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'District 9': gritty, violent, brilliant

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Aug. 28, 2009

Sharlto Copley stars in a scene from the movie "District 9." (CNS/Sony)

?District 9,? a science-fiction action horror story by freshmen South African filmmakers, conquered the box office on its opening weekend Aug. 14 and deservedly so.

Twenty years after an extraterrestrial spaceship parks over the city of Johannesburg, the alien travelers have been assigned to live in what amounts to a South African township, that is, a gigantic, sprawling, decaying ghetto. The aliens are called ?prawns? because they resemble bottom-feeding crustaceans and they are multiplying rapidly.

Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley) is the naive government office hack who is appointed to get the aliens to sign eviction notices, so that the forced transfer to a tent city for ?humanitarian? reasons will appear legal. Wikus is a bureaucratic pawn who goes merrily about his task, until he encounters resistance and discovers which creatures are authentically human. In the process he gains his own humanity and becomes a hero.

This sci-fi film is a study in the genre, which is, of its nature, a hybrid of many genres. It is low-budget, reminiscent of 1950s sci-fi black-and-white B movies like Don Siegel?s ?Invasion of the Body Snatchers? (1956). ?District 9? revisits familiar visual and territory elements such as the handheld camera technique of ?The Blair Witch Project? (1999), which was also made with a staggeringly low budget. The visual and thematic derivatives that occurred to me are ?Transformers? (2007 and 2009) and ?Men in Black? (1997 and 2002) without the gloss or the humor. The hovering mother ship recalls ?Close Encounters of the Third Kind? (1977) and the apocalyptic landscape and violence, ?The Terminator? franchise. ?District 9? is a brilliant, gritty, intelligent film, with a touch of sad romance, not unlike ?The Matrix? (1999 and 2003), though ?The Matrix? was elegant by comparison.

The political overtones are local and global. They refer to South African history such as the invention of and rationale for concentration camps (1900-1902) by the British in the second Boer War. The implication that the living conditions in townships still exist, as they did under apartheid, is less than subtle. The government of South Africa dominating ?District 9? is fascist, demonstrating a Nazi-like ideology with parallels to the genocide carried out by the Nazis in World War II. Then add in the current global industrial war complex, the philosophical/psychological fear of ?the other? that afflicts people from governments to tribes. Isolate the other

and it becomes easy to dehumanize them, then harm, kill and exterminate them.

The violence and gore in the film are intense, fitting its theme of fear-based genocide. The commentary by journalists and experts in the film seems disconnected, cold, uninvolved and inconclusive. A sequel is surely a possibility, in which the question, ?What happens next?? will be answered.

The story suggests a strong messianic theme that begs for analysis. The parallel with Christ is not exact, but consider that Christopher Johnson was the name of the alien who went back to his planet, with his son, to save his people. It will take three years for him to return. Christopher means ?Christ-bearer? and Johnson equals son of John. I thought the theological connections to John?s Gospel and apocalyptic vision of the book of Revelation were apparent as well. When watching ?District 9,? it is easy to consider the sixth chapter of John as articulated in the selections of the recent Gospel readings of the 17th through 20th Sundays of the year. If people, in this case the outlaw Nigerians who live among the aliens and control the cat food that the government feeds them, eat of the flesh of the aliens, they can obtain their perceived power. The film presents this idea as having roots in ancient African ?religion? or myth, if you will, but this is just the beginning of the idea of spiritual transformation in the story. The aliens become more human as humans become inhuman and alien to their own nature. The 72-hour, three-day, time frame is interesting as well.

?District 9? is based on the 2005 short film ?Alive in Joburg? and was created by some of the same people. They are filmmakers to watch: director/writer Neill Blomkamp and cowriter Terri Tatchell. Copley, a South African producer and director, is very good in his first major film role. In an understated way, he plays Wikus? transformation from a silly, superficial man who never questions his superiors to an appealing action hero with a conscience. His effort to save his own life leads him to think of others. This, in turn, leads him to make heroic choices. Coproducers Peter Jackson and Philippa Boyens (collaborators on ?The Lord of the Rings? trilogy) know talent when they see it.

I got a little tired of the handheld camera technique, as ?real? as it is supposed to make us feel. South African filmmakers seem very aware of the contrast between modernist high rise glass and steel office buildings with the natural environment -- think ?The Gods Must Be Crazy? (1980). I am glad the filmmakers went for shorter rather than the lengthier new ?normal? three-hour film length. It is a sign of intelligent filmmaking when those crafting the movie realize that less is more. Real artists show restraint.

True science fiction always asks: What does it mean to be human? And when a film creates a scenario like ?District 9,? one that questions what it means to be human, themes of human dignity, empathy, altruism, society, and often theology and spirituality become apparent. Good filmmakers never impose meaning. Instead they leave space between the film and the audience to create their own meaning and to consider things that matter.

Sr. Rose Pacatte, a Daughter of St. Paul, is the director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies, an award-winning writer on film and scripture, and a media literacy education specialist.

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