

Book Review

- Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, Editors. *Cinematic Settlers: The Settler Colonial World in Film*. New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. x + 215. Bibliography and Index. \$44.95 (paper).

Cinematic Settlers is an anthology of essays contextualizing specific films, cinematic genres, and national traditions within settler colonial settings from across the world. The publisher markets it as important reading for undergraduate classes on histories of empire, colonialism, and film. Its contributors are film studies scholars, historians, and literary scholars specializing in settler colonialism. Chapters focus on the more commonly understood contexts of settler colonialism in Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. It also delves into settler colonial contexts that are less often the focus of settler colonialism studies, such as Taiwan, the Soviet Union in Central Asia, Latin America, German East Africa, and—interestingly enough—outer space.

The opening chapters provide a short overview of film as a medium that both reinforced and challenged the legitimacy of settler sovereignty and claims to Indigenous land throughout the twentieth century. The editors frame the project as “intersecting film studies and settler colonial studies” to better understand how cinema connected the local and global, both capturing and furthering global settlement projects. Film is a medium that conveyed a “more global story of righteous conquest,” making such narratives of expansion, native threat, settler victory, and the promise of settler futures which might pertain to one local context, recognizable and relatable to settler audiences around the world. The book clearly illustrates that one cannot fully understand settler colonialism in the twentieth century and beyond unless one understands how film was and is a medium of both settler invasion and resistance. Furthermore, they argue that settler invasion is an ongoing, project, in which the story of invasion must constantly be “recreated and retold,” through film because settlement itself is never fully accomplished (2–3). The rest of the book consists of sixteen digestible chapters organized into four parts: Conquest, Settlers, Natives, and Space.

“Conquest” focuses on narratives of settler invasion and how they are illustrated in film. Its chapters detail different settler archetypes within the cinematic genre of South Seas Fantasies in the context of US imperialism in the Pacific, the naturalization of settler

conquest over Asian migration in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*, and the Soviet "Eastern" genre that was used to legitimize Soviet expansionism in Siberia and Central Asia. These essays analyze the varying ways in which conquest narratives in film serve nuanced justifications of settler projects at different points along the timeline of settlement. South Seas Fantasy films lay down racial boundaries, settler authenticity, and binaries between nature and humanity while dramatizing American conquest in the Pacific as it was first carried out in the 1910s and 1920s, and later on in 1959, after Hawaii was made a US state. By contrast, *Australia* narrates white settler occupation in the 1940s in ways that obscure it as a form of settlement and heighten the threat of Japanese invasion as the key threat to Indigenous characters. *Australia* invokes Australia's tradition of Asian invasion narratives while obscuring complex histories of Aboriginal-Asian intercultural exchange.

"Settlers" explores the cracks in narratives about settlers on screen. For example, the self-deprecating humor of stereotypical "Canadianness" in *Gunless* depicts a multicultural fantasy of late nineteenth-century Western Canada that erases the North West Mounted Police's violent history of Indigenous dispossession on the prairies and the exploitation of Chinese railroad workers. *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, which at first glance appears to destabilize the canon of "Westerns" by framing the settler West as purposeless, random, and futile, continues to center the existential crises of white characters. Chapters by Fuhrmann and Tsai both reflect on how the rise of specific genres of settler narratives tells us more about how settler colonialism features in the particular moment in which these films were produced. In the case of *Unser Haus in Kamerun*, the benevolent settler colonial setting depicted on screen reveals West Germany's new self-perception after World War II as "a recovered nation that wanted to be perceived as a new political and economic power in the world," and on the African continent in particular (89). Lin-Chin Tsai's essay on Taiwanese cinema in the 1970s and 1980s reveals triangulated narratives of Han settlers and their engagement with American neocolonialism and the People's Republic of China. Both films evoke a feeling of "Chineseness" upon the landscape of Taiwan. In doing so, the films spatially construct Taiwan as a province of the Han homeland of the Republic of China, which has yet to reclaim mainland China from PRC control. The narratives in these films narrate Han settler lives in Taiwan as a "homeland" while the historical realities outside the film restricted or criminalized Indigenous Taiwanese economic and cultural activities and usurped land. Both the films in Tsai's chapter immediately preceded decisive moments in Taiwan's Indigenous peoples' rights movements, in the 1980s.

"Natives" focuses on Indigenous peoples in the world of settler cinema. Barry Judd discusses how Jay Swan, an Aboriginal detective and protagonist in *Mystery Road* and *Goldstone*, complicates and challenges settler stereotypes about Aboriginal masculinity. Natale Zappia's essay on Edward Curtis's *In the Land of the Head Hunters* and Misha Kavka and Stephen Turner's essay on Taika Waititi's films both illustrate how Indigenous peoples

operating within the constraints of settler audiences used film for their own purposes. Zappia's essay contextualizes the Kwakwaka'wakw people's collaboration with Curtis within a longer history of their awareness of globalization and intentionality in embracing specific colonial technologies to serve their own purposes. Curtis's film served a white gaze, yet, decades later, became a vehicle through which Kwakwaka'wakw participants had innovatively preserved then-outlawed practices like potlach ceremonies, dances, and language, thereby speaking to future generations across time.

Essays by Kayka and Turner and M. Bianet Castellanos both discuss approaches to the disruption of settler innocence in film. Kavka and Turner argue that Waititi's top-grossing films, *Boy* and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* confront audiences with the painful realities of the colonized in Aotearoa while fielding the defensive feelings of settler audiences through nostalgic humor that references the broader pop culture of New Zealand and Australia. Castellanos argues that elimination and dispossession were pivotal to Spanish, Portuguese, and more recent neoliberal projects in Latin America, all of which are reflected in Latin American films like *The Mission* and *Even in the Rain*. Both films contain nameless, voiceless, or homogenized Indigenous characters, and depict settler violence and Indigenous elimination in ways that develop settler characters, center narratives of settler innocence in this violence, and reinforce tropes of the disappearing Indian and the noble savage.

"Space" interrogates the portrayal of cinematic spaces, particularly how films manipulate, compare, and interchange them. Maria Flood's essay discusses two films that depict racialized urban spaces in non-settler dominated neighborhoods, the *Casbah-banlieue*, in French-occupied Algeria and the Parisian *banlieues*, neighborhoods predominantly populated by the descendants of citizens from French colonial territories. Both the *Casbah-banlieue* and the Parisian *banlieue* appear in the films as spaces of otherness, architectural disorder, lawlessness, and heterogeneity. Settled spaces became interchangeable, as Paramount Studios mapped parts of California as "South Africa" in the 1920s with Hollywood's rising interest in frontier films set in the new Union of South Africa. Dominique Brégent-Heald's essay illustrates how William J. Oliver's films shifted from portraying the natural beauty of the Canadian Rockies as open for consumption by white middle class automobile-owning American tourists in the 1920s to films emphasizing conservation by the 1930s. Oliver's later films relied on "Grey Owl," an English man in Redface, to market colonial narratives of wildlife conservation that continued to erase European settlers' role in the near extinction of the beaver in the nineteenth century. The book ends leaving us in outer space, as Lorenzo Veracini analyzes the ongoing turn to settler tropes of exploration and discovery as solutions for humanity in the face of environmental crises on earth.

A major gap in this collection is the lack of engagement with settler colonialism in the context of Asia and the Middle East. Tsai and Alexander Morison's essays speak to settler colonialism in the context of East, West, and Central Asia. However, they would have felt

less out of place in the collection as a whole alongside other essays discussing similar Asian settler colonial contexts to cross-reference. These could have included recent films dealing with Japanese occupation of Korea, such as the popular Netflix series *Mr. Sunshine* (2018). The beautifully animated 2019 film, *Bombay Rose*, depicts the displacement of a young Kashmiri boy living in Mumbai. A discussion of Natalie Portman's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2015), based on Israeli author Amos Oz's autobiographical novel of the same name, would have also helped flesh out the post-Cold War settler colonial contexts that Tsai and Morison both refer to in their essays.

Overall, this collection would serve as an effective teaching tool that helps instructors bring recent developments in the field of global history, settler colonialism studies, and Indigenous studies to the classroom. Undergraduate and high school instructors would find this material accessible to students as an assigned reading alongside viewings of the films. One does not need to have viewed any or all of the films in any given essay to understand the arguments of the chapters. Many of the films are available on widely used streaming services. Instructors could build an entire semester-long course showing one film per week, facilitating a discussion, and assigning a chapter from the book alongside an additional background reading for more context. *Cinematic Settlers* ties together iterations of settler colonialism through film that are both historical and ongoing. The chapters go beyond the theme of settler domination through film and discuss how Indigenous peoples in a variety of global contexts have used film for their own purposes in the face of settler colonial violence. It also complicates well-worn binaries such as the divide between colonialism and settler colonialism, colony and metropole, and settler and Indigenous. The collection is a treasure trove that clearly lays out how film is both an archive of conquest and a medium for historiographical intervention.

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