

# Re-forming Hollywood's imagination: beyond the box office and into the boardroom.

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the commercial success of *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) and its ostensible achievement of making Hollywood more representative of black people and “their” narratives, the film is limited in terms of the progress on inclusion it can achieve. This is because, as a Hollywood superhero film, its success is predicated upon perpetuating the colonisation of the imagination of its (still largely white) spectators and it does not represent black people on their own terms. A close focus on form exposes the film as retaining the spectacular and action-orientated visual language of Hollywood that engenders cinema as fundamentally voyeuristic and imperial. In this way, a close examination of *Black Panther* supports the examination of limits of what the commercial structure of an industry established upon the colonial gaze of spectacle is currently able to produce. This paper goes further and also argues that decolonisation in cinema should involve a more radical confrontation of Hollywood aesthetics and the formal language of Hollywood’s gaze itself, so that the embodied visual languages of global cinema and New Black cinema may be more widely employed to reveal the world of those colonised by Hollywood as materially different, on their own terms. It is only by going beyond the success of films like *Black Panther* in the box office and through a radical investigation of form and haptic visuality that the considerably unequal structure of the Hollywood boardroom – which produces such films in the first place – may be transformed.

**Keywords:** *Black Panther*, embodiment, decolonisation, superhero film, Hollywood spectacle, haptic visuality, Hollywood gaze, New Black Cinema, global cinema.

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# Introduction

This chapter contends that, despite the apparent success of *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) in making Hollywood more representative of black people and more inclusive of African narratives, on closer inspection, *Black Panther* is limited in terms of the progress on inclusion it can achieve. This is because it does not sufficiently undermine Hollywood's colonisation of the imagination of its (still largely white) spectators or represent black people on their own terms. While the film cannot help but buckle under the weight of aspirations and responsibilities ascribed to it as a vehicle for decolonisation within Hollywood, as an example of a major cultural phenomenon ostensibly engaged with issues of racial representation, *Black Panther* may be scrutinised to study the limits of what the commercial structure of an industry predicated upon the colonial gaze of spectacle is currently able to produce.

The University of California, Los Angeles' most recent Hollywood Diversity Report (Hunt *et al.* 2019) mentions that Hollywood has been built on denying people of colour regular opportunities to engage with characters and stories that resonate with their own experience and implies that this has been a deliberate strategy to project a white image of America to the world. It also discusses how numerous attempts to solve this diversity problem have failed, emphasising that although diversity may be popular now because it serves the bottom line, as soon as it is seen not to, it will be back to business as usual. Sadly, this report also singles out *Black Panther* as a salient example of how the power of diverse images within the context of the Hollywood box office, far from helping to increase diversity and ultimately decolonising the American mainstream imagination, has instead convinced a significant number of American film spectators (42%) that enough has been done about diversity in Hollywood (Hunt *et al.* 2019:63).

This paper shows that it is inadequate to tackle Hollywood's diversity problem by merely including more black artists and appearing to "Africanise" film narratives to appeal to audiences, as *Black Panther* has been lauded for doing. Instead, it focuses on Hollywood's enduring and reactionary use of visual form to maintain a privileged position for the spectator. The chapter's approach is to consciously treat art as a fundamentally political expression and to use *Black Panther* as a prominent example for studying some of the obstacles to achieving change within a commercially-driven industry in which the aesthetics of spectacle and its disturbing social consequences are prevalent. Despite films such as *Black Panther*, black people and their stories remain underrepresented in Hollywood and significant proportions of Hollywood's audience appear unperturbed by this, presumably accepting that diversity issues

have already been addressed, thus perpetuating the insidious colonisation of Hollywood audiences.

Since Hollywood's dominant form of visual representation in superhero films is spectacle, these films are powerful instruments of colonisation. Such films necessarily set up expectations in spectators that they should be the masters of what they see. This position is embedded in the hierarchised structure of western epistemology, which reifies the role of vision above other senses in knowledge creation. Thus, in producing visually spectacular texts and largely ignoring visual techniques which evoke other senses, Hollywood reinforces the spectator's position of coloniser over what they see. This has substantial social consequences, not only for the diversity of the industry, but for the decolonisation of the imagination necessary to facilitate lasting empowerment of visible minorities. Thus, decolonisation in film should involve a radical confrontation of Hollywood's formal aesthetics so that more diverse forms of visual representation may be included to show colonised worlds on their own terms; beyond their box office clout, visible diversity onscreen or narrative content.

## *Black Panther white industry*

*Black Panther* was a phenomenal success at the box office grossing A\$700 million in the United States of America's domestic market and A\$1.346 billion internationally (Mendelson 2020). It is unusual for a superhero film that more than half of its box office sales come from the domestic market, and it is notable that this occurred at a time when there was 'a near-total 18-year blockade on big black-centric superhero movies' and where '[s]ave for the *Men in Black* sequels, the *Blade* sequels, Halle Berry's *Catwoman* and Will Smith's *Hancock*... comic book superhero cinema [was] a white man's game'. Scott Mendelson (2020) explains that this is due to a recent surge in sales to African-American domestic audiences: '2018, the year of *Black Panther*'s release, was the first time that Hollywood and the MCU aggressively targeted black audiences, proving that black audiences as well as white wanted to pay to see this film'. Reasons for this include that up to now, black people in Hollywood have generally been shown only through the lenses of tragedy or in minor roles, and thus *Black Panther* seems revolutionary for making black achievement – through something other than a historical lens – visible, and popular. Unlike other Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films, much is also made of it being the highest grossing film ever by a black director, employing a predominantly black cast and being the first superhero film to receive a Best Picture nomination (Keay 2020).

Yet, it is no accident that this strategy of targeting African-American domestic audiences has occurred at a time when there has been a slowing of the growth in people of colour writing and directing films in Hollywood (Hunt *et al.* 2019). This reveals Hollywood's strategy of simultaneously maintaining white privilege while placating African-American domestic audiences with films such as *Black Panther*. This film revives myths of black superheroes originally created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (1996) in the sixties in the *Fantastic Four #52* comic book, at a time when '[t]he superhero film has displaced the superhero comic in the world of mass culture' (Bukatman 2011:118). In adapting such comics into film and television, Hollywood successfully leverages invested audiences across media. In the case of super-hero films, this retains the interest of embedded comic-book fans (still mostly white males) while simultaneously enticing new ones.

Box office appeal drives these film adaptations, which are deliberately constructed to maintain the uniformity of the studio (in this case, Marvel) brand, without challenging American audience expectations of the status quo too much. Thus, since there is less to distinguish *Black Panther* in terms of narrative content, political engagement and film form from other MCU films, it is often sold as distinctive in terms of its diversity and cultural capital. *Black Panther's* reception, narrative concerns, visual, cultural and industrial context, are profoundly intertwined. Even its unique features are part of the broader resurgence of superhero narratives within the American mainstream, which is primarily profit-driven. This drives an established white industry, one where black people – though now more visible both as actors and paying audiences – have yet to be empowered, and white privilege is still actively entrenched. This is further evidenced if the structure of the industry itself is examined. Not only is it notable that Kirby and Lee were both white, but even as the Hollywood studio structure has changed from being vertically to being horizontally integrated, to becoming conglomerated, power has remained concentrated in the hands of mostly white top-level Hollywood executives. Disney (Marvel's parent company) still had all-white top-level executives and a mostly white board of directors at the time of *Black Panther's* production (Benash 2021:55). Astutely, these white executives appeal to an African-American domestic audience that they have previously been unable to seduce by framing promotional discourse and narrative content in *Black Panther* as supportive of diversity, while still largely disregarding African audiences outside of the United States.

The film has received acclaim for its realistic engagement with both African-American and African stories. As part of the film's promotion, both Ryan Coogler, the director, and Chadwick Boseman, who played the Black Panther/T'Challa in the film, spoke to media of the influence making the film had on them as African-Americans. They

identify a sometimes-unconscious conflict that exists in them because of their traumatic history of slavery, their African ancestry, and their identity as powerful players in the new world (narrative aspects acknowledged in this film) which remain largely obscured in Hollywood. They claim that *Black Panther* allowed them to address this erasure by making visible a compelling narrative connection between themselves and Africa (Coogler & Boseman cited by Setoodeh 2018:27).

But a closer examination of this connection divulges the limits in Hollywood's neoliberal imagination which also works to sustain the white privilege inherent in the industry. In *Black Panther*, the linking of African-Americans to Africa is presented through the antagonist Eric Killmonger, whose half Wakandan, half African-American ancestry functions as an allegory. Killmonger is one of the few characters in the film who openly confronts the current oppression of African-Americans, and yet he is most obviously the villain – radicalised and defined by rage and violence – reinforcing some of the worst stereotypes of black people. Killmonger's very name further demonises potentially revolutionary responses to current oppression. Additionally, Killmonger is shown to be misguided in his mission to become leader of Wakanda and continue his father, N'Jobu's (T'Chaka's brother), quest to make Wakanda's advanced technology visible to the world and aid people of African descent to conquer their oppressors. Moreover, in the narrative he dies and ultimately so does his goal; despite being treated with passing sympathy, he is ultimately unacceptable on his own terms. This is reinforced when T'Challa addresses the United Nations at the end of the film, demonstrating that Wakanda (and by extension, Africa) may only take its place alongside the free nations of the world if it does not upset the current socio-economic order in the way Killmonger aspired to. This reveals the narrative's support for the current world order and proclaims that colonised and coloniser should act as a single tribe, as identified by Hollywood. This narrative thus maintains a delicate balance between its audience segments to maximise profit. On the one hand, it maintains appeal to white domestic audiences (by retreating to the formulaic "white man's game" of the superhero narrative, which ultimately does not reward black empowerment on its own terms), while on the other hand also acquiescing to black domestic audiences' demands for improved representation onscreen.

While the inclusion of the slave narrative may emphasise black experience in America, black experience in Africa itself is less valued. On closer examination – even the film's acclamation received for its astereotypical portrayal of strong, advanced African women and its bucking of the trends to show African heroes either as sidekicks of their white counterparts, resistant or downtrodden – reveals its commitment to its domestic market, who may not all be interested in more authentic portrayals of African life (Gateward & Jennings 2015). Nakia (T'Challa's lover), Okoye (T'Challa's General)

and Shuri (T'Challa's sister) are mostly reduced to being part of the hero's journey. Moreover, Nakia's driving concern with issues of women sold into sexual slavery in Nigeria, a significant concern for African audiences, is not adequately engaged with, except to pass it off as a distraction from T'Challa's mission to keep Wakanda resources for Wakandans. The film has also been praised for its reliable portrayal of African cultures. However, while the costumes of *Black Panther* (incidentally designed by one of a few black members of the production crew) draw from numerous authentic African cultures, this remains merely an appropriation of an amalgam of some of the most popular visual aspects of some African cultures (such as lip pates and neck rings) to American audiences. Merely representing African narratives and African-Americans onscreen is not decolonisation or empowerment. Empowerment only comes about with more 'direct engagement with African political and social issues' and less emphasis on profit (Benash 2021:49). Thus, what might appear to be a progressive and representative narrative may in effect dull audiences to the need for further transformation, if the goals of (visible) representation are conflated with decolonisation of the imagination and authentic engagement with minorities inside and outside of Hollywood.

In short, while it seems as if the narrative content and representation of black artists in *Black Panther* has refocused the gaze of Hollywood and decolonised its "white man's" vision of the superhero film, it offers only a shallow glimpse of the issues facing African nations and does not empower African-Americans to radically change the industry status quo, where white money and white perceptions still dominate. Indeed, Matthew Alford (2010) has long cautioned that even when some filmmakers have progressive impulses, the system is hard-wired to encourage American global supremacy, particularly in superhero films such as this one. Moreover, it is largely the film's reception and the popular and critical accolades it has received that makes it a distinctive text and a cultural phenomenon, one that has been used by Hollywood to deflect deeper scrutiny from its seemingly intractable diversity problem. As a mainstream Hollywood production invested in a system designed primarily to leverage broad commercial appeal to entrench white privilege, *Black Panther* is necessarily, deliberately, constrained in its ability to support the re-imagination of the empowerment of black people outside and inside America.

Significantly, in its focus on the representation of black superheroes, superficially "Africanised" narrative elements, and especially its use of spectacle and spatialised images, *Black Panther* adheres to a conventional use of form. This reveals *Black Panther* as a product of what Michael Kwet (2019:3) calls 'digital colonialism', a tactic he claims is employed in tandem with the ongoing American imperialist domination of the global south, and in which Hollywood plays a starring role. Kwet (2019:3)

defines this as ‘the process whereby the United States is reinventing colonialism... through the domination of digital technology’ and the concomitant emphasis of vision and forms of spectacle. Thus, radically challenging Hollywood’s diversity problem and visualising a new social order, requires an approach that goes beyond focusing on what Hollywood allows audiences to see; but is instead integrally related to how vision is experienced and (over)valued in Hollywood, as mastery over the object gazed upon. It is thus a focus on visual form itself and how this structures Hollywood’s gaze, which is necessary to help understand the way the industry constructs films such as *Black Panther*, which is designed to keep audiences from political action and so continue the process of colonising audience imaginations.

## The politics of form-ing alternative visions

While it may seem counterintuitive to analyse form and take account of medium specificity to uncover how political power is expressed in aesthetics, several authors (for example, Agamben 1999; Chute 2008; Žižek 2008b; Zwicky 2012 cited by Viljoen 2019) maintain that the problem of representing violent experiences – including the erasure of racial identity – can be at least partially overcome if aesthetic form is emphasised. Anthony Bogues (2006:159) emphasises the crucial role of aesthetics in the decolonisation process and argues that restoring imagination allows for the critical confrontation of ‘...imperial power in its guise as an “empire of liberty”’. Jacques Rancière (2004) also directs attention to form when he describes aesthetics as the formal process of understanding the importance of art as fundamentally political. Alain Badiou (2005) explains how art is always both abstract in its attention to form and immersive in its attention to the embodied process of making it and how, in concentrating on form, the role of art in performing truths that otherwise remain “invisible” is uncovered. Thus, consideration of form in aesthetics helps identify ways in which Hollywood preserves colonialism through the insidious operation of visual conventions that structure its gaze.

Semi-independent cinema has long provided powerful alternative visions of decolonised black people through formal innovations (in addition to showcasing African-American talent and stories). A quintessential example from New Black Cinema, which has both cultural and commercial capital – and that paves the way for the deep political engagement necessary to underpin the kind of black empowerment and decolonisation that is possible in the industry – is Spike Lee’s (1989) *Do the Right Thing*. The eschewing of spectacle is apparent right from the opening credits scene. Here Rosie Perez, the already famous professional dance star – known for

her aggressive hip-hop moves – showcases her raw physicality as she dances to Public Enemy’s pulsating protest tones in ‘Fight the Power’. In stark contrast to the carefully choreographed and spectacular music videos of the eighties, this sequence shows Perez’s face in deep concentration as she performs her own moves, alone, at one with the militant music and in front of what appears to be the low-budget set of a musical. This sequence foregrounds sound and motion and their relationship to the rhythms of the body (to the extent that this sequence is popularly credited with legitimising hip-hop in mainstream cinema). This is realised through visual techniques, that unlike spectacle, make use of a series of close-ups of parts of Perez’s moving body (mainly her head and face), which must be puzzled out and that do not reveal the whole image at once. These techniques thus focus on the medium rather than the audience’s immersion in it and make audiences aware of their gaze and that they are not entirely in control of what they are seeing. Yet, simultaneously, the sometimes-blurry images – shown as the camera swirls to keep up with Perez’s movements – are highly embodied and immersive as they mimic the audience’s own sense of balancing and proprioception as audiences see the dancer’s body move through space, her hair flicking and her absorption in her task palpable. This effect of immediacy and distance at once, is a radical reconfiguration of Hollywood’s easily-consumable form of spectacle and offers an alternative model of viewing which holds potential for decolonising Hollywood’s cinematic imagination from one that is objectifying and supremacist into one that constructs a more equal relationship between the audience and the subjects in the film.

Laura Marks (2000) helps to theorise such an alternative reconfiguration of the dominant gaze of Hollywood through haptic visuality. She asserts that privileging sight – the most cerebral of senses – Hollywood and the west necessarily nurtures a destructive desire for control over the object of gaze. She points out that the emphasis on sight gives rise to a specifically western way of looking and building knowledge that objectifies others and attempts to dominate them. She argues that western ways of looking that mostly separate and distance the subject and object of representation, have come about in times of territorial dominion and the subjugation of vanquished peoples. Furthermore, Marks (2000) warns that many important aspects of culture or stories are in fact *invisible* and thus trouble the privileged relationship between vision and knowledge in the west. (This is so even when the obvious issue of representing visible minorities is addressed and emphasises that making black people more visible on Hollywood screens is not sufficient grounds for spectators to know their experiences or to empower them). In fact, Marks’s (2000) view suggests that another’s story cannot be known, or their origins or culture acknowledged through visual information alone. Thus, a visual system of representation should



actively arouse experiences of receiving information from the more embodied senses of touch (often through images that highlight texture), hearing, smelling, and tasting, and proprioception (often through images that conjure the effects of movement on a range of senses), which cannot be directly represented.

In this regard, Marks (1996:14) speaks of the potential of global cinema to act as a 'transnational' object which may be used as a bridge between different cultures, and which is able to reconfigure the act of looking as a knowledge creation process employed among equals (rather than as an exploitative gaze upon a spectacle). Marks (2000) claims that using visual techniques to evoke other senses is a powerful way to represent in which the eyes of the spectator function like organs of touch, brushing against the skin of the film, accentuating the haptic once again as a fundamental contributor to knowledge. Unlike in the cinema of spectacle, this supports a sense of mystery in relation to what is seen or known, where not all is discovered at once. This kind of vision holds subjects in compassion rather than authority and facilitates deep emotional and bodily engagement between the onscreen subject and audience, while simultaneously making the audience aware of form in a way that bars merely easily consuming images.

## *Black Panther's* reactionary use of spectacle(s)

Since the 1990s, the use of visual spectacle has grown tremendously within Hollywood, notably with the rise of computer-generated images and special effects. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the proliferation of science fiction and superhero films such as *Black Panther*. Scott Bukatman (2003:84) identifies the reason for the popularity of science fiction and superhero films a transition in the west away from the haptic and towards the privileging of the visual as the basis for knowledge. This results in spectators expecting digitally mediated information as a basis of truth as opposed to needing to verify reality through information received directly through their senses. This leads to satisfaction in experiences being depicted spectacularly, as a way for spectators to vicariously participate at a distance, largely mediated through visual effects. Therefore, representation in cinematic spectacles such as *Black Panther* begins to have less to do with the world and the material reality of the colonised than it does with the physiological conditions of vision, conditions that can now be simulated through cinematic effects. Thus, such films are not only limited in their power to decolonise the imaginations of audiences, but deliberately entrench spectators' sense of distance from and mastery over what they see through constructing a possessive mode of vision.

Tom Gunning (2006) argues that another effect of this over-emphasis of spectacle is a stopping of the narrative, resulting in a blunted ability to engage the audience emotionally. Gunning (2006:384) claims that cinematic spectacle is deeply embedded in commercial systems of consumption and influenced by advertising conventions to the point that 'theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption'. He asserts that such cinema is less a way of telling gritty and evocative stories (of the erased pasts of the colonised or otherwise) than it is a way of presenting a series of illusions and exotic views to an audience of consumers, who remain largely in a commanding position over a mediated visual spectacle that does little to trigger their emotional investment in the material world of the "other". Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola (2019 cited by Pulver 2019:[Sp]) argue the same and claim not only that superhero films are less cinema than they are theme park rides, but that the predominance of such franchise films in Hollywood is a deliberate political choice that 'has vastly restricted the opportunities for other kinds of films to be seen in cinemas'.

The opposite potential for cinema to facilitate a deep emotional and bodily encounter between audience and film is encapsulated in Vivian Sobchack's (1992) notion of the "zone of contact" between the film and the bodies of the audience, which she claims supports political engagement with a film. As an example of Hollywood's cinema of spectacle and unlike *Do the Right Thing*, *Black Panther* misses the opportunity to engage its spectators in this way. This means that although cinematic spectacles such as *Black Panther* can, on the face of it, make racial minorities more visible, because they are essentially only exhibitionistic, they are inadequate to portray complex, material accounts of the experiences of others, arouse deep empathy or spur political empowerment.

Although *Black Panther* has become the go-to example of a superhero film able to incite sympathy for diversity issues, like other MCU films, its use of spectacle precludes this happening in a profound way by diverting audience focus from other aspects of the narrative able to engage them emotionally, such as more complex character development. As such, its language of visual spectacle 'expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality' (Gunning 2006:385). In *Black Panther*, aside from his sometimes clashing motivations to be a better leader than his father, T'Chaka, and to protect Wakanda from the outside world, the film does not dwell on the inner turmoils of its hero, T'Challa's, psyche but is rather buoyed along by the spectacular moves of his 'kinetically effective' body and the amazing technologies that he uses while he displays it (Bukatman 2011:120). This is especially the case in the scenes of ritual combat that take place in the setting at the top of Wakanda's waterfalls, the ceremonial exhibition space for the visual display of its leader's prowess, which are portrayed less like a material setting than a spectacular and evocative backdrop. These scenes use a relative lack of textured

close-ups and instead a predominance of medium-close ups showing mostly flowing movement. The wide, overhead shots capture the slick, choreographed formations of warriors, with spears driving the fighters closer and closer to the edge of the waterfall as the camera pans out to show the dizzying height of the falls. These techniques of spectacle drive suspense in a way that is easy to consume and suspends the viewer in a state of scopic mastery over a spectacle of disembodied motion; their experience of the cinematic object almost entirely mediated by visual effects. The logic of spectacle begins to take precedence in the narrative, to the detriment of emotional engagement and an embodied meeting of the onscreen subject and the audience. This may explain why American audiences believe that enough is being done for diversity by simply having images like this available, without understanding that the way a film constructs them as voyeurs, is designed to keep them in a position of pleasurable control and mitigates forming a deeper or embodied connection with authentic African-American and African experiences. For these reasons, as a superhero film, steeped in Hollywood's masterful gaze and techniques of spectacle, *Black Panther* is at best a limited vehicle for the decolonisation of the imagination, and at worst perpetuates Hollywood's colonial vision.

## Superheroes do not scar

In *The wretched of the earth*, Franz Fanon (1963) claims that decolonisation starts with re-fashioning the imagination of the colonised who, like the coloniser, have had their imaginations psychically scarred through colonialism. As an antidote, Fanon (1963:63) proposes a radical re-envisioning of the world by the colonised and proclaims that challenging the dominant colonial ontological order is not merely a plea for visibility, so that there may be '...a rational confrontation of viewpoints...but the impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different' (Fanon 1963:63). This suggests that simply placing those on Hollywood's margins visibly in the mainstream – whether this involves casting African-American actors as superheroes or re-framing previously colonised Africa as spectacularly powerful and technologically advanced – is not enough. Challenging the objectifying structure of vision inherent in Hollywood's colonial gaze itself does not empower people of colour in a lasting way, because it does not decolonise the imaginations of its audience, whom it perpetually constructs as master consumers, ever-hungry for more spectacular images to offer themselves up to the spectator's gaze. Although *Black Panther* is a black superhero film and as such may beat "white men" at their own game with its box office success, it does not dismantle the structure of

Hollywood's predominantly western gaze, employing as it does the visual conventions of spectacle. Therefore, what Fanon goes on to assert – that to decolonise the imagination the colonised needs to be able to share *their* world, on *their* terms as materially different – cannot be accommodated. Therefore, even *Black Panther* perpetuates the erasure of the embodied experience of the colonised from the minds of distanced spectators. As Bukatman (2011:120) notes:

[t]he superhero film, then, provides neither...psychological weight... nor...ineffable lightness...It speaks to nothing but its own kinetic effectiveness. By removing the body from [real] space, it removes meaning – lived meaning – from the body.

The portrayal of the disembodied spectacle of the “other” is especially noteworthy given the professed concern with the materiality of race in the content of *Black Panther*. Applying Bukatman's insight to superhero films (even those that display black bodies) reveals that because of the spectacular, computer generated visual language used, they dissolve any material concerns with race because race is shown only in Hollywood's intangible world of kaleidoscopic visual movement and spectacle that spectators have come to enjoy, as ‘[r]acial identity is repeatedly referenced but neutralized through the endless state of mutability that characterizes the world...’ (Bukatman 2011:121). Such films thus remain limited in their ability to facilitate the decolonisation of Hollywood's imagination because they show black bodies in the visual language of the coloniser (bodies transforming through cursorily “Africanised” superhero costumes and narrative elements, choreographed movements and highly mediated spectacular images). Such films do not help audiences to come to terms with authentic experiences of race and, so that they may continue to perpetuate the absence of “other” bodies from industry executive boardrooms, they also take care *not* to enable “zones” for audiences to encounter those onscreen. As such, they merely reinforce the exclusive and disempowering politics of Hollywood, where both form and content are constructed primarily by an industry built and supported by white Americans for white audiences.

Relying so heavily on digital spectacle means that these films not only lose sight of materiality and historically situated narratives, but also enable audiences to gloss over issues of authentic representation of painful histories as if they have already been dealt with, so that ‘...the digital need bear “no scars and no history”’ (Bukatman 2011:122). This renders them especially limited in their use of form to decolonise the imagination. In *Black Panther*, the spectacle of Africa as a distant, self-sufficient kingdom where ancient beliefs and modern technology seem to be in idyllic balance is made plain. Yet, this vision is highly mediated by the distractions of spectacle which

stop the narrative engaging emotionally or materially with the resilience and triumph against the continued devastating effects of colonialism experienced in America (including in Hollywood boardrooms).

Although it may be argued that Wakanda provides a positive and imaginative (though unrealistic) vision of what an independent and uncolonised Africa might look like to Hollywood audiences, this vision is still fundamentally a vision of mastery and does not engage adequately with the unsettling reality of overcoming a slave history. This narrative erasure is also typical of the way that superhero films deal with race, which surfaces in them as an obsession with the trauma of the “other”, but remains always a trauma fetishised for spectators not only familiar with but constructed according to the possessive, colonial gaze of which they are always in control. Bukatman (2011:122) asserts: ‘the films make a fetish of trauma... [only to] better...compensate for the painlessness and weightlessness of digital being’. An example of this fetishised view of trauma is evident in a climatic sequence in *Black Panther* when T’Challa stabs Killmonger and Killmonger refuses to be healed, choosing to wear his fatal wound as a mark of pride and die from it as a free man rather than be incarcerated like his oppressed ancestors. This scene is preceded by Killmonger’s wounding, which is particularly spectacular. T’Challa and Killmonger glide and tumble on top of a high-speed train powered by Wakandan vibranium. T’Challa then chivalrously takes the dying Killmonger to the edge of a cliff where they may view the beauty of Wakanda together before Killmonger dies. As they gaze over the landscape together, spectators are reminded of a similarly spectacular moment when they engaged in ritual combat at the top of the waterfall. This moment of reminiscence prolongs T’Challa’s victory and reinforces him as the (super) hero in the formula. However, once again, this victorious moment is shown to be merely show because it is composed of the same spatialised images which emphasise the mediated rather than the material nature of this encounter. The scene hurtles on, and the spectacle continues with Killmonger struggling for breath, falling to his knees with T’Challa’s vibranium weapon protruding from his chest. Like a true Hollywood hero, T’Challa magnanimously offers to try to heal him. It is Killmonger who refuses T’Challa’s apparently generous gesture. The implication is that Killmonger would prefer to die than to continue to resign himself to a life where the oppression of his ancestors remains unacknowledged on its own terms. He explicitly asks to be buried in the ocean with his African slave ancestors who jumped from ships because they knew that death was better than slavery in America. Killmonger then stabs himself, succumbing to suicide in a close-up display which demonstrates the hollow victory of denying T’Challa the power to decide his fate.

Killmonger's suicide is perhaps the most profoundly decolonial moment in the film, because it makes visible the moment when Killmonger takes charge of his own life/death. Yet, it is still severely constrained, as Hollywood only allows the "other" (Killmonger) to express a radical response to colonial oppression within the tight constraints of narrative spectacle, once he has been firmly established as the villain, ensuring that he does not elicit too much empathy from spectators. Thereafter, the narrative moves on swiftly, dispensing of Killmonger as a resentful radical who rejects Wakandan civilisation and generosity. In this way, the disempowering narrative and visual conventions of Hollywood are co-opted by the film and the film expunges any hint of a story in which the lived histories, experiences, and bodies of the colonised may be marked as substantially 'different' and yet, engaged with on their own terms (Fanon 1963:63).

## Conclusion: from representation to empowerment through form

Embracing Hollywood conventions that relegate race merely to the realm of distant, digital fantasy worlds, yet materially re-enforce racial hierarchies inherent in Hollywood's model of objectifying vision (supported by the formal conventions of spectacle and spatialised images) actively prevents the decolonisation of the imagination. This leads a substantial portion of Hollywood's domestic audience to believe that enough is being done about representation by merely making superheroes black and superficially "Africanising" aspects of mainstream narratives such as *Black Panther*.

To support real empowerment, the long-established epistemological conceptual framework underpinning digital spectacle and Hollywood's gaze itself needs to be confronted and decolonised by including innovative visual techniques that dismantle Hollywood's exclusive focus on the visual modes of experience. This is so that a new visual conceptual framework, already explored in alternative cinema such as that of Spike Lee, may be expanded to evoke other senses too and thus may reveal the embodied experience of the colonised as materially different, on its own terms.

As a comic and a superhero film that brings black characters into the white mainstream and provides a narrative link between African-Americans and Africa, *Black Panther* has become established as a cultural phenomenon that gestures towards the reconfiguration of Africa in the popular imagination as advanced and powerful and ostensibly aids the progress of diversity within Hollywood. However, having audiences and critics fixate on *Black Panther's* narrative content and apparently representative cast (and crew) without studying the socio-political structure of its

industry in which is embedded a structure of viewing that is a perpetual instrument of colonisation, is a shrewd strategy. This allows Hollywood to continue to sell their “white man’s game” of spectacle and digital colonialism to more diverse domestic markets, while keeping audiences apathetic. By suggesting that in making the “other” cursorily visible, enough has been done to achieve empowerment, pathways for real access to power and self-expression are closed. Thus, both films and criticism that radically confront Hollywood aesthetics and its gaze are urgently required so that a new visual language may proliferate, which supports a deep engagement of audiences with the “other” on the “other’s” own terms.

## Notes

1. Kirsten McLean (2017), who also notes that comics is one of the few growth industries in the American book market.

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