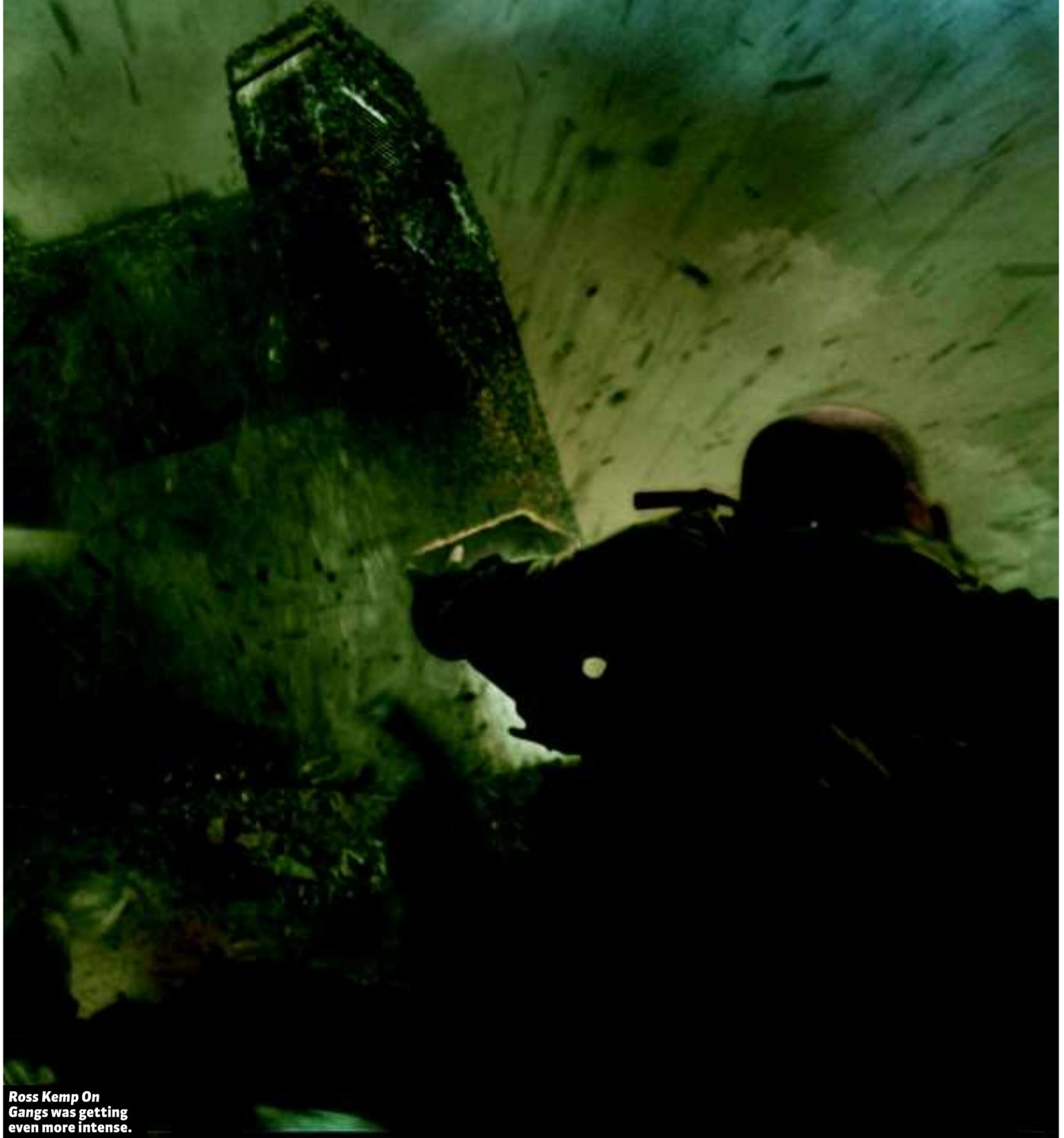


SCREEN

EVERY NEW MOVIE REVIEWED & RATED

★★★★★ OUTSTANDING ★★★★★ VERY GOOD ★★★ GOOD ★★ DISAPPOINTING ★ RUBBISH



Ross Kemp On
Gangs was getting
even more intense.

District 9

★★★★★ Science-fiction enters fresh territory...

OUT 4 SEPTEMBER Born out of the ashes of *Halo*, *District 9* flies in under the late-summer radar as a fascinating sci-fi specimen, wielding a South African based story about extra-terrestrial refugees forced to live in barbed-wire slums under the watchful eye of a sinister conglomerate called Multi-National United (MNU). It may have sparked to life as a project to ease Jackson's guilty conscience (for picking newbie Neill Blomkamp to direct *Halo*, only to watch the \$145m videogame adaptation go up in smoke), but the *Lord Of The Rings* man's support for the debut filmmaker allowed Blomkamp to make the film he wanted – namely, an expansion of his own 2005 short *Alive In Joburg*. Everyone's a winner: his vision contains traces of classic sci-fi (*Aliens*, *RoboCop*, *E.T.* – *District 9*'s aliens want to go home, too) but it's mainly a fantastically inventive piece of work, told through a guerrilla-style mash-up of video footage, corporate promos, news bulletins and traditional narrative.

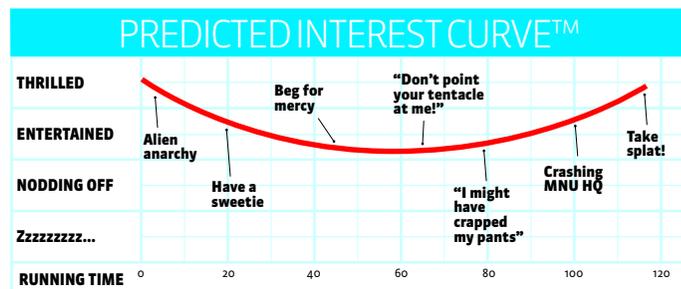
As early exposition reveals, the "prawns" – a derogatory epithet for the stranded ETs – came to a standstill in their spacecraft 20 years ago, hovering over the post-Apartheid tinderbox of Johannesburg. Such a move gives

(Sharlto Copley) that we witness the attempted alien eviction and subsequent spiralling events. A smarmy pencil-pusher in sleeveless knitwear, Wikus is an amusing bumbler but also a nasty creep who laughs at the popping sounds prawn pupae make as a flamethrower roasts them alive. In a cast of unknowns, he's the stand-out, bringing a relentless energy to his character that's edge-of-the-seat compelling. He also gets the most intriguing arc, the oppressor becoming the oppressed when he inhales some alien goo and starts turning into one of them. Forced to hide in the ghetto, he encounters prawn-with-a-plan Christopher Johnson and his cute, buggy son, Little CJ – and suddenly *District 9* cleverly shifts into a moving father-son story that, melded with Wikus' own horrific, Brundle-prawn journey, gives a soulful, heart-tugging purpose to all the mayhem.

"Peter Jackson Presents..." is our intro to *District 9*, and his splat-stick background can be felt throughout the film, from squelchy sound effects to gooey, exploding humans. But it's Blomkamp's stamp that's imprinted on every frame of this stunning debut, heralding the arrival of an exciting new action-cinema voice who can explore

topics like alienation, racism, vivisection and African mysticism without getting preachy for even a nanosecond. For all the political allegory, though, this is primarily a cracking sci-fi thriller, particularly in its frenzied third act when the beasties' super-cool weaponry (which only works with their DNA) comes into play, including a *RoboCop*-esque exo-suit that fuels the sadistic, orgiastic climax.

No, it's not flawless. There are supposed to be 1.8m of the critters teeming around *District 9*. But this being a \$30m blockbuster as opposed to a \$130m one, we don't usually see more than a few on screen at any one time, which disappoints. There's also a pace-dip in the mid-section, not helped by Blomkamp switching from guerrilla to old-fashioned camerawork. You could also argue that, come the end credits, he leaves too many mysteries unsolved. But it's a deliberate ploy, Blomkamp leaving the door wide open for an eagerly welcomed sequel. Funny: you wait years for a quality sci-fi tale to show up, then two beam down in the same season. Courtesy of Duncan Jones (*Moon*) and Blomkamp, the genre's giving us hope for the future again. **Matt Mueller**



Blomkamp licence to reflect incisively on recent South African history under the guise of his alien-segregation story. *District 9*'s alien township is essentially Soweto in the '80s, a subjugated and demoralised tin-shack shantytown ruled by anarchy, chaos and gang violence. Redneck Afrikaners as MNU's trigger-happy guards, the creepy occult practices of muti (South African black magic) and poor blacks spitting xenophobic abuse at the creatures in their midst: this is Blomkamp putting the city of his youth (he emigrated to Canada when he was 17) under a harsh, unflattering microscope. The historical resonances only enhance the film's blazing neo-realism, as does the dizzying, docu-style camerawork that propels the opening salvo and closing onslaught.

As for the interstellar visitors themselves... Underfed and unruly, with a taste for rubber tyres, setting fires and killing humans, they're like Joe Dante's *Gremlins* writ large, only without any conscious intent (part of *District 9*'s untold back story is that they're drones whose queen has died off, leaving them aimless). The first alien words translated on screen are "Fuck off!" and it's downhill from there.

It's no wonder they're so ill-tempered: they're due to be forcibly moved 200 kilometres south of Joburg into the concentration-camp-like *District 10*. It's through the eyes of MNU field operative Wikus Van Der Merwe

IN SHORT Whisking together raw docu-stylings, smart social commentary and wacky, insectoid aliens, Blomkamp has delivered a true original. Missing the thrill of brave, new, brilliantly realised sci-fi? Then don't miss the *No 9*...

CERTIFICATE 15
DIRECTOR Neill Blomkamp
STARRING Sharlto Copley, Jason Cope, David James, Vanessa Haywood, Sylvaine Strike
SCREENPLAY Neill Blomkamp, Terri Tatchell
DISTRIBUTOR Sony
RUNNING TIME 112 mins

Blomkamp's debut heralds the arrival of an exciting new action-cinema voice

SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED...

ALIENS (1986)
Angry space-fiends swarm together to kill off grunts and corporate creeps in Cameron's classic sci-fi.

TSOTSIS (2005)
The dark heart of Johannesburg – violent crime, rich vs poor – beats loudly in Gavin Hood's Oscar winner.

CLOVERFIELD (2008)
Subtext-a-go-go as NY's munched by a giant monster, recorded on shaky-cam for posterity.

 **For full reviews of these films and thousands more movies visit totalfilm.com/cinema_reviews**