

Seeing Otherwise: Decolonial Strategies in Expanded Visual Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the use of decolonial strategies within expanded visual narratives to challenge and reconfigure dominant colonial visual regimes. Drawing upon decolonial theory and visual culture studies, it explores how visual storytelling across multiple media forms—comics, graphic novels, interactive media, and installation art—can subvert Eurocentric epistemologies and recuperate marginalized histories and identities. By examining case studies from Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and postcolonial artists and collectives, the paper articulates how expanded narratives function as critical interventions that enact "seeing otherwise." This "otherwise" opens spaces for alternative subjectivities, histories, and cosmologies to emerge, disrupting the hegemonic visual order.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Visual Narratives, Expanded Media, Counter-Visuality, Postcolonial Aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED TO SEE OTHERWISE

Visual narratives have been central to the construction, perpetuation, and normalization of colonial epistemologies. For centuries, dominant visual regimes—ranging from ethnographic photography and imperial travelogues to cinematic representations and digital media—have circulated images that exoticize, marginalize, or erase colonized peoples and cultures (Said, 1978; Mignolo, 2011). These images have functioned as powerful tools in shaping global perceptions, naturalizing Eurocentric hierarchies and imposing a singular colonial worldview.

Yet the potential of visual storytelling transcends these oppressive frameworks. Visual narratives possess the unique ability to shape perception, affect identity, and mediate historical memory. They are, therefore, contested sites where dominant colonial gazes can be resisted, subverted, or reimagined. Contemporary practitioners and theorists within the decolonial turn recognize the urgency to "see otherwise"—to foster modes of visibility that dismantle colonial epistemes and open space for plural, non-Eurocentric ways of knowing and being.

This paper explores how expanded visual narratives—forms that extend beyond conventional, linear storytelling to include multimodal, interactive, and immersive techniques—serve as potent instruments of decolonial intervention. These narratives utilize nonlinearity, hybridity, and participatory modalities to disrupt hegemonic visual logics and offer alternative histories, subjectivities, and cosmologies.

The central questions guiding this study are: How do decolonial strategies manifest in expanded visual narratives? In what ways do these narratives challenge and reconfigure colonial visual regimes? And how do they enable audiences to engage with histories and identities from marginalized epistemic standpoints?

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 elaborates key concepts in decolonial theory and visual culture. Section 3 surveys the diverse media and formal strategies characteristic of expanded visual narratives. Section 4 presents detailed case studies from Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and postcolonial contexts. Section 5 discusses broader implications and challenges, followed by conclusions on future directions for decolonial visual storytelling.

DECOLONIAL THEORY AND VISUAL CULTURE

Decolonial theory is a critical framework that challenges the pervasive legacy of colonialism embedded in knowledge production, social structures, and cultural representation. Unlike postcolonial theory, which often focuses on the aftermath of colonial rule within nation-states, decoloniality interrogates the enduring structures of power—what Aníbal Quijano terms the "coloniality of power"—that continue to shape epistemologies, ontologies, and aesthetics globally, transcending formal political independence. This coloniality manifests in the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems, racial hierarchies, and the normalization of Western modes of seeing and representing the world.

Within visual culture, this coloniality is materialized in the "colonial gaze," a concept extending Edward Said's Orientalism to the visual realm, whereby colonized subjects are objectified and essentialized through images that serve imperialist and hegemonic narratives. These images do not merely reflect power; they produce and reproduce it by naturalizing binary oppositions such as civilized/savage, modern/traditional, or center/periphery. This dynamic renders marginalized peoples as static objects rather than active subjects with agency and histories.

Decolonial visibility or counter-visibility emerges as a praxis that seeks to dismantle this colonial gaze. Mignolo (2011) describes it as a form of "border thinking," which operates at the intersection of dominant and subaltern epistemologies, creating new ways of seeing that are attentive to the pluriversality of knowledge—multiple worldviews coexisting and interacting beyond Western modernity's monolithic claims. Decolonial visibility does not simply invert colonial images but reconfigures the semiotic and affective logics of representation to foreground subaltern perspectives, cosmologies, and identities.

Furthermore, decoloniality challenges the temporal frameworks imposed by colonial modernity. Western historiography privileges linear, teleological narratives of progress that erase indigenous and non-Western temporalities, which often conceive of time as cyclical, layered, or relational (Tlostanova, 2017). Visual narratives adhering to colonial temporalities risk perpetuating epistemic violence by enforcing singular historical trajectories and silencing alternative experiences of time and memory.

This epistemic disobedience is therefore not only about reclaiming representation but also about transforming the underlying structures of knowledge production, narrative, and temporality. Within this context, visual narratives become sites of struggle over meaning, identity, and history.

Expanded visual narratives—by employing nonlinearity, hybridity, and multimodality—embody these decolonial aims formally and thematically. Their fragmented storytelling, multiple temporalities, and interactive possibilities reflect and enact the epistemological pluralism foundational to decolonial thought.

Moreover, the affective dimension of decolonial visibility is crucial. Counter-visibility is not only cognitive but sensorial and embodied, engaging viewers' emotions, memories, and corporeal awareness to foster empathetic and relational encounters. This performative and affective engagement challenges the detached, objectifying colonial gaze by inviting participation and identification that transcends reductive binaries.

FORMS OF EXPANDED VISUAL NARRATIVES

Expanded visual narratives traverse a variety of media forms, each offering distinct affordances for decolonial practice:

Graphic Novels and Comics

Graphic novels and comics merge visual and textual storytelling through the spatial arrangement of panels, interplay of image and word, and use of symbolic visual language. Their multimodal nature enables the layering of historical testimony, myth, personal narrative, and collective memory (Chute, 2016). Importantly, the fragmentation of panels and non-linear layouts can embody the disruption of dominant chronological histories, favoring multiplicity.

Interactive Media and Digital Storytelling

Digital platforms—such as web narratives, video games, and virtual reality—offer interactivity that empowers users to participate actively in the narrative, making choices that affect temporal flow and perspective. This challenges passive consumption and enables exploration of multiple viewpoints and temporalities (Murray, 2017). Such interactivity can embody epistemic plurality and user agency, aligning with decolonial aims.

Installation and Immersive Art

Installation and immersive art combine visual, spatial, auditory, and sometimes tactile elements to create embodied experiences. By situating audiences within constructed environments that evoke alternative cosmologies or histories, these practices provoke affective and sensorial engagement beyond conventional viewing (Smith, 2020). This embodied encounter can subvert representational hierarchies and foster empathetic understanding.

Mixed-Media and Collaborative Projects

Often rooted in community engagement, mixed-media projects blend archival materials, oral histories, and artistic expression. Their collaborative nature resists authorial control, privileging collective memory and the co-creation of narrative (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Such projects embody decolonial values of shared knowledge production and cultural sovereignty.

Together, these forms disrupt the primacy of the linear, text-based narrative and open possibilities for plural, fragmented, and dialogic storytelling—formal characteristics that mirror the epistemological plurality central to decolonial thought.

CASE STUDIES: DECOLONIAL STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE

This Place: 150 Years Retold

An anthology graphic novel, *This Place* gathers Indigenous Canadian artists to retell settler colonial history from Indigenous perspectives (Vermette, 2019). The anthology disrupts official narratives through non-linear storytelling, fractured temporality, and hybrid aesthetics blending myth, memory, and contemporary experience.

The visual and textual elements create a dialogic interplay where multiple temporalities coexist—reflecting Indigenous cyclical notions of time and land-based knowledge systems. The work's plural authorship further challenges colonial claims to singular histories, emphasizing relationality and community.

Afro-Brazilian Visual Interventions

Rosana Paulino's mixed-media artworks reclaim Afro-Brazilian identity and history from colonial erasure and exoticization (Paulino, 2014). Combining archival photographs, collaged materials, and African diasporic symbolism, her pieces overlay narratives of trauma and resilience.

Her approach embodies "border thinking" (Mignolo, 2011), existing at the intersection of colonial and decolonial epistemologies. By disrupting fixed racialized representations, her art asserts fluid and multifaceted subjectivities, reclaiming agency through visual hybridity.

Interactive Digital Project: Nepantla: Views from South

Nepantla is a digital storytelling platform foregrounding Latin American indigenous and mestizo perspectives (González, 2016). The platform's multimodal design enables users to navigate multiple, non-hierarchical narratives with multimedia elements including video, text, and sound.

Interactivity allows users to traverse different pathways, embodying decolonial plurality and participatory epistemology. The project integrates indigenous cosmologies and languages, fostering an embodied, relational "seeing otherwise" that resists Eurocentric chronologies.

IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES

While the theoretical and aesthetic potentials of decolonial expanded visual narratives are significant, their practice is accompanied by complex challenges and ethical considerations.

Accessibility and Media Literacy

The multimodal, often nonlinear structures of expanded narratives require audiences to engage actively, interpret symbolically, and navigate complex temporalities. This can create barriers for those unfamiliar with such forms or lacking the cultural context needed to decode embedded meanings. For example, Indigenous cosmologies or Afro-diasporic symbols may be opaque to general audiences, risking misinterpretation or superficial engagement.

Addressing this requires deliberate strategies in mediation, including contextual materials, guided interpretation, and education programs that foster media literacy attentive to cultural specificity. Institutions

supporting such narratives must balance accessibility with preserving the integrity and complexity of the work, avoiding simplification that undermines decolonial aims.

Ethical Collaboration and Cultural Sovereignty

Many decolonial projects emerge from community-based collaborations that foreground collective memory and cultural sovereignty. However, the risk of cultural appropriation remains, particularly when dominant institutions co-opt or commodify marginalized cultures without proper consent or benefit sharing.

Ethical practice demands transparency, respect, and shared authority with communities. Artists and scholars must engage in reciprocal relationships that recognize indigenous and marginalized peoples as knowledge producers and rights holders. Decolonial visual narratives are thus not only aesthetic acts but political commitments to justice and self-determination.

Technological and Economic Barriers

Advanced media forms—such as VR, interactive web platforms, and installation art—often require significant resources, technical expertise, and infrastructure. Marginalized creators may face exclusion from these technologies due to economic disparities, digital divides, or institutional gatekeeping.

This raises questions about equity in the production and dissemination of decolonial narratives. Addressing these barriers involves supporting capacity building, funding, and access to technology for underrepresented communities, as well as advocating for democratization of media tools.

Risks of Cooptation and Commercialization

The increasing visibility of decolonial aesthetics within mainstream art and media markets introduces risks of dilution or commercialization that strip narratives of their critical edge. There is a tension between expanding reach and maintaining political potency.

Creators and institutions must navigate this carefully, preserving the radical epistemologies embedded in these narratives while engaging broader audiences. Strategies include critical curation, community involvement, and maintaining control over intellectual property.

Audience Reception and Impact

Measuring the impact of decolonial visual narratives extends beyond metrics of popularity or sales. The transformative potential lies in shifting perceptions, fostering empathy, and altering epistemic frameworks, which are intangible and long-term processes.

Research on audience reception, including ethnographic studies and participatory feedback, can illuminate how different communities experience and interpret these narratives. This iterative process enriches practice and theory alike.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A DECOLONIAL VISUAL FUTURE

Expanded visual narratives serve as crucial instruments in the decolonial project of "seeing otherwise." By embracing nonlinearity, hybridity, interactivity, and embodied experience, they resist the hegemonic colonial gaze and facilitate alternative visual epistemologies.

As the global cultural landscape increasingly embraces digital and multimodal storytelling, the decolonial imperative urges creators, scholars, and audiences to critically engage with the politics of representation. Through these expanded forms, visual narratives can contribute to epistemic justice, cultural sovereignty, and plural futures.

Future research might explore how emerging technologies—such as augmented reality, AI-generated media, and immersive environments—can further enable decolonial visual practices while addressing associated ethical complexities.

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