

3. The influence of pop culture on racism

In the vibrant tapestry of South African society, pop culture it serves as a mirror that reflects the group mind. At the heart of this lies the issue of racism, deeply rooted in our country's history and continually evolving in its current signs. Pop culture, including the ideas, practices, beliefs, and objects that dominate society at a given time, plays an important role in either maintaining or challenging racist ideologies. This essay explores the intricate relationship between pop culture and racism in South Africa through the lens of two contrasting films: "Zulu" (1964) and "District 9" (2009)

Racism, basically, is a system of advantage based on race. It involves the belief that certain races are naturally superior or inferior to others, leading to prejudice, discrimination, and inequalities. In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid has left deep scars on the communities, making the examination of racist attitudes and their representation in pop culture particularly relevant. Pop culture, as a shaper of societal norms, has the power to either reinforce or challenge these racist ideologies.

The link between pop culture and racism is varied. On one hand, pop culture can keep alive stereotypes and racist attitudes by presenting oversimplified or negative portrayals of certain racial groups. On the other hand, it has the potential to challenge these very stereotypes by offering more elaborate and positive representations. In the South African context, this dynamic is particularly complex, given the country's history of racial segregation and the ongoing process of reconciliation and nation-building.

"Zulu," directed by Cy End field and released in 1964, offers a perspective on race relations deeply rooted in the colonial mind-set. The film depicts the Battle of Rorke's Drift in 1879, where a small group of British soldiers defended their garrison against an attack by thousands of Zulu warriors. While celebrated for its cinematography and performances, "Zulu" presents a problematic portrayal of Black South Africans that shows the racial attitudes of its time. In "Zulu," the Zulu people are portrayed as a faceless, threatening mass. They are shown as primitive warriors, their humanity often masked by the film's focus on their military might and perceived savagery. This portrayal reinforces colonial stereotypes of African people as uncivilized and dangerous. As film critic Peter Bradshaw notes, "The film's portrayal of the Zulus is very much of its time: they are nameless, faceless, ruthless killers" (The Guardian, 2014).

The symbolism of "Zulu" is strongly oriented towards a colonial perspective. The British soldiers are presented as the bastion of civilization, their uniforms and firearms symbols of progress and order. In contrast, the traditional dress and weapons of the Zulu warriors are portrayed as primitive, reinforcing the notion of a clash between civilization and savagery. This serves to justify colonial rule and the supposed superiority of European culture.

The film's narrative prioritizes the experiences and perspectives of the British soldiers. The Zulu characters are given minimal dialogue and character development, showing them as 'the other' – a group threat to be overcome rather than individuals with their own motivations. This narrative reflects and reinforces the racist ideologies of the time, which denied the full humanity and individuality of African people.

However, it's important to note that "Zulu" was not universally accepted even at the time of its release. In South Africa, the film was initially banned by the apartheid government, ironically because it showed Black and white soldiers fighting alongside each other, which contradicted the regime's segregationist policies. This ban highlights the complex relationship between pop culture and political ideologies in shaping public perceptions of race. In stark contrast to "Zulu," Neill Blomkamp's "District 9," released in 2009, offers a radically different perspective on race relations in South Africa. While "Zulu" is set in the colonial past, "District 9" uses the genre of science fiction to comment on contemporary issues of xenophobia, segregation, and human rights in post-apartheid South Africa.

"District 9" tells the story of an alien species, insultingly called "prawns," who arrive on Earth and are confined to a slum-like compound in Johannesburg. The film serves as an illustration for South Africa's apartheid history and its ongoing struggles with xenophobia and discrimination. As Blomkamp himself stated, "The film is meant to speak about segregation and xenophobia and oppression. And Johannesburg is the right place to do that" (Empire Magazine, 2009). The portrayal of the aliens in "District 9" undoes the typical Hollywood trope of technologically advanced, threatening extra-terrestrials. Instead, they are presented as refugees, living in squalor and subject to exploitation and abuse by humans. This portrayal serves as a powerful metaphor for the treatment of marginalized groups in South Africa and around the world. The film forces viewers to confront their own prejudices and question the basis of discrimination.

The symbolism in "District 9" is rich and multifaceted. The segregated alien compound mirrors the forced removals and township systems of apartheid-era South Africa. The transformation of the protagonist, Wikus van de Merwe, from a bumbling bureaucrat to a hybrid being hunted by his own people, serves as a powerful narrative device. It allows the audience to experience the shift from oppressor to oppressed, challenging viewers to empathize with the 'other.' Unlike "Zulu," which presents a largely one-sided narrative, "District 9" offers a more intricate exploration of its characters, both human and alien. The film gives voice to the oppressed, allowing the aliens to express their desires, fears, and humanity. This approach challenges the dehumanization often present in racist ideologies and pop culture representations.

The use of documentary-style footage in parts of "District 9" adds another layer to its commentary on racism and pop culture. By mimicking the style of news reports and interviews, the film highlights how media representations can shape public perceptions of marginalized groups. It serves as a review of how pop culture and news media can perpetuate stereotypes and justify oppression. The contrast between "Zulu" and "District 9" in their portrayal of Black people and other marginalized groups is clear. While "Zulu" largely reinforces colonial stereotypes, presenting Black South Africans as a threatening mass, "District 9" challenges viewers to see beyond differences and recognize the humanity in the 'other.' The aliens in

"District 9," despite their non-human appearance, are filled with individual personalities, desires, and rights – a stark contrast to the largely faceless Zulu warriors in the 1964 film.

However, it's important to note that "District 9" is not without its own controversies. Some critics have pointed out that the film's Nigerian characters are portrayed in a stereotypical and negative light, reinforcing other forms of xenophobia. This criticism highlights the complexity of addressing racism in pop culture.

The evolution from "Zulu" to "District 9" reflects broader changes in South African society and global attitudes towards race. While "Zulu" was produced during the height of apartheid, reflecting and reinforcing the racial ideologies of the time, "District 9" came out in a post-apartheid context, wrestling with the legacy of segregation and the challenges of building a truly inclusive society. The shift in perspective between these two films also shows the changing role of pop culture in addressing racism. While earlier works like "Zulu" reflected societal racism, more recent pop culture productions like "District 9" critique racist ideologies. This shift represents a growing awareness of the power of pop culture to shape societal attitudes and the responsibility of creators to challenge rather than reinforce prejudice.

Moreover, the contrast between these films highlights the evolving nature of racism itself. This evolution mirrors the way racism has transformed in many societies from overt discrimination to more subtle, systemic forms of oppression. The reception and impact of these films also offer insights into the relationship between pop culture and racism. The ongoing popularity of this topic raises questions about how societies manage the blending of artistic expression and racist imagery, as well as how pop culture can be influenced by historical events. Its success demonstrates the appetite for pop culture that engages meaningfully with issues of race and discrimination.

In conclusion, the examination of "Zulu" and "District 9" reveals the complex and evolving relationship between pop culture and racism in South Africa and beyond. These films, produced 45 years apart, offer a window into changing attitudes towards race and the role of pop culture in shaping these attitudes. While "Zulu" largely reinforces colonial stereotypes and racist ideologies, "District 9" challenges viewers to confront their prejudices and empathize with the 'other.' The contrast between these films stresses the potential of pop culture to either continue or challenge racist ideologies. As a mirror of society, pop culture reflects existing attitudes towards race. But it also has the power to shape these attitudes, challenging stereotypes and promoting more inclusive perspectives. Pop culture can move from an uncritical reflection of societal racism to critique and subversion of racist ideology. As South Africa and the world continue to grapple with issues of race and discrimination, pop culture will undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and attitudes. The power of films, television shows, music, and other forms of pop culture to influence perceptions of race cannot be underestimated. As such, it is crucial for both creators and consumers of pop culture to engage critically with these works, questioning the representations they see and the ideologies they promote.

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