

Rewriting the Colonial Gaze: Postcolonial Cinema as a Tool of Cultural Reclamation

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Abstract

This article critically examines how postcolonial cinemas strategically dismantle and rewrite the pervasive "colonial gaze" the objectifying, Eurocentric visual regime historically deployed to justify domination and construct the colonized "Other." Analyzing seminal works from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Indigenous contexts, it argues that filmmakers employ specific aesthetic, narrative, and thematic strategies to reclaim cultural agency, redefine identity, and challenge Western epistemological hegemony. Through close readings of films by Sembène, Mambéty, Dash, Mehta, Sen, and others, the study identifies key modes of resistance: subverting ethnographic tropes, reclaiming historical narratives, centering subaltern subjectivities, reappropriating language and myth, and deploying hybrid forms. The research demonstrates that postcolonial cinema functions not merely as representation but as an active *tool* of cultural reclamation, generating counter-visualities that assert epistemological sovereignty. While acknowledging tensions within the global film market and internal critiques, the article contends that these cinematic interventions are crucial for decolonizing the imagination, fostering cultural resilience, and articulating postcolonial futures beyond the constraints of imperial visibility.

Keywords

Colonial gaze, Postcolonial cinema, Cultural reclamation, Decolonial aesthetics, Counter-narrative, Subaltern voice, Cinematic resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

The Persistence of the Gaze and the Imperative of Rewriting

The visual representation of colonized peoples and cultures has long been a potent instrument of imperial power. The "colonial gaze," theorized as a mode of seeing that objectifies, exoticizes, and constructs the racialized "Other" as inferior and knowable (Fanon, 1967; Said, 1978), permeated early ethnographic film, colonial propaganda, and Western narrative cinema. Decades after formal decolonization, this gaze persists in global media circuits, perpetuating damaging stereotypes and epistemological hierarchies (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Postcolonial cinema emerges as a vital site of resistance, actively engaged in what Trinh T. Minh-ha terms "rewriting the gaze" (Trinh, 1989). This article investigates how filmmakers from formerly colonized nations and marginalized communities utilize the cinematic apparatus to dismantle this gaze, reclaim cultural narratives, and assert visual sovereignty. We argue that postcolonial cinema is fundamentally an act of cultural reclamation, employing specific

strategies to decenter Western perspectives, restore historical agency, and articulate complex, self-defined identities (Gabriel, 1989). This process is not merely corrective but generative, creating new visual epistemologies essential for postcolonial subjectivity and cultural survival.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: DECONSTRUCTING THE COLONIAL GAZE AND FRAMING RECLAMATION

The concept of the "gaze" in cinematic and cultural theory is crucial. Building on Lacan and Foucault, film scholars like Laura Mulvey (1975) analyzed the gendered "male gaze." Postcolonial theory extends this to the racialized and imperial gaze, where the colonizer assumes the position of the unseen, all-knowing observer, rendering the colonized a passive spectacle devoid of history or interiority (Bhabha, 1983; Spivak, 1988). This gaze operates through tropes: the exotic primitive, the noble savage, the timeless landscape, the chaotic native, the eroticized woman of color all serving to justify control and

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deny coevalness (Fabian, 1983). Rewriting this gaze necessitates:

- **Epistemological Shift:** Rejecting the Western subject as the sole source of valid knowledge and vision (Mignolo, 2011).
- **Reclaiming Agency:** Restoring the colonized subject as an active historical agent and bearer of complex subjectivity.
- **Reappropriating Form:** Subverting or transforming cinematic language itself, often inherited from colonial/imperial models.
- **Centering Place and Memory:** Asserting the significance of indigenous landscapes, histories, and cosmologies silenced by colonial narratives (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Postcolonial cinema thus becomes a practice of "decolonial aesthetics" (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2013), creating sensorial and cognitive experiences grounded in alternative ways of knowing and being.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM COLONIAL PROPAGANDA TO EMERGENT COUNTER-VISUALITIES

Early cinema was deeply implicated in the colonial project. Ethnographic films like those of Felix-Louis Regnault framed African bodies as specimens (Rony, 1996). Colonial administrations produced propaganda films showcasing "civilizing missions" and "docile natives" (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Hollywood narratives consistently reinforced stereotypes (e.g., the savage African, the mystical Indian, the submissive Asian). The emergence of independent national cinemas post-1945 marked a crucial turning point. Pioneers like Ousmane Sembène (Senegal), Satyajit Ray (India), and Glauber Rocha (Brazil) consciously sought to break from these representations, using cinema to tell stories *from within* their cultures, addressing local audiences and concerns. This nascent phase laid the groundwork for more radical experiments in gaze subversion that followed, establishing cinema as a key battleground for cultural sovereignty.

REWRITING THROUGH NARRATIVE: RECLAIMING HISTORY AND CENTERING THE SUBALTERN

A primary strategy involves reclaiming historical narratives silenced or distorted by colonial historiography.

- **Confronting Colonial Atrocity:** Films like Ousmane Sembène's *Camp de Thiaroye* (1987) expose the massacre of Senegalese Tirailleurs by French forces in 1944, directly challenging official French narratives of liberation and fraternity. Similarly, Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993) uses a time-travel narrative to force a confrontation with the brutal realities of the transatlantic slave trade and its legacies, centering African resistance.
- **Centering Subaltern Voices:** Postcolonial cinema shifts focus from elites and colonial administrators to the experiences of peasants, workers, women, and the disenfranchised – the subaltern. Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) depicts the trauma of Partition through the suffering of a refugee family, particularly the sacrificial figure of the sister, Nita. Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998) portrays the horrific violence of Partition through the perspective of a young Parsi girl and her Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh friends, highlighting the human cost obscured by nationalist narratives.
- **Reinterpreting Myth and Legend:** Filmmakers reappropriate indigenous myths and legends, not as exotic folklore for Western consumption, but as living frameworks for understanding contemporary realities and asserting cultural continuity. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) draws on Gullah Geechee history, spirituality, and oral traditions to tell the story of an African American family at the turn of the 20th century, creating a uniquely Black feminist visual language and cosmology.

REWRITING THROUGH FORM: AESTHETIC STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

The reclamation extends beyond content to the very language of cinema, challenging dominant modes of representation.

- **Subverting Ethnographic Conventions:** Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973) employs surrealism, disjointed narratives, and jarring soundscapes to actively resist the exoticizing, linear narratives expected of "African cinema." It refuses easy consumption, forcing the viewer into an unfamiliar, challenging perspective.
- **Reappropriating Language and Sound:** The use of indigenous languages, vernaculars, and creoles is itself a powerful act of reclamation against the imposition of colonial languages. Sembène insisted on Wolof and Diola in his films. The complex soundscapes in films like *Daughters of the Dust* or John Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), blending music, ambient sound, and multiple voices, create polyphonic narratives that defy singular interpretation.
- **Hybridity and Third Cinema Legacies:** Drawing inspiration from the radical politics and aesthetics of Latin American "Third Cinema" (Solanas & Getino, 1969), many postcolonial filmmakers embrace hybrid forms. They blend documentary and fiction, incorporate ritual and performance, utilize non-professional actors, and experiment with narrative structure to create cinematic languages that reflect the complexity and syncretism of postcolonial realities (Cham, 1996). Raoul Peck's *Lumumba* (2000) mixes archival footage, dramatic reconstruction, and direct address to create a powerful indictment of colonialism and neo-colonial intervention.
- **Indigenous Cinemas and Embodied Landscapes:** Indigenous filmmakers like Zacharias Kunuk (*Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, 2001) or Warwick Thornton (*Samson and Delilah*, 2009) employ distinct visual strategies deeply connected to land, cosmology, and oral storytelling traditions. Long takes, landscape as active character,

non-linear time, and a focus on embodied experience rewrite the colonial gaze that sought to possess and map territory, instead presenting land as relation and ancestor (Raheja, 2010).

REWRITING THROUGH SUBJECTIVITY: COMPLEX IDENTITIES AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Postcolonial cinema dismantles monolithic, stereotypical representations by portraying complex, multifaceted identities.

- **Deconstructing Stereotypes:** Films actively work against reductive tropes. Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) explores the complexities of race, migration, and love within the Indian diaspora in the US, challenging simplistic notions of cultural belonging and confronting anti-Blackness within South Asian communities.
- **Feminist Interventions:** Women filmmakers offer crucial perspectives, reclaiming female subjectivity often doubly objectified by colonial and patriarchal gazes. Tracey Moffatt (*Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*, 1990) uses stark, stylized imagery to explore the trauma of Australia's Stolen Generations and fraught Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) boldly depicts female desire and resistance within a repressive Hindu patriarchal structure, sparking intense debate about tradition and modernity.
- **Queering the Postcolonial Lens:** Filmmakers increasingly explore queer identities within postcolonial contexts, challenging heteronormative nationalist narratives and colonial legacies of sexual regulation. Films like *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011) or *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2018), despite facing censorship, assert the visibility and validity of queer lives within the African diaspora and contemporary Africa.

TENSIONS, CHALLENGES, AND THE GLOBAL MARKET

The project of rewriting the gaze faces significant challenges.

- **The Specter of the "International Audience":** Funding often depends on appealing to Western festivals and distributors, potentially pressuring filmmakers to exoticize or simplify their narratives for foreign consumption (Diawara, 1992). Negotiating authenticity versus accessibility remains a constant tension.
- **Internal Critiques and Power Dynamics:** Postcolonial cinemas are not monolithic; internal critiques exist regarding class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and regional power imbalances within nations. Whose reclamation is prioritized? (Guneratne, 2003).
- **Neo-Colonial Circuits:** The dominance of Hollywood and Western media conglomerates continues to shape global viewing habits and expectations, making the circulation of truly alternative visualities difficult (Miller et al., 2005).
- **Commodification of Resistance:** There is a risk that "resistance" itself becomes a marketable aesthetic within global art cinema, potentially diluting its political potency (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Digital Frontiers and New Modes of Reclamation

The digital era offers new avenues and complexities for rewriting the gaze.

- **Democratization of Production:** Accessible technology enables marginalized communities previously excluded from film production to create and disseminate their own narratives directly (e.g., Indigenous media collectives, diaspora YouTube channels).
- **Transnational Networks and Solidarity:** Online platforms facilitate connections and collaborations between postcolonial filmmakers and activists globally, amplifying counter-narratives and building solidarity (Dovey, 2009).
- **Archival Activism:** Digitization projects reclaim and recontextualize historical

colonial footage, turning the imperial archive against itself (e.g., projects repatriating ethnographic films to source communities).

- **New Forms and Distribution:** Interactive documentaries, VR experiences, and social media campaigns offer innovative ways to engage audiences and challenge dominant visual regimes (Naficy, 2001).

CONCLUSION: CINEMATIC RECLAMATION AS ONGOING DECOLONIAL PRACTICE

Postcolonial cinema constitutes a dynamic and indispensable field of cultural reclamation. By systematically dismantling the colonial gaze through narrative re-centering, formal innovation, and the assertion of complex subjectivities, filmmakers reclaim the power to define their own histories, cultures, and identities. This is not a project of nostalgia but an active, often contested, process of decolonial world-making. Films like those analyzed demonstrate cinema's unique capacity to generate counter-visualities sensorial and affective experiences that challenge Western epistemological dominance and offer alternative ways of seeing and knowing. While navigating the constraints of the global market and internal power dynamics, this cinematic resistance remains crucial. It fosters cultural resilience, empowers marginalized voices, challenges historical amnesia, and imagines futures liberated from the constricting frame of imperial visibility. Rewriting the colonial gaze through cinema is, therefore, an ongoing and vital act of epistemological and cultural sovereignty, fundamental to the broader project of decolonization. As Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us, "There is no such thing as documentary" without critical reflection on the politics of representation itself a reflection postcolonial cinema performs with profound urgency (Trinh, 1993).

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