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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

District 9 was a 2009 science fiction film set in Johannesburg, South Africa, which showed the relationship between humans and aliens. The movie tackled many prevalent issues, with one of the main ones being racism. This was manifested through themes such as white supremacy, racial segregation and discrimination. The movie has sparked much debate over its message and symbolism, with many believing it to be a metaphor of the divide between the whites and the blacks. As such, this study aims to analyze how the theme of racism is portrayed throughout District 9, by applying the Critical Race Theory and the Race Conflict Theory.

1.2 Rationale

In the digital age where we are surrounded and molded by the media, one of the most popular forms of media would be movies. Movies have extensive outreach, reaching people all around the world and spreading their message to a wide audience. District 9 is no exception, and being a blockbuster film, it has an even greater influence. Since the film centers around race, which is a sensitive issue, it is important that we have a proper understanding of its message so that conflicts would not arise due to misconceptions. As such, this study aims to understand the portrayal of racism in the movie, and thus educate others about the proper message that the movie is trying to convey about racism to avoid misinterpretations of the movie.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do the social, political and economic forces influence racism in District 9 and how are they shown through the features of the film?

2. How is racism portrayed through the way the government and the "superior race" treat the aliens?

3. How does Wikus' outlook on race and racism change as he transforms from a human to an alien and struggles with his racial identity?

1.4 Thesis Statement

Racism would be evident in the way the aliens are treated by the humans and will mainly be affected by the social and political forces in the films.

1.5 Scope of Research

This study will only be focusing on analyzing one movie, District 9 (2009), as it would be inaccurate to compare multiple movies without some common criteria. Moreover, a deeper analysis will only be done for the more significant scenes, such as the eviction of the aliens, so not every scene in the movie will be covered in this paper. In addition, since the concept of racism is very broad, this study will only be focusing on some aspects such as white supremacy, racial discrimination and racial identity, as they are the more prominent themes.

1.6 Significance of Research:

This paper would help add to the field of research in the portrayal of racism in films, and could help others to identify the different ways racism is present in different types of media by comparing it with other similar studies. This paper would also help people to better understand the message behind District 9, preventing any misunderstandings or conflicts from arising.

1.7 Limitations:

Since only one movie will be analyzed, the results cannot be representative of the general outlook towards racism at that time, as there are no other proper sources for them to cross reference and compare. Moreover, since this study is only focusing on certain aspects of racism, it will not be able to analyze all the different types of racism that may be present in District 9. Thus, the topic of racism cannot be fully investigated as it would be impossible to make a study of all forms of discrimination against different races and different ethnic groups.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Critical Race Theory

While there is no unchanging definition of the core tenets in Critical Race Theory (CRT), most theorists, including founding figures such as Derrick Bell, propose two main ideas, which are largely based on social constructionism and critical theory. (Pulliam, 2017) Firstly, the CRT proposes that white supremacy and racial power are maintained over time, and that they could be significantly affected by the law. (Mohamed, 2012) Secondly, it proposes that “race” itself is a social construct rather than a biological one (Crenshaw, 1991), and that “racial difference” is created, perpetuated and reinforced by society. (Gillborn, 2015) As such, racism is seen to be a complex and flexible concept that manifests differently depending on the societal context, and racial identity is presented as constructed and malleable, usually depending on skin colour. (Leonardo, 2009) When applying it using the CRT lens, it focuses on the link between the cultural backgrounds of ethnic minorities and their experiential knowledge in relation to racial relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), thus identifying the ways race and racism can directly and indirectly affect them. (Yosso, 2005) It can then be applied as a framework to theorize, examine and challenge the impacts racial concepts have on social structures, practices and discourses.

2.2 Key Tenets of Critical Race Theory

The practical application of CRT in analysis typically involves creating rubrics based on its theoretical framework, which are guided by the key tenets of CRT. In this study, the analysis will be based around two main ideas:

2.2.1 Subconscious Racism

Racism has become a social norm, and is no longer viewed as aberrational. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) This means that racism is naturally manifested in our daily lives, thus becoming a normalized way of organising society. It can be seen most clearly through white supremacy. CRT states that social constructs of race were created by the whites for their own benefits, and while many whites view racism as a thing of the past, it has simply taken on a different form. (Sleeter, 2012) However, they usually do not notice these racial disparities due to an innate belief in their superiority and social norms. (Bowman, Rocco, Peterson & Adker, 2009) This subconscious acceptance of racism makes it difficult to address or cure as it is not acknowledged. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) As such, CRT then questions why racism persists despite it being supposedly ameliorated. (Sleeter, 2012)

2.2.2 Challenging Neutrality

CRT challenges claims of neutrality, especially that of the law, which is supposed to be impartial and neutral regardless of race or other demographic identities. (Sleeter, 2012) Despite this, there are many instances where their neutrality faltered, even at the level of international law. As such, the CRT questions whether the law is truly neutral, and instead calls it a front for masking white privileges and power. (Jenkins, 2016) However, it can also be argued that it is impossible for the law to be value-neutral in the first place, as legal rules would always reflect the moral character and views of those that set them. (Smith, 2011)

2.3 Race Conflict Theory

The Race Conflict Theory (RCT) has its roots in Conflict Theory, which was originally postulated by Karl Marx. He believed that conflict was the driving force of social life, and that there would always be fundamental conflicts between different societal groups. (Wieviorka, 2010) This is due to unequal distribution of scarce resources, as well as the Weberian three-

component theory of stratification, which involves class, status and power. (Dahrendorf, 2006) However, these conflicts are viewed as necessary as it would eventually lead to a balance of interests, thus producing order in society. (Rummel, 1976) RCT is the specific application of Conflict Theory in investigating racism and is most commonly used to investigate power disparities and struggles between various ethnic and racial groups.

2.4 Subsets of Race Conflict Theory

In this paper, the analysis will be focusing on three subsets of RCT. They are:

2.4.1 Racial Identity

Racial Identity Theory proposes that people view the world according to how they perceive themselves and others based on race, and seeks to discover how individuals come to identify themselves as different races. (Thompson & Carter, 2013) This can be done through analyzing the different stages of racial identity development, which differs for people of different races. (Tatum, 1992) One such example would be Helm's White Racial Identity Model. (Helms, 1992) Another important concept is Du Bois' idea of double-consciousness, which states that there are two competing identities which try to create a character that would be accepted into mainstream society. (Cook, 2014) This can lead to internal conflict as living as a member of a non-dominant race creates a fracture in your sense of identity within that society.

2.4.2 Racial Formation

Racial Formation Theory was put forth by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who called it "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed". (Omi & Winant, 1994) This means that it seeks to identify how social, political

and economic forces influence how a society defines racial categories and how those racial categories then end up shaping those forces, trapping them in a vicious cycle. Only by addressing this issue can we understand the ways that racial groups are structured and the sociohistorical significance of racial oppression and inequality. (Feagin & Elias, 2013)

2.4.3 Racial Politics

Studying racial politics investigates how race is intertwined with political power and the institutional structures within society. These are constantly changing as dominant ideologies and political leaders will be challenged by those who want to redefine and eventually overturn the existing racial order, until they eventually succeed. (Doane, 2006) As such, studying racial politics would help identify the reasons and the effects of this relationship on society. This relationship between society and racism may not be glaringly obvious but may instead be subtle due to the concept of “racism without racists” introduced by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, which believes that while explicitly racist views have become less acceptable in our modern society, structural racism is still present. (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) Structural racism is defined as the normalization and legitimization of practices that usually favor the whites and disadvantage the people of colour. (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004) This kind of white supremacy that is entrenched in political and legal structures still hinders the progress of racial minorities, which could lead to forms of retaliation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Data will be collected through the selection of prominent scenes from the movie, particularly the ones where the audio and visual portrayal of racism is more obvious, such as the scene of the eviction of the aliens from the slum. These scenes will then be analyzed using the Critical Race Theory and the Race Conflict Theory, by identifying key aspects and characteristics of the theories that are present in the movie's portrayal of racism. Through the application of Critical Race Theory, the analysis will be looking at scenes where racism has become a social norm, and where the law and the government play a role in enforcing racism as well. In addition, based on the Race Conflict Theory, scenes will also be analyzed if they show how the characters struggle with racial identity, how the social and economic forces influence the perception of racism, and how race is intertwined with political power. By identifying these characteristics of the film, the three main research questions can then be answered, thus allowing a conclusion to be drawn.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Overview

In this analysis, the selected scenes have been separated into three categories for easier understanding, namely the people's treatment towards the aliens, the government's treatment towards the aliens, and the evolution of the main character, Wikus van de Merwe's outlook on race and racism.

4.2 The People's Treatment Towards the Aliens

Racism can be defined as behavior that uses difference in skin color or appearance as “the basis of assumed inferiority and as a justification for less favorable treatment, whether through verbal or physical abuse”. (Platt, 2008) This is also known as racial harassment, which is evident throughout the film in the way the aliens are treated by the people. In the film, the aliens arrive in a spaceship that hovers over Johannesburg, a city in South Africa. The aliens are badly malnourished and weakened, so the government relocates them into an area known as District 9, a slum-like home located on the outskirts of Johannesburg. As such, the residents there are forced to live with the aliens, leading to much dissatisfaction among the humans. This resentment towards the aliens is manifested through the following actions.

4.2.1 Human Behavior



Figure 1: An official talking about why the aliens are called “prawns”

Throughout the film, the aliens are referred to as “prawns” which is a derogatory term used to describe the aliens, and it carries the meaning of a bottom feeder, a scavenger that is animalistic and lacking human qualities. While this is partly based on truth, as the aliens resemble prawns and behave slightly less civilized than humans, it is still an unfair and derogatory name as the aliens are shown to be a highly intelligent and sentient species, possessing technology far more advanced than what humans have. Through their words, it is evident that the people views the aliens as inferior to them, seeing them as a lesser species not worthy of the same amount of respect that they give other humans. While the aliens cannot be classified as a specific type of race, the way they are treated is a metaphor of the racism that exists between the whites and the blacks, where the humans represent the superior race and the aliens represent the inferior race. As such, their actions are can be explained using Racial Identity Theory, as they perceive their superiority due to their status as humans. It is also representative of the first stage of Helm’s White Racial Identity Model, which is about first contact between races, in which the superior race adopts a “colorblind” mindset where the only

race they acknowledge as their equal is themselves. (Helms, 1992) This would lead to them treating the other race unequally, as can be seen through the ways the aliens are treated by the humans.



Figure 2: A Johannesburg resident expressing his anger towards the aliens

Their words and actions also show that they lack care and compassion for the aliens, only focusing on their own needs and wants. As can be seen in the figure above, the residents do not care about the fate of the aliens, and only want them to be gone. Since the aliens are causing an inconvenience for them, they simply want to get rid of the problem to make their own lives better while not caring about the lives of another race. Similarly, this shows how the humans view themselves as superior beings, disregarding the lives and rights of the aliens who they regard as inferior to them. It even escalates to the point where the humans riot against the aliens and use violence against them to try and remove them from their city. The fact that they resorted to such extreme measures such as violence shows just how much they detest the aliens and want them gone. This again is a similar form of racism as the one previously mentioned,

which is akin to the oppression of the blacks by the whites in the past. As such, it is evident through the people's behavior that they are against the aliens simply because they are of a different species, making the aliens a victim of racism due to them being the minority group.

4.2.2 Social Forces



Figure 3: A sign that is against the aliens living in Johannesburg

The people's racist treatment towards the aliens is further strengthened by the fact that they all share a common sentiment against them. In the figure above, the man represents the general consensus of the people that they do not want the aliens to be living near them. There are even signs put up all around the city that state that the aliens are unwelcome. This common sentiment reinforces their racist ideologies, as there is no one to oppose their views or tell them what is right. As such, racism and discrimination against the aliens has become as social norm in the film, such that there is a constant societal pressure to hate the aliens and this discrimination is not acknowledged as something that is wrong. This is representative of the Critical Race Theory, as it shows how racism is naturally manifested in their daily lives and

has become a normal way for society to function. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) This racism may also be persisting due to the humans' innate belief in their own superiority and their refusal to acknowledge that racism is a problem. (Bowman, Rocco, Peterson & Adker, 2009) This subconscious acceptance of racism means that the unequal treatment of the aliens would likely continue for a long time, as can be seen in the film where it persists for many years.



Figure 4: The people rioting against the aliens

Since their racist ideologies are constantly strengthened, there is nothing to keep the humans in check, leading to them becoming emboldened to be more radical in their expression of resentment. As can be seen in the film, this escalates from simple verbal abuse to rioting and physical violence towards the aliens, as the humans become more convinced of their own superiority due to the social norms. Thanks to a common belief, they were able to unite against the aliens to carry out bigger acts of racial discrimination. This reflects the Racial Formation Theory, as the social forces in the film help to shape the way the aliens are treated, which in turn strengthens the social forces themselves as they slowly become social norms, trapping the

aliens in a vicious cycle of racial discrimination which they are powerless to escape from. As such, it is evident that racism in the film is greatly strengthened by the social forces at that time, thus showing the important impact society has on racism.

4.3 The Government's Treatment Towards the Aliens

The residents of Johannesburg are not the only ones who show racism towards the aliens, but even the government displays acts of racial discrimination, despite it being the ruling body. In fact, the government may be even worse than the people as they are the ones who are directly involved with the welfare of the aliens, allowing them to take greater advantage of them. The government's racism and mistreatment of the aliens can be seen through the following examples.

4.3.1 Living Conditions in District 9



Figure 5: An aerial view of District 9

When the aliens first arrived above Johannesburg, they were malnourished and dying, so with the rest of the world watching them, the government was forced to help the aliens, relocating them into a holding area which would become their home for many years. This was District 9. While the aliens were saved, the conditions they were forced to live in were very poor. As can be seen from the figure above, a few million aliens were forcefully packed into a relatively small area, where they were constantly under watch by the military. They lived in shacks made of scrap metal and other cheap materials and lived in dirty conditions with piles of rubbish everywhere. They foraged for food and materials amongst these rubbish, and black-market sellers had a flourishing business in the area, selling cat food to the aliens for extremely high prices. All in all, the living conditions were like that of a slum. The government had access to large amounts of resources that they could have used to give the aliens much better lives, yet they used only a minimal amount to make it seem like they were helping.

As such, it raises the question of whether the government truly cared about the aliens or if they simply did it out of peer pressure. It can also be implied that the government did not care too much about the aliens as they were of a different race. As such, they could not be bothered too much about helping them as it would be beneath them, humans, which they viewed as superior. This reflects the Critical Race Theory, as it questions if the law is truly neutral when dealing with matters of race as they claim, or if they have ulterior motives or are putting in less effort due to the difference in race. (Sleeter, 2012) This racial discrimination leads to the aliens being slowly disregarded and left to live in their slum without proper aid, thus showing how the government may not be fully racially neutral even when dealing with such important matters, likely due to a subconscious form of racism as mentioned earlier, where they have an innate belief in their own superiority.

4.3.2 True Intentions of the Government



Figure 7: The government revealing its true intentions

Continuing on the previous point on the Critical Race Theory, another aspect of it is shown when the Government reveals its true intentions behind helping the aliens. As can be seen from the figure, the government only cared about the aliens' advanced weaponry and were only thinking about how to benefit themselves from the situation. This shows how the government was putting up a front for them to mask their intentions to gain power, thus they did not truly care for the aliens and viewed them as inferior beings that could be easily exploited.

4.3.3 Behavior of Government Officials and MNU



Figure 6: An MNU soldier during the eviction of the aliens

Similar to the people, the government officials and the company Multi-National United (MNU), which was in charge of the eviction, also seem to treat the aliens as inferior beings, which can clearly be seen through their behavior. When evicting the aliens from District 9, the soldiers and officials treat the aliens without respect, constantly using vulgarities on them and threatening to kill them for every mistake they make. They are extremely rough when handling the aliens, sometimes beating them up and completely disregarding their basic rights simply because of their difference in race. They think that this difference does not entitle the aliens to basic human rights, showing how they have degraded the intelligent aliens to the standard of animals due to racial discrimination.



Figure 8: Colonel Koobus right before killing an alien

This violence is not simply carried out by the soldiers, but is even present in the highest authorities. Colonel Koobus Venter is the one in charge of the military operation, who is a ruthless person who kills the aliens with a sadistic pleasure. He views the aliens as worthless due to his innate belief in his own superiority, causing him to exert dominance over them as he views them as an inferior race. He represents an important part of Racial Politics, as he shows how political power is intertwined with race. In this case, Koobus abuses his political power to oppress the aliens, and feels no remorse in eliminating them as he views them as scum simply because they are not human, allowing him to self-justify his form of racial discrimination. As such, Koobus shows how racism can be present even in those in power, where their power instead allows them to further their racial oppression instead of helping to bridge the racial gap like they are supposed to.



Figure 9: MNU agents joking around after burning the aliens' eggs

One final example of racism would be when the MNU agents kill the aliens' babies by burning all their eggs. If this was a human case, it would be considered an abortion and likely a violent murder by many people, who would be outraged by the very thought of it. However, when it is carried out on the aliens, it is instead viewed as a good thing, and the agents even take it lightheartedly, joking around after carrying out the burning, even keeping a souvenir of it as if it was a fun event they went to. Their evident lack of care despite just committing mass murder shows how they disregard the alien lives and view them as inferior. The stark contrast between the human and alien cases show how significant the impact of racial discrimination is, as the vast difference in reactions is simply due to their difference in race. As such, it can be seen through the way the government treats the aliens that their lives and rights are disregarded due to them being discriminated for their race.

4.4 Evolution of Wikus van de Merwe

While District 9 does show many instances of racism itself, it also shows how the perception of racism can change due to new experiences. This is shown through the film's main protagonist, Wikus van de Merwe. Wikus started out as an MNU agent, who was later infected by a chemical which caused him to slowly transform into an alien. As such, the following examples will show how his outlook on race and racism changed as he evolves as a character.

4.4.1 Before Contamination



Figure 10: Wikus during the eviction of the aliens

Before he was contaminated, Wikus was a high ranking MNU agent who was put in charge of the eviction of the aliens from District 9 to relocate them. He was similar to the other humans, as he innately believed himself to be superior and did not treat the aliens as equals as they were of a different race. However, he did not overly discriminate against the aliens, and tried to resolve situations peacefully without using violence. As such, he is symbolic of those in the superior race who are like bystanders, experiencing the first stage of Helms' White Racial

Identity Model, in which they can recognize racial difference but do not regard it as salient. (Helms, 1992) This means that they do not actively discriminate against other races but may subconsciously discriminate due to influence from social norms. As such, Wikus is originally introduced as a character that shows how racism may not be as prominent in some people as compared to others, which is a much more positive outlook.

4.4.2 Process of Evolution



Figure 11: Wikus attempting to cut off his alien hand

After Wikus gets infected by the alien chemical, his transformation slowly begins, and is characterized by his strong denial and resentment towards it. Wikus starts off by hating his transformation, as it leads to his life falling apart. He is captured by the government and forced to operate alien weaponry while his life falls apart as all his family members leave him due to the rumors being spread. As such, he desperately tries to get rid of his alien hand, going to the extent of trying to cut off his own hand to rid himself of it. He is in clear denial of his

transformation, but it does change his outlook on racism. He is no longer regarded as the superior race, and is instead a hybrid that is viewed as inferior to them, and is now simply regarded as a military tool that can be exploited. Wikus gets a glimpse of what it feels like to be discriminated against, causing him to enter the second stage of the White Racial Identity Model, which is known as disintegration. In this stage, the person experiences something which challenges his prior conception of the world, causing feelings such as guilt as he questions his previous actions. (Helms, 1992) At this point he has matured in his perception of race and understands how the other humans' actions may have been racist and wrong. This is symbolic of the journey one has to go on to understand more about race and curb racism.

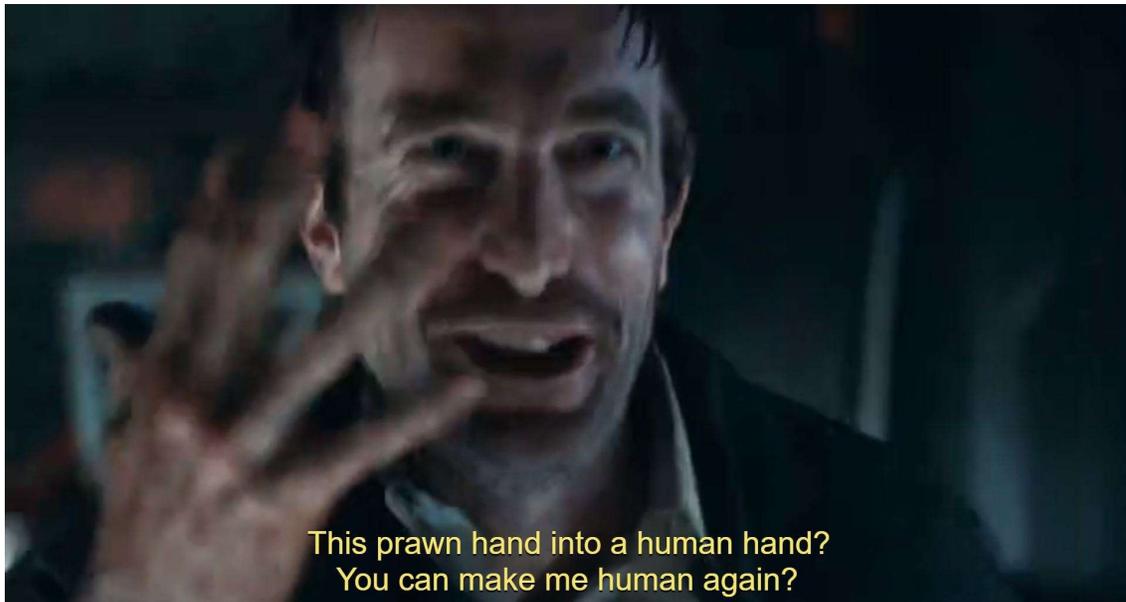


Figure 11: Wikus after learning he can be cured

Wikus constantly struggles with his racial identity, and he clings on to the hope that he can be cured and become human again. He is desperate for any chance to be healed as he wants to reassert his human identity, such that he can properly establish his racial identity. His alien and human identities fight to establish themselves, leaving him confused as to whether to side

with the aliens or with the humans. This is an example of Du Bois' idea of double-consciousness, in which two competing identities try to create a character that would be accepted into mainstream society, often leading to inner turmoil. (Cook, 2014) By spending more time with the aliens, he learns to respect them as he discovers that they are technologically advanced, changing his perception of them and allowing him to build a friendship with an alien named Christopher as they work together. As such, it can be seen that through the process of interacting more with the aliens, Wikus has become more accepting of other races and can now understand the negative impacts of racism having experienced them himself.

4.4.3 Near the End of His Transformation



Figure 12: Wikus telling Christopher to leave during the battle

Towards the end of his transformation, Wikus experiences a change of heart. Despite originally being obsessed with regaining his own humanity, he sacrifices himself in the end, holding off the military so that his alien friend Christopher could escape with his son. This

shows that after spending so long in the company of the aliens, Wikus had learned not just to accept and respect them but had developed a bond so deep that he was willing to sacrifice his humanity to save them. It is evident that Wikus had matured greatly in terms of his outlook on race and racism and had entered the final stage of Helm's White Racial Identity Model, which is autonomy. In this stage, the individual has a clear understanding and a positive connection to their racial identity, while also actively pursuing social justice. (Helm, 1992) As such, Wikus' evolution shows the journey of understanding other races and learning to oppose racism, which demonstrates how the perception of racism can be changed given time, effort and new experiences.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

From the analysis and findings, it can be concluded that racism is a significant theme throughout the film District 9, with it being mainly portrayed through the way the people and the government treated the aliens. The film can thus be seen as an allegory of the apartheid period of South Africa, which was a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination that existed in South Africa from 1948 until the early 1990s. The MNU and the government represent the whites while the alien prawns represent the blacks. Thus, the film is symbolic of the actual treatment the Africans received under the rule of the white minority during the apartheid.

Racial discrimination was the most prevalent type of racism in the film and was emphasized through both subtle and direct means. In the film, the most prevalent forces that affected racism were the social forces, such as social norms, and the political forces, such as the government abusing its power. From the analysis, it seems that the more prominent of the two was the social forces, as the general acceptance of racism as a social norm led to racial discrimination of the aliens not being regarded as something wrong. This was strengthened by the humans' innate belief in their own superiority, causing them to regard other races as inferior. As such, the film is trying to send the message that racism is a bad thing, and that we should do our best to avoid it.

While it is delivering a negative message, the film also shows a positive way of achieving racial acceptance and curbing racism, through the evolution of Wikus' character. It shows how by immersing yourself in the culture of another race you can learn more about them and eventually learn to respect them. As such, the film delivers both a positive and a negative

message in hopes of helping to raise awareness about the prevalence of racism in our society, encouraging others to try to curb racism and start learning to be more accepting of other races.

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