AFFIRMATIVE ABERRATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA?

Towards an investigation of possible effects in Neil Blomkamp's District 9 and selected works of Nandipha Mntambo
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Towards an investigation of possible effects in Neil Blomkamp’s *District 9* and selected works of Nandipha Mntambo

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Foreword

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Introduction

The terms “grotesque”, “monstrous” and “abject” all indicate that which is in one way or another aberrant to society; yet, contemporary Western visual culture with its predilection for vampires, zombies and other monsters is permeated with such instances. Monster studies expert Jeffrey Jerome Cohen thus observed in 1996 (vii), “We live in a time of monsters,” while renowned art and film theorist Noël Carroll claimed seven years later that “from a merely statistical point of view, the grotesque is one of the leading formats of mass art today” so much so that it can be said to have “gone mainstream” (2003:293). Indeed, it seems to me that not only do these authors’ statements continue to hold true today, but they are arguably even more relevant taken these categories’ growing proliferation in popular culture. For example, in television (from The Walking Dead to Spongebob Squarepants), films (from The Transformers series to The Twilight Saga), and even the music industry (from Marilyn Manson to Lady Gaga). This trend is also patent in South Africa, where the same American series, films and music are in high demand. In conjunction, the grotesque, (female) monstrous and abject also figure in the fine arts and local popular culture. However, while considering these I began to discern that the grotesque, for one, functioned as not only horrific, comic or sublime (the three major functions identified by Carroll), but seemed to fulfil a positive, attractive role; for example, Jake Sully willingly and for the better turns into his huge blue “avatar” in the film by the same name. Thus, although it is wholly counter-intuitive, the grotesque along with the monstrous and abject have come to be imbued with what I will call “affirmative” associations. In the light of its prominence in visual culture, this apparently paradoxical function of the aberrant is worthy of investigation. To further examine this phenomenon, I have selected two interesting cases, both rooted in Southern Africa. In keeping with the spirit of aberration, I have intentionally settled on two disparate examples: a blockbuster sci-fi film firmly situated in popular culture, and highly unusual cowhide sculptural works from the world of the fine arts. Precisely because they are associated with divergent sets of visual and medium conventions, a comparative analysis should prove fruitful.

The first is Neill Blomkamp’s debut feature film and surprise blockbuster of 2009 District 9 which raked in seven BAFTA nominations, four Academy Award nominations and one Golden Globe nomination as well as over USD200 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo 2011). In this sci-fi film, we follow the story of a white-collar Afrikaner man by the name of Wikus van de [sic] Merwe. He is appointed the head of a project to relocate a slum community of extraterrestrial beings further away from their human counterparts. These so-called “prawns” were stranded on Earth some twenty years before in the proximity of Johannesburg, and were steadily ostracised due to their repulsive appearance and frequently criminal behaviour. Himself at first bigoted towards the aliens, Wikus is accidentally infected and rapidly transforms into one of them, both to his horror and eventual salvation. The film’s local popularity can be seen as exemplary of South African viewers’ proclivity for the sci-fi, fantasy and horror genres, given the huge successes of such American films in the recent past, e.g. the Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Pirates of the Caribbean, and X-Men serials.
District 9 can also be considered as paving the way for the burgeoning local sci-fi and horror industry, from *Eternity* (2010) and *Night Drive* (2010) to the highly anticipated film-adaptation of South African author Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City*. Furthermore, what also makes District 9 an exemplary case study of South African visual culture is its engagement with and questioning of social and political discourse (particularly, surrounding apartheid and recent xenophobic attacks against foreigners), and challenging the representation of these issues in mass media. The film thus employs repulsion to deliver social commentary. Moreover, it accomplishes all of this with the aim of providing entertainment, an important distinction from my second example.

My second case study consists of selected works of a young artist who has become illustrious in and beyond the South African visual arts world in a relatively short time: Nandipha Mntambo. Although she works in other media too (such as painting and video), she is best known for her cowhide, –hoof and –tail sculptures. Basically, she moulds raw cowhide into the contours of a recognisably female body (specifically, a cast made from her own body, sometimes from her mother’s body or initially from store mannequins). She strengthens these moulds with resin, so that the sculptures are ghostly shells somewhere between dresses and hollow beings, while retaining the colour, texture and often, though less noticeably, even smell of the living creatures which they once formed part of. Her sculptures can be seen in terms of a current in South African art beginning roughly in the 1970s, where the aesthetics of the aberrant figure prominently. One such an established artist would be Jane Alexander. In her early acclaimed sculpture *Butcher Boys* (1985-6, figures 1 & 2), the viewer is suddenly startled by three life-sized, naked men with horned goatish heads. The destabilising sensation is further increased by the figures’ uncanny life-likeness: their glimmering black eyes and mundane seating postures, reminiscent of and presumably alarming the gallery visitors around them. This is offset by their cadaver-toned “skin” and the long post-mortem-like slits on their chests and spines. Made during the violence of mid-1980s Apartheid, the work denotes the brutal dehumanisation of non-white South Africans but also the ultimately fragile regime’s dehumanisation of its perpetrators (cf. Peffer 2009:63-6 for a more detailed discussion). Mntambo similarly blurs the line between the banal familiar and the repulsive grotesque through her sculptures. However, working almost thirty years later in a democratic South Africa, Mntambo shies away from overtly political readings. This places Mntambo in a more recent current in South African art – her work engages certain well-known social and political discourses, yet resists a principally socio-political reading. In other words, what is particularly interesting from an academic standpoint is that, while her works engage issues surrounding, for example, gender, race, culture and postcolonialism; they defy an overtly feminist, racial, postcolonial or post-apartheid reading. Instead she opts for an outlook which is both deeply personal and universal as opposed to “South African” per se. Yet, this tendency remains closely intertwined with the aesthetics of the aberrant, which are in fact essential to the very allure of her work.

This then brings me to the theoretical framing of my study; what I have come to call “categories of aberration”. I chose the label “aberration” (which, as far as I am aware, has not yet been firmly established as a distinct concept within the study of visual culture) because it entails various connotations. The aberrant is that which is conventionally considered as deviating from either
individual or collective normality and is thus unwelcome. However, in a rarer scientific sense it can also denote an erroneous observation caused either by imperfections in an optical device (called an “optical aberration”, found in organic or artificial lenses) or by the motion of the earth (“stellar aberration”). As such, aberration is a useful label because it could denote three meanings: either aberration is characteristic of an essentially abnormal entity, or it is a relatively sudden deviation in an entity’s usual character, or it is in fact the result of a mistaken perception. Thus, the “fault” of aberration may lie with the thing itself (Ding an sich), or with its changeable state, or with the process of perception. This distinction also proves productive because aberration is in essence relative; the same entity may be aberrant or not according to the time, place or culture it is encountered in. It appears to me, that my case studies (and many other contemporary examples in visual culture) incorporate all three sides of aberration simultaneously, showing a (self-)awareness of the conventions and moreover the relative nature of aberration. Finally, it is this relativity which I believe further paves the way for an affirmative kind of aberration, as I will investigate.

In spite of its relativity, however, aberration is constant in that in any manifestation it is always by nature that which is outside normality. This makes for a potentially infinite array of phenomena. Thus, I have narrowed my selection to the following three categories of aberration: the grotesque, abject and female grotesque or monstrous-feminine. This is because these three are not only relatively well-established albeit much-debated classifications within the humanities but they seem the most pertinent to my visual examples. Most importantly, each of these aberrant categories not only creates a destabilising or estranging experience but they also inherently possesses a generative and therefore arguably affirmative potential. Because they are interrelated like a kind of triplet Venn diagram, one of my first tasks will be to create a workable definition for each category, and to delineate each one’s generative potential. This quality, like aberration itself, seems to be linked to certain intrinsic characteristics of the represented entity, to its variability and to the viewer’s fallible perception. Thus, I will look at each in turn in my analysis.

Accordingly, the structure of the thesis is as follows: in the first chapter, I firstly delineate what I understand under affirmation, then my concept of effect and the three categories of aberration are outlined in further detail, followed by a demarcation of the research question and objectives, and finally the research methodology – drawn from historical poetics approach (from film studies) and from Bild-Anthropologie (“image anthropology”) – is discussed. Thereafter, one chapter is devoted to District 9 and one to Mntambo’s works, which are respectively examined in detail in terms of their aberrant and affirmative aspects. The final chapter is an appraisal of what the study has accomplished, along with its shortcomings and further questions which it has opened for my future (especially PhD) research.
Chapter 1: The composition of the study

1.1 Towards a definition of affirmation

Although it may seem counterintuitive, I will first begin with a definition of affirmation before I move on to the grotesque, monstrous-feminine and abject, so as to delineate their inherent albeit often overlooked affirmative possibilities as I define them. So, what precisely do I understand under the possible “affirmative” quality of the three chosen aberrant categories? Firstly, I discern an inherently generative and assertive trait of aberration. To put it in the rhetoric of dialectics, a \((\text{hypo/syn})\text{thesis}\) rather than \(\text{antithesis}\). That is, although the three categories have always been imbued with the potential to be both destabilising and generative (as I discuss below), it is mostly the former estranging quality which was emphasised in Western visual culture so that the aberrant categories function as an antithesis or \(\text{antitradition}\) working \(\text{against}\) the norms and rules of society (cf. Van den Oever 2003:49-51).

What is striking about my case studies, however, is that they firstly exhibit an awareness of this predominantly negative association of aberration; yet, secondly, they highlight the generative, affirmative potential of the aberrant. In other words, aberrant tactics are employed \(\text{heuristically}\) in a pursuit of new knowledge rather than to (overtly) destabilise existing systems; in fact, facets of the existing systems are \(\text{incorporated}\) into these new knowledges. I would argue that the case studies not only espouse aberration with the aim to be an antitradition to the superstructures of rationality and the status quo (as was the case with the various avant-garde art movements from the late eighteenth century onwards). They also do not affect “the loss of identity, […] the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order” (as Wolfgang Kayser, a prominent grotesque theorist, puts it, 1981:184-5), as employed by the likes of Franz Kafka and Frida Kahlo. Instead, it would appear that while my chosen visual examples do challenge these structures to a certain extent, it is in order to shed new light on them as \(\text{constituents of a personal heterogeneous identity}\), rather than to subvert or disavow them. The case studies seem to propose \(\text{additional}\) structures of understanding and being, rather than attempting to subvert existing structures.

Some illustrative examples would better clarify what I mean with this affirmative quality of aberration. To narrow my scope for the moment to the case of popular films specifically featuring the grotesque, I could easily find several examples where the hero or protagonist either is or becomes physically grotesque or abject, and this aberration is constructed in such a way as to provoke a physical reaction from viewers. Yet, his/her aberration is not presented as some affliction which must be rejected or overcome; instead, it is overtly presented as a form of positive identification. As mentioned, in \(\text{Avatar}\) for example, Jake Sully has to be completely \(\text{transformed}\) into his “Na’vi” (seven-foot tall, bright blue, feline-like humanoid) avatar in order to survive – a transformation which he in fact desires for most of the narrative. In the \(\text{Twilight}\) saga, a human girl not only falls in love first with a vampire and then with a werewolf, she later gives \(\text{birth}\) to the vampire’s child and is \(\text{turned into}\) a vampire herself by her then husband to save her life. Of course, in these two examples, the grotesque figures are also represented as quite attractive most of the
time, which somewhat weakens my argument. Nevertheless, the affirmative quality can also be found in decidedly unattractive examples; e.g. in the children’s animation series *Shrek* (Princess Fiona is not returned to her attractive human shape but instead permanently transforms into a troll); and of course in *District 9* (Wikus van de Merwe transforms into a more admirable person as he turns into an alien). Whether physically, mentally, emotionally or even morally/spiritually, the aberrant form is thus what is overtly presented as the protagonist’s way to self-development or self-fulfilment. Here, the grotesque is not employed to “exorcise” the “demonic elements” of the world (as Kayser (1981:188) would describe it) but rather to assimilate these elements in an affirmative, ennobling manner. To put it simply, if we were to apply this to the classic fairytale, a complete inversion would occur: “beauty” would now turn into “beast” (and not the other way around) to bring about the “happy ending”.

Again, I realise that this affirmative quality does not apply to all aberrant figures in contemporary visual culture, just as not all forms of contemporary visual culture espouse aberrant forms and effects\(^1\). Nevertheless, the very fact that I could find so many instances (and I have not even mentioned half of them) of affirmatively imbued aberrations, warrants investigation. Admittedly, the activity of discerning this quality is to a large extent interpretive – an activity which is thus susceptible to fallacious, subjective readings. Thus, I have devised a kind of “bottom-up” approach of first examining how the aberrations are produced and then testing my assumptions against real viewers’ reactions to at least make these interpretations more verifiable and thus open for future correction as necessary. First of all, however, it is important to look at each aberrant category’s inherent generative and thereby affirmative potential.

### 1.2 Three categories of aberration

As mentioned above, due to the extensive discourse existing on each category, I can only provide a brief overview at this point, concentrating for the most part on long-standing definitions of each category as they relate to my topic. Since I am interested specifically in what I have called their “affirmative quality”, I settled on an approach which considers each category in terms of its effect. As Cohen (1996:x) puts it with regard to the monster\(^2\), an aberrant entity is “best understood as an

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1. Indeed, it seems appropriate to emphasise that even though the grotesque is one of the leading formats of mass art, as Carroll (2003:293), it is not the leading or at least not the only leading format. For every aberrant example in contemporary visual culture one would probably be able to find at least ten un-aberrant instances which belong rather to the categories of the sublime, the beautiful, or, simply the everyday (basically what is known in art history as the tradition of rhopographia). Thus, even as the grotesque has gained a lot of proverbial ground, it is still not ubiquitous and neither does it have to be.

2. Although there is an entire discourse surrounding the studies of monsters which can be distinguished from studies of the grotesque, I will for the purposes of simplicity use the term “monstrous” as interchangeable with the “horrific grotesque” in this thesis.
embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis.” Thus, I follow an approach similar to that outlined by art historian Asa Simon Mittman who argues in a recent collaboration on the topic “that the monstrous does not lie solely in its embodiment (though this is very important) nor its location (though this is, again, vital), nor in the process(es) through which it enacts its being, but also (indeed, perhaps primarily) in its impact” (2012:7, original emphasis). In other words, as alluded to in the introduction, I understand each category and its (aberrant and affirmative) effect somewhat phenomenologically, as a kind of phenomenon. That is, I look at each aberrant form in terms of, firstly, its perceptible characteristics; secondly, its changeable state; and, thirdly and most importantly, its effects on viewers (whether taken individually or collectively), whose reaction in turn is based in part on the former two. In this case, effect is understood, as an intellectual, an emotional or even a physical sensation brought about by the aberrant phenomenon in the viewer. Arguably, this would differ with each viewer and entity; yet, there are certain effects which are characteristic of each category, which I will now outline with regards to their definitive aspects.

1.2.1 The grotesque

First of all, in accordance with what one would expect from an aberrant category, the grotesque is largely recognised as an aesthetic category with distinct features which qualified it as an “antitradition” of classical aesthetics (cf. for example Kayser 1981:180). Regarding grotesque aesthetics (which initially referred to the fantastical, half-man half-plant decorations of Nero’s Golden Palace (figure 3)), historical art theorists such Vitruvius and John Ruskin have cast it as being outside rules and reason, uncontrolled, asymmetrical – the anomalies produced by over-heated imaginations. There is general consensus that the grotesque threatens those biological and ontological categories we apply to make sense of the world, making the world strange in the process; it is a Verzerrung of the known (as seminal author on the grotesque, Kayser states numerous times (e.g. 1981:184)). The chief operation of the grotesque, and indeed of other kinds of aberrations too, is its destabilisation of our certainty of both embodied and mental reality, suddenly leaving us unable to orient ourselves in a world which has become strange, thereby affecting a state akin to insanity for the creator and/or viewer (cf. Kayser 1981:184-5). The basic effect of the grotesque is thus a destabilisation of those familiar categories we apply to make sense of the world. This destabilisation of rational categories may in turn produce short-lived but unpleasant emotional and physical sensations in the viewer, such as anxiety and nausea. This effect is also fundamental to the operation of the abject and female grotesque/monstrous feminine.

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3 This is unfortunately one of those words which can only be reductively translated into English. The closest would be to say that it literally implies a kind of deliberate and forceful tearing, and metaphorically a kind of distortion, misrepresentation or even perversion. The grotesque is thus a deliberate tearing and perversion of that which is known.
What distinguishes the grotesque from my other selected categories, and here I concur with Carroll (2003:297-8), is that properly speaking the *grotesque image* (whether written, spoken or, in our case, visualised) is always of a being (as indeed they are in those early examples from the Golden Palace). The ways in which such a grotesque being’s destabilising effect is achieved is through processes of hybridisation, dis- or decolouration, deformation, disproportion, gigantism and formlessness. Additionally, contemporary grotesque expert Geoffrey Harpham’s (2006) ontological extension of “grotesque fusion” as a fusing not only of inappropriate things/parts but also of *inappropriate conditions* in one being proves expedient; such as pregnant hags, an example he borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin. The grotesque category’s definitive aberrant effect is thus due to its allowing for usually *disparate* characteristics and states, such as animal and human, inside (muscle, blood, etc) and outside, alive and dead, male and female, to *coexist* in a single entity.

Yet, it is precisely because of its improbable and often dualistic nature that the grotesque has an ambivalent effect; arousing not only repulsion and fear but also attraction and fascination. This ambivalence is further nuanced by Carroll (2003) in his “structural approach” which focuses on the three major affective emotional responses that the grotesque usually produces: horror, comic amusement and awe. While horror is prompted by dangerous and impure/toxic entities, comic amusement is prompted by the incongruity of an entity in the absence of danger, and awe is prompted by the miraculous nature of an entity in the absence of both danger and comic incongruity. Harpham (2006:19-20) further describes our ambivalent response in terms of the “grotesque interval”: “Resisting closure, the grotesque object impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future” and we find ourselves under “the temporary reign of the senses”. Unable to fall back on ontological categories which have now been destabilised, we must rely solely on our senses to make “sense” of the encounter and determine our response – an utterly disturbing effect. In an attempt to resolve this destabilising effect of the grotesque interval, we could then decide to either reject the grotesque as an “antitradition” and “a distortion of an ideal type”, repressing or laughing off our own perturbation; or we could push through the grotesque interval and see the grotesque object as a new kind of object with its own “inward possibility” (Harpham 2006:18). In the former, we “retreat with categories intact”, while in the latter “we break through confusion to discovery, and what had at first appeared impossible or ludicrous ‘takes its place among recognized ideals’” (Harpham 2006:18). Basically then, human beings are inclined to habituatise and automatise any unsettling perception, so that our first response to the grotesque will probably be to try to shrug it off in terms of pre-existing categories of understanding. On the other hand, the grotesque can lead us to discovery, but only if we choose to allow it to by looking *beyond* our pre-existing categories in order to create new categories and discover new knowledge.

The “grotesque interval” thus exhibits a likeness with the encounter between viewer/user and artwork/visual culture product – we may likewise find ourselves under a “temporary reign of the senses”, immersed in the viewing experience, before we are able to either neutralise its effect as a *Verzerrung* of reality, or to view it as a unique object with its own “inward possibility”. As such, it is precisely because an aberrant grotesque experience is so destabilising that it can also be heuristic – opening up the third trait of aberration (i.e. raising awareness of perceptual errors) and the
affirmative quality I want to examine. Basically, precisely because the grotesque raises our awareness of the limitations of our referential frames, it allows us to expand these.

A second inherent affirmative quality of the grotesque has been delineated by Bakhtin especially, who brought to light the potential of the grotesque body in folk culture as a liberating and unifying or universalising force. In his re-evaluation of François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin highlights the importance of the “lower bodily stratum” in the medieval carnivalesque grotesque (which usually goes hand in hand with the affective response of comic amusement described by Carroll). For Bakhtin, this is closely associated with grotesque realism and with the grotesque body through the degradation (rabaissement) of the so-called “higher” categories of the abstract, rational, religious, etc. This reached a liberating climax for the populace in the topsy-turvy world of the carnival, the celebration of folk culture and the grotesque body. Because the grotesque body is simultaneously living and dying, reviving and decaying, it is associated with those bodily functions linked to eating, evacuating and copulating – in this way, the grotesque body can be said to be a creator of abject substances, which I will discuss in a moment. As such, the grotesque body is an aberration in that it exists in opposition to the “Classical body” of the “modern canon” which “presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, [and] is shown from the outside as something individual” (Bakhtin 1984:320) as well as being individualistic and impenetrable. Yet, for Bakhtin, it is precisely because the grotesque body is ultimately alive and so similar to the viewer’s own body while the Classical body is not, that the former is the one he views with absolute optimism as “cosmic and universal” (1984:318) because it unites all living beings (and even beyond, the cosmos itself) through their bodily existence. Due to its many “buds” and “sprouts”, “crevices” and “orifices”, it is only through grotesque body “that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome” (1984:317). The effect of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque is thus both to subvert the Classical body canon of the bourgeoisie and to (re)unite the people in laughter and resemblance through the grotesque body.

Of course, Bakhtin analyses a work and society which is historically specific, and his analysis in turn is historically specific, perhaps more remarkably so than most of the cornerstone texts I reference here. However, as the recent controversy surrounding and consequent vandalism of Brett Murray’s painting of South African president Jacob Zuma The Spear (figure 4) illustrates, linking an important public figure with the lower body stratum continues to be seen as an act of political subversion. Even though the tradition of the carnival and rabaissement as Bakhtin describes them have disappeared, equating a powerful social figure with his genitals is as potent as ever in issues of representation.

1.2.2 The abject

Whilst the grotesque body can be understood in terms of its consumption, defecation and copulation; the abject category is often the produced by these same processes. In her seminal work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), renowned theorist Julia Kristeva follows Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille and others in providing a psychoanalytic, poststructuralist delineation of the
abject. The complex book has been both praised and criticised for its *l’écriture feminine* style (despite the fact that Kristeva did not consider herself as a feminist first and foremost) and esoteric approach, but for my purposes it is important because provides vivid descriptions of the abject as an aberrant category. As such, I consciously pick out only those elements which are constructive for understanding the aesthetic *characteristics* and *effect* of the abject while concentrating less on many of the psychoanalytical aspects of the phenomenon.

Like the grotesque, the abject relates to both the senses shared mental frameworks – in this case what is considered as “clean” and what as “impure”. The abject also differs from symbols/signs in that it confronts us through its very materiality and in the process with our vulnerability as physical beings. Unlike the grotesque, however, the abject is not necessarily a being and it is often something which is in fact by nature normal and which vividly reveals our own mortality.

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death.  
In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, [...] refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. (Kristeva 1982:4)

The abject thus denotes the very products of life that we must in one way or another disassociate from because they are a constant and visceral reminder of our own decay. As such, one of the chief materialisations of the abject is formlessness and viscosity (whether as a thin fluid or a thicker substance). When Carroll (2003:300-1) refers to “impure” or “toxic” substances which blur boundaries or which are impossible to accurately categorise (such sewage and sludge), these would thus qualify as abject. This kind of aberration is thus due (as with the grotesque) to both its *physical characteristics* and its *changeability*.

Moreover, the abject is manifest through its sensory and corresponding mental and emotional *effect*. That is, the effect of the abject in this regard is very much a physical reaction, usually a violently unpleasant one at that, immediately causing us to attempt to extricate and decontaminate ourselves from this substance. Carroll (2003:302) also adds a further understanding to our violent reaction as “primarily an evolutionary safeguard for avoiding the poisonous, the noxious, and the contagious by splitting or vomiting it out if we ingest it, by closing down our nasal passages if we smell it, or by cringing or wiping away violently from our bodies if we touch it.” Our instinctive reaction is thus one which is also more directly an act of self-preservation than solely a psychic suppression of the knowledge of our imminent death. Even when we realise that a substance is fairly harmless – for example, menstrual blood – its smell, colour and texture may still provoke a strong bodily sensation to avoid touching it or wash ourselves after coming in contact with it. In this case, the aberrant effect is thus due to the substance’s physical and variable qualities but also, more significantly, to the beholder’s repulsed reaction to it which may often be exagerrated. Because it directly affronts our senses like the skin on a glass of warm milk (Kristeva’s famous analogy), the abject often prompts such a strong physical reaction that it temporarily threatens our rationality. As with the grotesque interval, the effect of the abject is to place us under “the temporary reign of the senses” and this highly destabilising sensation already threatens our individual subjectivity as we...
lose rational control of our senses (again, showing certain similarities to a highly immersive experience in visual culture or fine art).

The abject also holds a further threat in terms of the rules of society. Kristeva distinguishes between three kinds of abject, each associated with the body but also with human culture and learned behaviour: food (which is “probably the most elementary and most archaic”, 1982:11), excrement and the female/maternal body. These are notably virtually identical to the three functions of the grotesque body, except that reproduction is now conflated with the female body (an aspect which is particularly important in the female grotesque). In addition to its sensory nature, each type is also addressed by various rules and taboos in each cultural group, governing how/(into/out of)what/where/when we may eat, evacuate and menstruate, breastfeed or even give birth. Often, however, these rules may have little to do with physical health (for example, the taboo of chewing with one’s mouth open). Thus, “it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982:4). In this instance, Kristeva builds on Mary Douglas’ anthropological exposition on the socially and culturally determined nature of dirt as a dangerous disorder (in Purity and Danger, 1966). Harpham likewise refers to Douglas and other anthropologists in grasping the nature of the grotesque as a cultural phenomenon and effect produced relative to cultural prescription.

Where the abject specifically differs from the grotesque is in its active threatening of the distinction between the subject and object, or between “I” (the self) and “not I” (the “other”). Kristeva argues that the human corpse is probably the epitome of the abject: once a subject, now an object, we continue to believe on a subconscious level that it should be alive while realising (but only in theory, for death remains a “concept” until our final moment) that we will meet the same fate. Similarly, that which we expel was part of the “I” subject moments before and is suddenly separate – the effect of these substances is to remind us that we are ourselves not only changeable but in fact constantly decaying. The abject is thus “vile”, “disgusting”, “repulsive”, etc, not merely for its own empirical incarnation, but rather for what it exposes about the vulnerability of our own understanding and subjectivity; thus (according to psychoanalytic theory) the abject effect of female genitalia on men is due to the persisting castration complex. Another author on the grotesque and abject, David Summers (2003:27) thus points out that “if such terms [like obscene] are reserved for things we ought not to see, or cannot bear to see, they also refer to things from which we are at pains to dissociate ourselves, and this dissociation is deeply ambivalent” [emphasis added]. He suggests that this ambivalence is due to the ultimate fallibility of the Cartesian split between mind and body, and our ultimately doomed attempts to reject our own nature as ultimately dying beings.

However, like the grotesque, abject matter and experiences may also be generative. According to Kristeva, if one were to dig into one’s abjection, one could come to a fuller “understanding” (though this kind of “understanding” is clearly not one which is accomplished through rationality, or only partially so), opening up an affirmative potential for this aberrant category.

If "something maternal" happens to bear upon the uncertainty that I call abjection, it illuminates the literary scription of the essential struggle that a writer [and I would extend this to a more all
embracive “creator”) (man or woman) has to engage in with [sic] what he calls demonic only to call attention to it as the inseparable obverse of his very being, of the other (sex) that torments and possesses him. Does one write under any other condition than being possessed by abjection, in an indefinite catharsis? Leaving aside adherents of a feminism that is jealous of conserving its power—the last of the power-seeking ideologies—none will accuse of being a usurper the artist who, even if he does not know it, is an undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well, sexual included.

In this “essential struggle”, the artist thus “undoes” narcissism and yet conversely in the process learns more about him/herself than would otherwise be possible. I would thus contend that, as with the grotesque interval, this is where the potentially affirmative function of the abject effect can begin to be discerned—in this undoing and rediscovery of knowing and of the self. Abjection occurs within “a human animal that has been highly altered” (1982:11), who is thus heterogeneous and therefore experiences abjection because he/she has been “possessed” by this otherness. Precisely because the boundaries of the subject have become permeable, as with the grotesque body, this allows the subject to let the other in and thereby grow (that is, if one encourages instead of represses the abject experience). Again, this heterogeneity, utterly destabilising as its effect may be, is not understood by Kristeva as a negative force but rather as paradoxically affirmative as it “causes me to be” (1982:11). Akin to a sublime experience (but operating on quite different physical territory), the self is reconstituted precisely because it is “lost”.

1.2.3 The female grotesque and monstrous-feminine

As the term indicates, the third category of aberration, the monstrous-feminine and female grotesque, builds specifically on that which is monstrous and female. The original delineation of this fundamentally cultural phenomenon incorporates aspects from psychoanalytical and feminist theory. As with the other two categories, I will for the most part steer clear of the more philosophical aspects of this category; concentrating on the female grotesque in terms of its own characteristics, changeable states and effect (understood once more as having an sensory, emotional and mental component).

Citing amongst others Kayser, Bakhtin, Harpham, Kristeva and Laura Mulvey; film and popular culture theorist Mary Russo argues in her well-known The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity (1995) that previous delineations of the monstrous or grotesque neglect the extent to which gender conventions determine a specifically female being’s status as such (monstrous or grotesque). First of all, as a (conventionally) rigidly subdued object of the symbolic order, the effect is all the more destabilising when a girl or woman transgresses the social role assigned to her. Interestingly, this role corresponds closely to the Classical body canon and its idealised femininity. The ideal feminine is supposed to be all pristine surface – sealed-off, clean, sleek, smooth and carefully contained. However, citing Kristeva’s discussion of the female body in Céline’s work and the Old Testament, Russo asserts that it is especially the fertile and maternal female body with its hidden interior spaces, epitomised by that original “grotto” and “home” of the womb, which
presents the biggest abjection of all. This is because “[b]lood, tears, vomit, excrement — all the
detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly,
though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine — are [subconsciously seen as] down there in that
cave of abjection” (Russo 1995:2). This is precisely why the female body — as a body which
menstruates, lactates and gives birth — as strikingly captured by Bakhtin’s “senile pregnant hags”, so
epitomises the grotesque and abject aberration of the Classical body canon. In addition to the
threatening effect any embodiment of the potentially enveloping maternal presents to the subject
(akin to the abject and grotesque body), the pregnant hag “is loaded with all of the connotations of
fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging” (Russo 1995:63). In
the female grotesque, we thus find once again a vivid manifestation of those aspects of living and
dying which we would much rather repress. However, the female grotesque can also be
transgressive because it is excessive in form and behaviour — pregnant, fat, exuberant, a spectacle —
and the female monster’s nature is that of denying containment. The effect of the female grotesque
is akin to the grotesque and abject in being utterly destabilising, but in this case it appears to present
the biggest threats to a rigidly gendered social order and the psyche which is founded on this.

Notwithstanding its potential threats, Russo argues that just as the female grotesque menaces
the psyche and the symbolic orders, it is inextricably bound to these — that the Western psyche in
fact needs the grotesque female body and persona as a kind of “prop” against which it establishes
itself (1995:6). Just as the “higher” orders of civilisation needs the “low” of folk culture in order to
sustain the artificial high-low dichotomy, so the symbolic order needs these unruly women as a
counter example to keep ideals of femininity in check. Thus, by analysing David Cronenberg’s Dead
Ringers and Georges du Maurier’s Trilby, Russo argues that even when grotesque figures are
ostensibly male, “their identities as such [male grotesques] are produced through an association
with the feminine as a body marked by difference” (1995:13).

Barbara Creed, in turn, expounds on the female grotesque in terms of the “monstrous-feminine”
taking the specifically female monster in horror films as her case material. She argues: “As with all
other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she [the female monster] is defined in
terms of her sexuality” (1993A: 3); which in each case is performative (i.e. produced by the
character’s aberrant actions and changeable states). Like Russo (whom Creed actually pre-dates),
Creed links the monstrous-feminine with a psychical operation in the phallocentric order; in this
case, Freud delineation of the castration complex — it is precisely the female body’s difference from
and lack in comparison to the male which makes her fundamentally monstrous. Creed proceeds to
discuss the various “faces” of the monstrous-feminine, from the young girl who transcends social
rules to the castrating mother. I would follow this line of thought by claiming that the gendered
monster can thus be understood according to two lines of reasoning: as always potentially
monstrous (thus fundamentally monstrous, aberrant because of her characteristics) and as assuming
monstrosity when she transcends gender boundaries (thus circumstantially or performatively
monstrous, aberrant because of her changeable state). Firstly, precisely because the maternal
imaginary (and by implication all forms of femininity) is closer to the pre-symbolic Real, it is closer to
the uncontrollable and therefore threatening realm of the body — it is always potentially monstrous.
Secondly, a woman can become monstrous when she assumes prohibited power (usually over a man, such as the *femme fatale* who first overpowers the man by seduction and then kills him). Thus, the tension between the Classical body canon’s closed-off surfaces and the grotesque body’s hidden interiors comes to the fore again – even when a woman conforms to the ideals of the Classical canon she retains her monstrous potential, either through her very embodiment or through her ability to transgress gender roles. An embodied, living female always possesses this double aberrant threat of the female grotesque.

All of this being said and being significant for my purposes, what is of interest to me with regards to the affirmative function of the female grotesque is Russo’s and Creed’s delineation of the grotesque in terms of a female bodily performance, in other words in addition to having a psychological dimension it is specifically *corporeal* and *performative*. Despite her fundamental monstrous potential, the female grotesque is best understood as an *operation* threatening the non-grotesque subject, yet it is here that its affirmative potential may be discerned. As with grotesque realism, the carnivalesque and abjection, its heterogeneous and changeable nature is precisely what imbues the monstrous-feminine with *creative, generative potential*. For example, Russo (1995:75-9) comments on how being a “freak” was viewed with *pride* during and after the counterculture of the 60s (although this often included only “cultural” freaks and neglected “real” freaks), precisely because it created new ways of being in the face of “the Establishment”. The same goes for the woman who consciously “makes a spectacle of herself”, as Russo (1995:159-181) illustrates with reference to Fevvers in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*. Akin to that of the carnival’s participants, there is a certain liberating joy in being a “freak” and “spectacle” of a woman. Thus, while Kristeva (1982:8) points out that “laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection” – and Freud, Carroll and Harpham would all concur that humour is a way of rejecting and keeping a safe distance from what in fact disturbs us – this displacement applies only to those laughing at the aberration, not those laughing *with* (and thus celebrating) the aberration. Russo (1995:73) proposes an inversion of grotesque laughter when it is associated with the grotesque subject, which she aligns herself with:

> For now, right now, as I acknowledge the work of feminists in reconstituting knowledge, I imagine us going forward, growing old (I hope), or being grotesque in other ways. I see us viewed by ourselves and others, in our bodies and in our work, in ways that are continuously shifting the terms of viewing, so that looking at us, there will be a new question, the question that never occurred to Bakhtin in front of the Kerch terracotta figurines – Why are those old hags laughing?

In other words, when female grotesques and various other social outcasts *celebrate* their own grotesqueness, they abruptly turn the proverbial tables. These self-aware and proud female grotesques revel in their aberrant nature and in their destabilisation of their detractors. They make clear that our initial and presumably negative response to them may after all be due to a shortcoming in our own perception. Because they actively embrace and celebrate that which qualifies them as grotesque or monstrous, their *perceived* aberration becomes affirmative and turns out to be just that: perceived. As with the grotesque interval, we the viewers may thus become
aware of the limitations of our previous prejudices and frameworks. Thus, interaction with the female grotesque is also imbued with a heuristic potential for the willing viewer or participant.

1.3 Research question and objectives

The main research question would thus be: how do the case studies espouse aberrant effects, and to what extent can these effects be said to serve an affirmative function? As mentioned above with regards to Mittman’s (2012:7) definition of the monstrous, aberration can be largely understood in terms of its effect or impact, which is produced by the physical properties of the aberration, its changeability and the viewer’s reaction to it. As such, in terms of the visual representation of aberration, the representational, medial and formal properties of the work as well as its engagement with the viewer (which is simultaneously sensory, emotional and mental) need to be examined. I realise that to fully do this question justice would require empirical research (such as having an actual audience fill in a questionnaire after viewing District 9 and an exhibition of Mntambo’s work); unfortunately time and space constraints do not allow for this at present. Instead, the aim is that this thesis serves as a pilot for my prospective Ph.D. for which empirical research will be more practical and necessary. As such, for the purposes of this thesis, the viewer’s reaction in each case is a projection of the probable effect on a viewer which consists of a combination of “an educated guess”, artists’ statements, interviews, existing reviews and my own personal response. Admittedly far from an ideal solution, it should nevertheless suffice for the purposes of this thesis as a pilot for my future research.

The subquestions which follow on this for each work would be: How do the material construction and the medium-specific characteristics of the work relate to its effect on the viewer’s senses, emotions and mental conceptions? For example, how do District 9’s construction and specifically cinematic characteristics compare with Mntambo’s specifically cowhide and body mould artworks? As such, this could further raise interesting questions regarding inter- and remediality, although I will mostly refrain from delving into these for the sake of brevity and clarity. An image’s effect is also largely due to its less material qualities (e.g. genre framings, cultural functions, etc), so it would be necessary to also investigate these.

Other hermeneutic readings of the cases exist; such as District 9 “as a spectacularly violent, racialised revenge fantasy” (by John Rieder, 2011), and a dialectical, Derrida-ian “carnophallogocentric” reading of Mntambo’s work (by Ruth Lipschitz, 2012). My research question would thus be relatable to existing literature on the case studies, yet would also be distinct not only in bringing the two together under the umbrella of aberration but in looking at how these aberrant effects may serve an affirmative function. I will thus concentrate on the construction and effects (destabilising and affirmative) of the works first and foremost, and not so much on those more ideological aspects of society which the works could be argued to symbolise. The latter contexts, important though they otherwise are, will thus for the purposes of this study only be looked at in so far as they relate to aberration.
Part of the objective of this study would thus be to research from a distinctive, effect-driven angle these South African examples, each of which are important in their own right but which considered collectively would go some way towards elucidating some characteristics of contemporary visual culture in the country. This is especially true given the divergent media they consist of and the spheres of visual culture they form part of, which should make for a fruitful analysis. On a more ambitious note, it would be hoped that the research (more so my Ph.D. research) would explore and thus open up interesting areas of discussion in the more established terrains of the grotesque, abject, and monstrous-feminine in contemporary visual culture.

1.4 Research methodologies
I draw my methodology from aspects of Hans Belting’s Bild-Anthropologie and David Bordwell’s “historical poetics” (along with Jason Mittell’s adaptation thereof). The former was in fact not intended as a methodology, nevertheless, Belting’s conception of the image, medium and body can be employed as an analytical tool. In addition, his delineation of the interrelated nature of images proves most expedient for the analysis of my chosen visual examples which rely partly on inter-image relationships for their aberrant impact. However, the prominence which Belting gives to the image, results in the medium being cast in service of the image, so that the medium’s sensory and moreover its historically established conventions’ influence on the viewer is given a secondary status to a certain extent.

On the other hand, I feel that the medium plays a significant role in determining the aberrant effects of my case studies, both of which deliberately rely, at times even ironically, on the viewer’s preconceptions of the medium along with the medium’s sensory impact for their effect. I thus find it necessary to address this limitation in Belting’s theory with historical poetics, as developed by Bordwell and Mittell, because this methodology takes the research object’s medium-specific construction and formal properties as its point of departure. Unlike the broad purview of Bild-Anthropologie, historical poetics was intended as a methodology, specifically to analyse and inventory cinematic effects within a broader historical context. My focus will however be much narrower than Bordwell’s and Mittell’s, who conduct an inventory of specific genres within film and television. Instead, I will only look at those specific medium conventions which impact upon my case studies’ aberrant effects and viewers’ perception of these. Historical poetics as a methodology thus provides a way to look at the historical, formal context and material construction of the chosen works as well as viewers’ interactions with them. However, it neglects those iconological family relations which exist within historical contexts between images themselves. To a certain extent, it also passes over the way images depend on a specifically embodied viewer to come into their own, the latter issues being addressed by my adaptation of Belting’s theory.

Thus, once more in keeping with the grotesque hybrid, my methodology will likewise be an unusual hybrid of disparate approaches. Although it is expected that each approach will align better with one of the case studies than the other (Bild-Anthropologie with Mntambo, and historical poetics with District 9), their differences will bring to light unique insights into the diverse aspects of
aberration and its effects in both cases. On the other hand, neither approach was developed due to a specific interest in the aberrant image tradition. As such, the thesis may shed some new light on these two approaches, because of my specific focus.

1.4.1 The image, medium and body in Bild-Anthropologie (image anthropology)
In accordance with the ambiguous German word Bild (akin to “beeld” in Dutch and Afrikaans), Hans Belting’s Bild-Anthropologie implies both physical artefacts and mental imagery. Furthermore, as the second part of the term implies, the approach is also concerned with the “anthropology” of images, examining their origin and inter-relationships as human products. As such, this approach compliments historical poetics well because it likewise considers images as material constructions which are historically situated, but it also opens up other avenues of investigation of images as interconnected, mental products (understood as being more than a sum of cognitive functions) functioning in and across periods and cultures. As such, certain images and image traditions can be “anachronistic” in existing across time. For example, Mntambo’s Zeus (figure 26) refers to a particular mental image which originated in ancient Greek mythology of the Olympian god as a bull, but the image persists across time, disconnected from its original cultural significance, and even original gender and race, in Mntambo’s case. Belting’s theory thus proves expedient because it recognises the immaterial heritage of images. In addition, he locates this approach within his conceptual triad of the image, medium and body. This interrelated framework is especially useful in unpacking my research question, because it allows me to distinguish between the influence of the image, medium and the body in creating the aberrant effect. Belting’s focus on the image as a historical entity distinct from and migrating across media is also radical in the face of dominant media studies based approaches (which normally only view the image insofar as it is constructed by the medium). Moreover, it is specifically useful for my analysis of the grotesque and to a lesser extent the feminine grotesque and monstrous feminine, which have rich image histories (in the case of the former, dating back at least two millennia).

In light of its Germanic ambiguity, for Belting the word “image” thus implies both an “internal” and an “external” component at the same time, and these two components are inextricably reciprocal – “mental images are inscribed on external ones and vice versa” (2011:5). Individual images should thus not be separated from the larger tradition (of images) of which they are part; nor should they be confounded with their medium – both aspects go towards the construction and reception of the image. Belting (2005:302-3) thus conceived of images as happening through the transmission of the medium and perception of the viewer. This distinction seems particularly useful

4 There is of course an extensive discourse on the fashionable topic of the body. However, for the purposes of this thesis I concentrate only on the body as delineated within my outline of the aberrant categories (relative to both the visual product’s representation thereof and to how this relates to the grotesque and aberrant effect on the viewer’s body, especially the senses) and by Belting (relative especially to the embodied perception of the image).
in terms of the three aberrant categories which, as we have seen, can never exist as purely abstract concepts, instead owing their particular power to their potent effect and physical manifestation as well as existing as a kind of cultural construction and image tradition in themselves. Thus, Belting’s understanding of images as both external, material manifestations and internal, mental images, prove profitable in terms of my own understanding of the aberrant effects.

In addition, Belting’s (2005:303) “new kind of iconology” is new (and of special interest) in so far as he conceives of images as both distinct within but also migrating across time, space and cultures. This understanding is productive for the images of the aberrant categories which, although partly culturally and historically specific, do indeed “migrate” across cultural and temporal divides. Moreover, unlike Panofsky’s iconology Belting’s “iconology” is in line with the more recent development of visual culture studies, because he also examines images and their family history beyond the confines of the beaux-arts, which is of course especially useful because both my case studies draw upon the viewer’s familiarity with image traditions inside and beyond the fine arts. Moreover, according to Belting, images employ their medium in a specific way.

Thus, as to the second leg of the Belting’s conceptual triad, he defines media as being both vehicles for the image and as pertinent in their own right (although he emphasises the former, as stated previously). This contention is especially significant in District 9, because the film employs the cinematic medium’s as well as its sister television’s characteristics and conventions in a particular way to create as well as comment self-reflexively upon the effect of its aberrant images. Yet, Belting recognises that the degree of “invisibility” of the medium is also to a large extent determined by the viewer’s perception. Medium and image are thus distinct and unified in a complex tension, both co-constitutive and “competing” for the viewer’s attention. In other words, according to Belting, the image cannot exist without a medium to transmit it in the first place nor can the medium “work” without an image to transmit; yet, the more we concentrate on the medium, the more the image disappears from our attention until a self-referential medium in fact “turns against” its image. This distinction and yet union of medium and image is particularly useful for unpacking the issues surrounding my case studies, both of which employ self-referential media to open up the affirmative potential of their aberrant images.

Nevertheless, at this point, Belting would remind us that the mediality of an image cannot be equated with its materiality or physicality, especially in today’s new media world (think of CGI, for example) but also because each medium has over time developed its own conventions. By the same token, media cannot be equated with techniques or technologies, the latter two being facets of the former. This is where his conception of media emerges as being richer than Bordwell’s, who at times seems to equate the medium, and to a certain extent the image as well, with its formal properties and techniques. Belting further adds a sociological dimension to his definition of medium in how it is put to use by a particular culture. Media are thus also imbued with ideological implications so that

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5 In parallel to Viktor Shlovsky’s (1917) concept of “habitualisation” and its counterpart in art “ostranenie”; and Walter Benjamin’s (1936) notion of a medium changing and training our perception.
“[t]he politics of images relies on their mediality, as mediality usually is controlled by institutions and serves the interests of political power (even when it, as we experience it today, hides behind a seemingly anonymous transmission)” (Belting 2005:305). While I will refrain in this thesis from detailing all the ideological implications of the various media which come into play in each case study, this dimension is especially important in District 9’s utilisation of documentary techniques and Mntambo’s utilisation of cowhide as a medium. The sociological and cultural roles which the various media and their techniques fulfil thus shed some light on the effects of each selected work, and are thus examined to this limited extent.

The third leg of Belting’s triad – his conception of the human body in relation to images and media – is highly relevant to this thesis. First of all, as alluded above, I would agree with Belting that media are what connect the viewer’s body with the image because media “channel our perception and thus prevent us from mistaking them either as real bodies or, at the opposite end, as mere objects or machines” and thus it is because of “our own bodily experience that [...] we can] identify the dualism inherent in visual media” (2005:305). Moreover, through various mental processes and embodied reactions, we “animate” media (in particular in the case of written words) in order to experience the images they transmit as being “alive”. This particular kind of embodied perception it seems to me is palpable in each of the three categories but especially the grotesque and monstrous-feminine, where the impact of the aberrant image relies heavily on the viewer’s reanimation of them as “living” beings. It is thus also particularly illuminating in terms of District 9 and Mntambo’s sculptures, where the sensory and resultant emotional and mental effects are based on our animation of the media and images.

Belting consequently develops a most interesting case for our bodies as a “living medium” because it is through them that we are able to process, receive and transmit images – it is within the body that we “animate” media and images. While observing that the term “body” has itself become highly problematic, Belting claims that the human body is “the locus of images” in that it is “a place in the world, a locus in which images are generated and identified (recognized)” (2011:37). This is especially relevant to images of aberration in general, because they rely so heavily on the body’s lived, sensory reality (e.g., to perceive physically impossible or dead entities, and the smell of abject substances) for their powerfully destabilising effect. Further, Belting (2011:52-6) offers an interesting explication of the cinema as a public locus of images where our images (of ourselves and also our mental images in general) may easily “flow over into the images of the film”6. Because of the intense immersion and mental exchange offered specifically by the cinematic image, the aberrant effect of such a grotesque or abject image would be that much more potent in the shared and dream-like experience of the cinema. This observation, of course, proves especially relevant for District 9. Still, I would contend that a comparable amplifying experience could arguably be possible

6 In this instance, Belting cites anthropologist Marc Augé who in turn refers to film theorist Christian Metz to delineate the dream-like experience of watching a film which offers this process of simultaneous perception and (mis)identification.
in the isolated, silent, public space of the art gallery, which similarly promotes collective immersion and a confluence of external and internal images in the viewing experience and thus effect of Mntambo’s work.

1.4.2 Historical poetics: cinematic constructivism, medium specificity and viewer response

Because Belting’s approach runs the risk of becoming rather abstract and it places the medium in service of the image, David Bordwell’s historical poetics is a useful way to create a more balanced methodology (a difficult enough if not impossible feat in itself). The conflicts between the two approaches may also make for an interesting exploration into the nature of aberrant effects. This is because historical poetics is an empirically based methodology which focuses on specific, historical cinematic practices; medium-specific construction; and the intentions of the actual creators. Basically, despite its literary connotations, “poetics” as Bordwell (taking his cue from Aristotle) applies the notion, entails studying the “principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve a particular effect”; and also “how and why [...] these principles [have] arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances” (1989:379). In other words, this methodology analyses distinct devices and the conventions they follow in order to produce certain effects in cinema (originally, as embodied by Eisenstein’s and other constructivists’ use of montage).

As such, historical poetics thus shares much with its sister method “neoformalism” (initiated by Bordwell, his wife Kristin Thompson and Noël Carroll) in looking at the formal, stylistic aspects espoused by specific film makers or in specific film movements. Historical poetics is however not purely formalistic as it also historicises these devices and conventions in examining how and why they were developed. Thus, while this approach to a certain extent neglects considering images as independent from medium (as Belting’s approach does), it is useful as a way to analyse the medium-specific construction of an image. While Belting’s approach is thus more art historical in its delineation of the image in relation to iconological traditions, Bordwell and Mittell apply a method which is more closely aligned to media studies. This is useful because aberrant effects rely closely on their impact on a viewer’s senses; an impact which it seems is thus closely intertwined with the medium.

Historical poetics is thus expedient as methodology in my case because I analyse the ways in which the selected works are constructed and how they produce medium-specific effects (in relation to aberration). Furthermore, Bordwell inverses a conventional hierarchy by understanding “artistic intentions, craft guidelines, institutional constraints, peer norms, social influences, cross-cultural regularities and disparities of human conduct” as constituents which influence “how films work, and why under certain circumstances they came to look the way they do” (2007:1). Of course, Bordwell’s scope is much larger than mine – taking a large, representative group of films as his case study in order to discern patterns of cinematic practice, while I look at one film and a small selection of one artist’s works. Thus, although I will similarly look at these various factors in each of my case studies, my focus will be to see how these influence my visual examples’ effects in terms of aberration.
A further useful albeit somewhat idealistic characteristic of Bordwell’s method is his advocacy of “[e]mpirical inquiry […which] involves checking our ideas against evidence that exists independent of our beliefs and wishes”, evidence that “is corrigible in the light of further information.” As such, historical poetics is thus a historical practice which asks “midlevel questions”, such as “What regularities of film technique can one find in classic Japanese cinema or more recent Hong Kong filmmaking?” (2007:3) – a question he approaches in his comprehensive work on Yasujirō Ozu’s films. Proceeding from the verifiable answers one posits, one can then – as indeed Bordwell does – move on to discern and unpack larger implications, such as how viewers are able to make sense of films in the first place. Due to Bild-Anthropologie’s theoretical and art historical focus (on, e.g., inter-image relationships), it does not necessitate the same kind of “bottom-up” empiricism. However, because my thesis focuses on effect, I think it is vital to find verifiable answers as to how my visual examples’ construction aids their impact. I will thus begin by looking at how the effects are constructed in a medium-specific way before moving on to the larger implications of how these effects acquire an affirmative quality. In this instance, historical poetics would allow me to address questions such as “what role does high quality CGI (computer-generated imagery) play in the grotesque effects of District 9?” but not “what does the film express in terms of racial segregation in South Africa’s apartheid past?” This is not to say that the cultural and historical signification of the past will not figure in my understanding of the effects – indeed, as we have seen, each aberrant category and its potential affirmative function is very much culturally and historically qualified. Similarly, I deviate from historical poetics in that I will not conduct an in-depth analysis of industry or genre developments (e.g. the history of extraterrestrial sci-fi in cinema); instead, I will concentrate for the most part on the historical poetics method in my approach in terms of medium-specificity and the creative choices of the makers in the works’ construction.

Jason Mittell (2012) expands historical poetics by combining the approach with cognitive and reader-oriented poetics, two additions which are of interest to my thesis. After all, effect necessarily implies an effected subject, and this is especially the case with the aberrant categories which I understand partly in terms of their sensory, emotional and intellectual effect on the viewer. In his analysis of contemporary complex television narratives, Mittell supplements historical poetics, which generally downplays viewers’ interaction, with cognitive and reader-oriented poetics. “Under this model, viewing (or reading of literature) is imagined by drawing upon our knowledge of cognition and perception, and then positing how the formal elements in a text might be understood by such a viewer” (2012:6), which is then tested against the reactions of actual viewers. Clearly, this would be useful for my analysis of the possible ways in which viewers perceptually engage with the case studies. Thus, even as I will not (for the purposes of this thesis at least) be able to provide an in-depth exploration into cognitive science or empirical research, I would like to test my assertions against the responses of real viewers other than myself by looking at reviews and the creators’ statements. After all, part of ascertaining the hypothetical effect of anything implies looking at its actual effect. As mentioned above, the brunt of this kind of exploration will have to be postponed until I am able to conduct appropriate empirical research, however, I do feel it necessary to at least preliminarily test my notions. For the time being, a variety of sources (such as reviews and box
office records) as elaborated above will be consulted to get a notion of the actual viewing practices surrounding the case studies.
Chapter 2: District 9

2.1 A reduced historical poetics background: Creating sights and sounds

In several ways, District 9 was a pivotal film for South African cinema. The drama and comedy genres have reigned (and indeed continue to reign) supreme over the local industry since its earliest inception (cf. filmographies in Balseiro & Masilela 2003:243-5 and Maingard 2007:200-6), so that District 9 is remarkable merely by being science fiction. Yet, as mentioned in the introduction, it is important to remember that the popularity of the sci-fi and horror genres in South Africa is comparable to the USA. Thus, District 9 was exemplary of South African tastes for popular culture if not of the local film industry at the time. However, as also mentioned in the introduction, the film is further exemplary in that it has directly and indirectly spurred the growth of the sci-fi, horror and fantasy genres in the local industry (e.g. Night Drive (2010)).

District 9 is furthermore remarkable because of its production budget of USD30 million. The film owes this budget to its producer – Peter Jackson (of Lord of the Rings acclaim) who was collaborating with Blomkamp at the time on a film adaptation of Halo which subsequently fell through. This is a relatively small budget in comparison to similar studio films which combine live-action footage with high-end CGI. Visually comparable films of 2009 such as Where the Wild Things Are and X-Men Origins: Wolverine had respective production budgets of USD100 million and USD150 million (Box Office Mojo 2011). 2009 was also the year that Avatar was released, which won virtually all the major awards for best visual effects for which District 9 was nominated. Considering that Avatar’s production budget was around USD230 million (Dickey 2009), it is still an achievement that District 9 was a contestant with a budget that was only 13% of this. On the other hand, District 9’s budget is phenomenal for locally produced films. District 9’s budget translates to approximately R240 million, where the budget for the average locally produced film is currently between R4 million and R7 million (between USD500,000 and USD900,000) (Van Schalkwyk 2012). On the other hand, internationally produced films made in and about South Africa like Invictus (also released in 2009)

Whenever one speaks of a “national cinema”, issues surrounding definition arise. Should one include all films which are ostensibly set in the country (versus simply being shot in the country), even when these are written and directed by and star foreigners (e.g. Invictus which was based on a book by a Briton, was directed by an American and starred Americans in the leading roles)? Or should one limit it to those films which were created for the most part by nationals of that country? Because I am here addressing issues of both local social history and industry, my definition would follow that of Balseiro and Masilela (2003) in including both strands under “national cinema”.

Of course, this is not to say there were no such examples before District 9. Darrell Roodt (who directed the Oscar nominated Yesterday and Cry the Beloved Country (1995 version) for one made some forays into sci-fi-horror (e.g. Dracula 3000 in 2004) and fantasy (Sumuru in 2003), and even before this, there were a handful of appearances in these genres, such as The House of the Living Dead (1974) and The Demon (1981). However, none of these met with any kind of comparative acclaim, so I will leave them aside at this moment.
have much larger budgets (in this case USD60 million, *Box Office Mojo* 2011), although this would mostly be due to factors which locally produced films would not have to contend with such as the salaries of famous Hollywood actors. What all of this translates to for the historical poetics and success of *District 9* is that it was internationally remarkable for its achievements given its relatively small budget which allowed it liberties most high-budget films would not have; and locally it was remarkable for its relatively huge budget which allowed for the production of a *high-end sci-fi* film. Both of these factors created an additional potential for increased verisimilar and aberrant effects. The former allowed Blomkamp freedom from the limitations imposed by big studios so he could feature only unknown actors and include politically-charged, highly graphic material. The latter meant that the film could be all the more convincing, impressive and even all-round disgusting.

This leads me to another important aspect of the film’s individual historical poetics which played a decided role in its aberrant impact: its photoreal visual effects. These were due to technological advances and Blomkamp’s professional history. What the budget of the film made possible and what in turn makes it even more exceptional in the South African context, and, to a certain degree, even internationally, is that the non-human creatures, their ship, the mechanical exoskeleton and most of the weapons were computer-generated images (CGI). The designs were initially developed by Weta Workshop, but as the company’s resources were steadily absorbed by *Avatar*, Canadian-based company Image Engine took over the majority of visual effects. Jason Cope (who also plays Grey Bradnam – UKNR’s\(^9\) chief correspondent) acted as most of the aliens in the scenes, creating a consistency of body language for the aliens (Gilchrist 2009; Walters 2009). He was dressed in a light-reflecting lycra suit and wore stilts to reach the appropriate height (the adult aliens average 7 feet and above; e.g. figures 5a & b). His body movements and facial expressions were then replaced with the digital aliens through the computerised processes of key frame motion capture and roto-mation. Director and co-writer Blomkamp is also an experienced visual effects artist so he had a clear idea from the outset of which effects would be viable and how to execute the filming to make these possible. In an interview with Steve Weintraub (2009), Blomkamp explains how, based on his background in visual effects, he chose to give the aliens a hard shell exterior and place them in specific lighting environments because these would be conducive to photoreal visual effects. Indeed, he also explains how, since the 1990s, the increasing affordability of home computers and 3D graphic or modelling software developed for the private market have been pivotal in his career and moreover in the short films he made in his spare time; one of which was *Alive in Jo’burg* (on which *District 9* is based). Thus, the developments in the PC industry were important for *District 9*’s development too, and moreover, for the interest of this essay, its powerful aberrant effect.

Affordable equipment and programmes were also vitally important in terms of another of the film’s historical poetic features which add to the impact of its aberrant creatures: sound. In addition to its astounding visuals, *District 9* is also outstanding in terms of its sound design; after all, one of its

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\(^9\) An abbreviation which is left unexplained in both the film and derivative websites, possibly to reflect the obscurity and inscrutability of top-secret government organisations.
seven BAFTA nominations and several of the lesser known awards it received was for sound design. While it has been observed that the “click” sounds recall indigenous languages, such as Xhosa and Khoi-San (and indeed, this could add to the sociological parallels of the film’s narrative); the prawns’ clicks are in fact qualitatively distinct from those human vocal chords can produce. Sound engineer Dave Whitehead created them by micro-recording the sounds of living insects at a 192 kilobyte/second rate, and then mixed this with sounds of oceanic mammals and vegetables being rubbed together (Isaza 2009). These sounds were also digitally manipulated to create various echoes and purrs, and were then patterned according to a language Whitehead invented with his assistant. The resulting sound is thus only about “10% human” and would not have been possible without the specific devices at Whitehead’s disposal (Isaza 2009). As such, this feature of the historical poetics of the film is equally important for the sensory effect of the aliens.

Stylistically, District 9 is also exemplary of certain contemporary trends, which in this specific case once more go towards heightening the aberrant effect. The film employs an increasingly visible stylistic trend of recent cinema in an attempt to heighten its verisimilitude; namely utilising formal properties which are associated with television series, news programmes, documentaries, home videos and CCTV. Several financially successful sci-fi and horror films over the past decade have incorporated these “mockumentary” or “found footage” strategies, e.g. The Blair Witch Project 1, the Paranormal Activity series and Cloverfield. District 9 utilises these and various other “real-life” footage conventions to increase its pseudo-real and pseudo-historical effects; e.g. vox pops interviews, expert testimony, individuals reflecting on being filmed and addressing the cameraman (“Trent”, whose replies we are also privy to), CCTV footage, handheld cameras, (seemingly unintentional) out-of-focus and out-of-frame shots (including shots of the aliens), and the intersplicing of “archival” (made to look older in post-production) and “real-time” news footage (which even feature the South African Broadcasting Commission’s actual logo and real-life news reporters). In an interview with Moviefone (2009), Blomkamp reflects on this trend and decision as follows:

I think filmmakers in general are [using a documentary-esque style], as the tools become more and more advanced, [because] you’re able to tell stories in a way that I think is more realistic. The technology just wasn’t there up until pretty recently, and it takes a bit of time for the normal artistic way of approaching something to become a mainstream thing. So now that the technology is there, for me personally, and Children of Men [which uses this technique] is one of my favorite films of the last decade, so I think that people are starting to realize – or like I said, you can only make it a personal choice – but for me to see the fantastic placed in a real setting, it makes it more impactful than seeing those things in a magical, fantastical way. It [placing the fantastical in a fantastical setting] just makes it less real, so I don’t connect to it as much, so I think it’s about connectivity and trying to make the audience feel that this is real and you’re not messing with them, you’re just putting them there. [emphasis added]

What becomes clear then, is that Blomkamp employs these stylistic features as well as sets the film in an actual setting (the township of Chiawelo and Johannesburg CBD) to increase the impact of the fantastical on the viewer and to heighten his/her immersive viewing experience. Of course, Blomkamp unwittingly echoes Philip Thomson’s (1972:6) remark about the grotesque: “far from possessing a necessary affinity with the fantastic, the grotesque derives at least some of its effect
from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way.” In the case of District 9, this realistic framework does indeed heighten the effect of the aliens. In addition to making the grotesque and other aberrations more destabilising, this strategy also serves to increase our sense of immersion and finally our identification with the aliens and Wikus, which are vital for the possible affirmative function.

It is not only the visual effects, setting and stylistic features which increase the film’s verisimilitude; a further strategy for making the world of District 9 “more real” was Sony Tristar’s specific marketing strategies. This included “no non-humans” billboards and signs resembling those featured in the film (e.g., figure 6) at bus stops, etc. which did not feature the movie’s name but only its website address. The website also featured a whole plethora of links to other websites, from Christopher Johnson’s blog (aptly called “MNU spreads lies”, which has since become inactive, hinting at a plot development in the upcoming sequel) to the official MNU website which had an interactive feature allowing actual viewers to report “alien sightings”. There are also some online games and a wiki website dedicated to the world of District 9. In addition, a “real” protest march was organised in support of non-human rights at the 2009 Comic Con. All of these viral marketing campaigns served not only to pique viewers’ curiosity, but also to imaginatively extend the fictional world of District 9 into reality. Thus, by the time viewers finally saw the film, they should already have had a taste of what it might be like to live in its world – it has become more familiar which increases immersion. Moreover, these signs, websites, protests, etc were intended to frame the viewing experience by sensitising viewers to social issues such as racial segregation (or, species segregation) and human (or, alien) rights violations (Oldham 2009). Once this sensitivity has been achieved, viewers would be all the more prone to empathise with the aliens, again increasing not only the verisimilar effect of the film but also opening up the potential for an affirmative aberration.

Now, the reason I sketch all these details of the historical poetics of the film, is because this helps to clarify how the film is constructed and how it relates to and exemplifies contemporary trends within both the local and mainstream American film industry. Grasping the film’s construction and historical context, grounds our understanding of how its effects are produced and grasped by viewers. The industry and technological features of the film elucidate how the overall verisimilar effects of the film are achieved, which in turn amplify the impact of the various aberrations on an actual viewer. Moreover, the various strategies also go towards our emotional involvement with the film’s characters, which is precisely where it becomes possible for the aberrant categories to achieve an affirmative expressive potential (aside from their inherent potential for such an effect, as discussed in the previous chapter). To better analyse the relation between the film’s historical poetics and the aberrant categories, I will now turn to a brief analysis of the effects associated with each category, delineating how these may serve an affirmative function at the same time.
2.2 Sympathy for the grotesque

First of all then, is to hypothesise how the aberrant effects of the film are produced visually by its representational, aesthetic qualities. In District 9, the most patent examples of aberration are of course the aliens themselves and Wikus’ transformation into one of them (although the latter is reserved for the next section). In terms of the grotesque (which emerges as a being that consists of disparate qualities), the film deals in the horrific grotesque for the most part, only briefly tracing the comic and sublime grotesque. The visual image of the aliens (e.g., figures 7 & 8) meets several prerequisites and employs the key strategies of the grotesque. Chiefly, they represent an “estranged world” because they are a mixture of various biological categories and co-existing disparities, which in turn of course are based on our knowledge of our own bodies. That is, they are relatable to our existing knowledge in that they have a basic humanoid body: a torso with a head and appendages, they walk upright on two legs, they possess two arms and “hands”, two legs and “feet”, two eyes and one mouth. Yet, they are drastically different from us in their insect-like appearance. Amongst others, they are much taller than us; they have antennae, maxilla and labia in front of their mouth; they possess an extra pair of mantis-like appendages in their torso, a scaly exoskeleton which sprouts coarse hairs and spikes with patches of slimy skin between scales; and their overall colouration is a dark grey-brown streaked bright yellow, red or green. These bright streaks recall not only the association with insects but also of toxicity (bright colours often evolve to signal toxicity). Their skin seems as if it would be bumpy but smooth and hard to the touch; with softer, slimy patches between scales and coarse hair sprouting on their shoulders and scalps. The aliens’ offspring are likewise extremely grotesque: instead of cute pink infants with soft cheeks, their “babies” (figure 9) are given the form of oozing, dark-red to black pods of pulsating eggs (again, reminiscent of insects) which are connected by machine-like tubes (a grotesque in and of itself, fusing organic with machine) to a cow carcass (itself an abject entity). Thus, from conception to adulthood the aliens meet all the requirements of grotesque aesthetics. Their scrawny proportions are reminiscent of the human skeleton, with an almost non-existent waist and disproportionally large and protruding hips, which create a further uncanny effect. In addition, the aliens are also much taller, faster and physically powerful than human beings; inducing what Carroll would label a horrific grotesque experience, as they are clearly meant to generate fear.

Along with their physical appearance, the aliens’ aural, odorous and behavioural representation enforces the mental image we have of them as utterly grotesque. As discussed above, the sounds which the aliens make, both verbally (their clicking language) and non-verbally (growls, grunts, etc., and the eggs’ screeches and pops), are more insect- and machine-like than human. The rather graphic depictions of various kinds of flesh and bodily fluids, not to mention the oozing eggs, also connote various tastes and smells; presumably inducing an even stronger physical reaction from the viewer. In terms of portrayed life-functions and behaviour, the aliens’ grotesque nature is further emphasised. There is even a blurring of gender boundaries – e.g., one of the aliens is shown wearing a pink bra and yet urinates upright like a male human (figure 10). Although this is only hinted at in the film, the movie’s wiki website claims that the aliens are in fact hermaphrodites (District 9 wiki 2009-2012); thus, they are biological fusions which would in themselves qualify as grotesque.
Nevertheless, the aliens do engage in inter-species prostitution, so their genitalia are presumably at least comparable to ours; again, estranging that which would otherwise be familiar. In fact, MNU’s public explanation of Wikus’ transformation is that he contracted some kind of alien STD, making him all the more grotesque in the eyes of the (fictional) public. Basically then, all of the usual strategies of the grotesque are thus apparent in the externally mediated and resultant internal mental images of the “prawns”: hybridity (e.g., insect-humans), fusion (e.g., of genders, with machines), decolouration (e.g., grey-brown with bright streaks), disproportion (e.g., thin, elongated limbs), gigantism (larger than humans), formlessness (e.g., the eggs) and existing in an inappropriate condition (e.g., alien beings existing on earth). All of these factors thus collectively place the aliens squarely in the fearsome category of the horrific grotesque (cf. Carroll 2003:303-5).

What also comes to light as that our visual and resultant mental perception of the non-humans as grotesque is very closely intertwined with our perception of our own bodies – they are grotesque because we are able to “sense” them as living “bodies” in their own right, as it were, and to compare them with our own bodies. Because we find them similar enough to recognise basic commonalities, we are able to see their deviations all the more clearly (gigantism, disproportion, etc); hence they provoke sensations of fear and repulsion, more so since they are shown as dirty and malodorous. The viewers’ presumed reaction is further modelled and re-enforced by the film’s human characters – the latter usually approach the aliens with disgust and caution (often even in the case of the armed mercenaries; e.g., figures 8, 10 & 11) and avoid touching them as far as possible. As Carroll (2003:304) puts it with reference to conventional horror/sci-fi films: “When we respond with fear to horror fictions, we do not fear for our own lives. We fear for the characters besieged by grotesque monsters. We care for them, if only because they are human beings.” In short, then, the “prawns” provoke disgust and fear in the viewer, partly through their own representation and partly through the depicted humans’ interaction with them. The aliens’ aberrant effect is thus (at least in the first part of the film) shown as characteristic of them, not due to a changeable state or a fault on the part of the observer’s perception (the depicted humans’ reaction and the viewers’ reaction would probably be in sync, so that the one legitimises the other).

This leads me to those aspects of the grotesque body as outlined by Bakhtin, where the category is associated bodily functions and the abject. In terms of the sensations of impurity and disgust which are often associated with the horrific grotesque, even the derogatory term “prawn” “implies something that is a bottom feeder, that scavenges the leftovers” (as the sociologist character Sarah Livingstone asserts). The term is also a play on the so-called “Parktown Prawn”, a large species of omnivorous cricket (commonly mistaken for a cockroach) which is a prevalent pest in the area of Johannesburg. Thus, this derogatory name further enforces the grotesque association with insects for a South African audience. Clearly, the aliens’ vermin-like eating of cattle and goat heads, their refuse, and their beloved cat food all point toward further grotesqueness. In addition to their eating habits, they are grotesque in being mostly nude (something which is underscored by the few prawns who do wear some kind of clothing, like Christopher Johnson), and in vomiting and urinating in public. As we have seen, they partake in inter-species prostitution and their offspring incubate outside their bodies. Even their bodily shape – the slim waist and the protruding hips (protrusion in
itself going against the Classical body canon) – draw our attention to their lower bodily strata. Moreover, their scales and the folds and gaps between them; and their antennae, proboscis-like mouths, maxilla, and so forth; all evoke sensations of a body which is not neatly closed off, instead offering a profusion of protrusions, folds and entrances. Thus, through the processes and fluids associated with eating/drinking, evacuating and reproduction, and their “open-ended” body, the aliens are also grotesque bodies in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. (However, as Bakhtin would assert, the grotesque body is that which is generative and alive, so that the grotesque body already points towards an affirmative potential, which I discuss in a moment.) Thus, the images of the aliens are thoroughly disgusting and fearsome – there is no hint of the sublime about them and where their behaviour might promote mirth (such as the “propeller hat” alien who cram an entire can of cat food into his mouth) this is hindered by their possibly dangerous and repugnant physicality.

So much then for the grotesque image of the aliens, but as Belting would remind us, images cannot be separated from their medium/media, and this is especially true for a horrific sci-fi film like District 9. As discussed above, according to Belting images can be “self-aware” at least in how they employ their medium; and the grotesque effects of the aliens in District 9 owe their potency partly to the devices and formal properties specific to the cinematic medium. Most basically, in order for the total image which I have just described to come into effect, a (pseudo-)indexical audiovisual medium which also retains a narrative or at least temporal aspect is necessary. For example, on a very basic level, if we could not see the aliens move around and if we could not hear their sounds, their aberrant impact would clearly be less fearful; District 9’s convincing and detailed audiovisual effects make our reaction to them all the more visceral (even suggesting smell and taste). Thus, even if we were to “animate” the image of the alien in our minds after reading a text (as Belting suggests we would if we were dealing with a sci-fi novel), it would in all probability not have nearly the same sensory effect which seeing and hearing the film has simply because a film addresses and immerses the senses so much more directly. In addition, because the film also creates smell and taste images (suggested by Wikus’ gagging and the buzzing flies, for example), the viewer would presumably react all the more strongly to the fundamentally sensory destabilising effect of the grotesque experience. Viewing the film in that “public locus of images” of the cinema would further amplify the effect of the grotesque experience: the huge screen, the loud surround-sound speakers and the dark, isolating surroundings, all go towards creating an incredibly immersive, impressive viewing experience. This holds all the more true for a film like District 9 where the sheer scale and sound of the monster is meant to induce fear. In District 9’s case, the marketing campaign and the use of the various intermedial, documentary-esque features and the “real” setting of the film itself presumably further increase the immersive viewing experience and hence the grotesque impact of the aliens’ images on the viewer. Moreover, as I have shown throughout this brief analysis up to now, the image of the grotesque alien which is closely intertwined with medium-specific features, are largely based on the impact on the viewer’s body (via the senses) by the cinematic medium. Thus, it would seem as if image, medium and body all go towards a powerfully grotesque effect.

Yet, in terms of my main hypothesis, the aliens’ aberrant qualities are not only employed to serve a repulsive, fearsome function, but also become imbued with an affirmative quality. So, the
question is: how does this affirmative quality arise? Despite their fearsome, grotesque appearance, do the prawns inspire some kind of reaction in actual viewers which is more affirmative in nature than undiluted disgust? Or on the other hand, do actual viewers find the prawns merely repulsive?

So, it becomes necessary to briefly test my hypothesis of the grotesque experience evoked by the film against actual viewers’ responses. In terms of viewer-oriented poetics, countless reviews indeed confirm that spectators found the aliens to be disgusting, fearsome, dangerous, repugnant, etc., although I only quote some of the more well-rounded instances here. For example, ever-outspoken film critic Roger Ebert (2009) declares: “There doesn’t seem to be a lot to like [about the aliens]. In appearance, they’re loathsome, in behavior disgusting and evoke so little sympathy that killing one is like — why, like dropping a 7-foot lobster into boiling water.” In addition to confirming my suspicion that the aliens’ repulsion is due not only to their appearance but also to their behaviour, Ebert immediately establishes that we feel little sympathy for them precisely because we find them so repulsive.

Yet, what I also observed in reading these reviews is that viewers could still feel sympathy for these repulsive creatures. To cite Ebert (2009) again, he allows that “Blomkamp somehow does [...] make Christopher Johnson and his son, Little CJ, sympathetic despite appearances. This is achieved by giving them, but no other aliens [although I beg to differ on this point], human body language, and little CJ even gets big wet eyes, like E.T.” Here, we find the key to how these grotesque creatures may evoke an empathetic effect even while remaining repulsive: by emphasising their similarity to us. However, other reviewers disagree with Ebert regarding the other aliens. For, unlike E.T., most of the prawns are not small, cute (albeit odd-looking) and clumsy; yet, viewers still empathise with them. Thus, for example, in reply to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) District 9 board discussion on “Why must aliens always look so Butt Ugly??????” [sic], one of the more comprehensive and I believe desired responses to the movie (by “thisnameinuse”) goes as follows:

The Prawns appearing as something designed to be disgusting, unappealing and revolting was intentional. The entire point of the movie was a psychological journey for the viewer... to experience the transition between revulsion to acceptance to investment and endearment. To me, this is one of the most fantastic movies I have ever seen, precisely because of the exhilarating psychological process that I felt myself going through in the movie. At the beginning of the movie, I almost felt like turning it off because I didn’t want to see them anymore. By the end of the movie, I loved them, and wanted them to succeed and prevail. This was the whole point. Avatar, by contrast, was supposed to be a different issue. Artists took great pains to make Neytiri into an attractive, even weirdly desirable creature, and casting Zoe Saldana as the motion actor and voice talent only helped this process. By the end of Neytiri’s first scene, I liked her and her character. District 9 is supposed to be a more methodical and timed change in heart. [sic]

Thus, what comes to light from these two brief reviews is that, in terms of the affirmative quality of the grotesque in District 9, the film prompts us through certain cues in the narrative and cinematic text to feel sympathy for or empathy with the aliens even though they are horrifically and disgustingly grotesque, as opposed to the awe and desire we might feel towards the sublime grotesque like Avatar’s Na’vi, or the soft spot we might have for the non-threatening and comic E.T.
English literature theorist Gerald Gaylard (2010:169) recognises that Blomkamp’s portrayal of the aliens builds on common creature phobias in prompting our disgust, although for him this makes the portrayal “not exactly ecologically progressive”, so he concedes “that we feel at all for the ‘prawns’ is some sort of achievement.” This observation of Gaylard misrecognises an aim of the film’s narrative, which “thisnameinuse” reflects on: at the beginning of the film the viewers share the human characters’ disgust of the aliens, but at the end we are prompted to look beyond our disgust and begin to root for the aliens. In this sense, the film is thus ecologically progressive, because it makes us feel more than repulsion towards the utterly repulsive. As far as I can see, there are four chief ways in which this emotional response is achieved: portrayed likeness (showing what the aliens have in common with us), explicit social realism (for a South African audience especially, the film recalls the actual living conditions of many of the country’s past and present inhabitants), encouraging sympathy (portraying them as victims of their cruel human counterparts) and finally evoking admiration (for their advanced technology and even behaviour in the end of the film).

In terms of portrayed likeness, the film demonstrates the many physical and emotional characteristics that we have in common with the aliens. On a bodily level, humans feel empathy for other sentient beings which are capable of physical suffering (hence the prominence of animal rights laws, veganism, etc). Following Bakhtin’s line of thought, the grotesque bodies with which the prawns confront us, work on us precisely because we recognise in it something of ourselves. The depictions of their eating, bleeding, vomiting, reproducing, evacuating, etc., are indeed “gross” but these all indicate that they are living and able to feel suffering and this connects our bodies with theirs. Thus while Blomkamp was insistent that the aliens be “as disgusting as possible” like those of Ridley Scott and James Cameron’s Alien movies (Anders 2009), he also insisted that “they had to be humanesque, because our psychology just doesn’t allow us to really empathise with something unless it has like a face and kind of an anthropomorphic shape” (Blomkamp in Oldham interview 2009). We thus empathise with the aliens not only because they are capable of feeling pain, but because they remind us of ourselves. Therefore, the aliens are bipedal, have recognisable body language, expressive faces and eyes – all of which relate to our responses on a bodily and also emotive level. These last three factors are only possible largely because of how the aliens were created by combining the real-life acting of Jason Cope with highly realistic and detailed CGI, and these three are probably key to our empathy – the prawns are shown as capable of feeling emotion. Of course, this capacity is most evident in Christopher Johnson and his son, who express a wide array of emotions from fear and frustration to love and relief. This likeness as well as the narrative progression of the film prompts us to become emotionally involved with their fate as well as with the collective fate of their species. Indeed, in terms of historical poetics, Blomkamp (in Weintraub 2009) realised early on that in order to achieve this emotional effect he would have to switch to the conventions of narrative cinema (such as continuity editing, “invisible” visual effects and an omnipresent camera) in order to “get close” to the characters on an emotional level, which is why when the first time, twenty minutes in, the film switches to this mode is when we are introduced to Christopher, his son and friend (cf. Image Engine 2009:4, 7 & 8).
The film also creates a different kind of likeness through its explicit allusions to social realism (lower case letters). South African audiences especially would recognise the various references to apartheid in the title; to biological racism and the segregation of the oppressed into slums; and to the recent attacks on immigrants (called by the same “aliens” as their extraterrestrial counterparts in the film). Attacks against foreign refugees in South Africa escalated from late 2007 and throughout 2008; at least 62 people were killed and many more were seriously injured and displaced from their homes (cf. Xenophobia South Africa: Press Releases 2007-2012). This was especially worrying since “South Africa has the world’s largest number of registered asylum seekers” of around 260,000 (Human Rights Watch: South Africa 2012), and this excludes illegal immigrants, which is estimated to number between three and seven million (McVeigh 2011). Tragically, since then, xenophobic attacks have recurred time and again, even as recently as August this year (e.g., Xenophobia South Africa: Press Releases). Thus, the images of sentient beings living in extreme poverty and being subject to prejudice and violence, would have “affected South African audiences quite a bit more powerfully than overseas ones, particularly given the suffering on their doorsteps and the still-livid memory of xenophobic violence” (Gaylard 2010:168). While audience members’ reaction in this instance would thus be more individuated depending on our stance concerning the morality of the apartheid system or the treatment of foreigners – and the film does not provide an easy solution (besides Christopher Johnson’s return as the alien messiah) – if our empathy for the prawns is evoked, we would feel it morally reprehensible for them to suffer similar fates as the victims of apartheid and xenophobia. Nevertheless, even though the images may be relate directly to South Africa, Swedish scholar Stefan Helgesson (2010:173-4) refers to this aspect in a global context:

Clearly, the conjunction of corporate interest and the biopolitical reduction of the aliens to “bare life” and homines sacri, outlaws who are susceptible to death but not sacrifice as Giorgio Agamben explains it in Homo Sacer, is the most chilling and potentially radical aspect of District 9. It is by mining this dark seam that the film speaks to our conflicted age. Think of the opening of the space ship, revealing the multitudes of undernourished aliens inside (African refugees perishing in overloaded vessels on the Mediterranean), think of the battle scenes (the “war on terror” and urban warfare in Iraq), the generalized, extreme poverty of the District (Mike Davis’s “planet of slums”), the alien Christopher Johnson’s discovery of MNU’s laboratory (the legacy of biological racism, current day genetic research).

Now, again I must state that it is not the purpose of this thesis to investigate the cultural and socio-political aspects of the film’s narrative; however, these aspects clearly influence the effect which the aforementioned chilling images would have on the viewer. Because of its allusions to humanity’s and more specifically South Africa’s past, the film would prompt an even stronger emotional connection to the aliens and their fate, even though they are portrayed as “the Other” on so many levels. What is interesting is that the film becomes highly reflexive in this regard as it shows us how official discourses and their followers can be immoral and manipulative, while supposed media of “truth” (such as documentaries and journalism) can be unreliable. Instead, the “truths” of the film are found almost exclusively in the “non-official” footage of the conventional fictional narrative sequences (such as the cruel experiments inflicted by MNU on aliens).
In this way, the film sets up an interesting dichotomy between the superstructures of society and “the Other” it alienates. For the most part, this is achieved in the film by the contrast between the politically powerful humans and the disempowered aliens, which impels us to feel sympathy for the aliens. The aliens are tortured and exploited by both the Nigerian gangs (a stereotype which is problematic but which I will not analyse here as it is arguably a meta-image in itself) and the mostly white powers-that-be of MNU and the government. Even Wikus is a cowardly, “small-minded apartheid-era-like apparatchik” (Gaylard 2010:168) at the beginning of the film. The most pointed example is his callous joking while aborting the aliens’ eggs and his comparing their screeching, sentient deaths to “popcorn”. Indeed, several reviews call this the most disturbing and morally offensive scene of the entire film (e.g., Anderson 2010-2012; Jenkins 2009 and TVtropes 2009). Again, this effect is largely due to the medium and our empathy with other sentient beings; we are disturbed because we “sense” their suffering – and indeed that of many of the full-grown aliens – in the face of their brutal human persecutors. Baum (2009:86) thus considers the film from the perspective of post- and transhumanism as it “offers ambiguity about which civilization we should be rooting for and even about where one civilization ends and the other begins – where do we draw the line?” Because the film separates grotesque appearance and behaviour from morality, after initially conflating these in the unreliable “official” footage scenes, District 9 compels an affirmative quality to enter into images and effects which would otherwise be aberrant on all levels. In other words, the film ultimately signifies that the initial aberrant quality of the aliens is at least partly due to the faulty and relative perception of humanity (see for example, Lewis 2010:319). In terms of its narrative progression, the film thus suggests that one should indeed attempt, as “thisnameinuse” hints, to push through the grotesque interval and see the thoroughly grotesque aliens as a new kind of entity with their own “inward possibility” (as Harpham 2006:18 would put it).

Finally, an affirmative effect is achieved because we are impelled to admire the prawns, specifically as epitomised by Christopher Johnson and his son. As a species, their superior technology created interstellar craft and incredibly destructive weapons. While the prawns often engage in violent acts, what is interesting is that the film sets this against the calculated and methodical cruelty of the MNU and the sadism of the likes of Koobus [sic] Venter. Alien violence is “hot-blooded” (and therefore perhaps more forgivable) in contrast to human violence which is “cold-blooded” (and thus callous and more disturbing). At the very end of the film, the aliens also show a certain kind of loyalty towards our interspecies hero by tearing Koobus from limb to limb and leaving Wikus unharmed. Of course, this loyalty surfaces in a very different way in Christopher who vows to return for his people and shows concern for Wikus’ fate. Indeed, for most of the film, Christopher is portrayed as Wikus’ moral and intellectual superior, so that we mostly admire the grotesque alien protagonist more than the non-grotesque human protagonist. As Baum (2009:87-8) argues: “Clearly, the humans in the cinematic audience develop empathy for whichever film characters exhibit such traits such as fairness and compassion, even if other characters are more genetically similar.” In essence, although this is simplifying the film to an extent, this admiration would impact our perception of the “prawns” in general. Moreover, Wikus becomes increasingly admirable as he transforms into an alien, which leads me to the next section.
2.3 Living in abjection: the aliens and Wikus

As discussed in the first chapter, the characteristic operation of the abject is to collapse the distinction between the subject and object, or between “I” (the self) and “not I” (the “other”), so that the corpse is a pinnacle of the abject. I would argue that the figure of the mutating Wikus is the prime example of this operation in District 9. It is also through this process of making the “I” permeable to the other that abjection can “undo narcissism” and make the “I” heterogeneous – a process which for Kristeva can be potentially positive and cathartic. Like the grotesque, the abject confronts us through its very materiality and thus it relies on our embodied perceptions and reactions. Of course, in District 9 this materiality is not directly manifest; nevertheless, due to our ability to experience images in our bodies, the photoreal, audiovisual depiction of abjection in an immersive environment like a cinema would lead to a similar albeit weaker sensory effect. Unlike the grotesque, the abject is not necessarily a being but is still associated with sensations and cultural conceptions of repugnance, dirt and impurity (which is not always the case with the grotesque, especially not with the sublime grotesque). In fact, as we have seen, the abject often takes the form of substances which are associated with bodily processes and as such is associated with food, excrement and the female or maternal body. While I reserve this latter part of the discussion for the female grotesque, District 9 abounds in various kinds of abjections.

First of all, even before the aliens appear on screen for the first time, their environment – the mother-ship (figure 12) – is shown as utterly abject: moist, slimy and dark (which presumably further intensifies the horrific grotesque experience), like a sewer or a putrid “grotto” (which of course has womb-like associations). In terms of the narrative timeline, it would make sense that the ship would be dirty – after all, the aliens have been trapped in it for at least three and a half months. However, this rationalisation does not weaken our response to the ship’s interior which again would be guided through the human focalisers. We see and hear a man wiping sludge from the interior door, the team of explorers walk cautiously so as not to slip in the squelching dirty slush underfoot, and those who venture this far into the ship are covered from head to toe in protective suits. The grotesque image of the aliens is thus compounded with the abject overtones of dirt, impurity and the danger of contamination presented by their home environment. It is no wonder then that not long after they are ferried down to a refugee camp on the outskirts of the city, they are quarantined there to prevent further physical and behavioural contamination. At the demand of the general population then, the dirty and uncontrollable “prawns” are banished to the edges of society and civilisation, as befits their abject and criminal status. Of course, the encampment soon turns into a slum, so that the image of the alien as permanently living in filth is firmly established in the viewer’s mind. The aliens’ abjection is further compounded by the variety of things they eat (from their beloved cat food (figure 13) to truck tyres to chunks of freshly-killed Koobus Venter) and the fluids they excrete (projectile vomiting black fluid (figure 14) and ejecting streams of green urine). In light of this, Ralph Goodman (2010:170) thus makes the following assertion (regarding the allegories of the film):

The violence of the second portion of the movie [when the delivery of the eviction notices turns violent] is the obverse of the first [the mendaciously “peaceful” MNU bureaucracy], reflecting the submerged anger of the first part, with a violence which is unremitting and insatiable, typical of
the passion against any Kristevan abject which remains ineradicably present in the face of a schizoid contempt for its very existence. Such contempt—so familiar to South Africans who lived during the apartheid era—springs from a deep-seated fear of the intolerable Other, evoking both a need to distance and compartmentalize it, and a tormented and never-ending obsession to be rid of it.

The aliens’ utter abject existence could thus be seen as creating an utterly “schizoid” and passionately hateful reaction in the film’s humans to be rid of their own projected fetidness. Of course, the aliens continue to thrive and this only fuels the fires of this projected abhorrence.

As such, District 9 stands in a rather stark contrast to the majority of science-fiction films, where aliens and their vessels are either closer to the sublime (thus invoking feelings of awe rather than horror or disgust) or present an outright but clean threat of total destruction (with no opportunity for humans to discriminate against them). As Helgesson (2010:172) puts it: “If, way back in 1979, the first Alien film dared to imagine the future as something grimier than the glossy surfaces of the space-ship Enterprise in Star Trek, District 9 sets a new standard for dirty realism in science fiction—dirty, contemporary realism that unceremoniously does away with the USA as the template of sci-fi imagination.” To reiterate, audiences aware of the living conditions of many South Africans would recognise the social realism of the film here. Literally millions of the country’s population live in conditions comparable to the squalor of District 9; thus, it is reasonable to assume that the aliens may well have no choice in the state of their surroundings. For example, as South Africans would well recall from 2011’s so-called “toilet election”, a significant portion of the population still has a lack of access to basic services, including sanitation. As such, the abjection of the “prawns” and their living conditions becomes familiar and another source of empathy or at least sympathy.

This process of disassociating the abject from its usual condemnation is most apparent in the transformation of the human protagonist: Wikus is at first a “normal” human being who models the rest of his society’s repulsion for the “prawns” but he steadily transforms into an alien, so he is aberrant due to his changeable state. Firstly, for example, in the infamous scene where Wikus and his team find a shack filled with alien eggs, the viewer is clearly meant to find these pods repulsive as the human characters do. As mentioned, these dark blood-red, slowly pulsating pods slowly ooze a black fluid and are connected by dirty machine-like umbilici to a cow carcass (all disgusting in themselves); and their repulsiveness is further highlighted by the soundtrack of buzzing flies and an organic squelching. The naturalised (straight-on, eye-level) camera angle and (handheld) movement further increase the sensation of human focalisation, showing us the scene as if we were “really there” increases this effect. The “normal human” Wikus’ first reaction is to veer away (figure 15), gagging and putting his hand to his mouth; and our viewing reaction may well echo this. However, at this point, the viewer’s identification with him probably comes to an abrupt halt as he begins to exhibit the usual human characters’ callousness towards the aliens. He excitedly describes the nursery as “an amazing find” and proceeds to pull out some of their “umbilical cords” – ironically, his simile increases our likening the eggs to mammalian infants and, conversely, shows that despite Wikus’ similar identification, he is nevertheless capable of “aborting” them. Because Wikus is impervious to their anguish and treats the aliens as a kind of homo sacer whom he feels no guilt
exterminating (even making a joke of their “popcorn” deaths (figure 16) and laughingly offering one of the “plugs” to his protégé Fundiswa as a “souvenir” of his “first abortion”), the audience’s identification with him is abruptly brought to an end (see for example Anderson 2010-2012; Jenkins 2009 and TVtropes 2009). Now, I am not trying to suggest that we would suddenly want to cuddle up to one of these eggs – our disgust is still firmly in tact – but rather at this point we may become tolerant of their abjection. The film thus prompts us to separate our disgust (and the deeper and probably prolonged compulsion this may arouse to exterminate the eggs and aliens) from our sense of morality (they should have a “right” at least not suffer).

Shortly after this, however, Wikus begins to transform after accidentally spraying himself with the black fluid (figure 17). This substance in itself deserves a short analysis: its colour and consistency would already indicate a level of toxicity – recalling old motor oil (another visual echo of an organic-mechanised fusion). Black is of course also a colour which absorbs light and creates indeterminate spaces, so that already lends it the abject ability to blur boundaries. Christopher diluted this black fluid from the green fluid found in alien machinery (interestingly, this fluid in turn looks like the aliens’ urine) in order to use it as fuel for the mother-ship. These two fluids are thus also instances where the aliens’ technology blurs the lines between organic and inorganic (other examples include the DNA-detecting weapons and the amber goo into which Wikus dips his claw in order to control the command module\textsuperscript{10}). The black substance is also similar in hue and consistency to the alien’s vomit and the alien eggs’ secretion. Our image of the fluids at this point is thus that they are inherently excretions of aliens; and that they are organic-machine fusions. Thus, when Wikus inhales the black fluid in the canister, it is doubly abject: inhaling any fluid would be abject (because it crosses the subject-object boundary) but inhaling a black fluid which is excreted by an alien is abject in the extreme. Moreover, as Kristeva would remind us, the abject is that which threatens the borders between subject and object – inhaling a fluid so other than us certainly does this. Indeed, shortly after this, Wikus has a nosebleed with the black fluid dripping into his food and mouth (figure 18, again, ingesting his own abjection); later he vomits black fluid all over the cake at the party (figure 19), at least the alien he encountered earlier did not vomit indoors or over food!

Wikus also loses several parts of his body during the transformation (fingernails, teeth, bits of skin and flesh, e.g., figure 20); parts which he looks at after he loses them. This process is abject as the parts of the “I” suddenly become an “other” which one can scrutinise like an object. His body becomes both the medium for and the locus of the abject image; he witnesses his own abjection. This instance of body-horror presumably also relies on our sensory response, i.e., on our bodies as co-loci of the abject image, for its effect. The most abject aspect of the transformation, however, is that Wikus physically turns into the “other” from the inside out (e.g. figure 21). This transformation is also shown in graphic and convincing detail (although here the effect is created only partially through CGI, owing most of its verisimilitude to detailed and time-consuming make-up). Wikus becomes a mere bodily asset in the eyes of the corporation he worked for and is ostracised due to

\textsuperscript{10} Blomkamp jokingly hinted that this may be the ship’s urinal, increasing its abjection (IMDB 2009-2012)
his abject state (as supposedly infected with an alien STD) from the same community he was employed to protect. After he seeks refuge in District 9, he begins to live like a “prawn”: devouring cat food, becoming increasingly dirty and thus abject (figure 22), and engaging in criminal acts (stealing clothes, a cell phone and an axe, for example). In other words, in a social sense as well as a physical sense Wikus is turned into an object, an “other” who cannot be allowed in society. His aberration is one which is more abominable than the aliens’, because it is due to a deviation from his normal self and this makes him the embodiment of a deep-seated human fear – that we might likewise be contaminated by the dangerous and impure other.

What is perhaps the most remarkable is that despite his increasing otherness in the eyes of his human counterparts in the film, Wikus is meant to become more humane in the eyes of the audience. This is due partly to our own empathy for him as an “underdog” but more so to his increasing empathy towards the prawns and his final act of self-sacrifice (staying behind to stop the mercenaries while Christopher flees). As Baum (2009:87) puts it: “A running theme here is Wilkus’s [sic] gradual transformation from a devout abider of human rules to a selfish survivalist, and ultimately to an altruistic friend of the nonhumans. It’s as if he must lose his humanity to become truly human.” Baum (2009:87) also brings up an interesting issue around our moral concern for Wikus and the aliens after we learn of MNU’s biological experiments:

Those fellow moviegoers whom I asked about this replied that they would reject MNU’s tactics even if the ends were more noble [than the sole purpose of operating alien weaponry], for example to cure major diseases. This scene [of the MNU’s experiments on aliens] is thus at heart a classic case of consequentialist versus deontological ethics. By highlighting the gruesomeness, it induced a deontological reaction in my companions: no ends could justify this terrible means. As someone who is consciously consequentialist, I had a very different reaction: I found myself agreeing with MNU’s tactics, contingent on the assumption that their ends were worthy. Likewise, a deontologist might argue that it is impermissible to give someone new capabilities against his/her will. By contrast, I would permit this given adequate ends, in particular to reduce existential risk.

The film’s narrative thus relies on the viewers’ feeling that it is wrong to make any other sentient being suffer, no matter to what purpose. This feeling is prompted because of the gruesomeness of Wikus’ torture scenes and the mangled alien corpses in the lab; i.e., the cruelty with which MNU scientists reduce their subjects to objects. However, I think that Baum misses out on an important distinction here. Indeed, were this a purely deontological ethical issue, most viewers would indeed agree that it is wrong to give an unwilling subject new capabilities no matter what the consequence. Yet, I doubt whether the average person would object to such an action if it could save someone’s life; Bella Swan being turned into a vampire in the Twilight Saga being a prime example once more. Moreover, it seems that Baum underestimates the bodily dimension of our ethical situation. The torture images are doubly animated within our bodies (firstly as all images are symbolically animated as “bodies” as Belting contends; secondly as bodies in their own rights, which are corporeally comparable to ours). It is not a purely deontological, rule-based issue; it is inextricably bound with our own bodily experiences. I would contend that viewers would opt for whatever route led to the least
amount of (unjust) suffering, whether this would translate as condemnation of experiments being done on sentient beings, or approval of bestowing extra-human powers on an unwilling subject.

Indeed, Wikus’ metamorphosis proves to be as important for his physical survival (even while it originally threatens this) as it is for his moral salvation. Firstly, for example, moments before being “harvested” for his body parts, it is the strength from his alien arm that allows him to break free. Christopher decides to shelter him upon seeing his alien-claw (albeit with the ulterior purpose of finding. It is also his newly acquired alien DNA which allows him to operate the alien weaponry and machinery. In the final scene, the other aliens tear Koobus Venter from limb to limb and spare Wikus presumably because they recognise him as “one of” them (figure 23). Thus, his abject transformation saves him at the same time as it threatens his very existence. In Kristevan terms, it completely undoes whatever bodily narcissism and Cartesian dualism he may have possessed and makes him utterly heterogeneous, but it is precisely this that becomes his deliverance. As such, “[h]is experience has been one of conversion or revelation, based on the challenge offered to his corporeal identity by an alien invasion of his own body, and taking him further in his growth than he could ever have achieved by sheer will power” (Goodman 2010:171). Hence, even though this abject development was anything but willing, it is finally in Wikus’ best interest as a living and humane being; thus, countering Baum’s argument to a large extent. His abjection, despite being unwilling, is his salvation in more ways than one; even serving a consequentialist purpose (uncovering via Fundiswa and Christopher the truth about MNU’s immoral operations). Wikus’ abjection can thus be said to be affirmative: he survives and becomes a more fully-rounded person, the more heterogeneous and the less human he becomes; yet, this is only achieved through unwilling abjection and losing his initially homogeneous humanness. The effect in this case is thus achieved through narrative progression and meaning, and relies on the viewer’s sensory, emotional and intellectual response.

2.4 The (lack of the) female grotesque and monstrous-feminine

In terms of the dichotomy of conventional, stereotypical femininity and masculinity, District 9 does not present overtly gendered grotesques or instances of the monstrous-feminine, as delineated in the first chapter. This is mainly because the aliens are hermaphrodites and Wikus is male; and, unlike the Mantle twins or the male characters in Trilby, they do not owe their grotesque nature to an association with a grotesque female. In fact, aside from being hermaphroditic, the aliens are tall, hard, slim, physically powerful and aggressive – all characteristics which are supposed to be ostensibly “masculine” (I use the word reservedly for equating these characteristics exclusively with men would be sexist and reductionist in the same way as equating femininity with characteristics like softness, curvaceousness, passivity and caring would be). On the other hand, Wikus is hardly the prototypical “white male hero” of such landmarks of the action genre as Die Hard, Rambo and The Transporter. Rather, he is diametrically opposed to the macho Koobus Venter and his businessman father-in-law, and indeed he becomes “the other” and even then has to be saved from Koobus by other aliens. Thus, the film in fact can be said to critique masculine stereotypes. This in turn would
complicate a reading of the representation of the female grotesque, which as we have seen is traditionally established in opposition to the masculine order.

Alternately, one could similarly (over)extend one’s scope to include those instances which may be *symbolic* of the female body; for example, seeing the mother-ship as symbolic of the maternal body. Indeed, it is sealed off from the outside and must be entered (phallically, by men with drills) in order to open up its moist, dark inner chamber (the original grotto of the womb) where creatures (unborn foetuses) reside and are then “born” down to earth. However, in my opinion, this really would be a case of feminist over-interpretation, since there is no actual indication in the film that the mothership is meant to be a symbolic womb (especially given that the aliens are hermaphrodites). Indeed, the few feminist readings of the film that I could find, were either decidedly lopsided (e.g., Sundstrom 2009) or neutrally noted that there were few female characters although the co-writer was female (e.g., Smalls 2010). As an example of the former, here is an excerpt from one of the more comprehensive reviews I could find:

Women do not hold any positions of power, authority, or respect [in the film]. The two women in Wikus’s [sic] life, his mother and wife, are shown in interviews being concerned for Wikus; however, they seem to be devoid of purpose beyond wife and mother. Wikus’s wife also seems to be easily influenced and not an independent thinker. She believes the lies that the media and her father tell her about her own husband. Other women are depicted as sex workers located in District 9. Nigerian warlord Obesandjo (Eugene Khumbanyiwa) uses Nigerian prostitutes to exchange sex for weapons [not confirmed in the film]. These women are so irrelevant to the plot that they are nameless. The only female alien shown is identified by a soiled pink undergarment. We are introduced to the female alien as MNU officials approach her in an attempt to serve her eviction notice and she is urinate [sic] on her house. At the sight of this Wikus is disgusted and screams out to her “Don’t pee on your own house!” Wikus insinuates that she is not intelligent enough to know where to urinate, and further she does not possess the knowledge that she should not urinate on her own residence. Lastly, people begin to turn against Wikus, not because of his mutation, but because of the lies MNU released. The media reported that Wikus contracted an alien STD and was highly contagious as a result of having sex for hours [not confirmed in the film] with an alien. There is no public concern when human women are exploited by Nigerian gangsters to have sex with the aliens. However, when a human man is reportedly having sex with an alien, it poses a problem. This is a clear example of the lack of regard for women in District 9. (Lewis 2010:321)

Despite raising an interesting point about the double standard around interspecies sex, Lewis’ review contains several glaring omissions. First of all, of course, the aliens are hermaphroditic and the “female” alien (an identification she bases solely on the alien wearing a pink bra despite the alien having no breasts) is in fact urinating in a way which should suggest “she” is male if anything. As I have also sketched above, viewers may empathise with the alien after closer inspection when we realise there are no bathroom facilities in the slums. Be that as it may, these female characters are hardly exhibited as grotesque or monstrous because of their *gender*.

The same holds true for the more prominent and overtly female characters. In terms of the human characters, aside from several of Wikus’ colleagues, there are some women shown in
positions of authority; such as Sarah Livingston (a sociologist at the fictional Kempton Park University, figure 24) and Dr Katrina Mackenzie (an Aid Worker at the fictional UIO). As to Wikus’ wife and mother being shown solely in relation to Wikus: except in instances when they are talking about the aliens, all of the interviewees are shown in terms of their relationship with Wikus. Aside from that, Tania seems somewhat more intelligent than Wikus; for example, she figures out that her father was lying to her on her own (this becomes clear when she phones Wikus the second time). Moreover, from the very first line in the film (“You know, it was after last year’s corporate, my wife was always encouraging me”), it becomes clear that she is indirectly responsible for Wikus’ success (as both positive encouragement and more dubiously as daughter of his boss). Similarly, Sandra van de Merwe is in fact shown in a more favourable light than Wikus’ father (who is portrayed as obstinate and unforgiving). Thus, despite being portrayed as intellectually and morally superior to their husbands, these women are not represented as female grotesques for transgressing conventional gender roles. As to the perceived double standard surrounding interspecies sex, perhaps the stereotypical disregard for sex workers (male and female) and the phobia of STDs plays a larger role as opposed to gender discrimination than Lewis admits, although this is not resolved either way in the film. Moreover, she neglects to mention that the powerful Obesandjo obeys the advice of his female witchdoctor. Although her actions would be grotesque or monstrous in a different cultural context, her grotesqueness has more to do with that sub-culture’s practices of witchcraft and cannibalism than her gender. In fact, in her role as holy diviner to the Nigerians, she is powerful in her dominance over Obesandjo. Finally, as to the film’s alleged “lack of regard for women”, Lewis seems unaware that it was co-written by Blomkamp’s female partner Terri Tatchell.

Because it is not the aim of this thesis to provide essentially feminist or postcolonial readings outside of what this might bring to light of aberrant effects, I will put a halt to this line of investigation here. Suffice it to say then, that District 9’s representations of gender (and race) issues are more nuanced and satirically self-reflexive than its detractors often allow. As to the female grotesque or monstrous-feminine, instances thereof are not portrayed in such a way that their monstrosity is clearly due to their gender. As such, the film thus succeeds in problematising the category of the female grotesque and monstrous-feminine to some extent, as its female “monsters” are not any more monstrous due to their gender. I will thus reserve a fuller discussion of this category for Mntambo’s work, where it figures much more prominently.

2.5 Conclusion

Through its utilisation of various medium-specific cinematic conventions (such as a viewer’s multisensory immersion in the fictional world and its narrative) and verisimilar techniques (such as the advanced audiovisual effects and documentary-esque style), District 9 creates images which are grotesque and abject through and through. The aberrant effect can be said to be characteristic in the case of the aliens, and due to a changing state in Wikus’ case. The viewer’s initial reaction in both cases is clearly meant to be one of disgust, which is based both on the responses modelled by the human characters and the viewer’s own sensory responses.
However, as we have seen, both of these bases are ultimately employed to bring about a positive quality in the viewer’s response to these aberrations. Firstly, the human beings we might have modelled our disgust on, affect a multitude of cruelties upon the alien species; a course of action which is steadily portrayed as unjust. The humans’ cruelty is shown as being based on the their callous ability to reduce the aliens and later Wikus to mere *homo sacer* which in turn is legitimised for them by the aliens’ and Wikus’ aberrant natures. On the other hand, viewers begin to empathise with the aliens and later Wikus because of the various physical likenesses we share, because they are victimised and we pity them, and because we recognise in them many injustices of our actual contemporary world. Finally, we are prompted to admire the aliens’ technology alongside Wikus and Christopher’s selflessness. As such, the film’s emotional and sensory effects all lead towards our associating and identifying with the aliens and Wikus. Even though we may still feel physically repulsed by the aberrant images, this does not interfere with our narrative and emotional involvement with them. Indeed, as “thisnameinuse”, so succinctly put it: “The entire point of the movie was a psychological journey for the viewer... to experience the transition between revulsion to acceptance to investment and endearment” (*IMDB* 2009). As such, the film thus *ultimately* ascribes the aliens’ apparent aberrant quality to the human characters’ and our initially limited and repulsed perception of them. The film thus reflexively raises issues of representation and perception of the Other – a facet which is further emphasised through the meta-medium usage of unreliable documentary, news and CCTV footage. In conclusion, the affirmative quality of the aberrant effects can thus be said to be created by the *visual representation* and the *narrative development* of the aliens and Wikus. These two facets lead us to be thoroughly repulsed by the aliens and Wikus, and yet, they compel us to move beyond repulsion and pitilessness towards recognition of physical and emotional commonalities and empathy or even admiration.
Chapter 3: Nandipha Mntambo

3.1 Contemporary South African art and cowhide as an artistic medium: challenges to historical poetics

An analysis of Nandipha Mntambo and her work poses some interesting challenges to the methodology of historical poetics, due to her personal background and her rather unique sculptural medium. Mntambo was born in Mbabane (the capital of Swaziland) in 1982, although she grew up in Johannesburg and then moved to her current residence, Cape Town, when she commenced her tertiary studies. Her father is a Methodist priest and her mother is currently an HIV counsellor in Pretoria (Toffoli 2009:13). Even from this short biographical background, it should become clear that Mntambo cannot be easily cast as representative of “African art” – whatever such a reductive term may or may not mean in the first place. Indeed, Mntambo herself has repeatedly stated that the associations with Nguni traditions (e.g., paying lobola or wrapping chiefs’ corpses in cowhide) that are often associated with her work are in fact imposed by others; the same goes for seeing her as representative of “the female artist” or “the black artist” in “contemporary South Africa”, again, whatever any of these labels may or may not imply (cf. Simbao & Elliot 2011:15 & 26-7; Toffoli 2009:13; Buys 2008:11). Instead, Mntambo espouses heterogeneous and dynamic identities and interpretations: “There are so many things that influence the way I work that I refuse to be located in one particular identity. I exist between several worlds” (Toffoli 2009:13). Indeed, even more so than with District 9, this resistance to a single interpretive frame is precisely what makes her work such a fruitful case study, as it encourages multiple and even competing responses, simultaneously. However, this multiplicity creates an interesting problem in terms of historical poetics, which would analyse a certain set of visual objects in terms of their shared conventions. Unlike District 9 (which I could class as a sci-fi film), there is no established set of visuality under which to slot Mntambo because contemporary South African art is itself so diverse.

Yet, herein might lie a possible compromise: Her works’ refusal to be assimilated within single, modular cultural and political discourses in fact places Mntambo in a larger “movement”11 of the contemporary local arts world. Penny Siopis (a well-established South African artist and arts lecturer) compares this new movement with its more overtly political predecessor as follows in an interview with Sarah Nuttall (2010:460-1):

> It is true there is an overstabilised (actually anxious in the negative) belatedness about some current body art which almost trivialises the struggles that seemed to be so alive, in all their confusion, under apartheid and immediately afterwards. A kind of sanitising; a belated post-traumatic corrective to the ills of the past characterised some of this art. The language of “the body” has become well worn to the point of being “third hand”. Notwithstanding this rather paralysed position, I know many young artists who dress up and have somewhere to go! Their form is more liberating. More in tune with our times. Playful. Even fun. More open to engaging

11 Although it is a movement in that is in fact characterised by its heterogeneity and individuality.
a dynamic sense of community. [...] Significant works by Robin Rhode, Anthea Moys, Nandipha Mntambo and Zen Marie would be perfect examples. For all that their work might engage colonialism, migration, patriarchy, capitalism, sexuality; their play-acting is fresh. Maybe an impetus for this way of working is that these artists see themselves primarily as artists. They are less bound by the constraints of the prefix “South African” or “African”, as might have been the case before. Ironically, it seems that the rapid professionalization of art in this country has afforded them agency. Not only art galleries but also other opportunities – residencies, exchanges, unusual forms of public interactivity, the development of the Internet, and so on.

[original emphasis]

I agree with Siopis’ observation; these developments within the local arts scene – this overall resistance to be assimilated under the by now “well worn” and “third hand” discourses of the (post)colonial/ feminist/ queer/ (anti)capitalist, etc, body; this fresh and playful stance; and this more globally-aligned professionalism – all indicate the contemporary art world. Thus, the historical poetics of contemporary art in Southern Africa appear to be less marked by specific media characteristics and stylistic preferences, and more by this at times playful resistance and globally-aligned professionalism. This potentially broadens the historical poetics scope beyond formal properties or technical devices, to include similarities in how these are utilised and what ideological values may or, in this case, may not be of importance in a given historical selection of artworks.

In addition, as with District 9, Mntambo’s works are reflexive images in how they comment upon the very devices they are constructed of. Moreover, the affirmative quality of the works as well as their self-awareness are very much part and parcel of the material existence and formal properties of the work. As mentioned in the introduction, Mntambo works in various different media (such as video, photography, oil paint, charcoal drawing and bronze sculpture); however, she is probably best known for her sculptures made of cowhide, hooves, tails and hair. Although I will touch upon some of her work in other media, it is the bovine material works that will form the core of my analysis. Due to the unique nature of this medium (apparently, only two other artists in the world currently make use of it), there are no medium-specific conventions as of yet according to which Mntambo’s work can be judged. A historical poetics analysis in her case must be quite individuated and look at what cowhide, hooves, etc. are otherwise associated with (e.g., rugs and dog chew toys). To briefly contextualise these: Mntambo originally wanted to be a forensic pathologist but changed her study direction after she realised she “didn’t want to be sitting in a lab, looking at dead bodies all day” (National Arts Festival Grahamstown 2011). Nevertheless, her fascination with the interaction between chemical and organic substances remained, and, after having a dream about cow figures some time in 2004, she decided to begin manipulating raw cowhide with various chemical and physical processes (Simbao 2011:15). She began working with a taxidermist at Iziko and created her first cowhide sculptural pieces called idle later that year (Sichel 2008:6). Mntambo’s choice of material is thus fairly personal and is partly due to her fascination with the process itself.

To further elucidate the literal poesis of her works, Mntambo describes the arduous and often repellent creative process as follows:
I buy the hide as raw as possible in order to engage fully with the material. It arrives here salted, with thick layers of dried fat which I have to power-tool my way through, grinding it off. A nauseating procedure. It’s a long process — wrapping hooking, washing, cleaning, before we can tan the hide so it’s soft enough to mould over a plastic cast of my body. (in Toffoli 2009:13)

Often, the process further involves two stages of whetting and moulding, as well as being cut and meticulously trimmed, all of which her assistant Peter Njanji helps with. Yet, despite these various manipulations, the hide retains traces of all its previous incarnations, both pre- and post-mortem, in terms of texture and even smell in some of the works. As such, the works possess “a material memory that seems to live within the skin cells of the animals [...which] means that the medium itself can be seen as one that physically engages the concept of recollection, both on a cellular and physical level” (Mntambo in McIntosh 2008). This “material memory” is not part only of the medium but is indelibly inscribed upon the internal images; one cannot recall her cowhide figures without recalling their palimpsest-like corporeality. In terms of Bild-Anthropologie, Mntambo’s medium thus conveys not only the image to the viewer, but the medium’s presence is significant in itself. As such, analysing her works from Belting’s approach alone is somewhat limiting, because the image, medium and creative process are so very closely intertwined within the artwork itself. This is where supplementing the approach with historical poetics is useful: to recognise that not only the external but also the internal image is constructed through the medium.

In terms of the relationship between materiality, medium and memory, South African arts historian Bettina Malcolmess (2009:128) asserts that in “classical rhetorical and Modern psychoanalytic [delineations], memory is described in terms of something physical, whether a ‘trace’ or a ‘place,’ attributed with permanence, yet subject to inevitable erasure”12. This fragile relationship between believed permanence of trace or place and inevitable erasure is especially prominent in South African society, which has been (pock)marked by so many political upheavals and uncertainties. In the case of Mntambo’s sculptures, this relationship is explored in that the “material memory” is organic and reveals the various artistic processes. The artworks bear out their own eventual decay because of their striking medium. Naturally, all artworks and indeed all things material are subject to the law of entropy, but Mntambo’s cow-medium works visualise an added sense of mortality, one which is unsettling as well as fascinating because it is reminiscent of our own mortality. Significantly, this sense is also produced by the artworks revealing both their previous organic and inorganic carnations; in other words, her sculptures can be said to be reflexive in revealing their own materiality and poesis.

Mntambo’s work thus presents interesting challenges to both historical poetics and Bild-Anthropologie because her unique medium is so inextricably joined with both the external and internal images. Moreover, due to its powerful sensory, destabilising effect (especially in the clean white space of the art gallery) the medium is fundamental to understanding aberrant impact of her work.

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12 An elegant example of this would be Marcel Proust’s famous “petites madeleine” pastries anecdote.
3.2 The grotesque: the oddly godly cow

First of all, in terms of the images they present, numerous of Mntambo’s works bring together disparate qualities in singular “beings”, for example Europe (figure 25) and Zeus (figure 26), which join human and animal, male and female. Thus, some of her works already qualify as grotesque, even though they employ more conservative media such as photography and bronze casts. As to her cow-medium sculptures, the two works which I employ as specific examples at this point are Emabutfo and Nandikesvara (figures 27 to 34). They were originally exhibited as facing counterparts in Mntambo’s 2009 solo exhibition The Encounter. Nandikesvara is one of the more complete frontal body casts – reaching from the mid-upper arms and lower neck down to just short of the knees. The cowhide is of a pale cream to grey-white colour – hinting at both death and innocence or purity. Its edge is cleanly trimmed down on the right-hand side of the sculpture while the left-hand side has a furling, irregular edge; visually suggesting formlessness, that the figure is coming undone or melting on the one side. A sense of movement is further suggested by the bottom section of the cowhide which seems to fly away from the figure in folds, adding to the impression that it might be an animate being. The sculpture ends in a cascade of cow hooves which range from a dark ivory to a rich bistre shade and extend to a couple of inches above the floor, creating the sense that it is hovering in the air. As with the majority of her cowhide works, the sculpture hangs suspended from the ceiling by thin, transparent threads, which allow slight physical movement to occur and increase the sensation that we are looking at an organic being. As such, the image created by this sculpture is a Verzerrung of known reality: we see familiar elements in terms of the human form and parts of a cow; however, the being is incomplete or formless, and discoloured in tones reminiscent of a corpse. It is also a hybrid which combines human and animal, and a fusion in how it adds skin and hooves together. The image presented by the sculpture is thus thoroughly grotesque.

In contrast to the hairy texture of the front part of the sculpture, the “inside” is smooth and hard (from resin) and shows the mottled inside of the hide. This creates a further unsettling effect. Firstly, the viewer can see “inside” the figure (which would of course be impossible with a living figure). Secondly, the smooth, hard texture and mottled colouration are so utterly inorganic in comparison to the front of the sculpture. In addition, the mottled colouration visually recalls patches of black mildew or mould which suggest physical decay and toxicity, indicating, as Carroll suggests, that these grotesque beings are dangerous. As such, the figures do not stimulate comic amusement or awe, but arouse a horrified, fearful sensation in the viewer. The setting of the gallery would of course somewhat lessen this impact; yet, encountering such an entity here would create an all the more destabilising effect.

The same can be said for the “army” facing Nandikesvera. In comparison to the singular figure of Nandikesvara, Emabutfo consists of twenty-four female figures, arranged in eight rows of threes, which are similarly suspended from the ceiling and all “face” in the same direction (towards Nandikesvara). The cowhides they are made of are of comparable colouration, with a similar mottled, smooth interior. Thus, hybridity, corpse-like discolouration, formlessness and toxicity go towards an image of a grotesque being. These moulds are cast on a shorter section of the body,
stopping just above or below the middle thighs, further enhancing the sensation of incomplete, formless or deformed beings. Unlike Nandikeshvara, they have nothing attached to the bottom edge. Instead they have long strips of cow tail (including the long switches) which mostly extend comparatively lower than human hands would, thus they are disproportionate. While the Nandikeshvara figure is characterised by movement and its stubby “arms” stretch upward (an active posture), the Emabutfo figures seem more passive with their static postures and their “arms” dangling down below the ends of their bodies. They are thus more corpse-like than the former, but the fact that they are an upright, fairly uniform group and that they share the same confrontational posture make them threatening to the viewer. The effect is thus one of fear and unsettlement.

Basically then, all of the chief strategies of grotesque aesthetics thus come together in these twenty-five haunting figures of Nandikeshvara and Emabutfo. In addition to hybridisation of the human and animal, dis- or decolouration, deformation, disproportion and formlessness; the figure incorporate the grotesque strategy of gigantism – all the figures are somewhat larger than life due to their suspension and because the thick cowhide is moulded over a life-size cast. Thus, though they present certain similarities to the human and bovine world, these aesthetic qualities result in them representing an ultimately estranged world. In addition, due to their suspension, they can sway slightly from side to side, which further increases the impression of them as animate beings. All of these physical features thus combine to have an ultimately destabilising effect, which is based on our sensory perceptions and the conflict with our ontological categories (e.g., of what being “human”, “bovine”, “alive”, etc means). Thus one could argue that their grotesqueness is thus due to their inherent characteristics. Moreover, as indicated, these images evoke fear and repulsion in the viewer during the grotesque experience.

Nevertheless, as Harpham for one would remind us, grotesque figures can evoke the opposite reaction too: attraction and fascination. Mntambo herself inadvertently describes her figures in terms of the grotesque experience as “both beautiful and scary and repulsive at the same time” (in Bambalele 2009:4). In fact, Mntambo repeatedly states that she aims to evoke this oscillating response of attraction and repulsion to the figures. For example, “I find it interesting that because of what it looks like – the hair’s quite shiny and it’s quite striking in a white cube gallery space, and you can immediately see that it’s a female body – a lot of people are attracted to it and want to touch it, but at the same time you realise that it’s an animal. It’s hairy and it doesn’t smell good” (in Buys 2008:11); and “[t]he hair-covered but arguably beautiful female figures I create disrupt perceptions of attraction and repulsion. Being confronted with a hairy life-size woman which is not necessarily unequivocally repulsive causes various reactions, which have encouraged some viewers to re-think their ideas of the desirable” (Mntambo in McIntosh 2008). Thus, it is both the sensory appeal of the medium and the image of a nude woman which could attract viewers. The sculptures are reflexive to the extent that their medium complicates our response to the image they convey. The ambivalent effect they create within the viewer’s senses and emotions may impel the viewer to attempt to discover whether this attraction-repulsion is characteristic of the images or of our perception and “animation” of them. Art reviewer Gayle Edmunds’s (2011:4) reaction to Mntambo’s sculptures reflects this complex reaction: “I wanted to take one home, gaze at it forever and unravel
precisely what makes it simultaneously attractive and repellent.” Her sculptures thus employ strategies of grotesque aesthetics to arouse an utterly ambivalent but thus doubly fascinated feeling.

In the original installation of Nandikesvar and Emabutfo, additional dualisms are created in the viewer’s response because the works are engaged in an “encounter” but we cannot be certain which is supposed to be the aggressor and which the victim. Nandikesvar faces the Emabutfo group with its arms raised in a posture which could signify either victory or surrender or aggression (the latter would amplify the horrific grotesque experience). Either way, the viewer finds him/herself in an uncomfortable and even vulnerable position when placed between these two apparently opposing forces. This results in an even more destabilising viewing experience, amplifying the overall latent fearfulness of the encounter. The intertextual and inter-imagery references of the works offer some explication but also bring further complications. While Emabutfo refers to an army of young men in Swazi tradition (Jacobson 2009), Nandikesvar refers to a sacred bull in Hindu tradition. Mntambo (in Perryer 2011:21) explains the background of the works as follows:

Nandikesvar is a strange work, because it made me cry for a while. How it started: my best friend worked in India for two years and she called me and said, “Nandi, you won’t believe it, but there is a cow called Nandi. It’s a bull and they worship it here in India”, and I just kind of dismissed the conversation. When I was preparing the show Encounter (2007), I created the army first, and was drawn to white cowhide. I had no idea why because I had worked in black cowhide mainly before. As I was working, I don’t know what it was that happened, but I rethought of this Nandi and started researching about it and realised that it was a white bull. And I was really intrigued by the fact that all of a sudden I had been drawn to this white hide, as I had no idea why I was drawn to it. And then this story comes up again, and we have the same name... and so it was just really strange to me. I guess I started thinking around the idea of immortalisation again, and creating something that was very powerful, but also very quiet. As for the gestures, I think it was in relation particularly to the army and being a leader, but at the same time, Nandi became so full of himself that Shiva had to teach him a lesson in humility, and so he crippled him. Then he became the guardian of his temples. I think that quiet power, and having to learn the lesson of humility, was what I was thinking about. [sic]

As such, the figure of Nandikesvar thus represents power in a rather ironic manner as a limited, protective and humiliated power. Its raised arms are meant to bear an ambiguous signification of victory, aggression and surrender. In this light, the fearful effect of the sculpture may become complicated by the vulnerable humility of the figure. Later in the same interview, Mntambo adds that the cloud of hooves are somewhat ironic, because “the sculpture is never going to be able to walk anywhere [...] it is crippled [...] despite having these things that are meant to help one move around” (in Perryer 2011:22). Similarly, the “army” is both threatening and ultimately harmless: the “soldiers” have no legs while their “arms” and “hands” are thin and wispy. By creating this “army of [her]self”, Mntambo was thus envisaging the “idea of protecting and also being in a confrontation at the same time” (Lacheb, Aarnio & Virtanen 2011). In fact, the switches of the tails are reminiscent of Victorian hair ringlets which have run amok (which becomes visually significant in terms of the female grotesque). Elliot (2011:29) further expands on possible likenesses in Nandikesvar to mental images from the European visual tradition: “the assertive female form with outspread arms
or wings suggests the Nike of Samothrace, [...] while the ‘cloud’ which supports her is reminiscent of the chubby curves of the fog of *putti* who carry the Virgin heavenwards in an Immaculate Conception by a Spanish 17th-century master such as Bartolomé Esteban Murillo.” Interestingly then, this alternate Eurocentric reading arrives at a similar, apparently paradoxical construal of “quiet power”. Ultimately then, the sculptures ambivalence leads to an equally ambivalent grotesque experience for the viewer as a fearful and repulsive effect are mixed with attraction and perhaps even awe.

As to the conflation of various cultural allusions (which could be argued to form a cultural grotesque fusion), for certain reviewers such as Katherine Jacobson (2009) “the many references literally fight one another [...] and this] makes for a slightly unwieldy mixed metaphor.” While Jacobson’s criticism holds true from a culturally purist viewpoint, I would argue that the artist herself rejects any singular cultural interpretations: her work is *intended* to be multicultural and even omnicultural. Other culturally polyphonic examples would include her photographic composite works, such as *Narcissus, The Rape of Europa*, and *Europa* (which recall both ancient Greek myths as well as works by Caravaggio and Picasso); or her two bronze busks *Sengifikile* and *Zeus* (which recall Swazi verbal and the Renaissance sculptural tradition). Mntambo defends her multicultural images by asserting that the cow is the golden thread in her work. It recurs throughout virtually all cultures and mythologies (National Arts Festival, Grahamstown 2011) – the cow itself is the universal symbol which binds these disparate civilisations together. In addition, the abovementioned works are imbued this same kind of “quiet power” – potent without being either overtly subversive or confrontational. Moreover, what these works – and indeed virtually all of Mntambo’s works – have in common is the image of the artist herself who figures either mimetically (as in *Sengifikile*) or indexically (as in the moulds and photographs) in them. In the process, she identifies herself with these highly dualistic figures which are simultaneously beautiful and repulsive, elegant and powerful, controlled and primal, cultural-specific and universal. Moreover, if the viewer is aware of this process of identification, this would add an affirmative quality to the images – if the artist is willingly takes on a grotesque form which is oddly attractive, this form is made all the more desirable.

Interestingly then, her works invoke and also rebuke certain of Bakhtin’s assertions regarding the grotesque body and grotesque realism. Firstly, the works celebrate the same kind of bodily universalism which was so positive for Bakhtin. As Mntambo explains in an interview for the ARS 11 exhibition in Helsinki (Lacheb, Aarnio & Virtanen 2011):

The material is really interesting to me because it’s an organic, dead part of the cow. And the cow itself for me has a connection to every civilisation in the world. Everyone, right now, has some kind of a connection or has had some kind of an interaction with the animal, whether it’s through wearing it in shoes, eating it; so it’s a universal symbol to me. So I think that it’s become something that allows me to show how connected we all are. [sic]

In an interview with a correspondent of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival (2011), Mntambo expounds on this universalism beyond the sense that we all *use* animals to how in fact we all *are* animals. She explains that she is interested in “how we understand [...] animal/human and how we determine the separation [...] because] sometimes human beings forget that we actually are animals.”
In all the above-mentioned works, the visual and often material conflation of the two categories (human and animal) brings this idea forth quite literally. Moreover, Mntambo’s images reflexively bring to light another Bakhtinian aspect of the grotesque body: in terms of the image tradition’s counterpart (the Classical body canon), the grotesque body would present all that which is not closed off, clean, smooth, etc. Indeed, in Mntambo’s cowhide sculptures, we find several properties which would be counter-Classical: their “exteriors” possess a furry texture with many folds, protrusions and even orifices (e.g., figures 33 & 34); and they are in fact so “open” that the viewer is invited to “step into” them and “wear” them as a kind of second skin. The sculptures are thus (somewhat) permeable and, in the Bakhtinian sense, allow growth and life.

In the case of Mntambo’s sculptures, the “body” thus serves several roles: it is the medium (the cowhide was after all part of a body), the image (moulded on a woman’s body), the “locus” of the image (in terms of the viewer’s sensory and mental perception of the sculpture as a “symbolic body”, as Belting would put it) and also a universal kind of common denominator (in terms of the grotesque body). On a connotational albeit not directly representational level (except, perhaps in terms of the more pungent sculptures), the works are also reminiscent of the various bodily functions. For, as Bakhtin would remind us, the grotesque body is that which is ultimately alive even as and because it is dying. Indeed, on a basic level, these sculptures remind us through several of our senses that they were once part of a living being that had to die in order to then be moulded onto the form of another living being. Yet, the sculptures continue to bear forth and give “life” (through their material memory and our “reanimation” of them) to their origins even as they steadily decompose. In terms of their representation and medium-specificity, Mntambo’s sculptures thus visualise the generative (and thus affirmative) quality which Bakhtin outlined in terms of the living-death/dying-life of the grotesque body.

Yet, even as Mntambo’s works celebrate the universalism of material life in its various incarnations and inevitable decay (which in turn continues the cycle of life, ad infinitum), they espouse a specific kind of individualism. As Mntambo reflects: “representing other people is very complicated – the politics of representation are very complex” (in Lachèb, Aarnio & Virtanen 2011), so that (as discussed above) she does not attempt to represent any one group but instead explores ideas and feelings which interest her in terms of her own identity. This interest might align her work with the claim for individualism made by the Classical canon. However, as the discussion thus far shows, for Mntambo this sense of identity is fluid and multifaceted with ever-shifting and permeable boundaries; a dimension which is suggested visually by her sculptures’ open-endedness. Reflecting upon Ukungenisa (see stills, figures 35 - 40) – a work I discuss in further detail in the last section of this chapter – Mntambo describes the process of trying to assume the role of bull, matador and spectator during a bull-fight: “It was nerve-wracking … psyching myself up before doing it was really difficult. […] Performing as an animal has been an eye-opener. There are elements of myself that I don’t really understand, don’t necessarily like, don’t know how to handle at the moment,” so exploring these is part of what is “interesting” for her in her art (quoted in Simbao 2011:9). Thus, Elliot (2011:25) asserts that “[t]he fact that total resolution of self is both impossible and undesirable appears to be the main point [in Mntambo’s work]. It seems as though ambiguity alone allows us to
be human.” Thus, the grotesque being as well as the grotesque body through its paradoxical, simultaneous destabilising and unifying potential provides a fruitful set of strategies through which these various aspects of the self can be explored. Finally, the effect is ambivalent and multivalent, and yet this very ambivalence and multivalence can be seen an affirmation of humanness which is also a kind of animal-ness. In the process, Mntambo’s works create a further sense of simultaneous inter- and intra-species unity, compelling individuality. This line of thought leads me to the next section which deals with the boundary between subject and object; namely, the abject.

3.3 The material sublime in abjection
As we have seen, the abject involves those substances or entities that are undesirable “by-products” of being alive and which we must therefore reject or suppress as they confront us with our own eventual demise. It also presents a certain danger to the ego self in that it blurs the distinction between the subject “I” and the object “other”; one of the most powerful examples being a corpse. In Mntambo’s sculptures, the medium itself is utterly abject. As mentioned, Mntambo’s work presents a challenge to a historical poetics analysis, because its unique material has no related conventions as an artistic medium reflecting its use and associations as of yet. However, the medium can instead be considered in a broader sense in terms of cow-derived products. As we have seen, the cow “has a connection with every civilisation in the world”, because “everyone right now has some kind of a connection or has had some kind of an interaction with the animal” (Mntambo in Lacheb, Aarnio & Virtanen 2011). Mntambo’s sculptures thus function as grotesque bodies, and unify human beings, because the cow is so closely intertwined with our physical, day-to-day existence. For example, we eat it (from meat to dairy to gelatine), wear it (often in the form of tanned leather), and employ it in cultural practices (e.g., in the burial of Swazi chiefs or as lobola as we have seen) or for more humble activities (in the form of cattle-derived glue, pet food, fertiliser or even as fuel for household fires). As such, our physical and social lives rely heavily on this animal. In terms of abjection, the cow is thus closely associated with various bodily functions. Hence, we are ourselves responsible for continuously blurring the distinction between ourselves as human subjects and the cattle objects we consume and make “part” of ourselves.

Yet, in Westernised modernity, by the time we make use of bovine products, the animal they were once part of has been processed and sanitised beyond recognition. By using raw cowhide, hooves, tails, ears and even faces, Mntambo performs a kind of abjection which refuses this defamiliarising sanitization. Her sculptures confront us with their very organic materiality through our senses (sight, smell and touch) as specifically cow-derived artworks. As an example, I would like to refer to Iqaba lami (figures 41 – 43) which is one of the few works making use of cattle faces. The title can be roughly translated as “My traditionalist” and, along with the dimensions of the sculpture, it recalls the elaborate Victorian dresses worn by German settlers at the turn of the previous century in Namibia (then called South-West Africa). “The dress was ridiculously impractical for the climate and exigencies of the time, but was adopted by the Herero with such enthusiasm that the style - first constructed with multiple underskirts of animal hide and more recently translated into patterned
fabrics - is still worn with pride today” (Michael Stevenson Gallery 2007). Yet even though the work engages various issues surrounding (post)colonialism – most especially the Herero and Namaqua genocide of the early 1900s – Mntambo again refutes an overtly socio-political interpretation (e.g., as in Simbao 2011:22). I likewise limit these elements in my analysis of the work to their impact on the aberrant effect. Indeed the allusion to the genocide of tens of thousands of people amplifies the horrific effect of the work. Moreover, it further likens the genocide of these people to the slaughtering of cattle, which reciprocally increases the moral disgust the viewer feels at both.

To turn to the Bild-Anthropologische analysis of the sculpture, the image, medium and the body (of the artwork and viewer) are central in producing an abject effect. First of all, the outline of the work clearly recalls the image of the Victorian dress – with a disproportionately small bust and an elaborately furled and billowing skirt and train (see figure 43). Essential to the sculpture’s destabilising ability is the fact that despite its somewhat familiar shape, the material out of which the sculpture is constructed that is highly disturbing on a sensory level – the dress is made not only out of the cow’s hide (which would itself be unsettling) but also of the skin of cow faces with the nose-, mouth- and eyeholes still visible (see figures 41 & 42). Seeing these orifices could remind the viewer of the functions they once served and by extension abject substances they produced (mucus, saliva, vomit, etc.) The sensory effect of these associations thus amplifies the abject experience. Yet, these various openings represent the same orifices which Bakhtin would remind us are portals of life, so that they also infer the fundamentally generative quality of the abject. Also, despite being empty and dead, these faces retain their lifelike quality, creating a powerful uncanny sensation to boot. They are that much easier for the viewer to “re-animate”, because they were once alive. As such, the faces function as both medium and image and also bear a connection to the viewer’s body that is much more direct than in most of the sculptural genre. Moreover, because this sculpture is in fact composed of real bodies as opposed to being perceived as only a “symbolic body” (to use Belting’s term again), the sensory and emotional effect on the viewer would be that much stronger. As such, the viewer’s awareness of the once-subject, now-object cow is deliberately raised by the medium itself, and this leads to a powerful experience of abjection. In addition to the already grotesque experience, the viewer’s perception is thus further perturbed on both a sensory, emotional and even moral level by the confrontation with this an abject figure. Indeed, Mntambo (in Buys 2008:11) describes the visceral reactions she endures while making the works: “I gave up eating meat about 10 years ago now […] And thank God I don’t eat meat! The amount of times I’ve vomited and become freaked out while working with the material – dealing with things like maggots and fat – it’s really not fun.” Now, of course, by the time gallery viewers encounter the sculptures, these more extreme abjections have for the most part disappeared; yet, they retain the works’ material memory of the original animals in terms of smell, for example, and invoke the viewers’ strongly physical, sensory perception of both the external and mental images of the cows they once formed part of.

By the same token, their material memory destabilises our pre-existing associations of the cow in terms of various kinds of products. Because the skins “need to be hard and rigid” and “they don’t smell like leather, they smell like a cow” (Mntambo in Sichel 2008:6), they become “useless” as
products and their material presence as such means we have to approach them in a way other than consumerism. Furthermore, by including parts of the cow which would otherwise be considered “by-products” and are used for pet food or glue (such as hooves and ears), or are mostly thrown away (such as the faces in *Iqaba Lami*), Mntambo focuses our attention on those parts we might usually disregard as wastes, i.e., those parts which are in themselves abject now become central to the image. Through our sensory perceptions, we realise that what we are seeing and smelling are the material remains of what was once a living, breathing animal like ourselves – an experience which is strengthened by the figures being cast in a human form, hung at a human height and able of slight movement. In the case of *Iqaba Lami* specifically, this effect is of course brought on most powerfully by the faces of the cows which “return” our gaze from their empty eyeholes, thereby placing the sculptures in that foreboding terrain between subject and object. This abject state is further strengthened by the associations with death and decay which the sculptures foreground materially. What Mntambo thus accomplishes is to subvert our usual one-way relationship with the cow as a resource into something which is closer to an interaction with a living or once-alive being – the “animation” of the image that Belting spoke of is doubly effective in Mntambo’s work. While we could treat leather and milk as merely measurable substances like, the sculpture foregrounds the fact that fact that these were in fact part of distinct individuals, individuals like ourselves who were once alive and now are dead. These cow and then women subjects (on which the hide is moulded) have suddenly and irrevocably been turned into objects, and they potentially arouse the abject sensation we as physical, living beings will meet the same fate (see for example in Lacheb, Aarnio & Virtanen 2011). The sculpture becomes a visual reminder of the ego’s vulnerable status as subject.

The image of this and other of Mntambo’s sculptures as hollow, three-dimensional shapes could be argued to present a further threat to the subject-object distinction. Because *Iqaba Lami* is in the shape of a dress, and like *Nandikeshvara* is not quite closed off, viewers may experience an inclination to not only metaphorically but physically step into this twice subject-turned-object (an sensation which McIntosh (2008) admits to feeling). Skin is what distinguishes the tangible border between the “I” and the “other”, so that on a subconscious level stepping “into” the skin of a cow which was in turn moulded around the shape of the artist (becoming like her skin), challenges the various subject-object pairs which co-exist and contend between the cow, the artist, the artwork and the viewer. The experience is thus thoroughly abject, an effect which is heightened by the various other abject characteristics of the work and its medium. Mntambo’s sculpture thus possesses the potential to complicate and challenge through its very abject materiality those relationships which are central not only to the art-making and -viewing processes but also to the sense of a stable subjecthood for the artist and viewer.

However, most significantly, this destabilising experience is not solely negative but is imbued with an affirmative potential which depends upon our physical responses to the artworks. In Mntambo’s case, this is linked specifically to way in which her works foreground their status as material reincarnations. In this aspect, South African visual culture and art theorist Amanda Du Preez’s (2010) analysis of Mntambo’s work (along with that of Leora Farber, Zanele Muholi and Tracey Rose) as per the “material sublime” is enlightening. Citing Baudrillard (who famously argued that the
“real” had been replaced by the “simulacrum” and “hyperreal” in postmodernity, Du Preez argues that there has been a recent resurgence of the “real” post-9/11. As such, Du Preez argues, that the body has steadily become reemphasised as an “element of being” and authenticity in its own right. The body and its various sensations have become the new fulcrums in art around which being and experiences are actively constructed. Thus, the body of the viewer is essential, even more so than Belting might have conceived. Moreover, it is through the cascade of sensations and associations triggered by our sensory perception of the medium and the artwork that we are able to experience what Du Preez calls the “material sublime”. Her delineation of this seems highly relevant to grasping the affirmative potential of the abject within Mntambo’s work.

To form a definition of the material sublime, Du Preez (2010:398) refers in particular to Johann Gottfried Herder, a late eighteenth-century philosopher who was both a student and critic of Kant and Kant’s explication of the classic, transcendental sublime.

The material sublime dismantles the classical sublime by putting considerable emphasis on the phenomenological encounter and finding ways of giving form to the formless. It does so by rooting the experience in the embodied corporealilty of human existence. During this confrontation, the subject meets with an(other) that in its material thingness cannot be contained, transcended or avoided. This does not mean that the encounter should not be spoken of or given representational form. In fact, following Herder, we can only feel uplifted if the event is given form not in order to contain it, but roughly to make sense of the initial awe.

In order to experience the material sublime then, according to Herder and Du Preez, the subject’s embodied existence as well as that of the entity he/she encounters must be emphasised, while representing this corporeal experience becomes a way “to make sense of the initial awe” and of course of communicating this sense of awe to others too. Mntambo’s work could thus be said to incorporate two kinds of material sublime experience: her own phenomenological encounter with the medium, as well as foregrounding our own corporeal interaction with their “material thingness”. As such, “[e]ven if the bodies that have provided these contours are no longer present and have become haunting, what remains and reminds is how matter has and is continually materialising, even if [or, in Mntambo’s case, partly because] it is through its own constant decomposition” (Du Preez 2010:406). In this way, according to Du Preez, the work becomes a “materialised ‘eventhood’ [...] not frozen into finality, but rather matter inscribed with sublime potential” (2010:400). In other words, precisely because the skins are both materially present in their own right and present that which is absent and the processes which shaped them, they allow the potential for the material sublime which takes the form of an “eventhood” between the works and the viewer. As such, “both subject and object are immersed in the same ecstatic and constitutive moment of foregrounding the material event visually” (Du Preez 2010:409). In terms of Bild-Anthropologie the image and medium’s materiality are thus vital in creating this sublime effect within the viewer’s body. In terms of aberration, the sensory foregrounding would not be as effective were it not for the acute abjection of her artworks.

In conclusion, I would thus add to Du Preez’s analysis that the particular material sublime experience of Mntambo’s works is due to their abject nature. The thoroughly destabilising effect of
the bovine medium is fundamentally due to its being a material which was once alive but now is dead and decaying (a state of abjection we will all reach one day); something which retains the texture and even smell of the cows, and which also retains the shape of the woman it was modelled on and of this modelling process itself, and overall as skin which is the very border of between the “I” and the “other”. Mntambo’s bovine works are abject in all these senses and because they are abject, they foreground the corporeality of the encounter through the destabilisation of the viewers’ sensibilities – the material sublime potential of the works is thus founded upon their very abjection. This effect is probably most remarkable in her sculptural pieces, but it would also be applicable to some of her canvas-based works, especially those sprouting cow hair – *The Quiet Acts of Affection* series (e.g., figures 44 - 46). This is because they similarly albeit to a lesser degree foreground their own materiality and challenge notions of the subject and object, because the flat, inorganic canvas can “grow” hair. In addition, *The Quiet Acts of Affection* works also underscore the transgression of object-boundaries by the abject in that the hairs extend beyond the pieces of paper they are affixed to and are so fine that they seem to disappear into thin air. However, the viewer sees only the “front” of the canvas, so the paintings cannot be “entered” in the same way as the sculptures. For, as we have seen, in addition to being essentially heterogeneous images, the sculptures allow for another kind of heterogeneity and flexibility for the viewer who can “enter” them. Thus, her works’ abject heterogeneity becomes imbued with a further affirmative potential because they can offer the potential for growth for those viewers who like McIntosh (2008) feel a compulsion to “try them on” and thus potentially experience a different way of being by joining the body of the viewer in such a direct way with the medium and image.

### 3.4 The beauty and power of the female grotesque and monstrous-feminine

As we have seen, the female grotesque and monstrous-feminine are precisely that because they subvert conventional images of femininity and feminine behaviours. What makes Mntambo’s images so interesting in this regard is that they both recall and subvert Classical conventions of depicting the female form. Because they are hairy repulsive-attractive nudes, they infer not only the objectification of the male gaze (although this may be read as part of the history behind the work, underlying its perceived meaning) but also infer ways to incorporate these aspects into a heterogeneous identity and even move beyond them.

To take *Nandikeshvara* as an example again, there are several image and medium properties which evoke the “ideal feminine” but also subvert it, turning the sculpture into a female grotesque. Firstly, in terms of inter-image relations, the sculpture evokes the visual tradition of the classical female nude, at least from a distance. It takes the form of a curvaceous female nude which is (for the most part) pale like a Classical or Classicist marble statue. Its posture recalls the Nike (victory) figure as discussed above, and the lack of extremities recalls those oft-copied statues of Antiquity (e.g., the *Venus de Milo*). The sculpture’s flowing folds and seeming weightlessness also recall the virgins and Madonnas of Renaissance artists like Raphael, and even the cow hooves may recall putti as we have seen. From the front and from a certain distance, *Nandikeshvara* may appear smooth
and closed-off, without orifices, prominent nipples or pubic hair. But of course, on closer inspection, these initial impressions are disturbed. First of all, we are confronted not with smooth inorganic marble, but with hairy, once-alive, now-dead cowhide. In elaborating on the impetus behind the sculptures, Mntambo (in National Arts Festival 2011) recalls how in her puberty “a lot of the girls had this fascination with body hair and [...] there was this assumption that the lack of body hair would make you more attractive, so women were always shaving or waxing” and that this recollection “started [her] thinking around the idea of how people would react to a completely hairy female form.” The coarse and thick pelt of the sculptures’ medium thus already goes against the conventional social grain because such a hairy female would be considered monstrous, undoubtedly more monstrous than a comparably hairy male form. A further monstrosity can be found in the form of Nandikeshvara’s dark cascade of angular, sharp cow hooves. They create a widely different sensory effect from the paintings of soft putti or of the usually smooth, rounded feet associated with the Classical female body. In addition, while the hide’s colour is similar to the pale statues’ colours, the organic nature of the material rather evoke associations with human cadavers. This contrast is further highlighted by the smooth but bumpy, motley-coloured inside. In addition, the odour may retain a pungent organic trace – and again, a woman bearing such a smell would presumably be more offensive than a man. However, this fragrance is not human, making the sculpture even more repulsive. Unlike the Classical statues, Nandikeshvara is completely open at the back, inviting us to enter into it; however, its unyielding rigidity at the same time resists us – again simultaneously recalling and resisting stereotypes of female passivity. Thus, in spite of the sculpture’s deliberate sensual allure, its total image resists being subject to a possessive “male gaze”. Moreover, in this sense, they owe their status as specifically female aberrations to these fundamental characteristics.

Nandikeshvara, like many of Mntambo’s other works, could also be argued as presenting the image of a female figure who risks becoming “performatively” grotesque, thus also locating her female grotesqueness in her changeable state. This is because the image refutes the role of the subdued and passive feminine. Instead, this particular figure assumes a role of authority which is traditionally cast as masculine, not only because the Hindu god is in fact male but also because a patriarchal system would refuse women such roles. Instead of settling for being either conventional maiden, mother or crone, Nandikeshvara assumes the role of war general who is commanding a group of soldiers in battle. However, as we have seen, the figure’s power is not absolute; instead, being tempered with humility and immovability – characteristics one could argue are traditionally assumed to be more feminine than masculine. Interestingly, the image retains traditional associations of femininity even as it challenges these. Indeed, as mentioned above, even Nandikeshvara’s “army of young men” (Emabutfo), is a group of female figures with wispy, Goldilocks-like “hands”. The image can also be qualified as a female grotesque because of its excessiveness. After all, the group is an “army” of twenty-four larger-than-life, threatening females.

Similarly, Mntambo creates potential female grotesques in her other in terms of Mntambo’s recent interest in bull-fighting, she contravenes traditional gender roles in Spanish cultural traditions, and thus creates performative female grotesques who literally perform their grotesqueness for the video camera. She does this firstly by casting female figures in the role of the
traditionally male matador and bull in the *faena* and *paso doble*. (In fact, Mntambo wanted to train as a bullfighter in Spain, but was denied, not on the base of her race or nationality, but solely on the base of her *gender* (Toffoli 2009:13; Sichel 2008:6); illustrating just transgressive her *female* recasting would indeed still be in Spanish culture.) She has also replaced specific male figures with her own decidedly female form in artworks inspired by still other cultures’ traditions; such as Zeus in the form of the bull (in *Zeus, Sengifikile, The Rape of Europa and Europa*), Narcissus and of course Nandikeshvara. In other words, Mntambo’s female images subvert both generically gendered roles as well as specific male figures in mythology, confirming their aberrant status as female grotesques. In fact, Mntambo reflects that due to her height “people [are often] confused about whether [she is] a man or a woman” (in National Arts Festival 2011), a confusion that was further confounded by works like *Ukungenisa*. As with her sculptures, Mntambo’s extraordinary height could perhaps hint at a personal physical excessiveness; she herself runs the risk of being considered a grotesque female because she is “too tall” to qualify as a “normal” woman. Because nearly all her representational artworks in fact contain her image, this personal excessiveness is captured in the images themselves. In addition, she assumes these supposed gender-inappropriate roles, further confounding her own possible status as a performative female grotesque. Thus, all of these artworks featuring Mntambo’s own image are aberrant because of their and her characteristic features and also their and her implied changeability.

Yet, to return to the second part of my research question, the female grotesque in these instances is also imbued with another potential which is due in part to the very aberrant effect which classifies it. The spectacle of the grotesque woman in these cases places her in a position of power as well as of vulnerability comparable to that of Nandikeshvara; like the aliens in *District 9*, these female figures are both threatening and threatened – a duality which may create an empathetic response in the viewer. Mntambo again casts this paradox in terms of the *faena*: “the emotions of fear, expectation and this need to protect oneself are interchangeable with the crowd, the fighter and the bull” (National Arts Festival 2011). As a consequence, as with the grotesque and the abject, the figuration of the female grotesque and monstrous-feminine in Mntambo’s sculptures is marked by a certain type of unifying vulnerability, impelling an *empathetic* reaction from the viewer in the true sense of the word (as a kind of sympathy based on *familiar* distress recalled by the viewer).

Indeed, this aspect of powerful, unifying vulnerability can also be discerned in the fact that the sculptures’ external images present indexical traces of Mntambo and her mother’s naked bodies. Indeed, her mother’s initial reaction to the exhibition of the sculptures was: “But people will see me naked!” (in Sichel 2008:6). However, Mntambo (in Du Preez 2010:404) herself reflects on the power

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13 “[This is the] most beautiful and skilful section of a bullfight – a dance with death, where the matador must prove his courage and artistry.” (Mntambo in Stevenson 2007-2012)

14 A traditional Spanish dance representing the bull fight, where the male partner acts as the matador and the female partner presents his red flag.
of representation to defeat the vulnerability of “precisely those bodies that have traditionally been associated with brute matter” (Du Preez 2010:406) from being objectified:

Through the interpretation of my own and my mother’s bodies, I have taken control of their representation, and directed the way in which viewers encounter these forms in both their material realisation and installation. The figures, although hanging, have assertiveness in their posture and are intended to be sensuous but ambiguous in their presence. While these fragments of female form may elicit repulsion, it is repulsion intended to evoke the residue of life and the actual presence of the corporeal rather than the female body as victim, damaged, abused or abject.

Paradoxical though it may thus seem, potential negative associations of the female grotesque are thus dissuaded precisely because Mntambo consciously chose this visual representation with all its possible inter-image associations for herself and her mother. What also becomes apparent from this quote is that Herder’s and Du Preez’s observations regarding the material sublime further become significant in terms of the affirmative potential of the female grotesque. It is the attraction but more so the repulsion brought on by the “actual [material, physical] presence” of these “fragments of female form” which creates a powerful sensory effect in the viewer, thus leading to a (possible) experience of the material sublime. Because the raw “cowhides proudly parade what fashioned them” (Du Preez 2010:406) and the artist proudly chooses to parade her and her mother’s own female form in raw cowhide, these material representations also become sites of agency. Moreover, I would argue that it is this specifically materially sublime fusion of two kinds of grotesques – dead animal and excessive female – which further confers an affirmative potential on both. That is, through Mntambo’s choice of the one to embody the other in this attractive-repulsive way, she confers a reciprocal positive quality on both. Very importantly, however, this would not be possible without the decidedly material presence of her sculptures which are both organic and indexical of their previous incarnations.

In addition to the material sublime aspects of the female grotesque in Mntambo’s work, an affirmative function of the category’s aberrant effects can also be discerned in terms of how she incorporates aspects of the androgynous and the maternal body. As Mntambo reflects (in National Arts Festival 2011): “In some instances I really enjoy the very sensual, obviously female way in which the hide makes my body look. In other ways, I really enjoy bordering on masculine elements of the work. I really enjoy androgyny as well”. This latter enjoyment can be quite directly discerned in several of her hermaphrodite works. For example, in Europa (2008, figure 25) the somewhat menacing and powerful androgynous figure (again featuring the image of Mntambo herself), grimaces at us. Androgyny is also quite literally extended in Penis Vagina – One Man Capsule (2009). In this case, the androgynous image is destabilising as well as protective. The exhibition catalogue provides further information on this aspect:

In Penis Vagina – One Man Capsule (2009), the boundary between the need to fight and the need for protection is also apparent. Like Mntambo’s earlier piece uMcedo (2009), this work offers a space that one may enter for protection and perhaps preparation, only to emerge when one is
ready. The sculpture is both penetrative and encapsulating, an evocative hermaphroditic form that speaks of pure potential. (Michael Stevenson Art Gallery 2012)

Importantly, this androgynous cow-tail capsule is in itself a kind of grotesque fusion, but yet again, this is precisely where its paradoxical power lies. Moreover, this one man capsule – note the choice of “man” over “person” – also reminds one of the original “one man capsules” – the vulva and the womb, which encapsulate men during sex and before birth. In Mntambo’s hands, these organic, female sites are thus reappropriated as heterogeneous and even androgynous areas which are imbued not only with monstrosity or grotesqueness but with generative potential. The “walls” of these structures are also somewhat porous, allowing the viewer to see out of them without being seen but also figuring another aspect of the grotesque body in general and the female body in particular: penetrability. Indeed, with reference to umcedo; and presumably the same applies to Penis Vagina – One Man Capsule; Mntambo has stated that she wants viewers to actually, physically enter these somewhat smelly confines (National Arts Festival Grahamstown 2011). Here, the abject entering of the artwork is not only a compulsion but a kind of decree. In other words, these “wombs” can further heighten the abject sensation of blurring the distinction between subjects and objects (which is present in her cowhide sculptures), but here this sensation is more literal and encompassing. The sensation of literally entering into these works is significantly also accompanied by a stronger, even overwhelming smell of the dead cows they were constructed from – providing a powerful sensory experience of the material sublime. In this artwork, the division between the artwork as an image and object, and the viewer as a subject and perceptive body, is thus physically challenged as we “merge” into the sculpture. While this is the effect is destabilising in various aspects, it is thus again imbued with a generative potential for the viewer.

Then again, what I feel is also significant and what comes across when Mntambo herself enters umcedo (National Arts Festival Grahamstown 2011) is that the works are moreover imbued with a sense of playfulness. These sculptures become places where the viewer has the rare opportunity to play a game of “hide and seek” in an art gallery, thereby displaying one of the characteristics Penny Siopis discerned in the new generation of South African artists. Moreover, in an analogous sense, these two sculptures seem to invite the viewer to become one of those laughing pregnant hags whose glee Russo admires: we can enter this female grotesque area of absurd potential and more importantly enjoy it. In other words, Mntambo’s works can be said to exhibit an affirmative function of the female grotesque not only in how they allude to the heterogeneity and potential of this aberrant category, but also in their playfulness.

3.5 Conclusion

Nandipha Mntambo’s works, specifically those constructed from her distinctive bovine medium, can thus be said to realise the potential of the three chosen aberrant qualities to fulfil an affirmative expressive function in several ways. Firstly and perhaps most importantly, this characteristic medium of her sculptures and also her “hair paintings” do more than connect the viewer and the viewer’s body with the image in an extraordinarily visceral sense, thus presenting a challenge to Bild-
Anthropologie. Precisely because the medium and the (external and internal) image are so indelibly intertwined, it also creates the opportunity for the viewer to experience the “material sublime”, as Du Preez calls it. As such, the sensory effect of these works, and to a lesser extent of her video and photographic works, is vitally important in this process.

As we have seen, this aspect of the viewing experience is especially important in terms the grotesque, abject and female grotesque aesthetic and experiential categories in general, but would thus emerge as specifically prominent in Mntambo’s works with their “material memory” of the once living creatures and the artistic process. Shortly then, Mntambo’s works are imbued with an affirmative function of the aberrant in how their very materiality prompts a physical effect which potentially leads to an experience of the material sublime. Secondly, this potential is further strengthened by Mntambo’s underscoring of the unifying quality of cattle as they figure in various human activities and cultural traditions. Her images represent this aspect in terms of the grotesque body and the abject to both remind viewers of their own bodily mortality but also of their interconnectedness to other humans and living beings in general. This universal quality also figures into Mntambo’s exploration into issues surrounding her own corporeal and individual identity, which is ultimately expressed as being heterogeneous, thereby evoking the Kristevan delineation of the generative potential of a fluid identity. Thirdly, this multiplicity becomes a way for Mntambo to explore, and even transcend the boundaries between the supposed subject and object, living and dead, artwork and viewer, Western and African, power and vulnerability, male and female. Destabilising as the effect of these aberrant, heterogeneous images is, it also brings to light the inherent generative potential of both heterogeneity and aberration. Finally, this last aspect also becomes a way for Mntambo to explore, challenge and transcend traditionally established gender roles. She employs the conventions of the corporeal and performative grotesque female not only to destabilise this established dichotomy, but once again to celebrate the powerful potential it possesses. Likewise, androgyny and the maternal monstrous-feminine images are explored in a manner which is both serious and playful, as sites which of growth and protection. In conclusion, Mntambo thus explores those destabilised spaces and destabilising experiences which are created by the grotesque, abject and female grotesque in order to reveal and celebrate their inherent affirmative and generative potential.
Chapter 4: Reflection & conclusion

4.1 Reflection: What has this thesis achieved?
What remains then, is to surmise what this thesis has accomplished and to reflect on its shortcomings, which could point towards future research. Firstly, I feel that the delineation of aberration as an *effect* which can be brought about by the grotesque/ abject/ monstrous-feminine entity’s inherent aberrant characteristics, by its changeable state or by some fault in the perception thereof, proved to be quite useful. The conjunction with Hans Belting’s *Bild-Anthropologie* allowed me to further probe the aberrant affects in terms of internal and external images, how these employ their medium and how this impacts the viewer, who “animates” the image within his/her body (the “locus of images” and a “living medium”). I supplemented this approach with David Brodwell’s historical poetics, which in turn was expedient in looking at the medium-specific and historical conventions of each work. Furthermore, because aberration implies an operation which is effected on a perceiver, I also incorporated Jason Mittell’s augmentation of historical poetics to include viewer-oriented poetics. What these manifold delineations enabled me to do was to trace the “source” (/multiple “sources”) of aberration in each case.

In terms of my specific examples, this allowed me to see how one of the chief characteristics of affirmative aberration lies in a self-reflexive use of image traditions and medium-specific effects and conventions. *District 9*, I found that the viewer was at first prompted by the film to be repulsed by the utterly grotesque image of the aliens and their abject living circumstances. However, the film presented certain challenges in terms of the female grotesque and monstrous-feminine, as any aberrant female figures turned out to be incidentally female; their gender was not specifically relative to their monstrousness. This presents some interesting issues in terms of the continued validity of such a strictly binary view of gendered grotesqueness. Nevertheless, the analysis in terms of the grotesque and abject proved very fruitful. Through various medium-specific characteristics (e.g., highly convincing CGI, efficient use of sound, narrative development and the responses modelled by human characters) and also the broader inter-image relationships evoked by the grotesque figures and abject substances, the film creates a strong sensory effect and leads to a potent horrific grotesque and repulsive abject experience. As such, we are compelled at first to assign the aberrant effect of the aliens to some characteristic inherent to their image. When the human (anti-) hero Wikus van de Merwe accidentally becomes infected with alien DNA, the viewer is likewise prompted through the film’s construction to see his abjection in terms of his changeable state. However, in the film also compels us to question the authenticity of both verisimilar (e.g., “documentary-esque”) techniques and the perceptions we have formed of the aliens and Wikus. Thus, by evoking various narrative-prompted, emotional responses (via portrayed likeness, explicit social realism, encouraging sympathy and evoking admiration) the effect on the viewer steadily makes us aware that our rejection of the aliens and Wikus may be due to some limitation of our perception. Thus, by the end of the film, we are meant to be rooting for the very grotesque and abject beings we were at first repulsed by. The cause of the initial negative aberrant effect is thus
located within the film itself and the viewer’s reaction, while the generative, heuristic potential is revealed as having formed part of the aberrant forms all along. District 9 thus deliberately turns the proverbial tables and employs these aberrant effects to arrive at their apparently opposite effect of affirmative associations.

With reference to Mntambo’s work, the same kind of self-reflexivity can be found in terms of medium, the images and the larger visual traditions they refer to. In this sense, her works were seen to represent grotesque images which employed visual tactics such as hybridity, formlessness, decolouration, etc. Yet, in keeping with the richly ambivalent “grotesque body” and “grotesque experience”, her images underlined not only rejection and repulsion but evoked attraction and heterogeneous potential. However, her sculptures presented a challenge in terms of a historical poetics analysis, because her medium (actual hides, tails, ears, hooves, etc. of cows) is so unique as to entail no pre-existing connotations or conventions as an artistic medium. Similarly, trying to analyse the respective cow parts as if they were mere bovine-derived products, turned out to be overtly subverted by the medium. Instead, the medium was seen to be foregrounded in its own right in terms of the “material memory” the sculptures make materially perceptible (e.g., the smell of the cattle they previously formed part of). In this instance, Mntambo’s sculptures also presented an interesting challenge in terms of a Bild-Anthropologische analysis, because the medium and the (internal and external) image are so closely intertwined. Moreover, the potent physical, sensory and emotional effect immerse the viewer’s body in a very direct and bodily sense, to the extent that it even (abjectly) threatens the distinction between the art object and the viewing subject.

This leads me to my second point, which is that in both District 9 and Mntambo’s selected works issues of performativity, heterogeneity and changeability are affirmatively linked to identity. They visualise the fundamental operation of aberration by reflecting on and challenging the validity of diametrically opposed dualities and strict dichotomies of conventional ontology, such as male/female, clean/impure, human/animal or alien, and normal/abnormal. The boundaries of these dichotomies on which the aberrant effects of the grotesque, abject and female grotesque rest, are portrayed as flexible and never fixed. However, the case studies do not wholly disavow these dichotomies (recognising instead the usefulness of them too), nor do they affect “the loss of identity, [...] the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order” (as Wolfgang Kayser puts it, 1981:184-5). Instead, it was argued that while the case studies do this to a certain extent, it appears to be in order to shed new light on these ontological and cultural dichotomies as constituents of a personal heterogeneous identity, rather than to subvert them completely. In District 9 it is Wikus’ very heterogeneity which becomes both his mortal and moral saving grace by the end of the film, while Mntambo explores the heterogeneous identity in terms of the animal-human and androgyny. Thus, both cases could be said to favour heterogeneous, changeable, fluid and porous identities which are intrinsically bound up with the aesthetics and experience of the grotesque, abject and female grotesque. Hence, the visual examples can be argued to propose additional structures of understanding and being, rather than substitute structures, thus inferring the essential heuristic quality of the aberrant categories.
Fittingly, the works celebrate both the universality which the grotesque body and abject present; concentrating on the familiarity (albeit repressed familiarity) these aberrations present on top of presenting “estranged worlds”. However, they accomplish this in different ways. In the case of *District 9*, this is accomplished chiefly through its narrative aspects: through the viewer’s emotional response to the various characters and the empathy we are meant to feel for the aliens’ and Wikus’ various trials and tribulations. Once more, various formal features and medium-specific conventions were vital in accomplishing this; for example, the film’s utilisation of convincing CGI, verisimilar techniques, viral marketing and allusions to social reality. In Mntambo’s works, on the other hand, this was accomplished through her works’ various and often very visceral reminders of what we owe to and have in common with cattle, and how this, as well as our shared mortality, connects us with other human beings across the globe. More specifically, in her remarkable bovine medium sculptures, this effect was brought home through the medium’s traces of the being’s previous existence, as well as the fact that the works are indexical traces of the artist’s and her mother’s own living, mortal body.

A further discovery in terms of affirmative aberrations was the importance of the medium in connecting the viewer to the image in a manner which is rather more directly physical and sensorial than would usually be the case. In both cases, the medium and its impact on the viewer is closely intertwined with the image; I would even go so far as stating that trying to separate the one from the other in these cases would be more detrimental than in most. For example, *District 9*’s grotesque images would be a lot less effective if they did not employ photoreal CGI, and if they were static and soundless. Also, if we think of Mntambo’s sculptures as simply cowhide moulds, we lose sight of their power as images of female bodies; conversely, if we think of them solely as representations of the female body, we neglect the powerful effect of their materiality. This aspect is of materiality turned out to be more prominent in Mntambo’s case due to the importance of the material sublime experience in conferring an affirmative quality on her works’ effects on the viewer. Finally though, both sets of images do rely heavily on the specifically embodied, sensory perception of the viewer for their destabilising and affirmative effect, and also on the viewer “re-animating” the images as bodies in their own right. This response turned out to be especially marked in terms of the aberrant image and effect, because both of these owe their power to this. This insight challenges and deepens both the historical poetics and *Bild-Anthropologie* approaches, as it brings to light that the aberrant image may make different demands on the medium (for example, to be not only representational but be present in its own right) and the viewer (for example, to endure certain effects in order to push through the highly destabilising experience towards new forms of knowledge) than other kinds of images. Finally, it turns out that the case studies both employ the conventions of the three aberrant categories in terms of the material presence of the image, medium and viewer in such a way as to as to become heuristic devices for the viewer. By deliberately evoking strong aberrant reactions and then self-reflexively revealing the drawbacks of such a reaction (such as the callous prejudice towards the aliens in *District 9*), the works may have the potential of leading us to new forms of knowledge not only regarding these entities but regarding our own initial reactions and their fallible and somewhat arbitrary foundations.
4.2 Shortcomings and possible future research: What has the thesis not achieved?

Despite my interim solution of consulting existing reviews and artists’ statements to gauge some idea of the two case studies viewer-oriented poetics, I feel that the only way to really move the findings of this thesis from educated guessing towards proven hypotheses would be to conduct empirical research. As mentioned in the introduction, I would thus like to arrange a (series of) cinematic showing(s) of District 9 and test actual audiences’ responses. This would involve detailed questionnaires and interviews, and perhaps several separate viewing groups (for example, providing some groups with historical information and others not; or, lowering the sound level of certain scenes; or perhaps even removing some of the more visceral scenes). It would also be interesting to see whether a younger audience (who have presumably been drenched in grotesque imagery since a young age) would respond differently in comparison to an older audience to grotesque images. I would also like to orchestrate a similar arrangement with some of Mntambo’s sculptures. In her case, it would also be interesting to discover to what degree the material nature of the works would influence an audience. I could thus, for example, compare one viewing group’s reactions to the actual exhibition, to another group’s reaction to an HD video recording thereof (where, for one thing, the smell of the artworks would be cancelled out).

On a more a theoretical level, it would be interesting to look at contemporary Western culture in more detail. One could ask to what extent the steady dissolution from the 1950s onward of the artificial dichotomy of “high art” (beaux-arts, which relate to the Classical body canon) and “low” or “pop culture” (which relates more readily to the grotesque body) has affected our perception of the aberrant. What happens to the Classical body canon critiqued by Bakhtin when one of its strongholds – the fine arts – has been populated with the grotesque, abject bodies created by the likes of Kiki Smith, Damien Hirst, Joel-Peter Witkin and indeed Mntambo? Conversely, how much sway does the Classical body canon hold when popular culture as a major commercial stronghold is saturated with grotesque body humour (cf. Appendix A and B); a year-round kind of carnival but now big business? Also, how have the monstrous-feminine and female grotesque changed in a time when socially powerful female figures are steadily increasing in the political, business and arts arenas, to name but a few? Or when female sexual promiscuity is increasingly viewed as (nearly) as acceptable as male sexual promiscuity? In a time when women willingly broadcast explicit videos of themselves giving birth, does the womb still present an utter subconscious abjection? And what does this new-found agency and public platform entail for the female subjects? Of course, these are complex questions which relate to contemporary culture in a generalised sense and are therefore difficult to answer. However, I strongly suspect that these gradual changes hold significant implications for the three aberrant categories, which are so closely intertwined with cultural standards regarding “normality”. As such, I think that the attempts to begin to answer these questions will hold interesting implications for the analysis of the widespread prevalence of aberrant images.


50. Michael Stevenson Art Gallery. 2012. Artist entry: Nandipha Mntambo. [http://stevenson.info/artists/mntambo.html](http://stevenson.info/artists/mntambo.html) [contains several sublinks to information on Mntambo and exhibitions she has participated in]


71. There are no heroes promo video. 2011. www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmQlwzzuXjo


Visual material

General visual material


3. Fresco from the *Domus Aurea* (Nero’s Golden Palace). Ca 64 AD.

5a & b. *D9*. Before & after: Jason Cope in a light-reflecting lycra suit and on stilts; and his CGI, roto-mated alien replacement.

6a & b. *D9*. Signs of segregation: as a marketing tool in reality (left), and as a segregationist tool in the film (right).
7. *D9*. Close-up of one of the aliens, courtesy of “Egoli news” (a fictional news programme)

8. *D9*. MNU security guard Thomas keeps his gun on the much taller and stronger alien. Note also the alien’s anatomy, facial expression and the “official footage code” at the bottom of the screen.

10. *D9.* The “pink bra” alien, urinating a green fluid while standing upright.

11. *D9.* Two MNU security guards keeping a safe distance from an alien who abjectly chews on a bloody rag and pushes a shopping trolley full of cattle heads.

12. *D9.* Engineer wiping sludge from the inner door of the mother ship. Note also the protective clothing, the “official code” and how the footage is manipulated to seem aged.


15. *D9.* Wikus veers away, gagging from the stench of the eggs.
16. *D9.* Wikus cheerfully describes to the cameraman what the eggs experience as they die.

17. *D9.* Wikus sprays himself with the black fluid. The shot is accompanied by a high-pitched microphone disturbance sound to increase the eeriness.

18. *D9.* Black fluid drips from Wikus’ nose and into his mouth.
19. D9. Wikus projectile vomits black fluid over the cake. The tinsel and party hat he wears add to the disturbing comical sense of the scene.

20. D9. Wikus stares in horror at the bloody point of his thumb, after he has lost a second nail, which he abjectly spits out.

22. *D9*. A dirty, bloody Wikus gulps down handfuls of cat food surrounded by District 9’s dereliction.

23. *D9*. A group of aliens tears Koobus Venter apart while Wikus cowers in the background.

Nandipha Mntambo (b. 1982)


31 - 34. NM. *Emabutfo* installation view, detail, Kiasma Gallery, Helsinki (2011).

41. NM. Detail from *Iqab lami* (2007).
42. NM. Detail from *Iqab lami* (2007).


46. NM. Installation view of *uMcedo* in Michael Stevenson Cape Town Gallery (2009).

47. NM. Installation view of *Penis Vagina – One Man Capsule* in Michael Stevenson Cape Town Gallery (2009).
Appendix A

All-time top box office hits (in USA) by decade and year

(*indicates films featuring grotesque elements)

(adapted from [http://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice2.html](http://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice2.html))

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<th>TOP FILMS OF THE 1960s (unadjusted domestic gross totals)</th>
<th>TOP FILMS BY YEAR IN THE 1960s (unadjusted domestic gross totals)</th>
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<td>2. <em>101 Dalmatians</em> (1961)* (Disney's long time favourite of anthropomorphised animals)</td>
<td>1961: <em>101 Dalmatians</em> (1961) (Disney's long time favourite of anthropomorphised animals)</td>
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<td>12. <em>Guess Who's Coming to Dinner</em> (1967)</td>
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**TOP TEN FILMS OF THE 2010s**
(unadjusted domestic gross totals)
(tentative only)
1. Toy Story 3 (2010)*
3. The Hunger Games (2012)
4. Transformers: Dark of the Moon (2011)*
5. Alice in Wonderland (2010)*
6. Iron Man 2 (2010)*
7. The Twilight Saga: Eclipse (2010)*

**TOP FILMS BY YEAR IN THE 2010s**
(unadjusted domestic gross totals)
2010: Toy Story 3 (2010)*
Appendix B

Top 20 films of 2011 according to gross profit in the USA
(*indicates films featuring grotesque elements)
(adapted from http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2011)

1 Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*
2 Transformers: Dark of the Moon*
3 The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1*
4 The Hangover Part II* (comic grotesque)
5 Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*
6 Fast Five
7 Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol
8 Cars 2*
9 Thor*
10 Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (features a clairvoyant and Sherlock Holmes is imbued with powers of physical perception far exceeding normal human beings)
11 Rise of the Planet of the Apes*
12 Captain America: The First Avenger*
13 The Help* (one of the characters puts her stools in a pie and watches her ex-employer eat it)
14 Bridesmaids* (comic grotesque)
15 Kung Fu Panda 2*(anthropomorphised animals)
16 Puss in Boots*
17 X-Men: First Class*
18 Rio* (anthropomorphised animals)
19 The Smurfs*
20 Super 8*