



Article

Cinema, the Settler

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Abstract: While the history and technology of cinema are considered for the purpose of achieving decolonial ends, this paper suggests that ‘classic’ cinema may be considered a quintessentially settler colonial medium. However, the moving image is now delivered in new ways and through new devices, and streaming has transformed global patterns of cinema production and consumption. Thus, two developments are considered in relation to this transformation. On the one hand, there are signs that mainstream cinema may be genuinely addressing its implication with colonialism, and this paper focuses on a formal apology and on a big budget movie that adopted a radically innovative approach to representing Indigenous peoples: *Prey* (2022). On the other hand, streaming has made cinema portable and has made consumption in personally deliberated instalments possible. The ‘digital natives’ consume cinema in fragmented and noncollective patterns, and their activity is subjected to unprecedented modalities of surveillance and appropriation. This paper concludes that a form of digital colonialism supported by streaming operates in ways that are homologous with modes of settler colonial appropriation.

Keywords: settler colonialism; classic cinema; homology; surrogacy; parallax; resurgence; Indigenous cinema; fragmentation

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on cinema’s dynamic engagement with settler colonialism as a specific mode of domination. It argues that it is a significant relationship, historically and in a contemporary perspective, and that thinking this relation is especially important considering the ways in which streaming has transformed patterns of consumption. Before reflecting on more recent developments affecting the relationship between cinema and settler colonialism, an analysis that is presented in Section 3, Section 2 offers a brief outline of the technology and history of this relation. There is a significant scholarly literature base dedicated to the imbrications of cinema and settler colonialism, and the consensus is that cinema and film can often be seen as tools of settler colonial domination (see [Limbrick 2010](#); [Weaver-Hightower and Hulme 2014](#); [Lahti and Weaver-Hightower 2020](#)). The abusive relationship specifically linking Hollywood and the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island has also been the subject of significant and protracted scholarly activity (see [Bataille and Silet 1980](#); [Kilpatrick 1999](#); [Singer 2001](#); [Prats 2002](#); [Aleiss 2005](#); [Hearne 2012a, 2012b](#); [Howe et al. 2013](#); [Marubio and Buffalohead 2013](#); [Pavlik et al. 2017](#); [Black 2020](#); [Watchman 2022](#)). This paper concurs with these findings but pushes the argument one step further. It is not only about being a tool for or being conducive to domination; something deeper may be at stake. As outlined in Section 2, the bases for the claim that classic cinema may be considered a quintessentially settler colonial medium are the homology between cinema and settler colonialism as a specific mode of domination and the ways in which cinema became a surrogate for settler colonial expansion.¹ Section 3 deals with more recent, ostensibly contradictory, developments: the cinematic resurgence of Indigenous collectives and the fragmentation of the public that followed the advent of streaming technologies. The first development constitutes an undoubtedly decolonial passage, while



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the second portends modes of subjection that reinstate modalities of appropriation that are recognisably settler colonial.

2. Homology and Surrogacy

Cinema has *represented* colonialism but has *interiorised* settler colonialism. It had to face the former, either to denounce it (for example, and typically, in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, 1966), or to uphold it (for example, and most famously, in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, 1915, or in Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind*, 1939). Either way, the focus was on colonialism—the camera was trained on this mode of domination. In *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and Structures of US Antagonism*, Frank Wilderson contended that the very expulsion of Blacks from the realm of the human dialectically provides the very basis upon which the 'human' is constituted—the enslaved must be represented so they can be excluded (Wilderson 2010, p. 178). However, when cinema represents settler colonialism as a specific mode of domination, the camera behaves differently: it elides, it cuts off, it edits away. The *Last of the Mohicans* (directed by Michael Mann, 1992) is 'lasted' away (see O'Brien 2010). There is a consistent pattern: the film focuses on the decline and eradication of Indigenous peoples; when it comes to casting for Indigenous characters, non-Indigenous actors are preferred over Indigenous actors. At times, as in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), the settler literally and figuratively inhabits an Indigenous person through a sophisticated avatar (see Veracini 2011). *Last of the Mohicans* and *Avatar* came after classic cinema—they tried new ways of representing Indigenous peoples but could not escape the conventions of their medium. Cinema was locked in a history of misrepresentation. The Indigenous presence, what disrupts the settler colonial fantasy of undisturbed possession, was edited away. 'Lasting' is typically and crucially a settler colonial discursive formation.

Attention should focus on tropes and representation, as in prior criticism, but we should also concentrate on the mechanics of production. It is important to consider that film editing and settler colonialism as specific modes of domination proceed in homologous ways: there is a structural similarity in the ways they operate. The camera 'settles' on an image and elides everything else: unwanted segments are cut away. Film editing is performed in many ways, from where exactly the camera is placed to what exactly is cut off from a particular take; however, it is inevitably about what is deliberately left out, what is not seen. It is an act and a practice that covers its tracks, like settler colonialism is a mode of domination that programmatically erases the conditions of its operation. Settler colonialism also elides by way of 'editing'. For example, relationships with Indigenous sovereign collectives, populations that are to be assimilated or removed, or targeted for elimination, physical or otherwise, and complexities that are to be flattened, are all to be transferred and 'edited' away in accordance with the 'logic of elimination' (see Wolfe 2006; Veracini 2010). Editing is a normalising practice in both contexts—cinema and settler colonialism operate in homologous ways.

Moreover, when the specific dynamics of consumption that cinema engender are considered, the homology can be extended, because watching a movie in a traditional cinema turns anybody into a 'settler' of sort: the viewing subject is fixed, stable, safely sitting on a more or less comfortable chair. Robert Stam and Louise Spence already talked in a seminal 1983 paper about 'audiovisual masters' and 'armchair conquistadores' (Stam and Spence 1983, p. 4). Classic cinema, unlike a novel or a TikTok clip, could not be consumed on the move, or at any time. Edward Said offered the important point that the novel as a specific literary genre is especially linked to colonialism: the book is portable, and colonialism is also premised on the possibilities of displacement. The novel and colonialism—he noted—travelled together (Said 1994). With cinema, the viewing subject is sitting; they are literally settled, and yet are in a world that is not their own: they are in that world but not of it. A settler colonialist who has travelled to the settler colony is also someone who is in a location, but not of it. In other words, cinema makes one travel without moving. As they enjoy the fantasy of moving forward toward *their* country, settlers also move across space in ways that are distinct from the movement of all other travellers;

they also travel without really moving. The homology between cinema as a medium and settler colonialism as a mode of domination is sustained.

Additionally, there is yet another homology: cinema assimilates. When we are watching a movie, we are all viewing the same image, and we are all sharing the same point of view (and this point of view has the authority of the 'director', someone who has appropriated the sovereign authority to direct our gaze, and someone who is already editing 'in camera').² As Catherine Russell noted, 'narrative cinema' fixes 'the gaze of the spectator onto the projector/camera's line of sight' and fundamentally denies 'alternative viewing positions' (Russell 2002, p. 556). The camera settles on an image, it is part of an effort to settle the audience.

This has important implications, sets cinema apart from other mediums, and places cinema squarely in the settler colonial field. Indigenous scholar Jodi Byrd has convincingly described the unbridgeable gap between settler and Indigenous worldviews as a 'parallax' (Byrd 2011, p. 32).³ Byrd was adopting a Žizekian approach for the purpose of reasserting an Indigenous sovereign view (see Žizek 2006).⁴ Byrd saw two distinct worldviews literally premised on different modalities of *viewing*. 'Parallax' involves a focus on radically different perspectives: a settler and Indigenous person look at the same object and see different things and different contexts, just as two spectators watching the same theatrical show from opposite ends of the same theatre view objectively different things represented on stage (an actor does not look the same when seen from different sides of the stalls below; thus, the sets look different). Settlers look at Indigenous lands and see 'profit, fortune, equality', while Indigenous peoples inevitably see a devastating attack against their lifeworlds (Byrd 2011, p. 13; *Parallax*, of course, is also a scholarly journal dedicated to cultural studies and related disciplines established in 1995). Theatre implies a hierarchy of vision, but cinema is more egalitarian, and settlers routinely proclaim and celebrate their exclusive egalitarianism. Palestinian intellectual Raef Zreik also engages with the parallax metaphor. He describes a system of contrasting visions radically separating Indigenous Palestinians and Zionist settlers:

Zionism is a settler colonial project, but not only that. It combines the image of the refugee with the image of the soldier, the powerless with the powerful, the victim with the victimizer, the colonizer with the colonized, a settler project and a national project at the same time. The Europeans see the back of the Jewish refugee fleeing for his life. The Palestinian sees the face of the settler colonialist taking over his land. (Zreik 2016, pp. 358–59)

The Indigenous person sees something, the metropolitan person sees another, and the settler colonialist sees both at once. Cinema relies on projection, projection onto a bidimensional screen; it offers the same image to all, no matter where they are positioned, and attempts to erase alternative perspectives (parallax is also a cinematic technology, but it typically refers to a shifting view that is offered, not the simultaneous persistence of multiple views; see Whissel 2020). Cinema, in a fundamental way, assimilates: it erases the parallax, even if there are ways to undo the complicities linking cinema and settler colonialism, and Indigenous filmmakers have been especially compelled to perform this undoing, as this paper argues.⁵ Settler colonialism is about moving without really moving, moving across space while carrying the material and cultural worlds of the settlers across to the settler colony, and so is the moving image: there is a striking homology.

However, there is surrogacy as well as homology. In a way, and in the context of imagery, cinema historically functioned *in lieu* of settler colonialism after the closing of the settler colonial 'frontier'. Cinema can be seen as surrogate settler colonialism: Los Angeles and Hollywood came at the end of the 'global settler revolution', and when the political and imaginative traditions I have called 'the world turned inside out' had entered a critical crisis (Belich 2009; Veracini 2021). Los Angeles became cinema's global centre in the crucial decades when settler colonialism as practice, even if not as structure, had entered a global crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was a geographical and a chronological

end at once: the ocean was in the way, a trope that Walt Whitman had aptly encapsulated in his 'Facing West from California's Shores' (Whitman 1867). In the poem, a settler looked 'off the shores' of the 'western sea', while the circle of perennial 'Aryan migrations' out of Asia was 'almost circled'. Playing on a similar trope, John Steinbeck had later described 'a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them' (Steinbeck 1953, p. 199). Similarly, Joan Didion would remark, approximately a century after Whitman, that in California, 'things better work out', because there, 'beneath that immense bleached sky', 'we run out of continent' (Didion 1968, p. 172). No more lands to occupy, or Indigenous people to dispossess, and subsequently, 'last'. The sense that settler colonialism could no longer proceed as it previously had, and the idea that it was in Southern California and Hollywood that a new post-settler world would emerge was widespread. Of course, settler colonialism of the 'pioneers' of various 'frontiers' was perpetuated in the structures of settler colonialism maintained by the settler states that followed, and the settler societies retained a foundational logic of elimination, but the Okies who were moving to Los Angeles during the Depression were, in a sense, postsettlers and refugees—their settlement had literally been turned upside down. The Dust Bowl was literally unsettling.

The crisis of settler colonialism in the early decades of the twentieth century was followed by classic cinema (even if classic cinema was much more than the crisis of settler colonialism). When the settling of the land ended, settler colonialism remained as a structure and as a projection. A psychological projection is a defence mechanism that emerges when facing difficult feelings; it is what one does when they feel threatened and run out of emotional space. Cinema is not settler colonialism; it is much beyond a specific mode of domination, and much beyond the US, but Hollywood surrogated for settler colonialism after its end (and from where it ended, which is significant). The global 'Great Land Rush' (see Weaver 2006), the actual occupation of Indigenous lands by settlers, ended in projection, a very real metaphor—and cinema, after all, is literally about projecting. It seems significant that early cinema was very much about representing the settler colonial story, and so were the Western movies of classic cinema (see Frymus 2021; Gish Bernd 2005). Telling the story of settler colonialism is still one of the things cinema does best (Veracini 2020; Lechuga 2023).

Like the nineteenth century novel could be considered a quintessentially colonial device—by the way, the Jane Austen Museum has finally expressed a willingness to talk about slavery, even if the fans are less enthused about it (Gross 2021)—classic cinema is a quintessentially settler colonial medium, more so than other media. It is a history aptly summarised by Renae Watchman as one of 'misrepresentation, erasure, and silencing' (Watchman 2022, p. 112). However, Indigenous filmmakers have been subverting cinema's complicities with colonial regimes since an Indigenous director first utilised a camera or an Indigenous actor positioned themselves in front of one. Indigenous filmmakers used a weapon and a technology developed and wielded by colonisers for decolonial ends. Nonetheless, Hollywood's complicities with settler colonialism remain largely unaddressed. Will the John Wayne Birthplace and Museum ever issue an apology? It seems unlikely.⁶

3. Resurgence and Fragmentation

The imbrications of cinema and settler colonialism are now being transformed. Classic, modernist cinema was eventually superseded. There has now been a formal apology. Hollywood did eventually apologise: fifty years after Sacheen Littlefeather had expressed her dismay and uttered a few words of protest, appearing instead of Marlon Brando at the Academy Awards event, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences officially said sorry in 2022 (Holpuch 2022). Littlefeather had protested in particular at Hollywood's representation of Native Americans, a protest that retains its cogency irrespective of subsequent allegations regarding her Indigenous status (Clark 2022). On that occasion, allegedly, John Wayne had to be physically restrained by security as he intended to assault Littlefeather (Holpuch 2022).

It was a symbolic declaration, but, more substantively, in recent years, Indigenous cinema witnessed a veritable resurgence (Lewis 2010; Raheja 2010). Moving beyond relatively niche productions and markets, Indigenous filmmakers have been telling mainstream stories and directing mainstream movies. *Reservation Dogs*, co-created by Indigenous filmmakers Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi, was a resounding success.⁷ Indigenous monster-hunting has been an especially significant theme in this context (The Red Nation Podcast 2022b). If the horror genre under settler colonialism typically insisted on the trope or the ‘vengeful Indigenous killer’, this latest development constitutes a remarkable subversion (Simmons 2022). Indigenous horror is now an established cinematic genre (see Floyd 2023). Warwick Thornton’s series, *Firebite* (2021–), for example, is about Indigenous vampire hunters in outback Australia: the vampires came with the First Fleet of settlers, have been feeding on Indigenous blood since their arrival, and have never left (see Obenson 2021; Buckmaster 2021). Monster stories are often able and designed to express public anxieties. If vampire stories relate to concerns about mass immigration, and zombie stories convey the panic at the prospect of slave insurrection, monsters who come from elsewhere and are relentlessly and senselessly violent encapsulate Indigenous fears.

Prey—the latest instalment of the Predator franchise, released in August 2022—marked a significant transformation (The Red Nation Podcast 2022a; Native Film Talk Podcast 2022). *Prey* is about a violent alien invasion driven by the logic of elimination, and even if it is not an Indigenous production, it can be seen in many ways as a decolonial movie: a big-budget film by Native Americans, rather than about Native Americans. This movie is indeed different: first, there is no ‘lasting’ in *Prey*; and second, there are no Indigenous sidekicks, or appropriation. This prequel is set in 1719, when a band of Comanche becomes the target of the Predator (see Hoad 2022). There are other invaders too, encroaching Indigenous territory—they speak French, have firearms, and kill indiscriminately. The hero of the story is a woman: Naru, played by Assiniboine Sioux Amber Midthunder, who noted the movie’s ‘cultural accuracy’, and remarked on its deliberate intention to avoid ‘boiling’ Indigenous peoples ‘down to something one-dimensional, like that hyper-spiritual side or something overly violent’ (Hoad 2022). Additionally, the producer is Comanche, Jhane Myers, who ensured that this ‘frontier’ science fiction movie remains faithful to ways of Native American storytelling (see Navarro 2022). Her role in the making of *Prey* was crucial; not that of a cultural consultant whose advice could be overridden—these arrangements had been tried before and had not worked. Myers adapted the original script when needed, and most importantly, formally screened *Prey* to the representatives of the Comanche nation. This was *before* the movie was finished: they had a say in the final product. Moreover, the film has a Comanche soundtrack—the option to watch it in the Indigenous language is offered to all who want to enjoy it the way it was designed to be. Is this what Indigenous cinematic sovereignty looks like, especially considering that the Predator franchise in other instalments typically championed an imperialist worldview? The homology is superseded. *Prey* is genuinely unsettling, and not only because there are many gruesome shots. Additionally, there is no lasting. It is the invader who is killed off instead.

Other developments should also be considered: streaming, and the current reality of a post-cinema and post-broadcast era. In the early 2000s, the electronic image was generally celebrated. The ‘new technologies of distribution and exhibition of visual culture’, offered the possibility of unchaining classic cinema from its conscriptions at the dawn of the twentieth century (Russell 2002, p. 554). Scholars emphasised how the new technologies enabled yet more dislocations in the patterns of consumption and enabled finally abandoning the ‘illusions of visual mastery’ that had characterised classic cinema (Russell 2002, p. 555). The ability to interfere with a film’s narrative during playback was one aspect of this recovered agency, but mobility was also celebrated. Timothy Corrigan concluded that ‘in the contemporary cinema without walls, audiences remove images from their own authentic and authoritative place within culture and disperse the significance across the heterogeneous activity that now defines them’ (Corrigan 1991, p. 6).

Welcoming a return to its unruly origin, Catherine Russell, who cited Corrigan noted: '[b]efore and after classical cinema, spectatorship is conceived as more fluid, mobile, unstable and heterogeneous than the limited position of "mastery" that has been theorized as both masculinist and bourgeois' (Russell 2002, p. 553). Early and 'late' cinemas do not, she argued, have a homogenizing effect on the diversity of spectators; they 'enable subcultural formations of reception' (Russell 2002, p. 554). There always was resistance against cinema's colonialist homologies and surrogacies, and streaming shapes a spectatorship that differs from the unvarying 'spectator-position' of classic cinema. The new spectatorship modalities are mobile, interactive, and possibly even more immersive than before (one could not binge-watch in the old days), but I wonder whether this approach could be maintained in the face of streaming services dominated by a handful of media behemoths.

Russell welcomed renewed mobility and interactivity, and a return to an original liberatory dispensation, but there is currently no return to a collective and liberating pattern of deliberate consumption. The 'digital natives' and the users of streaming platforms consume the movie image in fragmented and noncollective patterns. Moreover, their activity is subjected to unprecedented modalities of appropriation. Their agency is contained within proprietary algorithm, and securely fenced in within proprietary platforms. The streaming spectator–subject is typically alone, identified by a specific id and login configuration, their agency fragmented and subjected to effective strategies of behavioural control. Streaming places the moving image in the context of what Shoshana Zuboff has convincingly explored as 'surveillance capitalism', whereby 'mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control', effectively 'exile persons from their own behavior', which is a form of elimination (Zuboff 2015, p. 75; see also Zuboff 2019). Surveillance capitalism is not interested in the reproduction of digital natives (indeed, the surveillance capitalists have lately even focused on the digital natives' need to sleep, an eminently reproductive activity, and Netflix chief executive Reed Hastings is on record saying that his company is 'competing with sleep' (cited in Hern 2017; see also Ontiveros 2019). Thus, we face a logic of elimination: the dispossessed in the face of digital colonialism are endogenous rather than Indigenous, but the homology linking the moving image and settler colonialism is renewed as it acquires a new meaning.⁸

4. Conclusions

Russell's work relied crucially on Benjamin's seminal reflection on cinema's transformative potential (Benjamin was especially concerned with cinema's role in urban and metropolitan culture, not on misrepresented, erased, and silenced Indigenous peoples). She cited his conclusions:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. (cited in Russell 2002, p. 557)

This travelling was always much more than a simple escape. However, pace Benjamin (and Baudelaire, and Russell), the digital natives' shifting identities and their unfixed viewing positions are unable to express the revolutionary or subversive potential of the urban *Flâneur* of the nineteenth century. Benjamin saw enormous potential in the flâneurs: they would roam the city, wander subversively, they would be entranced by its modernity and yet doggedly resist all demands for conformity. The 'digital natives' cannot escape. The imbrications of cinema and settler colonialism as a specific mode of domination are being simultaneously transformed and reinstated in contradictory ways.

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References

Notes

- ¹ For a definition of classic cinema during ‘mid-twentieth-century modernity, roughly from the 1920s to the 1950s, a definition that focuses on Hollywood and on a specifically modernist mode of mass producing and mass consuming: see, for example, (Bratu Hansen 2009, pp. 242–58).
- ² There is significant resistant viewing, of course. This appropriation is always contested. See, for example, (Diawara 1993; Mulvey 1988).
- ³ On settler colonialism and parallaxes, see also (Perzyna and Bauder 2022; Bauder 2011); on the visual regimes of settler colonialism, on what the settlers view, see (Bae-Dimitriadis 2021).
- ⁴ A parallax shift identifies the ostensible movement of an object when it is seen from different perspectives. Žižek postulates that the different viewing positions are incommensurable, and that discursive separation can be understood as a parallax ‘gap’: two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible’ (Žižek 2006, p. 4). He dialectically argues, however, that a synthesis can be achieved through a parallax ‘shift’. Byrd dismisses this dialectics.
- ⁵ See, for example, Indigenous filmmaker Sky Hopinka’s anticolonial cinematography, a subversion of ‘photography and cinema’s historical complicity with settler colonialism’, and a ‘filmmaking practice’ that ‘undisciplines vision as it has been constructed and sustained by settler visual regimes’ (see Flores Ruíz 2022).
- ⁶ See www.johnwaynebirthplace.museum (accessed on 5 June 2022).
- ⁷ Other instances of resurgent Indigenous filmmaking include *Wild Indian* (2021), created by Chippewa director Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr., and APTN’s *Mohawk Girls* (2010–2017). On Waititi’s Indigenous cinematography, for example, see (Ripeka Mercier 2007).
- ⁸ On surveillance capitalism and the moving image, on the settler coloniality of appropriating data about human behaviour, see (Gustafsson 2022).

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- Prey*. 2022. Director Dan Trachtenberg.
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- Wild Indian*. 2021. Director Lyle Mitchell Corbine Jr.

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