

FILM REVIEW

Prawns from outer space



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEY CREATIVES

When insect-like aliens land on Earth, it's the humans who turn out to be the vilest creatures

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

For decades — at least since Orson Welles scared the daylights out of radio listeners with *War of the Worlds* back in 1938 — the public has embraced the terrifying prospect of alien invasion. But what if, notwithstanding the occasional humanist fable like *ET*, all those movies and television programs have been inculcating a potentially toxic form of interplanetary prejudice?

District 9, a smart, swift new film from the South African director Neill Blomkamp (who now lives in Canada and who wrote the screenplay with Terri Tatchell), raises such a possibility in part by inverting an axiomatic question of the UFO genre. In place of the usual mystery — what are they going to do to us? — this movie poses a different kind of hypothetical puzzle. What would we do to them? The answer, derived from intimate knowledge of how we have treated one another for centuries, is not pretty.

A busy opening flurry of mock-news images and talking-head documentary chin scratching fills in a grim, disturbingly plausible scenario. Back in the 1980s a giant spacecraft stalled in the skies over Johannesburg. On board were a large number of starving and disoriented creatures, who were rescued and placed in a temporary refugee camp in the part of the city that gives the film its title. Over the next 20 years the settlement became a teeming shantytown like so many others in the developing world, with the relatively minor distinction of being home to tall, skinny bipeds with insect-like faces and bodies that seem to combine biological and mechanical features. Though there is evidence that those extraterrestrials — known in derogatory slang as prawns because of their vaguely crustacean appearance — represent

an advanced civilization, their lives on Earth are marked by squalor and dysfunction. And they are viewed by South Africans of all races with suspicion, occasional pity and xenophobic hostility.

The South African setting hones the allegory of *District 9* to a sharp topical point. That country's history of apartheid and its continuing social problems are never mentioned, but they hardly need to be. And the film's implications extend far beyond the boundaries of a particular nation, which is taken as more or less representative of the planet as a whole.

No group, from the mostly white soldiers and bureaucrats who corral and abuse the prawns to the Nigerian gangsters who prey upon the aliens and exploit their addiction to cat food, is innocent. And casual bigotry turns out to be the least of the problems facing the exiles. As it progresses, *District 9* uncovers a horrific program of medical experimentation yoked to a near-genocidal agenda of corporate greed. A company called MNU (it stands, none too subtly, for Multi-National United) has taken over administration of the prawn population, which means resettling the aliens in a remote enclosure reminiscent of the Bantustans of the apartheid era.

The MNU executive charged with carrying out this program is Wikus van der Merwe (Sharlto Copley), a nervous nebbish whose father-in-law (Louis Minnaar) is the head of the company. Cowardly, preening and hopeless at projecting authority, Wikus is the kind of guy who gives nepotism a bad name. It says a lot about Blomkamp's sense of humor, and about his view of his own species, that this pathetic little paper pusher is his chosen agent of mankind's potential moral redemption.

But I'm getting ahead of the story, and perhaps overselling the allegory. Not that the metaphorical resonances of *District 9* aren't rich and thought provoking. But the filmmakers don't draw them out with a heavy, didactic hand. Instead, in the best B-movie tradition, they embed their ideas in an ingenious, propulsive and suspenseful genre entertainment, one that respects your intelligence even as it makes your eyes pop (and, once in a while, your stomach turn).

The early pseudo-documentary conceit, which uses footage that pretends to have been harvested from news choppers and security cameras as well as some by the unseen crew accompanying Wikus on his tour of the prawn camp, fades away after a while. The academic authorities do too, having served the dual functions of providing narrative exposition and demonstrating the high-minded uselessness of official liberal discourse.

Once a terrible accident befalls Wikus, we are at his side and under his skin, and *District 9* subtly shifts from speculative science fiction to zombie bio-horror and then, less subtly, turns into an escape-action-chase movie full of explosions, gunplay and vehicular mayhem.

In the midst of it all you almost take for granted the carefully rendered details of the setting, the tightness of the editing and the inventiveness of the special effects. Not the least of these are the aliens themselves, who are made expressive and soulful without quite being anthropomorphized. (Their whirring, clicking speech, partly understood by Wikus and others who work with the creatures, is translated for the rest of us via subtitles.)

One in particular, named Christopher Johnson (Jason Cope), becomes Wikus'

protector and ward, and their relationship turns *District 9*, in its final act, into an intergalactic buddy picture, with some intriguing (and also possibly disappointing) sequel opportunities left open.

At its core the film tells the story — hardly an unfamiliar one in the literature of modern South Africa — of how a member of the socially dominant group becomes aware of the injustice that keeps him in his place and the others, his designated inferiors, in theirs. The cost he pays for this knowledge is severe, as it must be, given the dreadful contours of the system. But if the film's view of the world is bleak, it is not quite nihilistic. It suggests that sometimes the only way to become fully human is to be completely alienated.

Film Notes

DISTRICT 9

DIRECTED BY:
NEILL BLOMKAMP

STARRING:
SHARLTO COPLEY (WIKUS), DAVID JAMES (KOOBUS), JASON COPE (CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON), VANESSA HAYWOOD (TANIA), LOUIS MINNAAR (PIET SMIT)

RUNNING TIME:
101 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

Evil lurks in the hearts of all

Michael Haneke's tale of malevolence happens in a small town in Germany, a country that was about to embark on two horrendous world wars

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Michael Haneke is a master of unease. He does not want to let audiences sit back with a sense of satisfaction or assurance that they know exactly what is going on. In *The White Ribbon* he keeps you on the edge of your seat, but no murderous psychopath jumps out with a hatchet. Indeed, this is a horror film with no shocks, just an overwhelming sense that evil is afoot in the land.

The White Ribbon is getting a relatively quiet release in Taiwan compared to the greater fanfare surrounding Haneke's English-language remake of *Funny Games*, which came out in 2007. This is partly because *The White Ribbon* will be screening in German, and also because of the absence of any recognizable Hollywood names. *Funny Games* was a heavy-handed polemic about our fascination with horror masquerading as a atmospheric thriller, and while the long-drawn-out torture and death of the main characters played by Naomi Watts and Tim Roth was unnerving, it was also relatively straightforward — bad people do ghastly things to, if not good, then at least normal people, and because it is a Michael Haneke film, they get away with it.



Nothing about *The White Ribbon* is straightforward, and it has aspirations that extend far beyond the rather self-referential cinematic concerns of *Funny Games*. Here we see Haneke taking on the big issues, looking in an oblique way at a German society that was about to embark on two horrendous world wars, and touching on the very nature of evil.

The film opens with the narrator telling us that he hopes to clarify events surrounding a number of strange incidents that happened in a small north German

town just before the outbreak of World War I. The story he tells skillfully avoids clarifying anything at all, as every hint at what might actually be happening opens up an abyss of new questions.

A doctor is unhorsed by a wire strung across his path, the young son of the local lord is strung up and beaten and a mentally retarded child is savagely tortured, crops are willfully destroyed, a farm worker is killed in unexplained circumstances. These seemingly random incidents appear to have a common source, and while the culprits are indirectly identified

at the end, Haneke suggests that everyone, to a greater or lesser extent, is to blame.

There are more than 30 named characters in the film, a huge ensemble cast who uniformly turn in fine performances. The intricacies of the plot are too complex and too open-ended to bear recounting here, but suffice to say that attempts to understand these bizarre incidents reveal a society that is ready to tear itself apart through a mixture of envy, greed, religious hypocrisy, malice and fear.

The mood of the film bears

Film Notes

THE WHITE RIBBON (DAS WEISSE BAND)

DIRECTED BY:
MICHAEL HANEKE

STARRING:
CHRISTIAN FRIEDEL (SCHOOL TEACHER), ERNST JACOBI (SCHOOL TEACHER, VOICE), LEONIE BENESCH (EVA), ULRICH TUKUR (BARON), URSINA LARDI (BARONESS), BURGHART KLAUSSNER (PASTOR), STEFFI KUHNERT (PASTOR'S WIFE), MARIA-VICTORIA DRAGUS (KLARA), LEONARD PROXAUF (MARTIN)

RUNNING TIME:
144 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN GERMAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

comparison with the religious-based horror of *The Omen*, and of science fiction horror such as *Village of the Damned*, but we soon realize that Haneke has no need for either

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Summer Times

(夏天協奏曲)



A squeaky-clean love story filmed on Kinmen and subsidized by the Kinmen County Government? Buyer beware. A local lad (Bryant Chang, 張睿家) meets a pretty young pianist (Shara Lin, 林逸欣) on holiday — not just any budding young pianist, mind you, but a contest blitzer — and falls in love like any number of besotted puppies. Pity for him that she doesn't live there. What's remarkable about this scenario is that despite the travelogue opportunities, a chunk of time is apparently spent on our lovebirds using e-mail, instant messaging, cellphone cameras and other IT applications. Could subsidies also have come from communications firms in exchange for distracting product placement? Plonk down your money and find out.

Case 39



Renee Zellweger is a family services officer who gets way too close to the subject of "Case 39" — a little girl apparently at grave risk of harm from her own parents. Now why would parents want to do such a thing? (Ask Gregory Peck). Zellweger, her colleagues and other clients end up on the receiving end of all sorts of supernatural violence and shock therapy. Finally enjoying worldwide theatrical release after an eternity in limbo, this feature is from the director of *Pandorum*, which opened here only a few weeks ago.

The Fourth Kind



A titular reference to Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and some overlap with the vastly more successful *Paranormal Activity* (opening here in two weeks) seem to be trying to pull in at least two generations of moviegoers. Milla Jovovich (*Resident Evil*) is presumably meant to pull in all the rest of the fanboys. In this pseudo-documentary she plays a "real life" psychiatrist who revisits shielded memories to discover that something extra-terrestrial may have played havoc with her ill-fated loved ones. All hell then breaks loose when the forgotten visitors start visiting others in Jovovich's professional clique (she obviously never saw *Case 39*). Few critics got into the spirit of this derivative effort.

Ninja Assassin



Korean heartthrob Rain has come a long way. A few years ago his face appeared in local convenience stores in advertisements for skin care products. Now, in *Ninja Assassin*, he would rather slice the skin from your face with pieces of sharp metal. He plays a trained ninja who comes to the rescue of a pesky investigator (Naomie Harris) targeted for termination by the criminal group she is probing — and which happens to be the same group that gave him his fighting skills. Body parts cover the screen as the plot develops. Gone are the days when Tom Savini might have received a special effects credit for such bloodletting; most of the slaughter comes courtesy of sterile computer effects. From the director of *V for Vendetta* and the producers of the *Matrix* trilogy.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS FILMS

Beelzebub or aliens to explain evil. In *The White Ribbon* evil lurks in the hearts of all.

The constraints of a deeply conservative society push characters into acts of physical violence and mental cruelty. What applies between the adults can be seen to have a heightened effect on the children, whose viciousness is rarely seen, but is constantly implied from the thin facade of innocence they put on. We see the psyche of the children being molded by the hypocrisy of their parents, and a twisted moral code

in which a white ribbon, a symbol of innocence and purity, becomes a badge of shame for errant children. As with Haneke's other films, most of the violence occurs off screen, but more often than not, this just makes it all the more horrendous.

With its wide concerns, its formal rigor, the sumptuousness of the black-and-white cinematography, and the sense of horror that it evokes from small actions of willful children and narrow-minded adults, *The White Ribbon* is one of the best films to open here this year.