

ANALYSING HUGH GLASS'S REVERSE MIMICRY OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE IN FILM *THE REVENANT* (2015)

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ABSTRACT

Mimicry generally entails the colonized emulating the culture of the colonizer. In *The Revenant* (2015), the notion of mimicry is inverted, with the colonizer emulating the colonized. While prior research indicated that reverse imitation serves as a subtle method for colonizers to exert their dominance, the analyzed film demonstrated the contrary. This study employs a textual film analysis to scrutinize the film's visual composition, character representation, and symbolic imagery through Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and ambivalence. It concludes that Glass's imitation of Native American survival practices, including the consumption of raw flesh and the use of natural remedies, symbolizes his negotiation between colonial identity and reliance on the culture of the colonized. This study underscores how reverse mimicry complicates colonial hierarchies and identity formation within postcolonial film studies.

Keywords: *postcolonialism; reverse mimicry; ambivalence; native American culture*

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years, Western cinema has exerted significant influence in the worldwide film industry, often revisiting themes derived from its colonial history. The cultural influence of colonialism, stemming from the historical colonization by Western nations, persists in contemporary film storylines (Boshoff, 2023). Films utilize visual and auditory elements, including imagery, sound, and narrative framing, to develop specific viewpoints on history and power.

Nonetheless, despite ongoing engagement with colonial themes, numerous works, encompassing both films and literature, continue to represent the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in conventional hierarchical terms, illustrating the colonizer as dominant and the colonized as subordinate (Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska & Denkovska, 2023). This study presents a novel perspective by analyzing Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015), a film that reinterprets colonial dynamics through themes of survival, mimicry, and cultural contact. The film, set in the 1800s frontier, chronicles the journey of Hugh Glass, a fur trapper who, abandoned and presumed dead, endures the harsh wilderness by emulating Native American survival techniques, including the consumption of raw flesh, utilization of natural remedies, and concealment within a carcass, knowledge acquired from previous interactions with the Pawnee, the tribe of his deceased wife (Iñárritu, 2015).

Glass's dependence on Native American culture engenders a distinctive occurrence within colonial discourse, wherein the delineation of superiority established by the colonizer to differentiate their culture from that of the colonized becomes indistinct and unclear. Glass, a white colonizer, deliberately mimics and emulates the culture of Native Americans, whom he seeks to absorb, while preserving his own cultural identity. This pertains to an idea introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. H. Bhabha (1984) proposed the concepts of "mimicry and ambivalence" to analyze how the colonized, or the 'Other,' imitate the culture of the colonizer to attain recognition and establish themselves as equals within colonial society. Bhabha's idea of mimicry, developed in 1984, continues to be pertinent in the analysis of modern cinematic representations of colonial encounters, as it provides a framework for understanding the ongoing negotiation of identity, power, and culture in these films.

Nevertheless, *The Revenant* illustrates the ramifications of Bhabha's principle when implemented in reverse, or reverse mimicry. The phrase "reverse mimicry" denotes a phenomena in which the colonizer emulates the culture of the colonized, contrasting with Bhabha's original concept of mimicry, where imitation flows from the colonized to the colonizer. While prior research by Moni (2012) and Anzi (2024) indicated that reverse mimicry was predominantly utilized to bolster colonial subjugation, this film uncovers a divergent purpose. Glass's involvement illustrates that reverse imitation is not solely a tactic of dominance, but also a practical method of surviving in the unforgiving wilderness of North America.

This study reinterprets Bhabha's concept within the framework of survival cinema and broadens postcolonial discourse regarding visual storytelling in Western colonial narratives. Consequently, it seeks to analyze how Glass emulates Native American culture for survival and how this illustrates the ambivalence of his identity through the filmic aspects in *The Revenant*. The authors contend that reverse mimicry extends beyond colonial dominance to encompass practical necessity, as evidenced by Glass, resulting in an unconscious ambivalence regarding his identity. This research is guided by the following question: 1) In what manner does *The Revenant* depict Glass's reverse replication of Native American culture through its narrative and visual

components? 2) How do these cinematic representations illustrate the ambivalence of his identity?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prior Research

The intricate narrative and concepts of *The Revenant* have prompted numerous academic analyses examining the picture from diverse perspectives beyond its primary plot. A multitude of researchers have examined this film from many perspectives, each expanding its thematic breadth. The initial study was executed by Jimmi et al. (2022). This study examines the survival problems encountered by Glass in the film through the lens of DwiYuni's survival strategy typologies and Sun Tzu's principles. The research classified survival techniques based on environmental constraints, including extreme cold, wilderness navigation, and isolation, which are essential to the film's frontier context. Furthermore, the six categories of survival techniques encompass planning, raid tactics, power, movement, and strategic location. This study provides insights into the survival methods utilized by Glass and complements the current research due to their shared focus; nevertheless, it is constrained by its exclusive examination of his strategies, neglecting the impact of Native Americans and their culture on him.

Mikić (2017) examined the influence of the atmosphere in *The Revenant* on eliciting viewers' emotions. The cognitive approach to analyzing the portrayal of surroundings and environment during Glass's wilderness journey demonstrated that these depictions elicited emotional connections in viewers, provoking responses of horror, dread, sympathy, interest, and appreciation for nature. The study regrettably neglected the cultural values inherent in *The Revenant* and the manner in which Glass traverses the unforgiving landscape. Nonetheless, it offers a novel insight into how the natural adversities encountered by Glass in the film could elicit profound emotions in the audience.

Additionally, research on *The Revenant* from a postcolonial perspective has been identified, as the film primarily explores the interactions between Europeans and Native Americans within the colonial context. The initial study under examination is a thesis by Pettersson (2017). Through the framework of Orientalism, the paper identifies significant roles of Native American characters and their contributions to the film's narrative, suggesting that *The Revenant* subverts Western portrayals that typically depict Native Americans in a stereotypical and dehumanizing manner. This study, while pertinent to the examination of the interactions between Glass and the indigenous, overlooks the impact of Native American cultures on Glass's survival in the wilderness and how his imitations reflect the ambiguity of his identity.

Conversely, Sebastian (2017) contended that *The Revenant's* portrayal of 'savage' Native Americans and 'heroic' Europeans perpetuates the well-known clichéd images of natives in Hollywood cinema. The writers utilized the notion of cultural hegemony to analyze the divergent representations of Europeans and locals. The study's findings showed that although Native Americans occupy prominent roles in the narrative, they are still shown in a

dehumanizing manner as savage and ignoble. This study examines *The Revenant* from a distinct perspective, contrasting the conventional depiction of Native Americans as savage and Europeans as heroic. This paper examines how the film subverts the binary identified by Sebastian through Glass's embrace of Native American survival tactics, which obscure the conventional colonial order by utilizing Bhabha's concept of mimicry, rather than emphasizing the portrayal of the natives.

Mimicry

This study utilized Homi K. Bhabha's idea of mimicry to analyze Glass's emulation of Native American culture in *The Revenant*. Bhabha initially presented this concept in his 1984 essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," and subsequently elaborated on it in his 1994 book "The Location of Culture." He characterized 'mimicry' as a strategy utilized by the colonized to attain recognition as a 'recognizable other' inside the dominant colonial culture by emulating their customs, including speech, behavior, and attire (Bhabha, 1984; Bhabha, 1994). Moreover, he underscored that the colonized individuals who emulate the colonizer do not completely alter their cultural identity, since the nuanced distinctions persist. This phenomena is termed 'ambivalence' in a third space, a state in which a colonized individual resembles the colonizer while remaining different (Budianta, 2024).

Bhabha defines mimicry as not merely the colonized copying the colonizer, but also as a means of subtly mocking or ridiculing the colonizer (Anggraeni, 2022). When the colonized emulate the colonizer, the colonial distinctions that differentiate the two cultures become obscured. Through mimicry, the colonized individual becomes 'partial', indicating that their imitation is imperfect, which confounds the colonizer and subverts the purported civilizing goal (Bhabha, 1994), creating a gap that the colonized might exploit for defiance and resistance. The concept of mimicry underpins the comprehension of Glass's emulation of Native American culture, especially survival techniques, in *The Revenant*, as the colonizer's act of copying obscures defined colonial limits.

Reverse Mimicry

Traditional mimicry generally entails the colonized's emulation of the colonizer, aiming for acknowledgment and resistance within the colonial narrative. Conversely, this imitative activity may also manifest in the opposite direction, with the colonizer emulating the colonized. Within a shared cultural milieu, especially in a colonial framework, the colonizer may interact with and assimilate aspects of Indigenous culture, incorporating them into their quotidian existence. This enables the colonizer to acclimate to the environment and synchronize with the pre-existing frameworks within the colony, including its governance system. This premise corresponds with Glass's emulation of Native American survival techniques in *The Revenant*, thus establishing the foundation for the current study. This study applies postcolonial theory to a Western survival film, expanding its scope beyond

conventional colonizer-colonized binaries and dynamics through cinematic elements.

Moni (2012), in his analysis of Gurcharan Das's drama *Larins Sahi*, identified an instance of reverse imitation in which the British derived inspiration from the late Indian monarch, assimilating Indian principles to manage the colony effectively. Anzi (2024) disclosed that the colonizer's imitation of the colonized served as a tactic for territorial expansion, as illustrated in Israeli literary works. While reverse mimicry lacks a subversive impact, unlike traditional imitation that challenges colonial authority, the colonizer must avoid excessive indigenization to maintain the apparent superiority of their culture.

METHOD

This research analyzed *The Revenant* from a postcolonial perspective. According to Tyson (2006), the postcolonial paradigm facilitated the examination of the power dynamics intrinsic to colonialism. The film's clear subject of colonialism, with Europeans as colonizers and Native Americans as the colonized, renders this technique particularly appropriate. Moreover, postcolonialism analyzed identity as intercultural, highlighting its fluidity and the influence of cross-cultural interactions, rather than viewing it as unchanging and untainted (Richards, 2010). This viewpoint corresponds with the depiction of Glass's emulation of Native American culture, a vital element of his survival and inner turmoil. Their viewpoints on colonial power dynamics enhanced Bhabha's notion by contextualizing imitation within a wider discourse on intercultural identity formation.

This study utilized Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2015 film *The Revenant*, focusing mostly on the visual elements and speech, as its main data source, while being based on Michael Punke's 2002 novel of the same title. The protagonist in the film, Glass, was an actual fur trapper from the 19th century (Dubiel, 2024). Nevertheless, the authors concentrated solely on his fictional portrayal in Iñárritu's oeuvre.

This study employed textual film analysis to collect data, a method necessitating meticulous observation of a film to investigate the integration of its cinematic features in meaning construction (Wildfeuer & Bateman, 2017). The initial action involved viewing the film repeatedly to analyze the depiction of reverse mimicry, focusing on Native American survival practices, acts of imitation, and identity conflicts of the protagonist, through careful examination of cinematography, mise-en-scène, and dialogue to comprehend how meaning is generated through the interaction of these elements in the film. The chosen sequences were screen shot and meticulously studied numerous times, with comprehensive notes taken on camera angles, lighting, and dialogues for subsequent analysis. Bhabha's concept of mimicry was utilized to examine the data, emphasizing how these ideas elucidate the functioning of reverse mimicry within the film's narrative and visual design.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section elucidates and analyzes the principal findings of the study via a textual examination of *The Revenant*. The analysis utilizes Homi K. Bhabha's notions of mimicry and ambivalence to explore how the film navigates colonial authority through intercultural interactions between Glass and Native characters, especially Hikuc, who serves as his companion throughout the expedition. This section explores the complexity of mimicry, examining reverse mimicry rather than simply recognizing examples of adoption and imitation of Indigenous culture as a unidirectional phenomena.

This analysis examines the film's visual and narrative techniques, focusing on how *The Revenant* portrays indigenous culture and whether these representations perpetuate or challenge imperial inequalities. The results are categorized into three interconnected subsections: (1) Glass's reverse imitation of Native American culture for survival, (2) the ambivalence of Glass's identity, and (3) the paradox of cultural supremacy in colonialism.

Glass's Reverse Mimicry of Native American Culture for Survival

This portion analyzes Glass's expedition into the woods as a process of reverse mimicry, wherein he assimilates Native American survival techniques for endurance rather than for supremacy. *The Revenant*, via its adoptions and mimicry, creates what Bhabha terms a third space, a liminal area where colonial hierarchies disintegrate and new hybrid identities arise (Bhabha, 1994). In contrast to Bhabha's original notion, where the colonized emulates the colonizer to assert power, Glass's imitation subverts this intent, revealing the reliance of colonial identity on Indigenous knowledge. This dynamic reinterprets the colonial dichotomy: survival is now dependent on the culture formerly considered inferior.

Eating Raw Bison Flesh



Figure 1. Glass eating bison flesh
(01:26:12)

Figure 1 depicts Glass consuming raw bison meat. A close-up photo depicts him gnawing on the flesh with a look of desperation while lying prone. The scenario occurs on a black snowfield illuminated by surrounding bonfires, indicating a nocturnal environment. This moment illustrates Glass's voluntary alignment with Native American culture, exemplifying a reversal of Bhabha's mimicry, wherein the colonizer embraces the culture of the colonized. Despite

initially displaying revulsion, he ultimately consumes the raw bison flesh to endure in the woods. This moment signals not only physical desperation but also the dissolution of imperial supremacy. Through engaging in a technique previously deemed barbaric, Glass's body transforms into a locus of cultural inversion. Bhabha's concept of mimicry is intricate in this context, as the colonizer imitates the colonized out of necessity, rather than the colonized seeking to emulate the colonizer. This inversion highlights the ambivalence of power, demonstrating that the colonial ego is never free but perpetually dependent on that which it aims to dominate.

Treating Wounds Using Natural Remedies



Figure 2. Glass applies burning plants to his wound
(01:07:08)

Figure 2 features a close-up image of Glass applying burning therapeutic plants to his inflamed lesion. The camera focuses on his face, capturing his perspiration, trembling, and short breathing, while the diegetic sounds of fire and his muted groans intensify the physical torment. This application of natural treatments, originating from Native American medicinal traditions, exemplifies another instance of reverse imitation. Glass's action is neither appropriation nor domination, but rather an act of necessity. Bhabha's notion illustrates that this imitation exposes ambiguity, as Glass endures by depending on the information his society previously regarded as inadequate. This moment visually metamorphoses him from an emblem of colonial authority into a hybrid entity who inhabits the interstice of two realms, neither wholly colonizer nor colonized.

Sipping the Snow



Figure 3. Glass sipping the snow
(01:33:53)

Figure 3 depicts a serene moment shared by Glass and Hikuc. As Hikuc opens his mouth to capture the descending snow, the camera zooms in on his whimsical action. Upon observing him, Glass replicates the same motion, exhibiting a subtle and nearly delicate mimicry. The action, albeit uncomplicated, possesses significant symbolic importance. It signifies the juncture at which mimicry surpasses mere survival and evolves into a relational dynamic. Through the imitation of Hikuc, Glass enacts what Bhabha refers to as a partial presence, wherein his mimicry establishes a communal space that temporarily erases colonial demarcations (Bhabha, 1994). The stark contrast between the desolate cold terrain and the warmth of their contact amplifies the feeling of in-betweenness: Glass's identity oscillates between imitation and empathy, survival and togetherness.

Using Dead Horse Carcass as Shelter



Figure 4. Glass inside a horse carcass
(01:52:42)

Figure 4 presents a close-up image of Glass pushing his injured body into the carcass of a deceased horse, the crimson blood contrasting sharply with the white snow. The subdued illumination and muted sound of descending snow accentuate the scene's authenticity. This survival tactic, utilizing an animal corpse for warmth, exemplifies the emulation of indigenous wisdom of harmonious coexistence with nature. Mimicry evolves into metamorphosis at this juncture. By physically entering the cadaver, Glass figuratively traverses the threshold between life and death, civilization and wilderness. His 'rebirth' the following morning, drenched in blood and snow, symbolically signifies the emergence of what Bhabha designates as the third space, wherein colonial identity transforms into a hybrid and ambivalent construct (Bhabha, 1994). The carcass serves as a figurative locus where Glass relinquishes his colonial identity and embraces a nebulous cultural intermediary state.

Although Glass's mimicry of Native customs appears to render him more relatable and demonstrate reverence for indigenous wisdom, the film's narrative structure remains ambiguous. Chowdhury (2025) asserts in her analysis of *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar* that Hollywood frequently employs an imperial camera gaze, wherein white protagonists are foregrounded while Native characters are relegated to the background. *The Revenant* seeks to

diverge from this notion by illustrating that Glass's survival relies on Native ecological knowledge rather than his own supremacy. Nonetheless, the camera continues to adhere to his perspective and constructs most of the emotional narrative surrounding him. This generates a subtle tension, as the film acknowledges Native presence while yet maintaining the audience's empathy toward Glass. The film exemplifies what Bhabha refers to as a third space, when colonial borders are obscured yet never entirely eliminated.

The Ambivalence of Glass's Identity

The imitations executed by Glass, as elaborated in the preceding subsection, do not result in a comprehensive metamorphosis. Bhabha posits that mimicry inherently retains a trace of difference, characterized as "almost the same, but not quite," rendering the identity of the imitator unstable and ambiguous. In Glass's situation, his reverse replication of Native culture does not merely render him "the Other," but situates him in a liminal position. This ambivalence becomes evident in the subsequent scenario.

Glass's First Encounter with Hikuc



Figure 5. Hikuc is ready to shoot an arrow at Glass (01:25:02)

Figure 5 depicts a long shot of Glass prostrate on the ground with his hands elevated in surrender, while Hikuc looms above, drawing back an arrow. The geographical disparity between the two characters graphically subverts the colonial authority. The white colonizer, typically regarded as powerful, now finds themselves powerless. Nonetheless, this reversal does not entirely dismantle the colonial system. The camera maintains alignment with Glass's gaze, allowing the audience to see fear and submission via his perspective. By presenting the sequence in this manner, the film permits a fleeting instance of Native empowerment while predominantly focusing the emotional story on the white protagonist.

Bhabha contends that this moment encapsulates the tension of ambivalence: Glass's survival hinges on emulating Indigenous wisdom, while his identity is perpetually overshadowed by his cultural origins. His capitulation symbolizes the psychological instability engendered by mimicry, rather than mere physical frailty. He is ensnared between two realms, truly belonging to neither. *The Revenant* employs this conflict to interrogate

concepts of colonial masculinity and heroism, illustrating that endurance and power are not exclusively Western attributes.

The Paradox of Cultural Superiority within Colonialism

Colonial ideology delineates a distinct division between the colonizer and the colonized, with the former asserting superiority in civilization and rationality. Nonetheless, Glass's actions of reverse mimicry demonstrate that such boundaries are not definitive. His survival relies on the culture that colonial discourse considers inferior, revealing the underlying instability of imperial superiority. This paradox exemplifies Bhabha's concept of ambivalence, demonstrating that mimicry both contests and reinforces the authority it emulates, rather than indicating that colonial control is easily undermined.

Fitzgerald and Bridger at a Native American Tribe Village



Figure 6. Fitzgerald in an Arikaran village
(01:14:50)

Fitzgerald: "These Injuns ain't never as dead as you think they are. ... Look at 'em, huh? They're always stealing our shit."
(Iñárritu, 2015, 01:14:50)

Figure 6 presents a long shot of Fitzgerald and Bridger traversing a devastated Native settlement. The terrain is strewn with the corpses of locals, and the damaged edifices indicate a recent episode of violence. The elevated perspective and Fitzgerald's repulsed demeanor illustrate the colonial gaze that perpetuates the objectification of indigenous people. His statement, "These Injuns ain't never as dead as you think they are," underscores his dehumanizing perspective and his necessity to sustain a separation from those he loathes. The camera momentarily coincides with his perspective, illustrating the reproduction of colonial ideology through both imagery and conversation.

Conversely, Glass's imitation of indigenous survival techniques, including the utilization of natural cures and the identification of refuge in the woods, demonstrates a markedly distinct relationship with the land and its inhabitants. Fitzgerald's revulsion relies on emphasizing distinction, whereas Glass's endurance hinges on acknowledging connection. This juxtaposition not only exposes the absurdity of colonial superiority but also the inherent ambivalence within it. Although Glass mimics Native culture, the camera

remains biased towards his perspective, indicating that colonial narratives persist in dictating whose pain and resilience are foregrounded.

Bhabha posits that the simultaneous resistance and reproduction of power characterizes mimicry. It satirizes colonial hubris while remaining reliant on its contextual framework. Glass embodies a paradox. His survival exemplifies the significance of indigenous wisdom; nonetheless, his narrative is predominantly conveyed from the perspective of a white protagonist. This dichotomy illustrates the unsolved tension of the colonial encounter, characterized by the coexistence of power and dependence.

Overall, these findings suggest that Glass's mimicry functions as both resistance and repetition. It does not simply reverse colonial hierarchies, but exposes their fragility as well. Through Glass and Fitzgerald, *The Revenant* presents a moral and ideological paradox in which the culture deemed primitive becomes essential for survival, while the culture that claims superiority reveals its own dependence and moral decay.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, *The Revenant* narrates the survival odyssey of Hugh Glass, a European fur trapper abandoned in the forest following a bear assault. To survive, he assimilates and emulates several customs inherent to Native American culture, which subsequently obscure the colonial demarcation between the colonizer and the colonized. The film's visual presentation, characterized by close-up shots, low-key lighting, and spatial framing, illustrates the physical and metaphorical manifestation of Glass's impersonation. The close-up of Glass consuming raw bison flesh and the sight of him concealing himself under a horse carcass graphically illustrate both endurance and change. Moreover, the subdued color scheme illustrates the conflict between survival and identity, highlighting the ambiguity within Glass's evolving personality.

Through these acts of mimicry, Glass's exploration reveals the paradox of cultural supremacy inherent in colonialism. His readiness to depend on Native American culture undermines the idea that the colonizer had all authority or knowledge. Furthermore, the video indicates that colonial inequalities persist, as the Native perspective is perceived via the lens of the white protagonist. This ambivalence reflects Bhabha's assertion that imitation does not merely invert power but destabilizes it, exposing the reliance of colonial authority on that which it attempts to dominate. Consequently, *The Revenant* portrays mimicry not as an act of defiance or supremacy, but as a survival mechanism arising from human interdependence and cultural exchange.

This study emphasizes the continued relevance of Bhabha's notion in contemporary cinema depicting colonial contacts, rather than asserting an expansion of his theory. Mimicry can manifest in nuanced and practical manners, illustrating the fluidity of identity and the precariousness of superiority. The study encourages future academics to examine the film through the lens of Native American agency and worldview, or to juxtapose it with other frontier films that portray cultural interchange and resilience.

Ultimately, *The Revenant* posits that the distinctions between the colonizer and the colonized are not static, but are perpetually redefined by survival, connection, and the collective endeavor to remain within the expanse of nature.

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