In District 9, an alien spaceship reaches Johannesburg in 1982, during the South African apartheid era, and lingers over the city like an ominous cloud. When the authorities decide to cut their way in, they discover numerous malnourished aliens in the ship’s hold. With international human rights groups intently watching, South African aid agencies bring the aliens to Earth. But, despite initial attempts to give the aliens ‘proper status’ and ‘protection’, the temporary refugee camp in which they are housed turns into a slum, known as District 9, a ‘fenced’ and ‘militarised’ area. The aliens are associated with crime and discriminated against. After twenty years, anti-alien sentiment rises to an all-time high. The government outsources the task of evicting the aliens to a private firm, Multinational United (MNU), which plans to resettle them in a new compound, District 10, 200 miles away. During the evictions, MNU employee Wikus van de Merwe becomes ‘infected’ by his exposure to an alien fluid, and begins a painful transformation into an alien himself. Taking refuge in District 9, he befriends an alien whom he previously tried to evict, Christopher Johnson, in the hope of retrieving the fluid that transformed him, the only means of restoring his human form.

A US–New Zealand–Canada–South Africa co-production, involving the Hollywood studio Tristar Pictures, commissioned and backed by Lord of the Rings director/producer Peter Jackson, District 9 was a box office hit, despite its lack of stars and (then) unknown director, Neill Blomkamp (who, like Edwards, comes from a visual effects background). Made on a relatively ‘modest’ US$30 million budget, which it recouped within its opening weekend, the film went to number one in the US box office and earned over US$200 million worldwide (Schalkwyk 2009; Jones 2013). As in other films in this chapter, the use of real locations plus CGI gives a gritty, lived-in feel to District 9’s alternative reality. It was mostly filmed in Johannesburg, including a real shanty town on the outskirts, where ‘people had lived in shacks on landfill for years’ (Wordsdale 2009: 35). The digital elements – the spaceship, military vehicles and helicopters – were added to location footage in postproduction, along with the aliens, digital creations based on performance capture technologies.

In the moment of first contact, recalling discoveries of immigrants hiding in shipping containers, the film indicates what it is about. These are literally homeless, stateless aliens: refugees from another planet. On Earth, the aliens are treated in a similar way to today’s asylum seekers: unwanted and unwelcome, reduced to abject and humiliating conditions. The film has been accused of reproducing stereotypes about immigrants. According to James Zborowski, District 9 is a movie whose “immigrants” objectively are . . . the threatening, marauding, uneducated, slum-dwelling, amorphous social problem of the
xenophobic imagination... The film thereby justifies the reactions to immigrants it ostensibly condemns (Zborowski 2010). Similar criticisms have been levelled at its depiction of Nigerians, who mix with aliens in District 9, where they engage in illegally trading alien weaponry, interspecies prostitution and selling cat food (to which the aliens are addicted) at exorbitant prices.

What these debates miss is that *District 9* doesn’t aim to make morally upright, politically correct pronouncements about immigrants. At a deeper and more ethical level of reflection, it provokes us to think about how stereotypes are formed. With a startling directness enabled by the SF symbolism of aliens, it confronts audiences with their own xenophobic attitudes, magnifying the stereotypes to make them recognisable. But it then exchanges those perceptions with another set of perceptions, bringing about a cognitive shift; the same is true, to a lesser extent, of *Children of Men* and *Monsters*. The aliens are constructed as a ‘type’, with ‘a few immediately recognizable and defining traits’, yet these change and develop in the course of the narrative (Dyer 1993: 13). In the early part of the film, the aliens are seen entirely through the filter of the host society, including the media and academic experts; its latter part, however, increasingly focuses on the aliens’ own perspective, the pivot being Wikus’s transformation. As Richard Dyer reminds us, the crucial point about stereotypes is not simply that they are wrong but, rather, in whose power interests they work (ibid.: 17). *District 9* demonstrates this very clearly.

*District 9*’s mixed-media format, consisting of a corporate MNU video and faux news, documentary and CCTV footage, highlights how much we perceive the characters and their situation according to the medium in which they are presented; we are encouraged to see them as the medium, and the power interests controlling it, wish us to see them. The plethora of different speakers and pseudo-documentary footage not only heightens the film’s realism, reminding us that these injustices are based in reality, but also emphasises the aliens as an object of competing discourses. The alien population is caught in the crossfire between different interest groups: the government, the media, academics, humanitarian agencies, MNU and local South Africans, most of whom regard the aliens as a social problem to be resolved for the humans’ benefit rather than for the aliens themselves.

The film starts with the filming of a corporate MNU video following the protagonist as he embarks on the eviction operation he has been chosen to lead. We hear a lapel microphone being attached to Wikus’s clothes, as he garrulously talks off camera. The image jerks into vision, revealing him as a non-descript desk bureaucrat in a mundane office setting. As we will see, Wikus’s portrayal as an unsympathetic protagonist, played by a then unknown actor (Sharlto Copley), is crucial to his function in the narrative. The MNU logo occasionally appears at the corner of the screen, reminding us when we are watching the final, edited version of the corporate video. Documentary-style
titles appear, identifying interviewees. We also see outtakes from this video, which form an insight into the mindset of the aliens’ oppressors.

Occasionally, the narration switches to news footage, with headlines scrolling at the bottom of the screen. When it shows locals rioting, in an attempt to force aliens out of the townships, actual archive images of rioting supplied by the South African Broadcasting Company are spliced into the film. Voices of news anchors ring through District g’s world, giving the impression that what they tell us is lifted directly from reality. Nonetheless, it is a selective and highly mediated portrayal. News images link the aliens to criminality, emphasizing their destructive behaviour. Commentary over images of burning shacks in District 9 names aliens as perpetrators of this act, rather than as targets of the local community’s hate crimes. Media reportage is later proved to be unreliable when Wikus himself becomes the victim of a smear campaign during his transformation into an alien. On a TV at a fast-food outlet, a breaking news item declares him to be an escaped fugitive carrying a deadly contagion due to his ‘prolonged sexual activity with aliens’. Upon these words, the news programme produces an evidently fake image of Wikus having sex with an alien. The film shows how the media influence our perceptions of social groups and expose processes through which stereotypes are peddled. As Lindiwe Dovie remarks about media images of terrorism, the visualisation of violence enacts political goals: ‘In apartheid South Africa, this visualisation involved the constant streaming on television of black South African “terrorism” to convince whites that the government was justified in its (racist) laws’ (2009: 48). In District g’s world, too, media manipulation is crucial to justifying a new apartheid system and promoting it to the public.

Inserted into the narrative are documentary interviews with Wikus’s family and colleagues, academic experts and members of the public. Although some of the experts are sympathetic to the aliens’ plight, they tend to exert their power-knowledge: the aliens are considered inferior, as immigrants often are by the dominant culture. One such expert, sociologist Sarah Livingstone, informs us that the aliens are known by ‘the derogatory term “prawn”’, which ‘implies something that … scavenges the leftovers’. This provides the cue for an entomologist to comment on the aliens’ insect-like community. Both physically and in their mannerisms, the aliens appear to the humans like insects, with segmented carapaces and tentacles hanging from their faces. The digital design of the aliens was based on ‘cockroaches, dung beetles, goliath bugs’ (Fordham 2009: 25). District g engages with an SF convention of representing aliens in insectoid forms which evoke fear and dread; yet, in doing so, it reflects on processes of dehumanisation that enable others to be oppressed and destroyed more easily, recalling the Nazis’ characterisation of Jews as vermin and Hutus’ labelling of Tutsis as cockroaches, as well as news media attempts to convince us that immigrants are ‘almost subhuman’ (Hanson 2013).
In their interviews, members of the public express prejudices about the aliens, scapegoating them for social ills and supporting the government's policy of separation in the belief that this is for their own safety. It is mainly black South Africans who express greatest hostility towards the aliens, a provocative reference to the country's past. One declares emphatically: 'They should just go.' Another complains: 'If they were from another country we'd understand, but they are not even from this planet!'

The film evokes the history of apartheid to question the legitimacy of current practices used to deal with immigration in South Africa and elsewhere. Literally meaning 'separateness' in Afrikaans, apartheid was introduced in South Africa shortly after the Second World War, denying basic rights to the black majority population and forcing them to live in a state of physical, legal and political segregation, not regarded as equal to the ruling whites. The apartheid system was enforced through a series of laws designed to preserve white privilege and 'ensure that society remained segregated and unequal' (Durrheim et al. 2011: 4). Spatial segregation was the tool used to create racial inequality. As Kevin Durrheim, Xoliswa Mtose and Lyndsay Brown note, 'segregation is the socio-geographic form that perpetuates inequality' and 'keeps the poor trapped in poverty' (ibid.: 21). Under apartheid, towns and cities were organised into racially exclusive areas to reflect the racial hierarchy. In public places, signs like 'Whites Only' or 'Non-Whites Only' controlled access to amenities on a racialised basis.

The apartheid system was built upon a previous history of institutionalised socio-economic inequality under colonialism. Frantz Fanon observed that 'the colonial world is cut in two', its frontiers marked 'by barracks and police stations' (2001: 29). For him, 'apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments of a society that is essentially divided into two: a white minority and a black majority...'

Figure 4.3 In District 9's world, Group Areas Act wards are racially segregated neighborhoods, reminiscent of District 10 in the movie District 9, displaced black people are forced to live in order to deprive them of basic amenities.

Apartheid legislated economic and social discrimination against post-apartheid African countries. Immigrants are considered scapegoats when they are not nationals, or no riots broke out in response to restricted events in District 9.

As under apartheid, District 9's world is one of exclusion. Separetness is the city's spatial division: some areas are non-human loitering zones, full of skyscrapers and streets, all the same, yet their racial group from the other side of the road live on the other side as a barren wasteland.
places about the government's y. It is mainly the aliens, a factually: 'They of white of physical, ing whites. The ed to preserve equality and control to create racial y Brown note, inequality' and gead, towns and a ginal hierarchy. namly' controlled institutionalised served that 'the and police sta division into compartments of the colonial world' (ibid.: 40). District 9 reverberates with echoes of both colonialism and apartheid, including forced removals. Its title is reminiscent of District 6 in Cape Town, declared a whites-only area under the Group Areas Act, resulting in the expulsion of its multicultural community to racially designated townships. In addition, the planned eviction of aliens to District 10 recalls the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act (1970), which displaced black populations to rural areas known as 'Bantustans' or homelands in order to deprive them of South African citizenship.

Apartheid legislation was dismantled in the early 1990s. However, socio-economic and racial inequalities remain as a legacy of that era. In the post-apartheid era, South Africa, now a 'magnet' for migrants from other African countries, has become wracked with xenophobia (Harding 2012: 125). Immigrants are known by the pejorative term kwerekwere and have become scapegoats when nobody else is left to blame under a black political leadership (Maharaj 2011: 368). Citizens have supported 'heavy restrictions on foreign nationals, or no foreign nationals at all' (Harding 2012: 69). Anti-immigrant riots broke out in May 2008, forming the immediate backdrop to the fictionalised events in District 9.

As under apartheid, space is a mechanism of domination and control in District 9's world. The aerial shots of Johannesburg reveal its geography of exclusion. Separated into zones of human and non-human habitation, the city's spatial divisions mark social divisions, reinforced with signs such as 'No non-human loitering'. The inner city is sturdily built of steel and concrete, full of skyscrapers and gated communities, lined with leafy, well-paved, clean streets, all the rubbish cleared out of sight. Its borders protect the privileged group from its others. In contrast, District 9 is built on a landfill site. The aliens live on top of each other, in low-lying shacks crammed together. It is a barren wasteland, where nothing grows except the refuse of the city – a
place for beings defined as waste. The bleakness is intensified by its narrow colour palette, mainly dry earth-tones, obtained by filming during winter and draining colour in postproduction (Worsdale 2009). Aerial perspectives from circling helicopters emphasise District 9’s status as a place of otherness that is constantly policed and under surveillance. Surrounded by razor wire, electrified fences and armed patrols, it is an imprisoning structure. Its borders construct the aliens as a security threat and keep them firmly segregated from the wider population — reminding us of the structures of apartheid violence.

In District 9’s fictional world, MNU is one of the world’s largest weapons manufacturers, hence the implication that the real reason for the evictions is to find alien weaponry, despite the company’s humanitarian pretext of resettling the aliens in a more comfortable place. MNU represents the murky world of corporate and other non-state actors deployed by states in pursuit of mercantile interests. Along with other MNU officers, Wikus serves eviction notices, acting condescendingly to the aliens, threatening them with his armed guard and bribing them with cat food. At one point he discovers a shed containing alien eggs and removes them from the source of their nutrient, then summons MNU forces to torch the whole nest. He does so without any moral qualms, because he does not regard the aliens as human, though we hear sounds of babies squealing. Afterwards, he even jokes about it, comparing the popping noise the infants make when they die to popcorn.

Excerpts from the MNU video picture District 10 with the caption ‘Sanctuary Park’. Yet behind the barbed wire can be glimpsed countless, densely packed tents. Later in the film when Wikus finds Christopher looking at the promotional brochures, he warns him that the new camp is worse than District 9 — that it’s basically ‘a concentration camp’. Situated even further outside the city, District 10 condenses memories of historical atrocities, from the Nazis’ resettlement programmes and ‘Final Solution’ through to one of the earliest uses of concentration camps, by the British during the Boer War in South Africa. As suggested in relation to Children of Men, the film highlights how the ‘deportation of aliens’ is imbued with echoes of these former practices.

MNU’s nefarious activities, including the practice of torture and death squads, add to the already rich historical layering in District 9. When Wikus begins to transform into an alien, he is moved to MNU’s laboratories, where secret genetic experiments on aliens are underway. Even Wikus is aware that these experiments, which also hark back to Nazi practices, are morally abhorrent, exclaiming: ‘What are they doing to these prawns?’ For MNU, what happens to the aliens (and now to Wikus) isn’t important; it just wants to harvest their bodies in order to operate the billion-dollar alien weaponry it plans to sell to foreign governments. Due to the aliens’ sophisticated biotechnology, which requires alien DNA to be activated, MNU cannot operate it itself, so it takes advantage of Wikus’s transformation to test the weaponry.

Evoking not so much an alien than the anti-people. Our initial sympathy, this perspective suggests, is with a friend, with the precious home. The enabling is not only what makes the film possible but the possibility of making it...

So Wikus becomes a welcoming friend to his son, a friend who seems to be there for him, a ‘human’ such...

With this empathy, with this sense of friendship, the child becomes a repre-

sentative of the film’s remarkable and paradoxical achievement: a ‘human’ such.

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sentative of the film’s remarkable and paradoxical achievement: a ‘human’ such.
Evoking sinister corporate and government forces, MNU is rendered more alien than the aliens — forging a moral allegiance with the aliens.

Our introduction to Christopher Johnson and his son is the point at which this perspectival shift takes place. We first encounter them when they, along with a friend, are scouring a waste heap for alien technology in order to collect the precious fluid that will enable them to start up the mothership and return home. They speak in their language, which is translated for us in subtitles, enabling us to comprehend the motives behind their actions, which, by itself, makes them more relatable. Christopher is the first alien who is seen to explicitly question the terms of the eviction order, instantly recognising its illegality. So Wikus attempts a different tack — muttering patronisingly in an aside to his colleague that this alien is a little smarter than the others — and threatens to take his child away to child services. Christopher, who wishes no harm to come to his son, then has no choice but to sign the order. From this point onwards, the film cements our allegiance with Christopher and his son. Throughout the film, aliens wear odd combinations of human clothing in an attempt to assimilate. Christopher’s red jacket allows us to recognise and distinguish him from other aliens from scene to scene. Through conferring recognition upon and fostering allegiance with Christopher, the film gradually gives the aliens a ‘human’ face yet, at the same time, it highlights the failure to perceive it as such.

With their ‘expressive eyes and brows’, the aliens’ faces are designed to elicit empathy, enhanced in close-ups (Fordham 2009: 25). When MNU shoots his friend, Christopher’s large, soulful eyes widen in alarm and blink in despair — a representation that reflects anthropomorphic principles that the eyes are portals into inner subjectivity. This anthropomorphism can be explained by the structures of character engagement in cinema, as Neil Blomkamp remarks: ‘for any form of sentient being that the audience has to relate to, our psychology seems to require aliens to be presented with a human face’ (ibid.). Digital characters have to possess a ‘human-like agency’ in order for audiences to recognise and empathise with them (Purse 2013: 62). However, this anthropomorphic dimension works on a deeper level in District 9, where the alien appearance also represents the filter of popular perceptions through which refugees and immigrants are seen, including as lowlife scavengers and scroungers. The film shows us an internal world of emotions that the media, academic experts and locals fail to see — they just see the aliens superficially, from the outside, through the grid of their own prejudices. When Christopher encounters the MNU experiments undertaken by those who had no regard for alien life, he is rooted to the spot, displaying moral emotions lacking in the human characters. Later, he declares: ‘I must save my people.’ His pain confirms that they are people upon whom this violence is being meted out.

In contrast to the media and experts’ portrayal of aliens as a threatening
horde or insect-like colony, the film individualises Christopher Johnson. It gives him a name, a family and a story: a longing to go home. As a caring parent with a child, he evokes sympathy; he is shown to have desires for a better life similar to the local community. His son displays a young child’s curiosity in trying to find out about his home planet and his roots, inviting empathy that only intensifies when Christopher tells him that they can no longer return home, since the flask of fluid they have painstakingly been collecting for twenty years has been stolen by MNU. The son’s light, playful movements are like those of a human child. The scene where he is trying to hide from MNU is filled with both humour and suspense, as the film makes us feel and imagine the aliens’ experience of danger. Humour is often used to enable an in-group bond against an out-group, who become the butt of the joke (Morreall 2009: 121). This reactionary type of humour denigrates others and ‘serves to reinforce social consensus’ (Critchley 2002: 11). It is the laughter of the powerful at the powerless. As Simon Critchley observes, ‘the ethos of a place is expressed by laughing at people who are not like us’, underlining the ‘belief that “they” are inferior to “us”’ (ibid.: 69). Jokes are therefore a good indicator of ‘who a particular society is subordinating, scapegoating or denigrating’ at any moment (ibid.: 76). In *District 9*, the aliens appear in the media and academic commentary as figures of fun – for example, being addicted to cat food or wearing odd items of human clothing. But in this sequence, the humour depends on our sharing a world with the aliens, laughing with them.

Here it is not the dominant culture claiming likeness in its own (selective) terms; rather, it is the other way round. The alien child tells Wikus ‘We are the same’, a proposition that he vehemently rejects, even though at this point his DNA is being altered into alien DNA. After his exposure to the alien fluid, the transformation causes his nails to flake off, his teeth to fall out and his skin to blister all over. He is shocked when the bandages of his injured arm are unreviled to reveal that an alien arm has grown in its place. As a result of his transformation, he is compelled to experience what the Other experiences – namely segregation, destitution, loss of safety and rights, and exploitation. Criminalised, then alienated by his family and society, he loses his place in the organisation of the city, ending up in the low space of *District 9*. With the media smear campaign against him, Wikus becomes a victim of hate propaganda. Sara Ahmed writes that ‘hate has effects on the bodies of those who are made into its objects’. Moreover, ‘if the effect of hate crime is affect, and an affect which is visceral and bodily’, the victim’s body becomes its testimony; in a circular effect, the victim’s affected body is read as the ‘truth’ of the hate crime by its perpetrators (Ahmed 2004: 58). Wikus, the eviction officer, is forced to feel how racism and discrimination operate on his own body, the implications of the coercive measures that he carried out against aliens.

Through its transformation into

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But even if refuses to rew. conventions. It happened to be the government he artificial flower could be from waste heap in

**CODA: ELYSIUM**

It would be imply that Blomkamp makes set-up but now Damon and Joel pollute Earth filled with waste here is grimy, underresourced space station, a

Elysium is a place maintain their urban homes with
her Johnson. It is my desire for a young child's roots, inviting them to bring out their light, playful. He is trying to make the film make us used to the butt of the emigrates others. It is the laugh diverts, the ethos, underlying, are therefore a scapegoating aliens appear in example, being. But in this one aliens, laugh-

own (selective) Wikus. We are tough at this point to the alien fluid, fall out and his injured arm. As a result of his experience and exploitation. Places his place in District 9. With the power of hate prop, those who are affected, and an in his testimony; the ‘truth’ of the eviction officer, his own body, his against aliens.

Through its expressive visual effects, the film dwells upon his physical transformation into an alien, simultaneously a moral and an ethical transformation. Although earlier in the film we are aligned with Wikus – we hear his voice commentary and the camera follows him – we do not share his moral perspective. It is only when he transforms into an alien that we are encouraged to ally ourselves with him, especially when he sacrifices his longing to be ‘fixed’ to help Christopher and his son return to their homeland. Through his contact and positioning with aliens, he morally evolves. However, a distinction between the film’s moral and ethical perspectives becomes crucial. After Wikus’s transformation, the film focuses on another perpetrator, the sadistic MNU mercenary Koobus Venter. In the film’s moral perspective, violence towards Koobus and MNU is made acceptable because by this stage we are rooting for the aliens, a limiting perspective that simply switches allegiance from one group to another, rather than fundamentally changing attitudes. The greater, ethical potential in District 9 lies in its ability to make us infer connections between past and present wrongs carried out in the name of humanity and to assume responsibility for them, to imagine how this present state of affairs came to be.

But even if Wikus’s journey is one of upward moral progress, the film refuses to reward him with an elevated, heroic status, according to narrative conventions. In media interviews, we hear people speculating about what has happened to him. Various conspiracy theories hold that MNU or a foreign government has captured him. The film shows us his wife Tanya holding an artificial flower that she found on her doorstep, though she doesn’t believe it could be from him. Its final image is an alien crafting the same flower from a waste heap in District 9, implying that this is Wikus, still an alien outcast.

CODA: ELYSIUM

It would be impossible to end this chapter without mentioning Elysium, which Blomkamp made after the success of District 9, with a similar production set-up but now with a US$115 million budget and two Hollywood stars, Matt Damon and Jodie Foster. Its story is set in 2154 on an increasingly derelict and polluted Earth. In this future, Los Angeles has become a Third World city, filled with waste, poverty and a substantial Latino/a population. Everything here is grimy, weathered and dilapidated. Hospitals are overcrowded and underresourced. Everyone aspires to travel to Elysium, the wealthy elite’s space station, a shimmering double halo visible in the sky.

Elysium is another world, a pristine habitat where the wealthy are able to maintain their standard of living, enjoying luxury and longevity in large suburban homes with neat lawns and swimming pools, and attended upon by droid