The new colonial politics in Indonesia: Representations in the documentary film *Colonial Debris*

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ABSTRACT

Background: The documentary film *Colonial Debris* attempts to represent new colonial politics in Indonesia, providing a narrative of resource exploitation and agrarian conflict by corporations and state apparatus against indigenous peoples in Indonesia. **Purpose:** This study aims to reveal how the documentary film *Colonial Debris* represents new colonial politics in Indonesia through a system of visual signs. **Method:** This study uses qualitative content analysis with a semiotic approach, with data collection techniques in the form of film archive documentation, which obtained a corpus of 40 sign-objects from the film *Colonial Debris*. The data was analyzed using Pierce's semiotic method with a sign, object, and interpretant framework. **Result:** This study shows that the film *Colonial Debris* represents new colonial politics through visual narratives about colonial legacy in the Indonesia's agrarian system; State-Corporate repression and criminalization of community resistance; Socio-ecological inequality; People's resistance and solidarity. The interrelationship of the film's visual sign system reveals the power imbalance and social inequality maintained by the state apparatus and corporations as the superior, and indigenous communities as the inferior. **Conclusion:** *Colonial Debris* depicts new colonial politics as a continuation of old colonialism, through signs of eviction, state apparatus, biased rules, and citizens' struggles refer to the object of state-corporate colonialism, forming an interpretant that positions Indigenous communities as the colonized. **Implications:** This study contributes to media and documentary film studies, particularly in postcolonial approach, by showing how documentary films can reveal postcolonial power dynamics and inequalities in society.

Keywords: *Colonial Debris*; documentary film; politic colonial; postcolonial; semiotic

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INTRODUCTION

Documentary films do more than just record facts; they actively construct narratives and shape meaning through cinematic techniques such as montage, voice-over and editing (Balaguer & Alberich-Pascual, 2024). These techniques are critical in steering the audience's emotional and cognitive responses to the issues at stake. Style involves more than presenting the facts as they are. It involves event framing, perspective selection, and interpretation steering. Documentary films, as Frassinelli (2021) and Koch (2023) puts it, are spaces where meaning is negotiated, and not simply spaces where meaning is sent as neutral messages.

Colonial Debris is a documentary film by Watchdoc Image that runs for 84 minutes and 31 seconds and was uploaded to YouTube on May 23, 2025. Watchdoc Image, a company in Indonesia, has been known for being the first critical visual journalism company in Indonesia. Since the early 2010s, the company has created many documentaries that have captured the structural elements of social inequality, land grabbing, and the violation of human rights (Faiz et al., 2021; Gurning et al., 2024). Documentary content in the digital era (Watchdoc Documentary Content Study. In the production of Colonial Debris, Watchdoc uses its signature style of collaboration with communities, field research, and advocacy-oriented media.

Colonial Debris narrates the intertwining legacy of colonialism in the social and economic infrastructure of the construction industry in Indonesia. The film illustrates how big construction projects are indifferent to the rights of the native communities and the displacement from their historical territories. The film emphasises that, while colonialism no longer exists in the form of direct colonisation (Leurs & Seuferling, 2023), it continues to exert control over living spaces and local resources through collaboration between capitalist companies and the states (Nessel, 2021).

Colonial Debris portrays communities' struggle to defend land rights against corporations and state officials through intertwined collective and personal perspectives. It follows individuals who have endured land grabbing and physical as well as psychological violence, giving voice to people long silenced and exposing the human cost of conflicts too often treated as technical disputes. The film also documents organised resistance by indigenous communities and farmers—protests, road blockades, blocking heavy equipment, and confrontations with security forces seeking to evict residents from their territories. These scenes show resistance as both embodied action and an affirmation of identity and collective rights.

In this study, the film *Colonial Debris* is positioned as a visual representation of a new form of colonial politics in contemporary Indonesia. The film shows the dynamics of village life, customary land, and community resistance against state actors such as the police, military, and local government

collaborating with large corporations. While traditional colonialism has formally ended in Indonesia, new forms of colonialism persist through the collaboration of the state with large corporations, both local and foreign, in areas such as economic domination, land grabbing, and power imbalances (Baker, 2023; Nessel, 2021).

Contemporary studies demonstrate that documentary films have evolved into a strategic political medium capable of challenging official narratives and presenting alternative perspectives on history, power, colonialism, and postcolonialism. Studies of film during the colonial period in Indonesia, as demonstrated by Sandeep Ray's research, highlight Dutch non-fiction films produced between 1912 and 1930 (Cohen, 2017). Although these films were not as powerful as While not as instrumental as British propaganda, these films still described, albeit in a limited manner, the social, economic and cultural dimensions of colonialism in the Dutch East Indies (Barker, 2022). his analysis of the films aids in the understanding of the ways colonial domination was exercised beyond the enactment of policies, but also through the 'visual' construction of colonial societies and the subjective construction of the contemporary understanding of the dominant and the dominated.

Other studies, such as Kishore (2023) have examined how films from the colonial period acted as sites of community defiance and engendering a sense of collective belonging.

Kishore discusses how the media collective Chalchitra Abhiyan used documentary as a way of moving the narrative away from victimhood and, instead, to a position of collective assertion, especially in reference to the marginalised groups, such as the Dalits and Muslims. Documentary, when infused with aesthetics from community forms, also became an instrument of visibility, alternative representation, and social engagement. On the other hand, Deprez (2017) analyses the relationships between the state, the documentary industry, and the filmmakers and how these relationships helped structure the documentary for the purposes of national integration, illustrating the conflicts between artistic, state, and popular.

Subsequently, film studies focusing on the Japanese colonial period revealed that films were also employed as instruments of cultural imperialism and technical education. As Tyas and Darumukti (2025) explain, Japan used cinema to disseminate Pan-Asian ideology and eliminate Western influence. Nevertheless, the legacy of this period also influenced the development of national cinema after independence. Study from Fajar (2024) shows that contemporary films such as *Bumi Manusia* revisit the theme of colonial heritage, particularly through representations of cultural hybridity. Indigenous and Indo-European characters negotiate between local and European values, reflecting strategies of resistance or adaptation to colonial reality. This demonstrates that the visual legacy of

colonialism lives on in the narratives of modern Indonesian cinema.

Turning to film studies and post-colonialism, as done by Frassinelli (2021), it is evident that post-apartheid documentaries such as Miners Shot Down are capable of shaking up the dominant discourse and exposing the "trap of nationalism" that masks the power of the post-colonial elite. Through the construction of sharp and emotional visual narratives, this film not only conveys information but also sparks political awareness among viewers about the structural repression that persists behind the image of a democratic state.

In a similar vein, Duarte (2025), highlights the interplay of visual archive and testimony as a unique strength in Andringa's documentary, which focuses on the colonial trauma of Portugal. It allows for a micro-historical strategy that positions individual stories and small events against the huge narratives that the state claims. Both authors, Frassinelli and Duarte, show that documentary films go well beyond a simple representation of reality and that they have an important role in cultural and political critique. Documentary films provide means to critique history, national identity and power in postcolonial society.

Mancosu (2017) and Stock (2018) also attempt to situate documentary films as one of the counter-memory means and evidence of resistance against the state/oppressive institutional documentary colonial memory. They show that documentary films can contradict and offer alternatives to dominant and hegemonic historical accounts by employing visual archives and using aesthetics that centre on the collective. Thus, the potential of documentaries goes beyond the mere recording of history and also offers the opportunity to critique and revisit the past that has been exclusively represented by the powerful.

Through their analysis of Italian and Portuguese documentary films Mancosu, (2017) and Stock (2018) also analyse some Italian and Portuguese documentary films to show how, through cinematographic means, colonial recordings, be they old documentaries or nostalgia-propaganda, can be examined. By focusing on the experience of dispossessed and marginalised people, documentary films can unveil a counter history to the dominant one and provide a basis to challenge colonial constructs and to revisit the power relations, frozen in the colonial visual, between the colonising and the colonised.

Stenberg (2023) and Wibawa (2018) offer an Indonesian perspective of colonial films and wars and children (2018). They provide an important ethnographic and historical potential of such films that are part of the colonial ideological project. The use of children and the representation of the 'future of the nation' conceals the existing power relations and justifies colonial supremacy. The ideological representation of children as a symbol and an empty vessel for the public's perception of colonialism, where the dominant view of

colonialism as a civilizing project, rather than as a structural violence, is a critique of the colonial legacy of visual culture. It is the re-examining of the visual culture that creates the means to critique the colonial legacy.

This is similar to the critique that Paramaditha (2019) made, with respect to *The Act of Killing,* as a 'Western discovery' of the violent history of Indonesia. She argued that the dominant external perspective establishes the moral and epistemological structure of the dominant narrative of the history of the Third World. From this perspective, and with recognition of the dominant external view, the autonomous agency of the documentary genre transcends the simply presenting alternate historical narratives, and elevates the discourse to the battleground of competing global and local narratives. All of these works underscore the evolution of the post-colonial Kaleidoscope and the historical documentary as a discursive space to re-negotiate memory, identity, and history (Koch, 2023).

The new political colonial representation in the film *Colonial Debris* will be analyzed using Charles Sanders Peirce semiotics. By using semiotics, we will be able to analyse the film's visual and narrative signs and get to the implied meanings and morals as well as the ideologies and in some cases, the hidden values (Jamasbi et al., 2024). Semiotics will help get the hidden values and meanings (whether positive or negative) regarding the film's depiction of the unequal power relations and post colonialism.

Pierce's semiotics consists of; (1) Sign: the real world; to revise in the case of pictures, film location shoots; (2) Object a causal relationship; in the case of a village in ruins as a consequence of corporate crime; (3) Interpretant the social and cultural establishment, in the case of a customary land, a community is reduced to the identity of the land (Hoed, 2014; Sdrolia, 2018). With this analysis, meaning is explained beyond mere visibility.

In the last five years, the most prominent example of using Peirce's semiotic system to analyse documentary films is to examine ideology, power and social roles concerning signification. It allows for an in-depth reading of the visual and narrative elements that compose meaning in films. For instance, the analysis of *Dirty Vote* demonstrates how the film influences public opinion on the legitimacy of elections via a complex system of signs, from initial labelling to audience interpretation (Taufani et al., 2025). The study of Indriani and Rosfiantika (2018) analyses the racist message in the episode "The Vinyards" of the film American *History X* through Pierce's semiotic approach, focusing on verbal and nonverbal communication as icon, index, and symbol in triadic semiotics.

Similar results were found in the analysis of *Don't Tell My Mom That I'm in Pakistan*, which successfully dismantled cultural dichotomies and the position of individuals within the global power system through an

in-depth reading of its representations and interpretants (Parveen, 2023). This film shows that visual signs not only represent national or cultural identities, but also reveal how these identities are negotiated within the context of global geopolitics. The interpretations generated depend on the audience's socio-cultural understanding and are reflective and contextual.

How to Bury a Dead Cat symbolically represents the de-emphasising of Singapore's education curriculum, depicting criticism of the educational structure through cinematic aesthetics (Setiawan, 2022). This study, along with others, confirms that documentary films convey reality and shape political consciousness through ideological visual constructions (Frassinelli, 2021). Thus, Peirce's semiotic approach can unravel the symbolic processes behind the production of meaning in contemporary documentary narratives.

While several studies have emphasised the significant role of documentary films as instruments of political criticism and postcolonial awareness (Harvey, 2025; Mancosu, 2018; Nessel, 2021), research specifically examining how contemporary Indonesian documentaries depict neocolonialism, particularly in relation to agrarian issues and state- and corporate-driven land grabbing, remains limited. Previous studies have primarily focused on historical trauma (Duarte, 2025), colonial memory (Stock, 2018) or symbolic nationalism (Deprez, 2017; Wibawa, 2018). However, few have connected the visual structures of documentary films with modern colonial practices in Indonesia.

This study aims to address this gap by posing the following research question: 'How does the documentary film *Colonial Debris* represent new colonial politics in Indonesia through its visual sign system?', with a particular focus on agrarian issues and land grabbing by the state and corporations. Focusing on the film's visual structure and signs, this study will reveal how postcolonial power manifests through cinematic narratives and how the film portrays the power relations between indigenous communities, the state, and capitalist interests (Harvey, 2025; Nessel, 2021).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses qualitative content analysis with a semiotic approach to reveal how the film *Colonial Debris* represents new colonial politics in Indonesia through a system of visual signs. Semiotics approach helps researchers to reveal and describe how social, cultural, and political representations are conveyed explicitly and implicitly (Even-Simkin, 2019; Hoed, 2014) in the film *Colonial Debris*. Researchers can also explore ideological contexts through ideologies, values, or worldviews that reflect colonial and postcolonial structures, and identify narrative patterns that reinforce specific meanings (Glapka, 2024; Sujoko et al., 2022).

Peirce's semiotic model was chosen

because this approach provides researchers with flexibility for a richer analytical framework, depth of meaning, and contextual relevance (the authenticity of Pierce's model), which helps researchers understand the meaning contained in the film *Colonial Debris,* encouraging them to analyze critically, sharply, and in line with contemporary political and cultural realities (Even-Simkin, 2019). Peirce's semiotic model, which consists of signs, objects, and interpretants (Kimdem, 1979), helps researchers reveal the visual sign system used by the film *Colonial Debris* in representing the new era of colonial politics in Indonesia.

Data collection techniques were carried out by documenting the film *Colonial Debris* uploaded to Watchdoc Image official YouTube account. The film then became the chosen data corpus for semiotic analysis. From the documentary of 84 minutes and 31 seconds, 40 material signs were collected from different moments. These signs were analysed contextually, concerning the issues of colonialism, agrarianism, and community resistance, to analyse how visual and ideological meaning systems are constructed within the narrative of *Colonial Debris.*

The analysis of data for this research utilises the semiotic model of Charles Sanders Peirce as cited of the three fundamental sign elements (Jamasbi et al., 2024; Taufani et al., 2025): Sign: The first phase of the data analytical process identifies the colonial debris film scene visual signs, verbal signs, and auditory signs, such as the symbol of colonial buildings, the voice-over narration, and the facial expressions of the characters. Each sign is coded as a data unit that is considered to represent something outside itself. This process involves coding cinematic elements that function as representamen in the sign system.

Object: Once the signs have been identified, the next step is to determine the objects referred to by the signs, whether in the form of direct objects (e.g., heavy equipment as a representation of development) or dynamic objects (such as capital domination or the loss of customary rights). Researchers associate each sign with its social-political or historical context in order to explore deeper and more ideological meanings.

Interpretant: The third step is to analyse the interpretant, which is the meaning or interpretation that emerges from the relationship between the sign and the object. In practice, researchers write down their interpretations by reflecting on the sign-object based on critical awareness, ideology, or collective experiences of new colonial politics.

Through Pierce's semiotic model, researchers interpret how a sign refers to a particular object and how meaning is constructed in a socio-cultural context (Hoed, 2014; Sdrolia, 2018). This process helps to gain a deeper understanding of symbolic
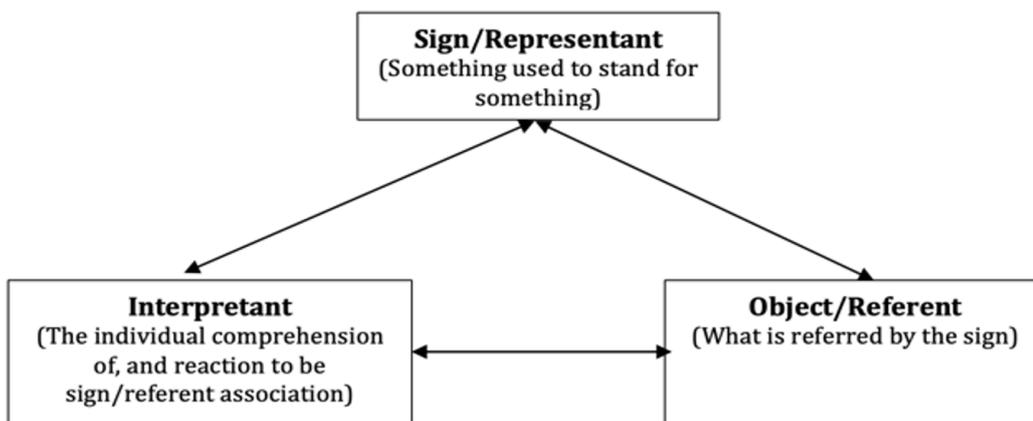
Source: Taufani et al., 2025
Figure 1 Semiotics analysis from Peirce's

representation in the text or visual material analyzed in *Colonial Debris*. Here is the model of peirce's triadic semiotics in figure 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study has identified 40 visual objects in the form of scenes in the documentary film *Colonial Debris* (2025). These objects were selected based on their relevance to issues of agrarianism, power, and symbols of new colonialism. All objects were analysed using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach, which emphasizes that meaning is formed through a triadic relationship between signs (signs or representamen), objects, and meanings or interpretations (interpretants) (Jamasbi et al., 2024; Taufani et al., 2025). The results of this analysis revealed four categories of new colonial political representations that are repeatedly used in the narrative and visual structure of this film. These four categories of new colonial political representations are shown in table 1.
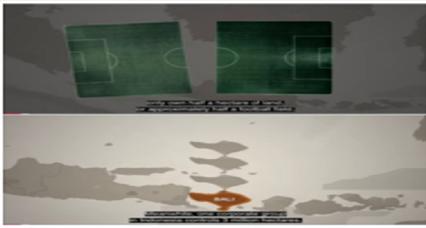
The first theme in the documentary *Colonial Debris* shows how agrarian colonialism never really ended. In scenes 1 and 17, the inequality of land ownership

Table 1 Corpus and Data Categorisation

No	Category	F
1	Colonial legacy in the Indonesia's agrarian system	8
2	State-Corporate repression and criminalization of community resistance	14
3	Socio-ecological inequality	10
4	People's resistance and solidarity	8

Source: Researchers own work, 2025

Table 2 Data display of colonial legacy in the Indonesia's agrarian system

No	Scene	Interpretant
1	Scene 1	Describes structural agrarian injustice and the legacy of a colonial system that does not favour small farmers.
2	Scene 17	Linking past colonial history to present land conflicts; colonialism as a continuing legacy.
3	Scene 27	Awareness that agrarian conflicts intersect with the development sector: infrastructure, militarisation, and industrial expansion to the detriment of many communities
4	Scene 28	Agrarian conflicts cannot be separated from the history of colonialism and laws that favour the power of capital, not the people.
5	Scene 29	The realisation that the roots of agrarian conflicts stem from colonial legacies and unequal laws.
6	Scene 31	The gateway to private exploitation of forests and land.
7	Scene 33	Traces of colonialism still linger in today's ecological devastation.
8	Scene 38	Colonial legality continued by the modern state in Indonesia

Source: Researchers own work, 2025

between small farmers and large companies is highlighted. This is not merely a contemporary conflict, but a continuation of the colonial agrarian system that placed companies as the main actors. The Table 2 presents the data analysis.

The new colonial politics in the film *Colonial Debris* is reflected in the continuation of colonial laws such as the Agrarische Wet 1870, which is still used in the legalization process of land acquisition (scenes 27 and 28). This law was originally created to support colonial exploitation, but to this day it remains the basis for modern agrarian policy. This shows that colonial logic remains alive in contemporary governance. This finding aligns with Duarte (2025) and Lees (2024) argument, which emphasizes the importance of visual archives in uncovering colonial traces in documentary films. Thus, documentaries serve as a critical tool for analyzing historical power structures that persist to this day.

The replacement of agrarian law begins with scene 31 of the documentary, where the UUPA begins to be replaced with pro-investment laws, the Foreign Investment Law and the Forestry Law. This development concerning agrarian law shows a change in the state's role from protector of the people's rights, to the facilitator of corporate and capital interests. These laws show that the state, in its legal reforms, has prioritised economic growth over social justice. More specifically, policies which provide economic growth have little concern for the agrarian plight of the marginalised and economically vulnerable communities. The state, instead of acting as a reforming actor, reinforces structural inequalities that have their roots in the colonial period and, through modern legal systems, continue to sustain those inequalities.

The visual narrative of ecological damage that colonialism bequeathed to us continues in scene 33 that shows forest destruction in Java. This destruction of the forest is yet another example of the exploitation of land that has continued from the colonial period. According to Ekers (2023) the destruction of land and spaces is continuing in the name of development, and is the result of industrial and financial capitalism, which has now taken the living spaces of the indigenous communities. The documentary shows us that colonialism did not end when the European colonisers left; it changed into development projects that sacrificed both the rights of the local people and the natural ecosystems. The ecological destruction we witness today is part of the land industrialisation that the colonisers established when they first entered the land.

Scene 38 illustrates new colonial politics as depicted in the transfer of control over land from colonial rulers to modern ones. This transfer, though, is more than a change of rulers; it illustrates the continuity of land grabbing logic that adjusts to new forms of modern governance and capital accumulation. Mancosu (2017) and Stock (2018) show the ways state-

sponsored colonial memory can be challenged through the articulation of collective memory and alternative identities in documentary filmmaking. In this regard, Colonial Debris serves as a counterspace where the visual narratives disrupt the ideological persistence of colonialism in the agrarian policies of the colonialism of the past.

Lastly, scenes 17 and 1 affirm that present-day regulations and infrastructures of colonial land marginalise local communities. The opening scene's portrayal of inequality among farmers and businesses exemplifies the social inequality of the colonial structure. The formal legal system renders farmers invisible and dispossesses them of their land rights. The eight visual signs detailed in Table 2 show that land grabbing is part of an institutional pattern rooted in colonial history. As emphasized by Baker (2023), documentaries like *Colonial Debris* serve as alternative visual archives that reveal the continuity of colonial power in current land control and the importance of agrarian reform as an effort to dismantle the colonial legal framework for social and ecological justice.

The second theme in the documentary *Colonial Debris* shows how the state acts as a protector of corporate interests in agrarian conflicts, rather than siding with the interests and rights of indigenous peoples, as seen in the data display in table 3. Scenes 2, 3, and 6 show testimonies from residents, clashes with armed forces, and student demonstrations. In the sign-

object-interpreter relationship, these visuals become representations of institutionalized repression, with the object being structural violence and the interpreter being the state as an instrument of capitalist domination, not a protector of the people. Table 3 is the data analysis.

The repressive actions of state officials are explicitly shown in scenes 6 and 7, which depict violence by officials when confronting students and residents. Though these measures are repressive, they do not always succeed in quelling dissent. In scenes 22 and 25, residents show unity in the demand for the release of the criminalised. This type of resistance focuses on the economic impact of criminalisation, as land is viewed as an intrinsic and irreplaceable part of the community's identity. Therefore, land is much more than a mere commodity; it is a resource for social reproduction and a site of collective defence for political resistance and a struggle that is maintained in the community (Frassinelli, 2021).

The film *Colonial Debris* depicts the state apparatus as not a custodian of true justice, but of investment. In scenes 8 and 18, the state authority is seen enforcing the law, not for the people, but for the protection of inequity. This is popularly referred to as the 'responsiveness paradox' where the state is seen to be dialogically open while the law is simultaneously being used as an instrument of disempowerment (Truong & Trinh, 2024). This depiction illustrates the law as a mechanism to formally cloak structural

Table 3 Data display of repression and criminalisation of state apparatus

No	Scene Evidence	Interpretant
1	Scene 2	Local resistance is criminalised by a legal system that protects corporate interests.
2	Scene 3	The dominance of state-protected corporate power shows that colonialism continues through the militarisation of agrarian conflicts.
3	Scene 6	The police are deployed not to protect the people, but to secure the company's operations.
4	Scene 7	The actions of the authorities are not seen as neutral, but rather as a continuation of colonial logic, with the state becoming a tool of oppression for the interests of the elite, rather than a protector of the people.
5	Scene 8	The state has secretly taken sides, even though the law has not resolved the conflict and the authorities are not seen as supporters of the capitalist system and the status quo.
6	Scene 18	A visualisation of state power ready to suppress the voice of the people, a symbol of the threat to freedom of speech.
7	Scene 18	Losing one's life as the price of resisting extreme power imbalances.
8	Scene 21	Unfair law enforcement that favours corporations.

9	Scene 22	The people's movement as a response to state repression.
10	Scene 23	State violence has penetrated the boundaries of society's safe space.
11	Scene 24	There is a sense of injustice, as these residents have become victims of criminalisation over their own land rights.
12	Scene 25	A symbol of collective resistance and public concern over injustice.
13	Scene36	The voice of the people is considered a threat, not a legitimate aspiration.
14	Scene37	The state's repressive response to environmental protests

Source: Researchers own work, 2025

violence, with the state as an embodiment of capital.

Scenes 23 and 37 show the powers that be using tear gas, bullets, and intimidation, which further demonstrate their repressive nature. But the state is not represented as one whole entity, such as in the example when there is an attempt to communicate with the powers that be and the citizens. This shows that not all forms of resistance need to be direct. Obstructive forms of resistance can be employed, and in this case, that means the citizens using legal means to defend what is left of their civil space. This means that in the film, to deal with the power system, these forms of resistance can be utilised in a way that does in scene 19, we see

movement with the involvement of some sort of security personnel, guiding impacted civilians through what one may assume to be a civil disturbance requiring some form of policing involvement. This scene demonstrates the idea of force working in a dual-purpose approach, controlling one side, and discrediting the other. Most of the time the perpetrators go free and the victims pay the fine. This is the case in scene 7 where some civilians face negatively brutal treatment by their own government, police. This exemplifies the idea of dissent being the morally superior position and the government attempting to revise the laws to paint those who stand up for the rights of the citizens as dangers and position dissenting as a crime, rather than a politically charged act (Jelenković, 2016; Koch, 2023). The film illustrates how the 'governance by coercion' approach is more than simply a brutal force; it is also legal and symbolic.
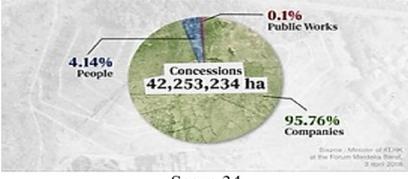
From scene 25, we see the police administrators using brutal force, in contrast to the other scenes where people look in solidarity with one another. This suggests the idea of dissent being sourced not solely from a political place, but also from the land and culture. This is also evident with the land in the Rempang farmers' struggle in scene 37, providing land as a part of collective identity. Based on this film, dissent is portrayed as a struggle from a place of cultural awareness and the community's moral position against the predatory capitalism that allows encroachments on the community's living space.

Scene 37 demonstrates that the state's decision to use coercive measures is a clear response to the citizens exercising their rights. In scenes 2 and 3, the state acts simultaneously as a defender of capital and a defender of order while simultaneously constraining citizens in these roles. The film reveals that the state is not a neutral entity, but rather an integral part of the capitalist system that criminalises resistance. Scenes 21 and 24 depict the legal process imposed on citizens as a form of 'selective repression' (Finkel, 2015), in which oppression gives rise to more militant resistance groups. This criminalisation symbolises a collective awareness of injustice.

The third theme in the documentary *Colonial Debris* explores how social inequality and ecological damage arise through conflicts over resources between local communities and large corporations, as seen in the data display in table 4. Scenes 4 and 5 show the narrative of residents harvesting palm oil and then being reported to the police. This visualisation represents a sign that the law favors corporations over the basic needs of the community. Table 4 is the analysis data.
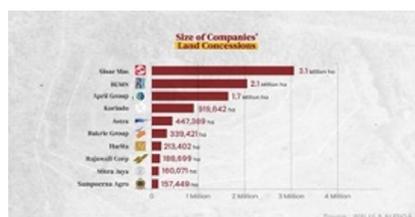
The documentary film *Colonial Debris* highlights the ecological inequalities that arise from agrarian conflicts, such as the seizure of customary forests and the burning of land by extractive industries. These issues are depicted in scenes 9, 13 and 35. Such practices cause ecological damage and disrupt the natural balance, as criticised by Baker (2023), because

Table 4 Data display of socio-ecological inequalities

No	Scene Evidence	Interpretant
1	 Scene 4	State does not protect people's basic needs as much as corporate assets; morality of law questioned
2	 Scene 5	Systemic dispossession of customary land by palm oil companies.
3	 Scene 9	Power imbalances in relations between indigenous peoples/ farmers and state corporate interests.
4	 Scene 13	Describes the massive exploitation and deforestation of indigenous forests, the inequality in land rights and the weak legal protection of indigenous or local communities.
5	 Scene 14	The disregard for customary tenure systems leads to unilateral claims by the state, demonstrating the imbalance of legal power versus the socio-cultural existence of indigenous peoples.
6	 Scene 30	Oppression of the Sakai people as slaves rather than owners of the local area
7	 Scene 32	Indigenous forests are increasingly pressurised by modern infrastructure development
8	 Scene 34	Private companies contribute greatly to the erosion and destruction of Indonesia's forest land

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| 9 | Scene 35 | Big corporations fueling social-ecological conflicts in Indonesia |
| 10 | Scene 39 | Symbolic actions of citizens defending inheritance rights in agrarian conflicts |

Source: Researchers own work, 2025

the exploitation of resources often exceeds the capacity of ecosystems to regenerate. This exacerbates the vulnerability of local communities who lose access to land and resources that form part of their identity and livelihoods.

Further ecological damage is depicted in scenes 14 and 30, where forests are cleared and customary lands belonging to the Sakai tribe are taken over by companies. In addition to the environmental effects of exploitation, there is exploitation of the tensions that develop among people as a result of encroachments by outside settlers upon the customary boundaries of the land. Large-scale land acquisition leaves local communities with little room to live and weakens the social cohesion that has enabled the indigenous communities to defend their land and their ancestral values.

Scenes 32, 34, and 39, among others, show the diverse forms of indigenous resistance to the clearing of native forests for the construction of infrastructure and the establishment of concessions for indigenous elites. However,

there are clear signs of collective resistance in the form of trench digging and other measures to mark the boundaries. This response shows a rare case of a community that succeeded in combining the defence of conservation with the defence of social justice. Scene 40 shows the residents' victory in constructing a school on the reclaimed land illustrating social and ecological healing that is a result of sustained agrarian organising.

The extractive companies that are allowed to operate without restraint show a worrying lack of social and environmental accountability for the ecological injustices and land disputes they create. Malin et al. (2019) refer to this as the 'resource community lifecycle': a cycle of false prosperity followed by community destruction. In the film, land is reduced to a mere economic asset, as seen in scenes 32 and 35. Meanwhile, state and legal institutions, as seen in scenes 4 and 5, side with corporations rather than the community.

Ultimately, the film affirms that ecological resistance is inseparable from social struggle.

Scene 39 shows residents defending their land as a means of protecting the ecosystem and securing the future for future generations. Through ten systems of signs in Table 4, *Colonial Debris* illustrates that true sustainability can only be achieved through a fair and participatory environmental governance system that recognises access to land, community voices and local values.

The fourth theme in the documentary *Colonial Debris* shows the suffering of the people due to agrarian inequality, as well as the spirit of resistance and solidarity among the people against the new colonialism of companies and state apparatus. In scenes 10 and 11, residents are seen demonstrating in front of the governor's office. This action shows resistance against leaders who are considered negligent. The following is the analysis data (Table 5).

Collective resistance is strongly depicted in scene 16, where community involvement in demonstrations demanding agrarian justice is not portrayed as a spontaneous act, but rather as the result of a long process of collective awareness. *Colonial Debris* emphasizes the importance of community solidarity as a major force in resistance against agrarian injustice. Example, scene 20 shows that differences in opposition can be vertical stand-offs, horizontal mediation, or both. From these instances, opposition can be seen as educated, thoughtful resistance that comes from constructions of hope, intertwined struggles, or an expanded sense of community.

The importance of communal solidarity strengthens even more in scenes 25 and 26, where three farmers suspended for fundraising and protest poster activities were featured. Although unknown and unconnected previously to the detention of the three farmers, the agrarian movement emotionally and politically integrated individual farmers and protest poster activities (Balaguer & Alberich-Pascual, 2024; Frassinelli, 2021). Scene 26 shows the strength of visual symbols in steering movement legitimacy and public support. This suggests that public support can be material and non-material through diverse alternative narratives that subsidise the dominant state and corporate narratives (Kishore, 2023).

The people want solidarity in addition to the struggle for justice; they want the government to be held accountable. In scenes 10 and 11, the community demands the presence of the governor to address the issues of agrarian conflicts. This illustrates the community's struggle to challenge the position of the state, in this case, the governor, who remains unresponsive. Collective action is not exclusive to men or dominant groups. In scenes 12 and 15, women play a leading role in the agrarian movement, highlighting that activism arises from the most impacted and marginalised communities, and that the pursuit of a decent habitat transcends the confines of gender, class, and geography.

The citizens' solidarity movement is effectively demonstrated in scene 40, in which

Table 5 Data display of people resistance and solidarity

No	Scene Evidence	Interpretant
1	 Scene 10	The absence and silence of local leaders amidst the ongoing crisis.
2	 Scene 11	A form of popular resistance to unresponsive power, for officials to come down from the towers of power and face the realities of the people directly.
3	 Scene 12	Against structural forms of discrimination, the legitimacy of people's struggles should not be diminished by the question of whether they are "indigenous" or not.
4	 Scene 15	Gender aspects of women's struggle for agrarian justice.
5	 Scene 16	Gender aspects of women in the struggle for agrarian justice
6	 Scene 20	Tensions and potential political conflicts remain high in the completion of the verification or re-measurement process of concession boundaries.
7	 Scene 26	There is an imbalance of power between large companies and indigenous peoples, with the legal system and the state perceived as not favouring the common people.
8	 Scene 40	Struggle and solidarity in people's agrarian reform brings hope for a new generation.

Source: Researchers own work, 2025

a new school is built on newly reclaimed land. This school is a defensible structure, but it is also a defiant school. It exemplifies a community that has reclaimed and restored its identity. This school is a landmark of collective defiance that unites social and ecological justice, achieved through solidarity, reclaimed land, and a redefined solidary social and ecological framework. The eight semiotic systems displayed in table 5, entitled "People's Resistance and Solidarity," are evidence that defiant collective action is the most potent weapon in the fight against structured agrarian injustice. Protests, community rituals, and local alliances are manifestations of the collective will that resist displacement and ecological destruction.

Documentary films such as *Colonial Debris* serve as both documentation of resistance and a means of building collective memory of the people's struggle. As Stenberg (2023) and Wibawa (2018) have noted, colonial films of the past attempted to hide colonial ideology, whereas contemporary documentaries expose these symbols, revealing the continuity of power and control. In this context, documentary films become symbolic battlefields, showcasing communities' active role in reclaiming their land, history, and identity. Contemporary agrarian movements are part of a broader network of solidarity and documentaries serve as tools for political alliance, cultural memory and ideological confrontation towards a more just and sustainable future (Truong & Trinh, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Colonial Debris critiques the new colonial politics in Indonesia vis-à-vis a range of visual and auditory signs related to land grabbing practised by state officials and private entities, and the lingering presence of colonial agrarian law that sustains structural inequalities. The eviction and state deployment of officials, the operations of heavy machinery, and the narratives of victims, are signs that index the power relations at play; the reference is not an administrative issue, but rather modern colonialism that is policy, legal, and violent. In Peirce's triadic model, the repression of state capitalism and the criminalisation of citizens is the interpretant formed. The film, through activist networks, citizen actions, and community solidarity, consolidates the land-as-identity, collective rights, and living space for defiance. In employing Peirce's semiotic theory, the ideology, representational politics, and strategy of resistance in contemporary postcolonial Indonesia that are at play in colonial debris document other postcolonial films, and are a welcome addition to media studies, particularly the documentary films of the period.

The main limitation of this study is how it primarily concentrates on reading signs at the level of the film text and therefore ultimately misses out on how the meanings of colonialism and resistance are constructed in the act of viewing. For future research in this area, especially for understanding the

representations of colonialism in contemporary media and the responses it evokes, viewing audiences of documentaries on colonialism and postcolonialism is likely to be crucial. Therefore, future research can conduct research related to audience meaning (reception analysis) and the socio-political context behind the creation of postcolonial documentaries.

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