

Exploring the Potential Presence of Colonialism in the Digital Art Field from A Global Perspective

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Abstract. The advancement of digital art has significantly transformed how artistic creations are presented. Nevertheless, this transformation is intrinsically entwined with the historical impact of colonialism. This article takes a global perspective to investigate underlying colonialism-related concerns within the realm of digital art. It begins by elucidating how colonialism distorts conventional art forms, often resulting in the erasure of indigenous cultures. Subsequently, it delves into the enduring influence of colonialism in digital art, encompassing aspects such as technological dominance, cultural value crises, and the emergence of digital capitalism. The study underscores the imperative for researchers to scrutinize this multifaceted issue through a global lens, honoring the richness of diverse cultures and facilitating equitable dialogues. Furthermore, the article advocates for the concept of "digital interruption," endorsing collaboration among peripheral nations and the pursuit of developmental avenues aligned with local circumstances. The presence of colonialism in digital art serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity to cultivate critical thinking, foster cultural empathy, and champion the causes of historically marginalized groups. Ultimately, this endeavor contributes to the positive and inclusive evolution of digital art.

Keywords: Digital Art; Globalization; Colonialism; Digital Universalism; Cognitive Violence; Digital Capitalism.

1. Introduction

The Digital art represents an artistic genre that completely diverges from traditional artistic forms in terms of its physical composition. It is composed of countless "bits" (devoid of color, shape, or weight), which are the fundamental particles in virtual space and the smallest units of information. Digital art is an art form that possesses the capability to break all physical constraints. Beginning in the 1970s, the development of personalized electronic computing and network digital technology has led to a revolutionary transformation in the field of art. Digital art has now become an integral part of the entire artistic ecosystem. In the realm of digital art, emerging technologies open up boundless opportunities. The swift march towards digitization is shrinking our world, fueling the relentless acceleration of globalization. This phenomenon reverberates across multiple spheres, including cultural evolution, societal dynamics, consumerism, and even the way we think.

This paper aims to understand the potential implications of colonialism in the field of digital art. Behind the splendid and captivating façade of technology, we must stay alert and keep exploring the hidden aspects related to value and cognitive violence. We also strive to challenge the techno-deterministic assumptions and positions of Western centrism. Like all forms of creative expression, digital art is not exempt from the influence of history. Understanding how colonialism, as a historical phenomenon, intersects with this modern medium helps us reflect on the ongoing dynamics of power, narratives, and inequalities while providing a space for marginalized voices in history. Essentially, researching the latent colonialism in digital art is meant to foster critical thinking, cultural empathy, and a sense of responsibility in both artists and audiences. It is a way of shaping digital art into a force for positive change, inclusivity, and a deeper understanding of our shared global history and identity.

To avoid the occurrence of overly simplified or ethnocentric analyses, it is crucial to adopt a global perspective when examining potential colonialism. Such an approach enables a more detailed,

culturally sensitive, and inclusive analysis. It acknowledges the complexity of the digital art landscape, respects the cultural backgrounds of different societies, and contributes to the creation of a fairer and more informed dialogue surrounding the intersection of digital art and colonialism.

2. Understanding Colonialism in the Arts

2.1 Definition and interpretation of colonialism in historical and contemporary contexts

In a historical perspective, colonialism emerged in European nations during the 15th century. Under the influence of imperialism, these colonial powers, through warfare and other means, sought to exploit the resources and labor of other countries. Typically, the colonizers acquired substantial privileges in the regions they colonized and often deprived indigenous populations of their property to enhance their own capital accumulation. They also established laws and policies that placed the indigenous inhabitants at a disadvantage. The expansion of Europe and the accumulation of capital were initially driven by the crises facing imperialism, European feudal systems, and the development of capitalism, making colonialism a necessary condition for their continued growth.

From the 15th century to the mid-20th century, European colonial powers aggressively established colonies overseas, resulting in resource extraction, labor exploitation, cultural assimilation or destruction, ideological reinforcement, and even direct political control.

In the contemporary context, the legacy of colonialism continues to influence socioeconomic disparities, cultural trauma, and contested national identities in former colonial territories. Contemporary colonialism signifies the persistence of inequalities in resources and class, exploitation, cultural appropriation, and domination, often as remnants of historical colonial structures. As society acknowledges historical injustices and strives for a more equitable future, contemporary colonialism also involves ongoing efforts in decolonizing institutions, narratives, and representations.

2.2 Discussing How Colonialism Influences Traditional Art Forms and Narratives

Historians play a pivotal role in constructing our understanding of human history. However, a significant portion of historical writers often carry with them the unmistakable imprint of a specific historical era – colonialism. Today, whether it's in traditional fields such as art history, design history, or philosophy history, the narratives of history still bear the perspective of Western-centrism, perpetuating conventional and colonial power dynamics, with a severe absence of many third-world perspectives, sometimes rendering them voiceless. Even research involving the history of non-Western countries often struggles to break free from the methodological framework rooted in Western art history. What we need to do is to unearth the truths concealed by European colonialism within the predominantly Western historical context.

Colonialism also strongly manifests itself in traditional art forms and narratives, reflecting in various aspects of power, culture, and identity dynamics. Colonizers often appropriated and distorted colonial cultural symbols, styles, and artistic techniques. This led to the distortion and commodification of traditional art due to colonialism, where traditional art forms were exploited for economic gain. Colonialists collected artistic items as souvenirs, curiosities, or symbols of status, often stripping the art of its cultural significance. During the colonial era, Chinese exports of art, including ceramics, textiles, and paintings, were tailored to European tastes and demands. Even today, we can find traces of Western aesthetics in historical artifacts, designs, and architecture.

In that era, traditional art forms were often shaped by the power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized communities. Colonizers significantly influenced the themes and subjects of traditional art creation. This interference led to the loss of traditional knowledge and artistic techniques, as well as the displacement of cultural artifacts through theft, robbery, or destruction. African masks and sculptures were frequently collected by colonial powers as treasures and "primitive" artifacts, stripping them of their cultural significance and presenting them in European

museums out of context. Ngil masks, worn by the Fang people in Gabon [1], were considered one of the "holy grails" of African art. The Fang people created Ngil masks as a form of enlightenment and social control, using them to identify wrongdoers and unveil their masks during ceremonies. With the colonization of Africa, European colonial powers often targeted and suppressed traditional customs. As a result, the use of Ngil masks declined, affecting their role in Fang society.

Similar cultural encounters occurred among the indigenous Maori people in New Zealand. With the arrival of European colonizers, significant changes took place in the traditional Maori art form of Ta Moko [2], a form of tattooing. Maori cultural practices, including Ta Moko, were considered "barbaric" or "uncivilized," as missionaries attempted to convert Maori people to Christianity and discourage traditional customs. They associated tattoos with paganism. Under the pressure to conform to the norms imposed by colonial powers, the art of tattooing gradually declined. This, in turn, set off a chain reaction as the tools used for creating Ta Moko, such as the Uhi [3], were replaced by metal tools obtained through trade with Europeans. The suppression of traditional customs, coupled with the influence of new tools and materials, resulted in the decline of the traditional artistry of Ta Moko, making it less prevalent, and knowledge of the art form increasingly difficult to obtain.

Fortunately, as part of the Maori cultural renaissance in the late 20th century, Ta Moko reemerged in the public eye. In the 1984 exhibition "Te Maori: Maori art from New Zealand collections," Maori critic Hirini Moko Mead's comments shed light on the cultural suppression experienced by indigenous societies after colonization, a problem faced by indigenous people in New Zealand, Australia, and the Americas alike [7]. Their traditional ways of life were disrupted, natural resources and cultural treasures were plundered, property was confiscated, and cultural traditions were rewritten by the "conquerors." They were angry yet helpless [4].



Fig. 1: Ngil's Fang Mask, Wood, 60(h)x20 cm, 1.95kg, Origin: ex-collection francaise.



Fig. 2: Ta Moko, Maori tattooing on face. Photographed by Aaron Smale

2.3 Exploring the Preliminary Aspects of Colonialism in Digital Art

After delving into the profound impact of colonialism on traditional artistic forms and narratives, we now shift our focus to the contemporary realm of digital art. Just as colonialism has left enduring marks on historical artistic expressions, digital art, as a mainstream artistic form in the age of globalization and a part of popular culture, holds the potential for global accessibility and cross-cultural exchange. It is imperative to investigate how similar dynamics unfold within the realm of digital art.

The unique attributes of digital art heavily rely on science and technology, making "technology" the ideal entry point for observing how colonialism unfolds in digital artistic expressions. Information technology continues to shape and solidify the "development discourse" of the 21st century, with digitization and networking representing new prospects for societal advancement. In the digital age, parallels can be drawn between the violence and oppression exhibited by technology as an imperial tool in contrast to the physical, tangible world during 19th-century colonial expansion. The most significant distinction lies in the shift from colonial oppression in the physical realm to the flattened world of the internet, where war is no longer a concern.

However, Western nations still wield significant discourse power over the majority of science and technology. For instance, the launch of software development, technological products, and internet projects by Western countries undoubtedly mirrors resource exploitation and control in regions lacking in digital technology, akin to the resource extraction during the colonial era. Data is extracted from underdeveloped regions and can be used to develop new technologies and products, generating substantial profits for the dominators. These dominators can further extract economic value by owning and controlling applications and services.

Observing contemporary society's blind adoration and infatuation with digital technology, French contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler once remarked, "Especially after 2008, a pervasive numbness appears to accompany this systemic ignorance and functional stupidity." According to Stiegler, the global systemic ignorance and numbness occurring today are the result of a series of "technological shocks." Stiegler bluntly asserts that the primary culprits behind these technological shocks are the four major American tech and internet companies: Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon [5]. Similar to the historical role Western powers played in colonial networks, many large Western technology and internet companies today represent central nodes of information flow, monopolizing the single gateway to the contemporary digital world. They control digital space and platforms, potentially including key technology companies, social media platforms, and internet infrastructure ownership. Here, everything is organized, and reason and order flow from the center to the periphery, while goods and raw materials flow from the periphery to the center. Comparing information flow to the raw material flow that sustained the European empires during the height of the Industrial Revolution, they also attempt to establish their "digital services" as universal standards that non-Western technologies must adhere to. In this process, technological practices are intricately linked with cultural production, replicating cultural knowledge production and power practices from colonial history.

In the following chapter, we will delve deeper into the potential colonialism within digital art from various dimensions.

3. The Complex Situation of Colonialism in Digital Art

3.1 Technological Hegemony in Digital Art: From Digital Universalism at the Core to the Periphery

In recent years, AI has seen vigorous development with applications across various industries. Among the most prominent topics of discussion is the use of AI in art creation and content production. For instance, in February of this year, the AI image generation program known as Disco

Diffusion gained immense popularity. It has the capability to render images based on descriptive scene keywords. In April, the renowned OpenAI introduced a new model, DALL-E 2, named after the famous artist Dali and the animated robot Wall-E. This model also supports Text-to-Image generation. The strength of artificial intelligence lies in its ability to swiftly evolve, allowing these program models to reach new heights within a matter of months. These software models all share a common underlying principle: they enable digital creations by rapidly and accurately interpreting the fundamental features, structures, and styles desired by the creator based on given descriptions or keywords. Essentially, behind digital works lies a complex amalgamation of "data" and "code."

Not limited to AI drawing, the "data" and "code" behind most digital art embody a universality: knowledge and representations applicable to any specific location or situation are equally applicable to any other. For example, when issuing a command to artificial intelligence in different countries, it does not tailor its responses to the cultural and historical context of your location. In the 21st century, within the utopian narrative of technological promise, the universalism inherent in digital technology and computation carries the potential for a kind of "colonial impulse." As Rob Kling reminds us, scholars in the field of computing often perceive themselves as scientists or technical experts, with limited reflection on ethical and philosophical dimensions. In fact, the development of computers is not a value-neutral technological practice. It constitutes a social action imbued with specific values, involving the absorption of scarce resources, redistribution through data, equipment, specialized expertise, and other forms, and the imposition of technological bureaucratization to force non-Western nations into dependency for the sake of technological hegemony[6].

In many third-world countries, digital technology applications are viewed as effective means to address societal issues and promote development. Under this optimistic sentiment, critical research into the applicability of digitization in local contexts is lacking. Scholar Per Lind from Egypt argues that local policymakers, scholars, and providers are mostly familiar with the Western value of computers but know little about local information and technology needs [7]. Similarly, in the fields of art and design, practitioners often adopt a "borrowed" mindset, using programs and applications developed in Western countries with limited vigilance and critical thinking.

Looking at the process, users of software in less developed countries engage in more than just learning the technical aspects of software model development and device operation. It involves a process of ideology, education, and emulation. In the design of application software, the definition of problems and the choice of solutions are not neutral technical processes; they are linked to specific social, group, and value systems. Models, when removed from their original context, encounter challenges posed by different social norms, value systems, rationalities, and cultures, which subsequently lead to issues of applicability in the new environment. The software openness and application in non-Western societies, based on models designed with Western concepts of reality, reflect a mirrored Western reality and do not align with the realities and needs of the local context. In such a situation, there is a need to shift the mindset from learning, emulating, and replicating to seeking the establishment of "alternative models" that align with local needs [8].

The information superhighway of the 21st century has reshaped modern society and life, giving rise to a new concept of "digital universalism." Although it has achieved what many previous universalism plans failed to realize, there is a deep-seated belief that the internet and digitization are unquestionably self-evident and universally necessary [9]. However, if practitioners from "peripheral regions" uncritically accept the "core" technological culture provided by Western countries, there exists the potential for a concealed symbolic violence [10] in the digital age, leading to the possibility of neo-colonialism—digital colonialism.

3.2 The Cultural Value Crisis Potentially Induced by Digital Art

The excessive dependence on digitization not only deepens the technological dominance of Western nations but also poses a cultural value crisis, jeopardizing the judgments, decisions, and governance of entire societal groups in less-developed countries, primarily based on digital information. The fundamental issue lies in the fact that digital representation alone cannot fully

encapsulate the truth of the world. For instance, in the realm of digital art, instances of cultural appropriation are frequent, whether intentional or unintentional. Creators from mainstream cultures often draw inspiration or directly borrow elements from marginalized cultures without proper understanding or respect for their origins.

In 2016, controversy arose around Snapchat filters resembling headdresses and cultural appropriation, with one notable example being the use of filters resembling headgear from certain Indigenous cultures, notably in North America. These headdresses hold profound cultural and spiritual significance within these communities, extending beyond mere accessories or clothing. Snapchat faced vehement opposition for creating and promoting these filters as they were seen as disrespectful and disregarding Indigenous culture. Users could "wear" these headdresses as if they were fun and casual accessories, without the need to comprehend the cultural background or acknowledge the historical trauma associated with appropriating Indigenous symbols. Critics argued that these filters perpetuated stereotypes and failed to recognize the history of colonization and cultural exploitation experienced by Indigenous communities. They called for increased sensitivity and cultural awareness when incorporating features from different cultural traditions in digital creations.

In the context of postcolonialism, "cultural appropriation" is generally regarded as "cultural theft" or "cultural occupation," sparking accusations that dominant cultural groups adopt aspects or elements of marginalized cultures without the consent of the weaker party, resulting in distortion, misrepresentation, or even damage to the source culture. The 1972 version of the American TV series "Kung Fu" is undeniably a classic case of cultural appropriation, as it unilaterally utilized narratives of monks and revenge stories from Chinese traditional culture. However, it is also common to find depictions of Asians in many Western film and television productions, characterized by slanted eyes, small noses, and small mouths. In early 20th-century American theater and cinema, a specific form of performance emerged: white actors donning distinctive attire of Black or Chinese origin, and in some extreme cases, blackface or yellowface makeup, performing stories of Black and Chinese individuals. This was termed "blackface" or "yellowface" performance. However, these portrayals often lacked depth and individuality, either depicting characters as irredeemable villains (such as Fu Manchu) or as foolish and submissive slaves. In essence, they were the antithesis of just, brave white individuals, only to be eliminated or rescued.

This undoubtedly continues the stereotypical impressions of formerly colonized cultures by culturally dominant nations.

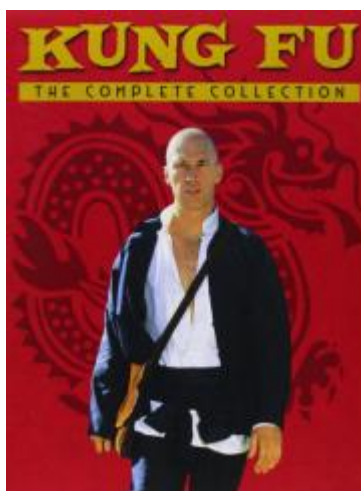


Fig. 3: Poster of the American drama "Kung Fu"

In 1985, the American postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduced the term "epistemic violence" in her book [11], where she used it to describe acts that legitimize the violence imposed by imperialism on former colonies and result in the destruction or forced loss of cultural subjectivity for people in these regions. They lose the possibility to express their unique experiences,

thus remaining in a state of dependence [12]. Western countries still harbor ambitions to spiritually tame and revalue the civilizations of the Other (similar to the 20th-century American promotion of the "American Dream," which had cultural value repercussions on colonized nations). As reflected in the previous section, the "universality" of Western culture is already manifested in technology and, culturally, advanced nations have digitized and disseminated digital art content, including artworks, films, music, games, and academic conferences, using sophisticated digital platforms and data systems to expand globally. Under the influence of Western digital imperialism and epistemic violence, the cultural values of third-world countries will face new challenges and threats.

3.3 The Digital Capitalism Behind Digital Art Communication

Whether it is the control of technological dominance or the reconstruction of cultural values, achieving these goals depends on information dissemination. Communication political economist Dan Schiller, in his work "The Rise and Expansion of Information Capitalism: Networks and the Nixon Era", traces the development of the entire American information industry, particularly pointing out the historical process where the information industry gradually shifted from government-owned to corporate-controlled, with regulatory agencies quickly losing their voice. He pessimistically critiques, "Rather than being a wonderful tool for democratic liberation, the internet is more appropriately described as a battering ram used by multinational corporations and the U.S. government to expand their economic and social power" [12].

The influence of digital art has gradually expanded due to the development and widespread dissemination of internet technology. This expansion has led to the commodification of digital art, a deepening of commodification being one of the results of capitalist expansion. Alternatively, we can directly view digital art as an extension of the digital economy and the expansion of digital power behind information dissemination.

On March 4, 2021, a group of "art enthusiasts" set fire to a painting by graffiti artist Banksy, titled "Moron." This artwork was created in 2006 and depicted a scene from an auction in a sketch style. The items being auctioned were beautifully framed but contained a simple phrase, "I can't believe you morons actually buy this shit." The entire burning process was publicly posted by an account named BurntBanksy. In the video, a young man wearing a T-shirt featuring another well-known Banksy artwork, "Girl with a Balloon" (which gained notoriety when Banksy partially shredded it inside the frame at a Sotheby's auction in London in 2018, seen as a challenge to the art market), ignited the painting, reducing it to ashes. This act seemed to echo the skepticism about the commercial value of art. Subsequently, these enthusiasts auctioned the encrypted digital version of "Moron" as an NFT (Non-fungible Token) on the OpenSea platform for a high price of \$380,000. According to public information, the group of "art enthusiasts" behind the burning of the painting was actually a blockchain company called Injective Protocol, which had previously purchased the artwork for \$95,000. Some claimed this was a publicity stunt by the blockchain company.

Turning to digital imagery, when Hollywood film production companies, leading the way in global expansion, sought to maximize their interests (political, economic, and cultural) by catering to a broader market, they began to "unquestionably" incorporate elements from peripheral and semi-peripheral countries (characters, images, and cultures, among others) into the production process. In the consumer market, there was a gradual emergence of "heavily invested international films." Behind these films were not only the values, cultural concepts, and lifestyles they promoted but also "rampant" capital accumulation.

People saw significant commercial potential in digital art, leading capitalists to join the fray, and digital art consumption became a form of "investment consumption." "The long-standing capitalist desires for profit maximization, cost-effectiveness, and labor control have not only continued to develop but have also been greatly extended" [13]. Similar to previous internet practices, digital art is merely implementing the old logic of capitalism while attempting to create a new order. As mentioned earlier, the utilization of digital art in various industries and commercial activities has prompted the elite in media, finance, art, and the internet to unite. This alliance is also exposing the

continuation of colonial narratives (as mentioned earlier, colonialism is an inevitable result of capitalist development).



Fig. 4: The “Moron” was burnt in a video livestreamed from a park in New York



Fig. 5: Banksy's self-destructed work re-auctioned at Sotheby's London

4. Conclusion

In an era defined by powerful material and economic forces, the world has unequivocally entered a digital historical process. However, persistent issues such as the digital divide, social fragmentation, and global inequality cast shadows over this digital transformation. This paper has embarked on a journey through the realm of digital art, shedding light on the colonialist phenomena and symbolic violence concealed beneath its dazzling façade from various angles. Nevertheless, the influence of colonialist hegemony and racial division extends far beyond the confines of digital art, permeating various fields, including modern design and technology. Scholars in their respective fields are all actively working to eradicate the influence of colonialism.

Within the domain of digital art, scholars have introduced the concept of "post-digital art," emphasizing a heightened concern for humanity over mere digitality. They propose reimagining the physical environment to transcend pure digital technology, challenging the ubiquity of digital universalism and thereby alleviating the inequalities of the digital age. "Digital interruption" emerges as a method to eliminate internal tensions associated with digital universalism, with the potential to slow down the march of digital-era inequalities. By fostering technological cooperation and innovation among peripheral nations and critically rejecting the dominance of Western-centric information technology, we can pave the way for development that aligns with local needs while preserving cultural autonomy.

In the realm of modern design, the notion of non-colonial design has also surfaced, rallying marginalized groups to join the struggle against the inequalities wrought by colonialism. This paradigm seeks to fundamentally redefine existing design concepts and establish new design ideologies and worldviews [14]. While non-colonial design currently relies heavily on Western knowledge systems, interdisciplinary research is gradually refining its theoretical foundations. Approaches like participatory design and culture-oriented design serve as commonly employed tools, aiding non-Western countries in crafting context-appropriate design frameworks.

In the field of technology, the countercultural movement of the 1970s in the United States attempted to package digital networks as the sole "way out" for humanity, envisioning a

decentralized digital utopia that took root in people's hearts like a hidden seed. Yet, digital networks ultimately evolved under the manipulation of capitalism, becoming a new form of colonial intrusion [15]. Recent advancements in AI technology offer a fresh opportunity for anti-colonialism, and whether they can break the shackles of cultural colonialism in the future remains a hopeful prospect.

Amidst Complex Historical Dynamics, the Frequent Erasure and Appropriation of Cultures Highlight the Contemporary Significance of Artistic and Design Voices with Critical Thinking. Examining Colonialism and Exploring How These Historical and Contemporary Interpretations are Conveyed and Narrated Through Digital Media is Extremely Important. This Will Reveal How Colonial Legacy Continues to Impact Artistic Discourse and Challenge Us to Critically Address the Influence of Colonialism in the Digital Age. In conclusion, delving into colonialism within the realm of digital art contributes to the creation of a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally sensitive artistic ecosystem. Furthermore, it aids in comprehending the intricate dynamics of colonialist narratives across diverse global domains.

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