

Panel 27

Film, Phenomenology and Storytelling

From Orature to the Big Screen: Storytelling in Oceania's Indigenous Cinemas

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Many Indigenous societies have considered cinema—an invention of Western colonizers—to be a medium incongruent with their traditional modes of storytelling. Yet in the 1970s, Ousmane Sembène, widely regarded as the Father of African Cinema, redefined filmmakers as modern-day griots: traditional storytellers with a movie camera. Building on this vision of utilizing the “master’s tool”, Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay introduced the concept of “Fourth Cinema” in the early 2000s to describe films created by and for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous storytelling has since taken on new forms, blending oral traditions with the visual language of film.

A central philosophical underpinning of this syncretic cinematic practice in Oceania is the Moana-based theorization of time and space. Through narrative structure, shot composition, editing, camera work, and sound design, Indigenous filmmakers embed their worldview into the construct of their films. This paper examines the aesthetic and epistemological concerns of Oceanian Indigenous cinemas, analyzing how they not only foreground Indigenous languages but also craft a visual grammar rooted in their oral tradition.

Drawing on contemporary film texts from this region, I argue that these filming strategies, grounded in Oceania’s time-space (Tā-Vā) philosophy, form the foundation of a “counter-cinema” that challenges dominant filmmaking conventions, and as a result, reclaims a space for cultural continuity and political advocacy. By infusing cinema with this Indigenous worldview and theory, these filmmakers develop an approach to indigenize filmmaking and transform cinema into a site of resistance and decolonization.

Biography

Yifen Beus received her PhD in comparative literature from Indiana University, Bloomington and teaches film studies in the Faculty of Arts & Letters at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. Her teaching and research interests include modernity, reflexivity, intertextuality, minor (trans)nationalism and indigenous storytelling in cinema.