underpinned by spatial dichotomies.

Shifting Space? Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*

The films in question have until this point been analysed in the framework of their binary depictions of space. However, sci-fi hit *District 9*, Neill Blomkamp's most commercially successful film to date, provides an interesting case in the possible evolution of spatial representation. The film takes place within the urban setting of alternative reality Johannesburg, addressing several wider socio-political issues specific to South African society such as race (Valdez-Moses et al.), Nigerian immigration (Van Wyk), and the legacy of apartheid (Walder). Central to the communication of these themes is the use of space to delineate differing formulations of identity and allegorise South Africa's struggles in the frame of contemporary multiculturalism (Weaver-Hightower). It is possible to observe quite early on that, unlike the settings to *Total Recall*, *Avatar* and *Elysium*, *District 9*'s Johannesburg is divided into three distinct territories: a high-rise metropolis, an idyllic white suburb, and an alien (coded black) township (van Veuren). Supporting this claim, it can be noted as early as the opening title sequence that a boundary between the alien township and the metropolitan city is present, with director Blomkamp employing a bird's eye view shot to draw attention to a heavily fortified border running vertically down the left-hand side of the screen. The symbolism of the township itself also follows the previous examples of colonial space discussed in this study in both its physical design and Orientalised nature. This immediately works to segregate District 9 from the metropolitan city. Regarding the physical make-up of the township itself, this study is inclined to agree with Nel, who writes that District 9 can be characterised as a typical urban, African ghetto; "dirty, claustrophobic, and litter-strewn, with nightmarish labyrinths and alleys" (552). The township certainly exists in binary contrast to the rational order of metropolitan Johannesburg. The alien population is generally depicted as the typical savage Other: the "prawns" have no apparent culture of their own (Weaver-Hightower) and are unruly and violent, spending their time scavenging huge piles of litter for food. They are also typically irrational: at one point handing over a mechanical battle suit to the Nigerian gangsters in exchange for 100 cans of cat food. This, in particular, is an aspect of the aliens' representation that would correspond to colonial ideas of the Other as intellectually inferior. In addition to the depiction of the aliens as "savages", Veracini's description of the Nigerians as "stereotyped and racialised figures, superstitious thugs with cannibalistic tendencies" (355) is also worth mentioning. This study would add that Blomkamp "Orientalises" the characters visually: displaying the gangsters with snakes wrapped around their bodies and electing to show the group's leader Obesandjo (Eugene Khumbanyiwa) involved in the practising of witchcraft.

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4 The film was shot almost entirely in New Zealand except for some close-up street shots of Yokohama that were filmed in California, USA. Views of Mt. Fuji were superimposed CGI.

Unlike the other films, the township can be contrasted with two distinct areas of Johannesburg, with the configuration of protagonist Wikus's (Sharlto Copley) suburban neighbourhood and the downtown city centre, suggesting a progression on Said's original model. Two moments articulate this well. The first comes in the scene where wife Tania (Vanessa Haywood) organises a dinner party to celebrate her husband's promotion to lead coordinator role of the District 9 evictions. Before the camera cuts to the inside of the house, the shot emphasizes that, unlike the labyrinth-like composition of District 9, this suburbia is rationally ordered—with straight roads and pavements, manicured gardens and clean driveways. The sudden drop in background noise and the gentle sound of the crickets chirping also stress a change in the ambience and pace of the film compared with the previous images of the township and the city centre. The depiction of downtown Johannesburg—the base of private military contracting company Multinational United (MNU)—is fundamentally different still in its formulation: here the noise returns in the form of car horns and bustling traffic. The city streets are crowded with people surrounded by high-rise buildings. Furthermore, taking into account the attention *District 9* dedicates to highlighting the risks of surrendering government control to unaccountable private sector organisations and its overarching anti-capitalist agenda, the location of MNU headquarters right in the heart of this chaos is noteworthy in that the urban centre is a location typically reserved for the power brokers of capitalist order in Hollywood film codes of reference.

Upon establishment of this triangulated spatial structure, at no point in *District 9* do we see any characters negotiate these boundaries with any meaningful significance except Wikus as he embarks on a gruesome transformation to alien "prawn". This mutation then works to blur the rigid lines of segregation, the symbolic value of which is well articulated by Nel:

> The act of breaking, erecting and shifting borders enables a re-imagination of the established cultural, political and social spaces. For example, the world of orderly structure of the dominant hegemonic order as opposed to the chaotic racial ghetto on the periphery of Johannesburg. The imagined boundary between the living subject, the Self, and that which threatens the Self is consequently broken (558).

The blurring of these imagined boundaries exposes both a racial hierarchy and a colonial mentality that exists at the core of identity constructs in *District 9*, something that also underpins the fundamental *raison d'etre* of space in colonial discourse. Wikus' wife Tania, in particular, seeks to maintain strict segregation, implying on several occasions that she prefers a world where humans and aliens do not interact. For example, after initially stating that she does not want to see Wikus again, she phones her husband a second time in tears declaring that she "just wants everything back the way it was" before posing the question: "how can we go back?" Wikus also wants that same thing; moments after the call, when Christopher (Jason Cope) announces that the metamorphosis-reversing fluid can be used to power the alien mothership, he enthusiastically declares "I can go home, you can go home, you can take your boy, you can take all the prawns with you". He even becomes a cold-blooded murderer in his attempt to maintain the earlier established boundaries by killing several MNU employees when storming the organisation's headquarters. Indeed, Wikus' and Christopher's incursion can be interpreted as a symbolic attack on a corrupt and immoral capitalist elite in the wake of the various socio-economic crises of the twenty-first century. In this way, *District 9* follows other Hollywood films like *Avatar* and *Total Recall* in what could be described as the widespread tendency to demonise the US military-industrial complex and corrupt political elites in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion (Eberwein 139). Despite this, in the film's essentialist portrayal of MNU as inherently malevolent and unethical, distancing the organisation from an imagined innocent, passive public, *District 9* develops a scapegoat for colonial and capitalist exploitation at the expense of the audience who are not asked to consider their ongoing (admittedly indirect) complicity in a continued propagation of this form of damaging neoliberalism.

Overall, in the attention that the film gives to maintaining carefully established territories, *District 9* highlights an anxiety regarding the possibility of exclusion for any individual that does not maintain strict boundaries of mental and physical segregation with the Other. As Weaver-Hightower rightly highlights, Wikus's experience plays on the fears of conservative white South Africa by insinuating that they would

have to assimilate into the numerically dominant black post-apartheid nation (255). In this way, *District 9*'s fundamental message is one of rejection (as is done quite explicitly in the case of Wikus) if spatial lines are not strictly maintained.

Colonial Continuities in Space

Despite attempts by Hollywood cinema to disseminate more culturally sensitive and globally-minded portrayals of the Other, space remains particularly problematic. It also remains vital to storytelling narratives of race, gender, class and society in consideration of the film cases analysed in this study. While Fanonian notions of space continue to permeate cinematic examples—with *Total Recall* and *Avatar* in particular drawing upon stereotypical motifs, it is possible to observe developments upon these discourses. *Elysium* and *District 9* highlight this, with each feature employing space to address increased questioning of US cultural superiority since the failed Iraq and Afghanistan invasions and the 2008 global economic crash. Both of these films approach this by placing the viewer on the other side of the colonial divide, inverting the colonial discourse trope of the Self as materially superior to the Other. As McLeod summarises, the postcolonialism focuses its enquiries on four key areas, however, in comparison to the other three, the nature of space *vis-à-vis* its importance to storytelling narrative framing in Hollywood means that this element needs to be scrutinised more extensively if we are to fully expose the enduring cultural legacy of colonialism in all its forms.

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