

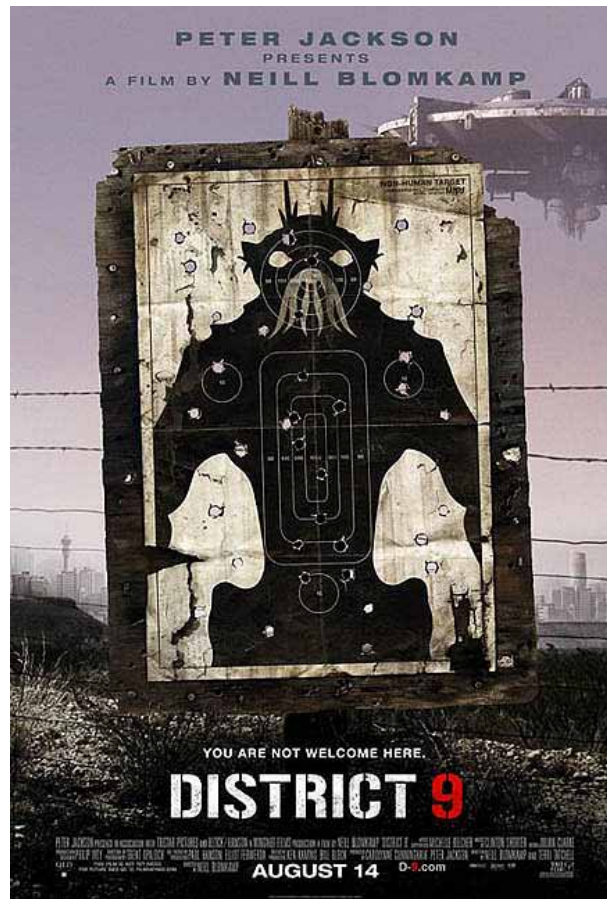
THE USES OF 'EX-CENTRICITY': COOL REFLECTIONS FROM HOT PLACES

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Inspired by District 9, a sci-fi movie set in South Africa, Jean Comaroff argues for the analytical power of estrangement and defamiliarisation, and the importance of ex-centric perspectives in any quest for critical self-understanding.

In the summer of 2009, movie-goers across the world were captivated by a surprising blockbuster, a relatively low-budget film from the Global South. As a bemused Mike Ryan wrote in *Starpulse Entertainment News*, *District 9*, which on the face of it was just another tired “Man Versus Scary Alien” story, had no business being a great picture, let alone an allegory of our time. This hot item arrived like a blast from somewhere else, from a peripheral place we seldom associate with the cultural cutting-edge. A giant space ship appears over Johannesburg, South Africa. Its sizeable, starving population is brought down to earth with the help of humanitarian sympathizers from across the globe. But the do-gooders lose interest, leaving the impoverished aliens to fend for themselves in an urban slum, exploited by organized crime and threatened by the xenophobia of their human neighbors, who refer to the crustacean-like strangers as “prawns.” The drama begins when the state hires a private military corporation to relocate the aliens to a refugee camp beyond the



Poster for the film *District 9*

city. Each is served with an eviction notice that seeks signed consent to his or her own dispossession.

Hailed by Lisa Schwartzbaum in *Entertainment Weekly* as “madly original, cheekily political, and altogether exciting”, the film has garnered great praise for making a high-tech thriller speak poignantly of some of the paradoxes of our late modern world, a world of porous frontiers and abject refugees, of expansive but inconstant humanitarian sympathy;

of anxieties about borders and strangers that grow in proportion to global integration. Sci-fi and action movie nerds have delighted in the film’s many references to classics of the genre – from *Alien* and *Blade Runner* to *RoboCop* and *Terminator 2*. More serious minds, on the other hand, might accuse me of invoking something too trivial, too ephemeral for serious intellectual consideration. But I would argue that the film exemplifies an enduring feature of “enlightenment” in its broadest sense: the importance of estrangement from received wisdom and reigning pieties in the way we interrogate the human condition. Estrangement is a necessary component of the production of new, questioning insight into the familiar and the taken-for-granted. It is the cornerstone of critical thinking of all kinds.

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There have been many champions of alienation as a route to enlightenment. The Russian Formalists referred to it as “defamiliarization”; the dramatist, Bertold Brecht, Frederick Jameson reminds us, called it the “estrangement effect”. As an orientation, it draws on a productive paradox at the heart of the concept of alienation itself: a simultaneous quality of dislocation and demystification, the kind of unsettling discrepancy that W.E.B. Du Bois dubbed “double consciousness,” and that Edward Said saw as the positive effect of exile. It is this same illuminating displacement that anthropologists pursue in making sense of the meaning of social and cultural phenomena across the lines of radical difference in space and time.

The unsettling impact of *District 9*, then, stems from the fact that it estranges us in a double sense, offering “other worldly” insight of two distinct, but not unrelated kinds. The first is the critical dislocation of the extraterrestrial. The second the instructive disorientation that comes of looking at our own world from what, following Homi Bhabha, I would term an ex-centric location, a place beyond the traditional heartland of Euro-America.

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In its twin ex-centricities, *District 9* invites comparison with that classic work of alien fiction-as-critique, H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* (1898), about a Martian invasion of imperial London. In 1953, a movie version would relocate it to Los Angeles, center of a new kind of empire, that of global image production. Well’s original aliens prefigured the hapless postcolonial “prawns” in several ways: they, too, had what Wells described as “Gorgon groups of tentacles,” with which they gesticulated as they grunted in communication. But Wells was also writing in the shadow of Darwin. His aliens were less abject refugees than superior beings from what he termed a “cooler world.” Possessed of highly evolved brains and bodies they viewed humans as an inferior, expendable species. Wells meant his tale not merely as a jolt to what Peter Fitting terms the “complacency of his contemporaries,” but also as a commentary on the nature of colonial conquest. In its opening pages, he notes that the Martian disdain for lowlier, more earth-bound forms of life could be likened to the



Alien tripod illustration by Alvim Corrêa, from the 1906 French edition of H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds*.
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wars of extermination waged by European invaders on peoples whom they judged racially inferior: the aboriginals of Tasmania, for example. This critique, clothed in extraterrestrial allegory, was one of the earliest, most unflinching denunciations of the violence of British imperialism. Sci-fi at its best, says Darko Suvin, veteran scholar of the genre, is about seeing what is hidden “yet [is] advancing upon us.”

War of the Worlds was clairvoyant in another way relevant to my theme here. It was also a story of “first contact,” of a consequential first meeting be-

tween humans and aliens. At the time of its writing, it invoked European voyages of discovery, and expanding colonial frontiers in Africa and India, where encounters with “others” provided the foil against which a distinctive sense of “Western” civilization took shape. This was also the era in which anthropology, the science of human being in the world, was first gaining recognition. In its founding years, the discipline focused chiefly on the comparative study of other, often radically different cultures, those at the margins of the great European empires. It set out to catalogue the broad range of human social and physical variation, with the aim, as Clifford Geertz would put it in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, of enlarging “the universe of human discourse.” But its ex-centric method ensured it another, more subversive role: that of nudging the metropole into critical forms of *self*-discovery. By throwing a skeptical, relativizing light on the axiomatic truths and established institutions of the European heartland, it cast a shadow of doubt upon them, making clear that they were, in fact, particular to their time and place: that they were *not* the indisputable end-point of all social evolution, of the search for universal truth. In the manner of H.G. Wells, anthropologists gave graphic account of different ways of organizing human society or defining the value and the purposes of life. They challenged us to reflect – as alien visitors might – on our priorities, principles, and precepts, on the organization of our economic and educational systems, on our family lives, our modes of government and our health care.

Like *District 9* and *War of the Worlds*, in short, the ex-centric perspective of anthropology has long prompted us to see ourselves in defamiliarized light. A famous example speaks of another kind of alien

in Africa, immortalized in the volume, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, published by Edward Evans-Pritchard in 1937. This work explores the Zande faith in witches, raising questions about the ways in which unquestioned truths – paradigms, if you will – are maintained by communities of believers against the onslaught of doubt and disproof. Witchcraft provides an explanation for why it is that “bad things happen to good people.” It attributes misfortune, be it illness or loss of wealth, to the ill-will or jealousy of others. Evans-Pritchard was concerned to explain how ideas so obviously fallacious to the European mind might retain plausibility among an otherwise canny and skeptical African people. The Azande, he insisted, reasoned from evidence in a fully empirical manner. But they did so in such a way as to protect their core assumptions from being refuted – this by a process of “secondary elaboration” that discounted evidence which undermined their entrenched assumptions.

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Evans-Pritchard’s account of the triumph of African witches over disbelief was to have a signal impact on the manner in which philosophers came to think about Western thought itself. One, the Hungarian-British Michael Polanyi – note how many boundary-crossing scholars have themselves been aliens – found the account of Zande reasoning highly suggestive. He saw in it a model for the way in which “tacit awareness,” the kind of knowledge that Pierre Bourdieu suggests “goes without saying because it comes without saying,” is perpetuated in spite of counter-experience and disproof. His



Book cover by Troy Thayne for *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. Public Domain.

work anticipated Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, often named one of the most influential books of the late Twentieth Century. Kuhn famously posited that, in the everyday practice of “normal science,” researchers tend to protect theoretical paradigms in which they have vested their faith by discounting as “mistakes” those data that seem to refute their hypothesis. They engage, in other words, in precisely the same forms of secondary elaboration as do the Zande in justifying the existence of witches.

If the Zande occult unsettled home-truths about the workings of empirical reason, the extra-terrestrials in *District 9* breach boundaries of a different sort. They raise questions about why it is that borders and aliens have become such an overriding pre-

occupation – not merely in ex-centric places, but everywhere nowadays. The United States, for instance, is famously a nation built by naturalizing strangers. Yet strangers have become an unnatural source of anxiety for Americans. The movie urges us to ask why, in an era that has seen the ever more global flow of goods, images, currency, and knowledge, the migration of human beings should be a matter of hyper-ambivalence; why international frontiers are such sensitive sites of dis-ease about security; why they should be the object of contradictory efforts to ensure their openness, thus to facilitate the free passage of capital and commodities, *and* their closure, to protect national polities from the loss of scarce jobs and the unrestricted inflow of undesirable people; why, also, the meaning of identity, belonging, and citizenship should pose such urgent challenges in everyday life and in scholarship; why global efforts to protect the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers should exist alongside xenophobia and the abuse of aliens. It urges us to understand why it is that the treatment of strangers emerges as a yardstick of universal human rights and social justice. *District 9*, like anthropology, makes plain that what is happening most evidently in ex-centric places teaches us not about aliens, but about ourselves, about our world, about its contradictions. Those faraway places, in other worlds, pre-figure in many ways what we ourselves are becoming. More than this, the history of the modern world, sometimes stranger than the best science fiction, shows all too often how circumstances can make the most secure of us into aliens.

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The point of ex-centric visions, in conclusion, is to make sense of the present and future of our world by means of the act of critical estrangement. In this respect, travel certainly broadens the mind; the many American students who join “study abroad” programs each year learn a great deal – most of all, about how others view the United States. But estrangement is ultimately an attitude, one that should permit us productively to ‘go elsewhere’ without actually leaving home: it enables creative double-consciousness, both detachment and engagement; it facilitates an ex-centric relationship with the world, both the world of others, and the world which we call our own.

This essay was redacted from an address to the Autumn Commencement at the University of Chicago, 2009.