

Nostalgic Dystopia: Johannesburg as Landscape after *White Writing**

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Summary

In 1988 J.M. Coetzee published *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, formulating landscape as inherently entangled with problematic notions of white identity and belonging. Coetzee posits that white descendants of the Dutch and English colonists failed to find an appropriate “language” to represent the country’s landscape because they failed to establish an African identity. This crisis seems topical again with debates around land expropriation in the media, as well as #FeesMustFall considering questions of race and belonging. How is this reflected in contemporary landscape representation? By investigating the depiction of Johannesburg in the film *District 9* (Blomkamp 2009), I aim to consider how landscape is seen as a contradictory nostalgic dystopia, reflecting the complexity of whiteness in relation to place in South Africa. The land itself bears the dystopian scars of the colonial mining industry, the geographic segregation of the apartheid regime, and the decay following the aftermath of so-called “white flight” in the inner city. At the same time, it is nostalgically depicted as the urban landscape of the 1980s, which for white people offered an illusory utopian lifestyle. Johannesburg in *District 9* is thus a projection of white anxiety around land, hearkening back to Coetzee’s notion of disconnection between white South Africans and the landscapes of the country, and which seems to inspire an ironic nostalgia for a fictional past.

Opsomming

In 1988 het J.M. Coetzee die landskap beskryf as problematies in terme van die verhouding tussen wittees en die idee van behoort of ’n gevoel van aanvaarding. Vir Coetzee kon die nasate van Nederlandse en Engelse setlaars nie ’n geskikte “taal” ontwikkel om die landskap uit te beeld nie, omdat hulle ook nie ’n suksesvolle Afrika-identiteit kon bewerkstellig nie. Hierdie soeke na ’n geskikte taal en identiteit staan nou weer voorop in die lig van resente debatte in die media rondom grondonteiening en #FeesMustFall, wat albei vrae stel rondom ras en die landskap. Hoe figureer hierdie vrae in hedendaagse voorstellings van landskap? Deur ’n ontleding van die uitbeelding van Johannesburg in die film *District 9* (Blomkamp 2009) poog ek om in hierdie artikel verder in te gaan op die wyses waarop landskap voorgestel word as teenstellende nostalgiese distopie, wat die kompleksiteit van wittees in verhouding met plek in Suid-Afrika weerspieël. Die grond self dra die letsels van die koloniale mynbedryf, die geografiese segregasie van die apartheidregime, en die verval van die middestad as gevolg van die sogenaamde “white flight” ná 1994. Terselfdertyd word die landskap ook nostalgies voorgestel as die stedelike landskap van die tagtigerjare, wat aan

witmense 'n valse utopiese leefstyl voorgedhou het. Daar word dus aangevoer dat die uitbeelding van Johannesburg in *District 9* 'n projeksie van wit angs in verhouding tot grond daar stel, wat Coetzee se beskrywing van 'n skeiding tussen wit Suid-Afrikaners en die landskap herroep, en wat om die beurt weer 'n ironiese nostalgiese na 'n fiktiewe verlede skep.

What does whiteness have to do with landscape? This question is as pertinent in South Africa in 2020 as it was when J.M. Coetzee (1988) published *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Questions of land are particularly relevant today: the president, Cyril Ramaphosa, has taken steps to expedite land expropriation without compensation, and many white South Africans, as the historical land-owning classes, are wondering what will transpire. South Africa has a history of enforced white land ownership dating back to colonial times, further entrenched by the apartheid regime's legislation of the Group Areas Act of 1950 (Penfold 2012). Johannesburg is a city premised on a history of segregation, and its townships were built primarily to separate races, tribes and classes and to keep black urban labourers, such as mine workers, domestic workers and gardeners, a "sanitary" distance from the white population of the city (De Satgé & Watson 2018: 37). Labourers could not settle in urban areas but were instead on the periphery, having to commute back and forth to townships such as Soweto, Alexandra, and Katlehong (Murray 2010: 1-22, Poyner 2011: 309-326, De Satgé & Watson 2018: 47-53). Various waves of subsequent urban planning seem to have reinforced rather than redressed the issue and there are thus geographic traces of colonial and apartheid segregation and oppression in Johannesburg, underpinning the view of it as a "white" city (De Satgé & Watson 2018: 41-43).

This article investigates the depiction of Johannesburg in Neill Blomkamp's film *District 9* (2009) for its particular portrayal of whiteness in relation to the landscape of the city. The film depicts Johannesburg's problems – extreme poverty, spatial inequality and failed urban planning – in a manner I term "nostalgic dystopia", the term emphasising contradictory aspects of how the city is depicted as place. While depictions such as *District 9* seem to highlight what is wrong with the city, these portrayals are also visually alluring, even seductive, relying on exaggerated texture, motifs such as urban ruins and dramatically sombre colour palettes.¹ Johannesburg as nostalgic dystopia may thus evoke both feelings of attraction and repulsion in the viewer, much like sublime landscape representations have been theorised to do in art historical discourse (Su 2011: 78; Pierce 2012). Such landscapes are fundamentally discomfiting to behold, but no less aesthetically charged than picturesque landscapes. Coetzee (1988: 36-62) suggested in the 1980s that the sublime

1. Films such as *Tsotsi* (Hood 2005) and *Battle for Johannesburg* (Desai 2010), and photographs by Andrew Tshabangu, Santu Mofokeng, Mikhael Subotzky, Patrick Waterhouse, Guy Tillim and David Goldblatt (among others) portray various versions of this contradictory view.

might have been the most fitting landscape tradition for European settlers to employ in representation, but instead they battled to establish a vocabulary to capture the landscape, which revealed, according to Coetzee, their lack of belonging in the country. It is significant then to consider that the sublime may indeed be at work in contemporary depictions of the South African landscape, and that it may articulate a sense of embattled belonging (or even non-belonging) in relation to whiteness. I argue here that *District 9* functions within the same set of dynamics of repulsion and attraction, depicting Johannesburg as a broken city. The film is primarily shot in an informal settlement portrayed as a refugee camp for aliens, but it depicts the setting nostalgically. Often regarded in discourse as an apartheid allegory, *District 9* portrays the complex geopolitics of the city, gripped by a state of post-apartheid anxiety, which I argue is configured in how whiteness is inscribed on the landscape as a state of non-belonging and ruin.

The article begins by considering dystopia and nostalgia in relation to depictions of contemporary Johannesburg. I then briefly discuss the mining landscape as instrumental to Johannesburg's image as "white" landscape. Related to the mining landscape are the city's urban ruins, abandoned buildings that have deteriorated into slums of some degree (Beavon 2004: 244-245); for example, the well-known Ponte City in Berea. Also related is the figure of the township, constructed in *District 9* as a dystopian alien refugee camp. These difficult landscapes are inherently complex – they evoke viewers' contradictory responses and are the setting for the white anxiety Wikus van de Merwe embodies as the film's protagonist. In light of these contradictory responses and the foregrounding of anxiety, I focus on their complexity in relation to Dylan Trigg's (2006) concept of the post-industrial sublime. The article concludes by considering the work of an art collective that was particularly active around the time *District 9* was released: the AVANT CAR GUARD. The collective's awkward interactions with the landscape make for a fruitful comparison with *District 9*, foregrounding the lack of a resolved, white African identity, which Coetzee (1988:11) evokes so eloquently when he suggests that white South Africans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were "no longer European, not yet African". It is my contention that such a state of not-yet-realised metamorphosis is what characterises whiteness in relation to the landscape as a state of anxiety and non-belonging in *District 9*.

Johannesburg as Dystopia

The dystopian appearance of Johannesburg in *District 9* is not completely fictional and reflects many aspects of the actual contradictory character of the city, powerfully captured in recent photographs of inequality by Johnny Miller for the May 13, 2019, issue of *Time* magazine (Pomerantz 2019).

Johannesburg is known as one of the most unequal cities in the world, where extreme wealth and poverty are contiguous, and theorists relate this back to its history of segregation. They interrogate the seemingly dystopian aspects of Johannesburg, which are marked by the stark disparity between wealthy suburbs and informal settlements, evident in the geographic settings of townships and informal settlements, and strongly affecting the lives of Johannesburg's citizens.²

Dystopia is not only a motif related to the science-fiction genre which operates in *District 9*, as one would expect, but it also relates to the film's mockumentary character: *District 9* mimics a documentary depiction of the city, aiming to capture the problems associated with it.³ Adele Nel discusses *District 9*'s dystopia as typical of science fiction, describing the cityscape as abject, and therefore as an exaggerated, excessive view of a city specific to the genre of science fiction, but she also suggests that it depicts the "real world out there" (2012: 547-569, original emphasis). *District 9*'s dystopian setting therefore provides a dystopian view of the actual city of Johannesburg. Indeed, the film was shot in an existing informal settlement in Chiawelo, in the township of Soweto. Areas of the township had been evacuated due to xenophobic unrest in the city in 2008, and this site was used to film the scenes set in the alien detention camp called District 9 in the film (Frassinelli 2015: 293-309; Brott 2013: 31-32). The township or camp is depicted as a hellish place; it is indeed, as Aghogho Akpome (2017: 94) argues, a "zone of indistinction", where basic survival is at stake, and a disregard for human rights prevails. Nel (2012: 550-552) describes it as an "abject cityscape", a contemporary urban ghetto, which is unhygienic and claustrophobic.

From this perspective, the depicted township is furthermore a space that embodies many of the perceived "problems" with the city, such as an incongruent character and a fraught relationship with urban planning agendas, a place where vibrant trade and extreme poverty co-exist, where the urban and rural collide, and where the public and private are dubious functional

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2. Numerous authors such as Loren Kruger (2013, 2006), Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2004), Jennifer Robinson (2010), Lindsay Bremner (2010), David Bunn (2008), Jane Poyner (2011), Martin Murray (2010), Leora Farber (2010) and Alexandra Parker (2016, 2014) have explored the geopolitics that relate to the state of urban crisis that is associated with Johannesburg. Townships and informal settlements are often situated far beyond urban centres, forcing people with meagre means to commute long distances to work daily, while wealthier suburban residents can afford to live close to their places of work. Such divisions are furthermore racially determined due to colonial and apartheid-era urban planning agendas which sought to entrench such segregation.
 3. See Tom Penfold's (2012) discussion of dystopian literary depictions of the city, which takes a comparable view of depictions of the actual city as dystopian, rather than considering dystopia a fictional category.

categories.⁴ In film, photography and art, the township has often come to represent the city as a whole, as Loren Kruger (2006, 2013), Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2007), Jordache Abner-Ellapen (2009: 113-137), Alexandra Parker (2016: 83-97) and novelist Ivan Vladislavić (2006: 46-47) note. Nuttall and Mbembe quote a local architect who calls the city a “township metropolis” (Nuttall & Mbembe 2007: 281). In this sense then, one may argue that the township is emblematic of Johannesburg in *District 9*, and that it is depicted in the film as a dystopia, a terrible place where basic survival is almost impossible. It is characterised in the film by fires, violence, poverty, and decay, thereby emphasising the worst attributes of townships around Johannesburg. It is thus this depiction, of the township as a zone of indistinction, that defines how dystopia is articulated in this article.

Reflective Nostalgia and the Johannesburg Landscape

What about *District 9*'s depiction of Johannesburg is nostalgic, then? The film evokes apartheid-era Johannesburg through references to the 1980s such as landmark buildings, 1980s newsreel representations of township unrest, and through the characters in the film. The landscape itself has the appearance of Johannesburg in the media in the 1980s, at the height of apartheid, a time marked by the declaration of several States of Emergency (Merrett 1990: 1-22). It is clear that the apartheid past is not a time to be longed for, however, and so nostalgia in the film is of a discomfiting kind. Svetlana Boym (2001: 41-48) proposes two types of nostalgia in her seminal book on the topic, one being restorative and the other reflective. The former is nationalist in emphasis and focuses on a shared longing for “home” and one’s return there. The latter is more individual in emphasis and focuses on ambiguous collective and cultural frameworks of memory. This particular nostalgia, along with its resultant notion of Johannesburg as dystopian, is thus socially constructed, and based upon cultural experiences (and even fantasies or projections) of the landscape. Such nostalgia also defers returning to a real place; the nostalgic feeling is located in the distance from “home” itself, not in the place one longs for. She goes on to observe that this nostalgia is ironic and self-reflexive, and that it encourages critique through its use of irony and humour. Such irony is evident in how *District 9* depicts Johannesburg in a difficult time in South Africa’s history, evoking the viewer’s recollection of a fraught and brutal history rather than a pleasant time.

4. See Mzwanele Mayekiso’s (1996) seminal political discussion on Alexandra township during the 1980s and 90s, and also Mda in Myambo (2011: 67), for a description of the problems in townships in South Africa.

Of importance here is how cultural assumptions underpinning nostalgic dystopia may serve to normalise and conversely question histories relating to place, as *District 9* indeed does in its depiction of the character of Wikus. Wikus is portrayed as an unfashionable throwback to the apartheid government, a clerk with a heavy Afrikaans accent (often denigrated in South African popular culture as signifying a lower-class white person or an unreconstructed racist). He represents apartheid-era claims to land and belonging, which in effect are in ruins, like the landscape itself. Yet he is the protagonist of the film, also representing aspects of hope in the political conundrums of South Africa in 2008 (Walder 2014: 151; Nel 2012: 554, 561; Frassinelli 2015: 293-309; Jansen van Veuren 2012: 571, 580-583). Nostalgia here is thus fundamentally contradictory and discomfiting but is tempered with humour and irony. Both the representation of landscape and Wikus's characterisation recall the apartheid past of the city, and nostalgia is thus embedded in Johannesburg's representation in *District 9*. This article focuses more on the landscape than on Wikus, however, since most critical attention to *District 9* has focused on its allegorical significance but has often neglected the landscape as contributing to understandings of the film (see for example Jansen van Veuren 2012, Walder 2017 and Veracini 2017).

The “White” Landscape in Ruins

District 9 opens with an aerial shot approaching the city from a distance. Large mine dumps loom in front of the familiar skyline of the city, and suburban settlements dot the foreground. The cluster of mine dumps (known as tailings dumps) depicted in *District 9* can still be found (in 2020, at the time of writing) situated to the south-west of Johannesburg, on the intersection between the so-called Soweto highway and the N1 Western bypass. The cluster is in an area known as Mooifontein 225-Iq, and forms part of the Central Rand Goldfields (CRG) mines that have declined drastically in production, with all of the large mines operating here shutting down by the late 1970s (Harrison & Zack 2012). Mining itself is thus a nostalgic part of Johannesburg's landscape, and the tailings are the remains of that industry, evoking the colonial and apartheid past. The history of mining in the area is fraught with racial politics and inequality. Racial segregation on the mines and in the city was established by the colonial colour bar, among other things, which prevented black Africans from attaining higher-level jobs on the mines (Harrison & Zack 2012: 554). Many of the African labourers in the early period of mining before 1928 came from the Portuguese East Coast (now Mozambique). According to Jonathan Crush, Alan Jeeves and David Yudelman (cited in Harrison & Zack 2012: 555), the recruitment of labourers from across southern Africa is the only reason that deep-level gold mining was affordable enough to pursue. Significantly, these migrant labourers were

housed in compounds under terrible conditions for limited period contracts and could only return to their families in rural areas after these contracts expired. Socio-political and socio-economic concerns are thus integral to understanding Johannesburg's mining history (see Harrison & Zack 2012; Nyoni 2017: 133-154; Munakamwe 2017: 155-186). As markers of former white privilege in the landscape, the tailings dumps may thus be seen as a (white) blight, having created a polluted landscape, which, like apartheid's hegemony, is in ruin.

As mentioned above, the presence of urban ruins is one of the most significant aspects of the way in which Johannesburg is depicted in *District 9*. A pivotal scene depicting ruins in the film occurs towards the end, after Wikus turns on and fights his former colleagues in the MNU (Multi-National United, a weapons-manufacturing corporation where he works), thus assisting the alien Christopher Johnson to escape. Wikus has been badly wounded and is seen in the fore- to middle ground, pulling himself along by his arms in the dust. He has been ejected from an alien-mechanised body armour or suit after it has been destroyed by the fire of MNU officers. To his left are the remains of the body armour, and on the horizon is an architectural structure that looks like a ruined house with no roof, doors or windowpanes and consisting only of bricks and the remnants of tiles, plaster and paint. The structure is covered in graffiti. Around it is objects like mattress springs, scraps of fabric, plastic food and drink containers, cardboard packaging, and other unidentifiable items contributing to the overall impression of "rubbish". Wikus and the armour blend into the landscape: he too is in a state of utter collapse. Although he merges with the landscape, and at the end of the film finds a reluctant sense of belonging in transforming into an alien himself, the camp/township is a place where his apartheid-era white identity is fundamentally one of non-belonging. Irony thus suffuses the scene as Wikus is brought close to his demise (indeed the demise of his whiteness) in this setting. Here he experiences the crisis of his metamorphosis into an alien; his arm and one of his eyes have transformed, but he is still recognisably human, rendering him hybrid and abject. As Nel (2012) and Jansen van Veuren (2012) both argue, this incomplete state of change is what is so discomfiting to him, and this discomfiture is echoed in the landscape of ruin, which shows no evidence of transformation after apartheid. Township planning under apartheid led to many socio-economic problems, isolating residents from the urban centres in which they worked. The expectation that these problems would disappear at the end of apartheid has not come to fruition, as Myambo (2011), among many others, has noted. The township as a space of oppression and poverty has not yet transformed; it is in a state of as yet unrealised, incomplete metamorphosis, like Wikus as he is represented in this scene, in which the focal point, a ruined structure with a section of blue wall jutting out at the centre of the landscape, could be seen as symbolic of the ruination of apartheid in the country and in the city.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is notable that the cinematography in the film is decidedly nostalgic, since Blomkamp aimed from the outset to emulate the washed-out appearance of newsreel footage of apartheid South Africa from the 1980s (Robinson 2009). This nostalgic visual design is evident in the scene described: the colour palette resembles analogue representations of Johannesburg, such as archival footage of the city (see The Kinolibrary 2017), which is remarkably comparable to the visual aesthetic of *District 9*. This referencing of historical analogue representations of Johannesburg substantially contributes to *District 9*'s depiction of the city, which may be considered visually nostalgic despite its dystopian appearance.

Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse also explore the theme of ruinous aftermath in their photographs of the infamous Johannesburg building, Ponte City, erected in 1975. The building's principal designers, Mannie Feldman, Manfred Hermer and Rodney Grosskopff, conceived the building as a modernist beacon of progress. With its cylindrical atrium and its perched position atop a hill in Berea, an adjacent area to the now notorious Hillbrow, the building was intended to be futuristic and forward-looking, affording residents singular and expansive views of the city. As a familiar landmark on the Johannesburg skyline, the building appears in *District 9* as well as *Alive in Joburg* (2006), a short film also by Blomkamp, preceding *District 9*. Ponte City notoriously fell into decay in the 1980s and 1990s and since then has been central to several waves of renovation projects, of limited success (see, for example, Ponte City Apartments 2018). At the time of Subotzky and Waterhouse's photography project, enormous heaps of rubble and garbage were in the process of being removed from the atrium.⁵



Fig. 1. Subotzky, M. & Waterhouse, P. 2008. *Cleaning the core* (360 Degree panorama (Subotzky Studio, courtesy the artists and Goodman Gallery).

Due to images like this, and in part perhaps due to its actual demise, the building has come to signify the antithesis of (apartheid-era) modern progress; it is urban living gone awry, a wasteland of concrete, seemingly in these

5. See Vocativ (2014), for an independent short documentary on the revival of the building, and Svea Josephy's (2017) article on the project by Waterhouse and Subotzky.

images inhabited by the poor, and those who have no better alternatives.⁶ In an article appearing in the UK's *The Telegraph*, the building is described as a site for so-called "dark tourism", a form of "poverty porn" for middle class South Africans and tourists from overseas who visit the building for its notoriety (Leadbeater 2018). This ruinous environment thus holds an abject allure.

Images of Ponte City such as fig. 1 (see Subotzky Studio 2008) may be morbidly fascinating to look at, and at the same time may evoke feelings of guilt and empathy for the people who live in such appalling conditions. Post-industrial ruins (and urban ruins or industrial ruins, as some authors refer to them) such as Ponte City in fig. 1 have a contradictory effect on the viewer (Orvell 2013). These sites are in the process of decaying, and there is no sense of closure for the viewer, which broken historical structures such as Roman ruins often seem to afford (Murray 1971: 1-47). Post-industrial ruins may inspire repulsion while at the same time being fascinating. Trigg (2006: 147-148), writing on sublime, post-industrial landscapes, sees post-industrial ruins as akin to the sublime but nonetheless different in some respects. The sublime is more commonly associated with nature and landscapes unmarked by human presence, although the discomfiting contradictory effect they have on the viewer seems comparable to the effect industrial ruins have on spectators. Post-industrial ruins are also different from classical ruins; while the latter may be pleasing to look at (see Murray 1971 and Riegl 1903), in industrial ruins, the indeterminacy of time, sense of place and form precludes any sense of a satisfying resolution. This is evident in fig. 1, in the landscape of rubble. It comprises an amorphous mass, lacking structure and, as a result, precludes any visual conventions that allow for interpretation. Ponte City, as represented here, is neither a natural landscape, nor a functional human-made structure. Instead of architectural forms, the viewer is faced with mounds of crumbled concrete. The scale of these mounds is indicated by the presence of human figures, who are dwarfed by it. In *District 9*, Wikus is also overwhelmed by the landscape of urban ruin in the sequence referred to above and reduced to dragging himself through the dust. The overwhelming landscapes of urban ruin, or indeed ruined apartheid structures referred to above, are then perhaps best understood as sublime landscapes of a particular kind.

Thinking about how *District 9* depicts the post-apartheid landscape in this scene as an instance of the post-industrial sublime is also interesting when one revisits Coetzee's thoughts on white landscape representation. It seems to recall the contradictory relationship between whiteness and the unyielding landscape that Coetzee describes in relation to the arid Karoo region, which

6. It is important to note that this is only one representation of the building. Despite having a history of real problems, Ponte City is not solely inhabited by the poor or destitute. The building has at various stages attracted middle-class residents and continues to have a complex and variable residential makeup.

was at times seen as wilderness or wasteland (1988: 47-51), but which was never fully realised in a vocabulary of the sublime. It is notable that such conventions seem to emerge again here in the contradictory elements of *District 9*'s depiction of Johannesburg. The landscape, or cityscape, is not hospitable to Wikus, and yet it is where he finds a dubious sense of belonging after he finally does transform into an alien himself. The scene is unpleasant to view, but it is visually compelling in all its textures and in its dramatic emphasis upon the ruined structure and ravaged landscape, capturing Wikus's relationship to his whiteness and his attendant sense of non-belonging. This "place" is at best a sublime landscape to him, offering no ease or comfort, but ultimately perhaps offering the potential for transcendence associated with such landscapes (Trigg 2006: 147-148).⁷ As such, it is particularly evocative of the state of whiteness in contemporary South Africa as discomfiting and anxious, and perhaps, as Gillian Straker (2013), Melissa Steyn (2005) and Anthea Garman (2014) suggest, as yearning to transcend this unease.⁸

White Anxiety

According to Straker (2013: 91-100), white anxiety (associated with the fear of the decline of white hegemony) may specifically be structured around latent forms of racism such as the belief in the basic incompetence of black leadership, and the collapse of institutions under its rule. Straker, engaging with the psychosociological project entitled the Apartheid Archives Project, sees this anxiety as indicative of a re-assertion of white supremacy. She (2013: 84), along with Derek Hook (2014: 170-193), discusses the sense of vulnerability related to the loss of privilege and the implications of guilt that linger in post-apartheid society. They suggest that melancholia results from deferred mourning, as whites face relative powerlessness in the new political climate.⁹ Whites may also suffer from feelings of betrayal by their own group

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7. Trigg (2006: 147-148) in fact argues that post-industrial sublime landscapes do not offer a sense of transcendence but may be unsettling and yet affirming, since they offer critical resistance to the enforcement of spatial rationality. This spatial rationality is here akin to Gabay's (2018: 1-45) description of "Whiteness", the supremacist fallacy that "White" people are superior at ordering the world. This is discussed below.
 8. Wikus has also been interpreted as a symbol of anxiety by Mocke Jansen van Veuren (2012) and Nel (2012).
 9. Melancholia is discussed as a complex emotive response to transitioning from loving something to having to hate it unconsciously. This causes the object of this emotive response to become in a sense "entombed", and denied in conscious life. As such, it haunts the subject (Straker 2013: 96). This kind of grief

and its former ideals that were shown up to be false. The crisis of white identity and its concomitant anxiety is also investigated by Steyn (2005: 119-135), Garman (2014: 211-228), Alfred J. Lopez (2005), Georgina Horrel (in Garman 2014: 215), Helene Strauss (in Garman 2014: 216) and Dennis Walder (2014: 143-157).

Although not all of the scholars mentioned above make use of the term “anxiety”, the complexity of feelings like guilt, melancholia and nostalgia would seem commensurate with how anxiety is embodied in the character of Wikus and within his interaction with the camp/township. It is also commensurate with how Gabay (2018: 1-45) describes “White anxiety”. He discusses “Whiteness” as more than a “phenotypical” condition of being racially white, but rather as a system of universalising values, which has constructed the West in a Eurocentric manner as superior to the rest of the world. It is the fear of the loss of this “Whiteness” by white people, which he describes as “White anxiety”. In other words; a fear of the loss of the notion that “White people” are superior, or possess a mythologised institutional genius, and are better than others at ordering the world.

Reading the scene referred to above as symbolic of Wikus’s anxiety and non-belonging, one may argue, then, that the source of anxiety is in fact Wikus’s sense of non-belonging, that the loss of the notion of white supremacy has come to pass for him, and that he is an unrecognisable entity in the landscape in which he finds himself. All signs of white supremacy have crumbled around him: the supposed rational order associated with apartheid-era urban planning; the righteousness of the humans (an allegory for the apartheid government) who have turned on him and are pursuing him as “other”; and his own sense of superiority to the aliens, because he is becoming one of them. The depiction in the scene described, of Wikus as a symbol of crippling white anxiety (literally crippled within the landscape), losing his white identity and becoming one with the ruins of the township landscape, brings to mind Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (fig. 2). Two aspects of Wikus crawling in the dust remind me of that painting: his reaching posture, and the section of blue wall which hovers above the horizon. This wall seems to be the punctum of the scene, drawing the eye, and reinforcing the place beyond the horizon for which Wikus is aiming, perhaps symbolising his striving to be redeemed by ascending in Christopher’s spaceship.

cannot be assuaged; there is no resolution. Apartheid and its attendant nationalist ideologies can become such a haunting presence for white people after apartheid. The atrocities associated with or even enabled by its ideologies are seen as defying understanding in this regard; apartheid’s true nature and atrocity is in itself unrepresentable, exacerbating the inability to mourn its loss, and highlighting the absurdity of mourning such a “loss”.



Fig. 2. Géricault, T. 1818-19. *The Raft of the Medusa*. 4.91 m x 7.16 m. Oil paint. Louvre Museum, Paris. (The raft of the Medusa 2019).

Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* depicts the last few dying survivors of a failed French mission to re-establish colonial power in Senegal in 1816 (Nicolson 1954: 240-249). The political message of the painting is not unlike the political allegory of *District 9*, with a cast-out survivor of the old regime languishing in an inhospitable landscape. This comparison might seem gratuitous if not for a contemporary artwork by a collective active in the late 2000s named AVANT CAR GUARD.¹⁰ In 2007 they produced a series of photographs where they performed various scenes relating to their art career in South Africa. The series is entitled *Africa Biennale*. One of the photographs that constitutes the series is irreverently entitled *See ya later./Triple AVANT CAR GUARD on the Rocks*. In the image the three members of the collective appear stranded or washed up on a raft made of cardboard boxes. One central figure reaches towards the horizon, mimicking Géricault's famous triangular composition. A pirate flag sits on top of the mast of the raft, perhaps implying a post-colonial status of non-belonging as "legitimate" white South Africans. One could also see the image as symbolic of the fate of the white Afrikaner in South Africa at the time. Like Wikus, the members of the collective battle with their lack of relevance and belonging in contemporary South Africa. They are political castaways, abandoned by the old regime, like the soldiers from the ship, the *Medusa*, who had to fashion a life raft to "escape" after the

10. The collective consists of three artists who also practice in their solo capacities: Zander Blom, Jan-Henri Booyens and Michael MacGarry.

ship ran aground and the captain and crew abandoned them.¹¹ AVANT CAR GUARD's work brings to mind a song released by popular Afrikaans rock band Fokofpolisiekar entitled *Antibiotika* (2006). The chorus goes: "Ek's net 'n toeris in my geboorteland, 'n gekwete dier in 'n hok op antibiotika"; translated into English it roughly reads: "I am a mere tourist in my country of birth, a wounded animal in a cage on antibiotics." This describes Wikus's own predicament of non-belonging and betrayal by white hegemony, and perhaps encapsulates some of the anxiety associated with whiteness in South Africa at the time. Steyn (2001: xxi) emphasises this sense of anxiety, describing the political transition in South Africa as one of the most significant psychological adjustments happening in the contemporary world. Garman (2014: 215-216), too, observes that white South Africans need a better way to think about their identity than the seeming binary of African or European. Steyn suggests that one of the coping strategies of whiteness, after the fall of apartheid, has been to identify with other centres of whiteness, such as the United States and European and Australasian countries. This form of white identity sees itself as part of a white diaspora, keeping ties with global centres of white power (Steyn 2005: 127-128). From such a perspective, white people in South Africa might identify with a sense of abandonment by their "own kind", but also might seem like "tourists in their country of birth".¹²

11. The soldiers were abandoned due to a shortage of life rafts, and of the hundred and fifty original soldiers left behind only ten survived (see Huet 2007: 7-31; Tinterow 1990-1991: 60-61).

12. One might even suggest that such a tourist view of the landscape is evident in landscape representations. Coetzee (1988) indeed traces aspects of the picturesque tradition in South African art history. It could be fruitful to consider this tradition in relation to whiteness in contemporary representation.



Fig. 3. AVANT CAR GUARD. 2007. *See ya later./Triple AVANT CAR GUARD on the rocks.* Inkjet print, 1072 x 738 mm, Edition of 15 (Image courtesy of Zander Blom).

It would seem fitting to end this article with reference to the mining landscape. In an artwork entitled *Stupid Fucking White Man* (2007) the AVANT CAR GUARD collective is shown dressed in what resembles 17th century costumes. They each have a ship made of cardboard and other materials and seem to be stranded or washed up on a tailings dump. The absurdity of their performance is emphasised by the title of the artwork. As in the image described above, they are ill-matched with the landscape, embodying Coetzee's (1988: 1-7, 36-62) notion of the mismatch between European landscape traditions and the South African landscape itself. The figure in the centre, presumably Jan-Henri Booysens, sports a moustache that makes him resemble Jan van Riebeeck, one of the first Dutch settlers in the Cape and the figure that was printed on the currency used during apartheid. Their reference here to colonial settlement, the mining industry and the currency, the Rand, named after the mining belt, as well as their absurd appearance, contributes to a parodic performance of South African history from the Dutch colonial (Afrikaner) point of view, and thus to their parodic performance of whiteness. In *District 9*, Wikus is the epitome of this tragi-comic legacy. His inevitable fate is to transform into the "other" – the allegorical, "alien" opposite of his whiteness, and he has to sacrifice his whiteness in order to uneasily belong in the township setting. Wikus, who throughout the film becomes less and less human, and more and more alien, thus makes a fitting metaphor for whiteness in the Johannesburg landscape. One may revisit Coetzee's (1988: 11) description of white South Africans cited at the beginning of this article: "no

longer European, not yet African”, describing them as caught in a state of incomplete metamorphosis or transformation.



Fig. 4. AVANT CAR GUARD. 2007. *Stupid Fucking White Man*
Inkjet print, 1072 x 738 mm, Edition of 15 (Image courtesy of Zander Blom).

In this article, I have considered nostalgic dystopia as a term that may offer useful descriptions of the contemporary landscape of Johannesburg in relation to whiteness. *District 9*, which depicts the city as both dystopian from a position of whiteness, and as nostalgic for a less-than desirable past, further configures whiteness as an identity of non-belonging in the landscape. The dystopian landscape in this context is one of mine waste areas, urban decay and township slums, and these spaces are depicted from the situated position of a loss of white hegemonic power. I have suggested that the protagonist of *District 9*, Wikus, epitomises such a position; he is dispossessed and abandoned by the world of white suburbia and economic power where he belonged at the beginning of the film. The reflective nostalgia in the depictions I have discussed is a discomfiting nostalgia and cannot feasibly be framed as nostalgia to *return* to the apartheid past. Instead, it seems to manifest itself in white anxiety, again embodied by Wikus, whose transition into otherness is fraught with anxiety; his is a protractedly unrealised metamorphosis, echoed in depictions of urban ruins that seem to point to the unresolved socio-economic problems in Johannesburg after the end of apartheid. Whiteness is inscribed in how the landscape is depicted as a place of decay and ruin, comparable to the sublime wasteland in Subotzky and Waterhouse’s photographs of rubble in Ponte City. It is thus with more than

a touch of irony that one may look back to Coetzee's (1988) interrogation of the landscape genre in early South African writing and painting. He suggests that the sublime was perhaps the most fitting landscape tradition that settlers might have used as a language to articulate their place in the seemingly alien African landscape in which they found themselves. Nostalgic dystopia is a contemporary visual idiom that shares aspects with the sublime tradition, and which relates the landscape of urban Johannesburg to whiteness in a manner that is fundamentally contradictory, evoking both negative responses of anxiety and non-belonging, and conflicting positive responses of longing or reflective nostalgia.¹³

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