

Other Cinemas

Colonialism and the Climate Crisis

An exploration through cinema

This publication was commissioned as part of the Other Cinemas April Weekender in 2025, which explored the connection between colonialism and the climate crisis and its depictions in cinema.





Development landscapes: cinema of environmental necropolitics

By Megan Arranagu-Reddy

Diamond Island (2016) opens with a departure. Eighteen year olds Bora and Dy are leaving their village in rural Cambodia to toil on the site of a luxury development in the capital, Phnom Penh. A CGI promotional film invites us to 'cross the bridge and enter the future of Cambodia', promising 'European architecture for a heavenly lifestyle'. Developments such as these, that proliferate across the Global South, re-apply the logics of colonialism, decimating local life, both human and more-than-human, to produce extensions of Europe.

This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection (2019) also opens with a son's departure. In a small village in Lesotho, 'the widow' Mantoa has been counting down days, weeks and months for her son to return from the goldmines in South Africa. A painfully long take stays on Mantoa as she realises her son is not returning to her alive. The camera briefly and partially glimpses his body wrapped in white. His death is not shown in spectacle but catalyses the films' persistent intimacy with loss. Over beautiful frames of the land and sky in its vastness, full of green mountains and valleys, the film's storyteller narrates, 'a miner coming home is like a war hero. As the soldiers hear the whistling of bullets in the trenches, the miners hear the trembling of earth beneath their feet. For one to come home alive, it was the day of the Lord.' The black and brown deaths of extraction are coded into the ecological consequences of mining, construction and other extractive economies.

In Davy Chou's *Diamond Island* (2016) and Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese's *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* (2019), sites of development are revealed as spaces of death and displacement, critiquing a colonial discourse of progress. These films resist the short term, spectacular harm common in narratives of climate crisis and instead represent the suppressed violences of land development through a visual language of loss. In their pairing of development with death, these films express an environmental necropolitics that centres the lives sacrificed to global capital (1). 3

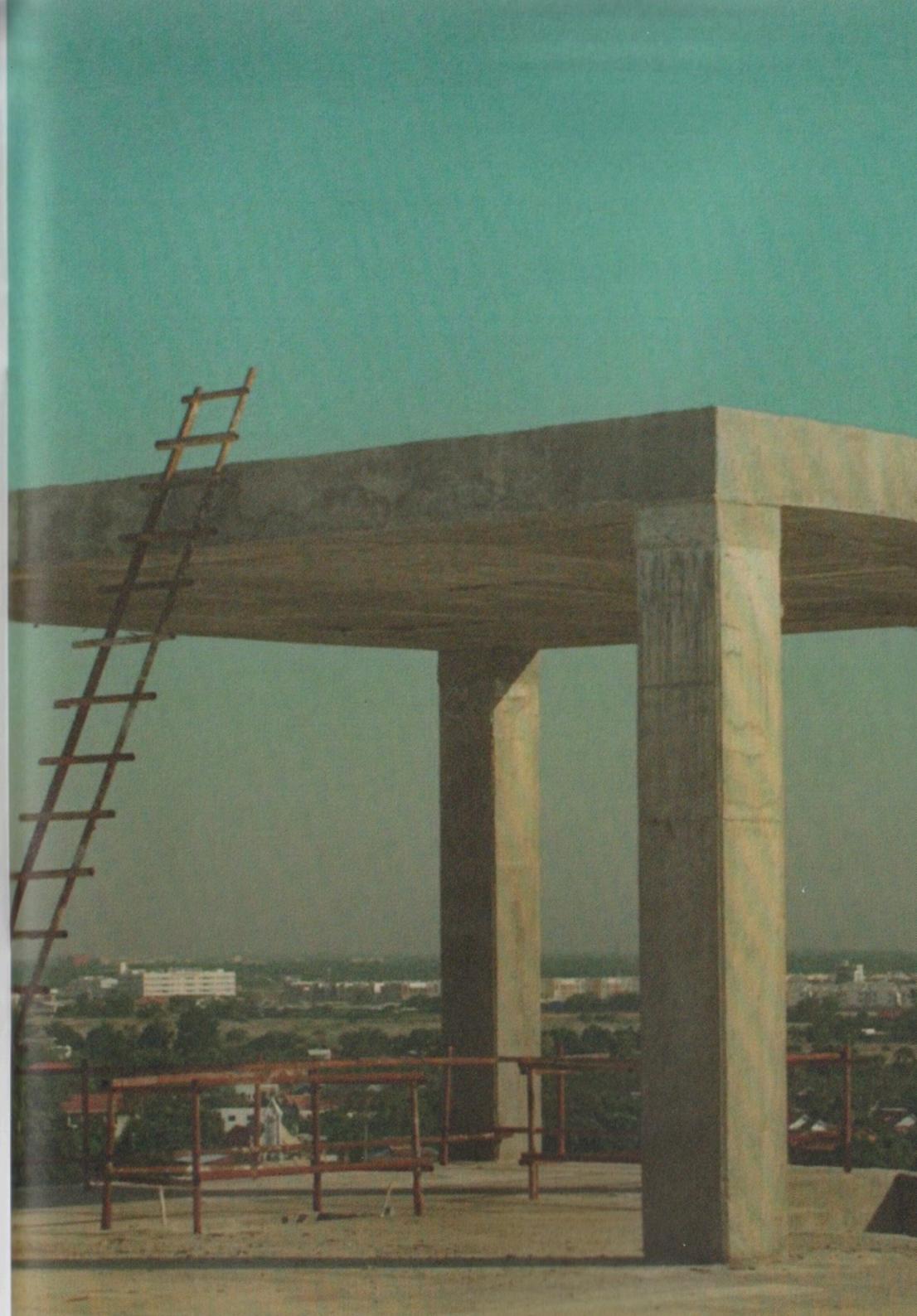
They intervene in the visual domination of neocolonial construction sites, their billboards and speculative renderings of wealth, to stay in the losses that global capital works to conceal.

In Davy Chou's *Diamond Island* (2016), we cut from a glittering CGI swimming pool, grand piano and chandelier to the corrugated metal sheets of the construction workers' dwelling, the skull-boring sound of drilling in the background. Bora and Dy emerge looking sleepy and young as other labourers walk by, already dusty from the day's work. Early in the film, the construction site is paired with death, at first philosophically, as Bora and his previously-estranged brother, Solei, stand atop an unfinished structure. Solei muses 'you feel dizzy because you are afraid of death. If you accept death, you will not feel dizzy'.

The material danger of these heights is soon realised, when Bora returns one night to hear that Dy has fallen from a building whilst working overtime in the dark. The news is delivered from offscreen, the camera staying on Bora's face as he tries to make sense of the accident. The fall itself is not depicted and we see Bora only outside of the hospital, framed by the entrance. Like the invisibilized deaths on sites like these across the "developing" world, a poetics of absence shrouds much of the violence in the film.

In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, critical geologist Kathryn Yusoff highlights the harm inherent to labour in spaces like these as an example of the 'codes of disposability' black and brown bodies are marked with in their 'proximity to power and toxicity' (2). In sites where land and more-than-human life are lost to development, black and brown life is sacrificed for the wealth of others, binding the climate crisis to racial violence.

Through long takes and the abstraction of sound and image, both films speak through a visual language of loss, one that allows for the longer scales of interconnected harms present in environmental destruction. On a date with fellow Diamond Island worker Aza, Bora walks to the bridge that connects the island to the mainland of Phnom Penh.



Aza reveals her grandmother had lived there 'before the Khmer Rouge.' Her voice appears over the built environment as a long take slowly sweeps the cement banks of the river, the high-rises on the other side, circling around across the bridge. The shot confines Bora and Aza to Diamond Island, despite her connections to the city. Layering reference to a previous generation's experience of displacement and genocide over these images of infrastructure, we sense the immense losses that continue to haunt this land.

Similarly, in Mosese's quiet aesthetic of environmental necropolitics, landscapes are infused with the multiple scales of violences they hold and bear witness to. Orders from a faceless authority confirm the village is to be flooded to construct a dam. Mantoa learns this on a visit to the cemetery. Having lost her husband and every one of her family members, Mantoa is singularly focused on those buried in the ground. If their village is flooded, it is not just the living who are displaced.



Through Mantoa's relationship to death, that of her son and the generations of dead in the burial ground, the violence of labour in the goldmines is placed in connection to the ecological loss of dam construction, revealing a network of necropolitics that cuts across environment and colonised bodies.

In her essay '*Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation*', philosopher Sylvia Wynter identifies this necropolitical relation as originating in the first colonising voyages of the 15th century(3). These journeys, and the racialised deathworlds they enacted, marked a code of disposability onto certain bodies that we still live with. Chou and Mosese make visible the colonial deathworlds of contemporary goldmines, luxury development sites and dams in the Global South.

Wearing her mourning cloak beyond the socially accepted grieving period and listing the warriors, children and umbilical cords buried in the ground, Mantoa refuses to abandon death and in the process, reminds her community of the meanings their land holds. She speaks both the names of those buried in the cemetery, and the original name of their village before missionaries christened it with their own. This devotion to grief goes beyond immediate material loss, resisting the physical and cultural erasures of colonial land dispossession.

In an early confrontation between agents of development and the villagers, an elder watches as the land that feeds his family is divided up by measuring tape, calculating the puny compensation he will be offered. Eventually a villager lunges at one of the construction workers, the quiet violence of this moment becoming too much to bear. As they tussle, the shot cuts away to Mantoa watching the altercation. A voice is heard offscreen: 'I'm a hired hand and a witness. I know exactly where this is heading. The dam will be built and the flood will come'. Instead of viewing the speaker, we see Mantoa in profile, her black mourning cloak framed by the pink and green of wildflowers. In visually fragmenting this moment, Mosese reproduces the way global structures of capital unfold on the ground. We do not see those responsible for planning this dam, only a 'hired hand and a witness'.

It is impossible to view, to speak to, to physically engage, the figures who claim control over this part of the Earth. The film's depiction of the deadly impacts of such power without visible perpetrators replicates the haunted feeling of living under colonial logics. Sites of development are home to both the hauntological and the necropolitical, as ancient futures lost to colonialism sit alongside a contemporary overexposure to death.

As the village begins to resist displacement, violence escalates. Towards the end of the film, Mantoa returns to find her home in flames. Framed from above, she sits on her burnt bed frame amongst the destruction, her ash-streaked cloak blending into the wreck. In one unrelenting take, we sit with her for almost two minutes. Her body is completely still amongst the slow movement of sheep filling the frame. These minutes of staying with Mantoa in her loss are a visual act of mourning. Sitting in silence with her, multiple absences begin to haunt the frame. Mantoa's home, her son, her husband, children, the village's name and religion lost to Christian missions. Over a frame of Mantoa's burnt belongings, the village chief reflects 'I have come to believe that this incident is related to the dam'.

In their long, unyielding takes, shrouded sources of violence and a ghostly poetics of absence, *Diamond Island* and *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* provide an aesthetics of environmental violence that is slow and quiet enough to grasp the many networks of loss present in one site of construction. Resisting the amnesia of capitalism that asks us to forget what stood before, the films dwell in the complex violences neocolonial development relies on, enacts and hides.

Footnotes:

1. Necropolitics, a term coined by Achille Mbembe, refers to the use of political power to decide who lives and who dies.

2. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019) p. 51.

3. Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation, an Argument' CR: The New Centennial Review (2003)

Images:

The first & forth images are film stills from *This Is Not A Burial, It's A Resurrection* (2019), directed by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese.

The second & third images are from *Diamond Island* (2016), directed by Davy Chou.

