

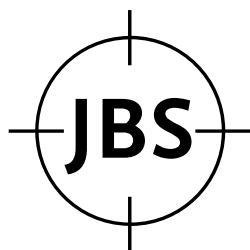
Bond as Neocolonial Blueprint

The Case of Michael Power

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In the early 2000s, television screens across Africa introduced a new kind of hero in the form of Michael Power. Portrayed by Jamaican-British actor Cleveland Mitchell, this charismatic journalist and adventurer was launched as “Africa's very own ‘James Bond’”, the centerpiece of an elaborate advertising campaign by Guinness designed to boost stagnant sales. The character was an instant phenomenon. His five-minute mini-episodes – serialised adventures replete with narrative arcs and thrilling action – became so popular that “cash-strapped TV stations in Africa sometimes aired them as free programming” (Foster 2003, n.p.), and the character eventually starred in a feature film, *Critical Assignment* (2004). The campaign's commercial success was undeniable; by 2004, “Guinness sales in Africa beat those in the United Kingdom and Ireland, making up about 35% of the global take” (Thompson 2014, n.p.). Yet, behind this commercial triumph lay a deeper, more complex cultural transaction. A close reading of the Michael Power campaign reveals it not as a simple transposition of a popular archetype, but as a sophisticated exercise in neocolonial rhetoric, where the mechanisms of branding and identification work to launder corporate interests under the guise of African empowerment.

On the surface, the parallels with the James Bond franchise are striking. The early advertisements feature a classic Bond villain in Hector Dexter, com-



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plete with a remote evil lair and an army of henchmen. Power himself possesses the killer good looks and cool demeanor of a classic action hero, his signature bottle of Guinness standing in for Bond's "shaken, not stirred" martini. However, this mimicry quickly fractures under scrutiny. The campaign's internal contradictions – a pacifist hero in a genre defined by violence; a larger narrative about water scarcity produced by a corporation with a significant water footprint – are not mere oversights. They are signals of a fundamental instability, pointing to a qualified, second-class inclusivity on offer. The campaign choreographs a model of African modernity that is aspirational, consumer-oriented, and ultimately acquiescent to the very power structures that perpetuate global inequality.

This article argues that the Michael Power campaign functioned as a form of neocolonial image laundering, operationalised through key rhetorical strategies. First, it employed Kenneth Burke's concept of identification, persuading African audiences that Guinness, a British multinational, shared their concerns, and so crafted a strong, positive African icon modelled after a globally-known British one. Second, it advanced a hegemonic project by promoting consumer citizenship as the pathway to modernity, defining empowerment not through political self-determination but through the savvy consumption of a global brand. Finally, the campaign (developed with notorious advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi) served to launder the image of its creator, Diageo (parent company of Guinness), using the social justice theme of clean water access to obscure its own role in resource monopolisation. In this framework, James Bond is not merely a comparative archetype but a precursor in the business of image laundering; where Bond laundered the violence of geopolitics into a stylish fantasy of Western superiority, Michael Power laundered corporate extraction into a story of corporate-led African progress.

The following analysis will first establish a theoretical foundation for understanding neocolonialism as a rhetorical project rooted in economic history. It will then position the James Bond franchise as a blueprint for imperial image laundering. The core of the article will dissect the Michael Power campaign's evolution, demonstrating how its rhetoric of identification and hegemony ultimately exposed the limits of the neocolonial bargain. The campaign's legacy demonstrates that the thrill of seeing oneself on screen, however compelling, cannot permanently conceal the grim reality of the transaction – an offer of dignity in exchange for accepting a constrained, second-class citizenship in the global order.

To fully grasp the rhetorical significance of the Michael Power campaign, it must be situated within the specific economic and historical structures that defined the relationship between Great Britain and its former African colonies in the post-independence era. The campaign is not an isolated marketing phenomenon but a cultural artifact of neocolonialism, which Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, defined as the practice whereby economic imperialism persists long after flags have been lowered and anthems changed. In this system, a state may possess the "outward trappings of international sovereignty", but in reality, "its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (1965, 15). The dissolution of the British Empire thus marked not a clean break but a transition to a new, more insidious phase of influence, where corporate capital replaced direct administration as the primary mechanism of control.

This transition was heavily mediated by the institution of the Commonwealth. While presented as a voluntary association of equal nations, the Commonwealth also functioned as a network that preserved British economic interests. It facilitated trade patterns and diplomatic relations that often continued the colonial model: African nations supplied raw materials while serving as markets for finished goods from the UK and other Western nations. This economic dependency created the perfect conditions for multinational corporations to become the key agents of neocolonial power (Rodney 2011, 279).

Companies like Diageo did not retreat after independence; they dug in. The establishment of the first Guinness brewery outside the British Isles in Lagos, Nigeria in 1962 – a mere two years after Nigerian independence – was a symbolic and material declaration of this enduring presence (Thompson, n.p.). This was not merely business expansion but the entrenchment of corporate power within the newly independent political landscape, creating a foothold that would eventually enable campaigns like Michael Power. Guinness's deep history on the continent, with 13 breweries across Africa by the time of the Michael Power campaign, forms the unspoken bedrock upon which its rhetorical strategy was built. This long-standing presence allowed Diageo to frame itself not as a foreign extractive force but as an African institution, a committed partner in local economies (Thompson, n.p.).

This corporate camouflage was essential, creating a veil of legitimacy that masked the underlying neocolonial dynamic of external economic control. The Michael Power campaign, then, can be seen as the ultimate expression of this entrenched position – an attempt by a British multinational to guide the very nar-

rative of African modernity and heroism, all while operating within an economic system that perpetuates inequality. The campaign's central theme in *Critical Assignment* – industrial espionage over water rights – powerfully illuminates this neocolonial bind. The film identifies a critical, real-world issue yet frames the solution within a narrative that absolves the broader system, instead focusing on individual villains. As such, the narrative framing is a hallmark of the neocolonial spectacle; it acknowledges the symptoms of inequality while diverting blame away from the underlying economic structures, structures from which corporations like Diageo continue to benefit.

The neocolonial economic structure, characterised by external corporate control, requires a powerful cultural and rhetorical apparatus to secure consent and maintain stability. The Michael Power campaign exemplifies this apparatus in action, and its mechanics can be deciphered through a theoretical triad that explains how power is mediated and reproduced in the postcolonial era: *identification*, *hegemony*, and *the spectacle*.

The foundational rhetorical strategy at work is Kenneth Burke's *identification*. Burke posits that persuasion occurs primarily not through logical argument but through the rhetor's ability to convince an audience that their interests, values, and substance are identical (1950). For a multinational corporation like Diageo to succeed in postcolonial markets, it must overcome the latent suspicion of a foreign entity. It does this by persuading local consumers that it is not an external force extracting profit, but a partner sharing their aspirations for progress and positive self-representation. The creation of Michael Power is a masterful act of identification. By presenting an "African hero", produced with local talent and reflecting a desire for dignified iconography, Guinness camouflages its British corporate identity. This strategy answers the implicit question of why a consumer should trust a foreign corporation; the campaign replies, symbolically, "because we are one of you".

Identification, however, works in service of a larger project of *hegemony*, a concept articulated by Antonio Gramsci (1971). Hegemony describes the process by which a ruling class secures consent for its power not through overt coercion alone, but by making its worldview appear as universal, inevitable "common sense". In a neocolonial context, this involves promoting (Western) values that ensure the stability of the global economic order (under Western leadership and control). The Michael Power campaign choreographs a specific model of African modernity and citizenship. Power is intelligent, successful, and morally upright, but crucially, also resolutely non-violent, pro-business, and defined by his consumer choices.

Finally, these strategies are delivered through what Guy Debord theorised as *the spectacle* (1994). In advanced capitalism, Debord argues, social life is increasingly mediated by images (newspapers, advertising, television, cinema), and the spectacle is the primary tool for making the prevailing social and economic order appear natural and desirable. The Michael Power campaign, with its cinematic production values and mass media distribution, is a quintessential example of the spectacle's power. It disseminates and naturalises the hegemonic project, making the model of the pacifist consumer-citizen appear as an aspirational ideal. This process can be seen as actively fostering what might be termed a corporate-guided "postmodern" condition in Africa, where identity is increasingly shaped by commodified signs and media images – what Jean Baudrillard would call *simulacra* (1994) – rather than solely by traditional, localised and/or federal and imperial institutions. This transition correlates with the dissolution of the British Empire's direct political control over its former colonies, as multinational corporations rushed to fill the void left behind by the Empire's absence. In other words, it marks the evolution in the mode of subject-making. The spectacle does not just sell a product – it sells a complete subject-position, encouraging individuals to see themselves through the lens of the brand and the constrained form of modernity it offers. Together, this triad forms a powerful analytical framework. Identification builds trust by creating a symbolic bridge between the corporation and the consumer. Hegemony choreographs consent by defining the "common-sense" boundaries of acceptable identity and action. Spectacle is the means of dissemination.

This analysis of the Michael Power campaign also intervenes directly in longstanding scholarly debates within African media and cultural studies concerning globalisation, representation, and agency. On one hand, scholars have critically examined the power dynamics of global media flows, often framed by earlier theories of cultural imperialism. In this view, Western media exports can overwhelm local cultures, creating homogenised markets and imposing foreign values. The Michael Power campaign, as a corporate-produced text, could easily be seen as a manifestation of this dynamic, where a Western brand dictates the terms of African heroism.

However, more recent scholarship, exemplified by the work of scholars like Winston Mano, emphasises the complexity of African media reception and the active negotiation of global forms. Mano argues for understanding African media encounters through a lens of critical agency, where audiences are not passive recipients but actively interpret, adapt, and sometimes subvert external me-

dia influences. Similarly, Keyan G. Tomaselli has explored the intricate ways local cultures appropriate and re-signify global media content (1988). This article builds on this latter body of work but argues that the Michael Power campaign represents a sophisticated corporate pre-emption of such agency. Diageo and Saatchi & Saatchi, anticipating the desire for authentic self-representation, did not simply impose a foreign archetype; they professionally produced a *simulacrum of local appropriation*. The campaign uses the *rhetoric* of hybridity and identification – employing local directors, actors, and settings – to advance a hegemonic project that ultimately serves global capital. Therefore, this case study does not merely illustrate cultural imperialism but demonstrates a more advanced neocolonial strategy: strategically incorporating the aesthetics of local agency to more effectively launder corporate interests and constrain African modernity within a non-threatening, consumerist, framework. The following analysis will demonstrate how the Michael Power campaign operationalised these strategies to create a compelling, yet deeply constrained, vision of African empowerment.

JAMES BOND: THE BLUEPRINT FOR IMPERIAL IMAGE LAUNDERING

Image laundering, analogous to money laundering, describes the practice of cleansing a tarnished reputation or obscuring problematic origins through strategic public relations, narrative, and philanthropy. It is a deliberate effort to create a palatable public image that distances an entity from the negative consequences of its actions, and is often the culmination of large-scale rhetorical strategies of identification and hegemony, in which the relationship between producer and consumer needs to be repaired (Manoli et al. 2004, 35). While the term is often applied to corporations, its logic also finds a powerful precursor in the realm of statecraft and imperial propaganda.

The James Bond franchise serves as a foundational blueprint for imperial image laundering in the Michael Power campaign. For decades, Bond's cinematic adventures have performed the cultural work of sanitising the messy, often brutal realities of geopolitical intervention. The franchise takes the violence of espionage, the meddling in sovereign nations, and the protection of economic interests often extractive in nature, and launders them through a filter of high-gloss style, humor, and cartoonish villainy. This narrative machinery makes the projection of Anglo-American power appear not only necessary but enviably cool, laundering the image of Western meddling into a stylish fantasy of benevolent superiority.

The franchise's most potent achievement lies in its ability to aestheticise intervention – to transform the morally and politically complex realities of espionage and imperial power projection into a sleek, palatable, and aspirational product. This process of image laundering begins with the fundamental premise of Bond's character: his "license to kill". This is not merely a detail but a powerful narrative device that sanitises state-sponsored violence by wrapping it in the legitimacy of a formal permit issued by the British government. Assassination, rendition, and the provocation of international incidents are thereby laundered into the professional duties of a civil servant, framed as a necessary, if gritty, component of protecting the realm.

This laundering is perfected through the franchise's iconic villain archetype. Bond's adversaries are consistently portrayed as grotesque megalomaniacs whose motives are so cartoonishly evil that they exist outside the bounds of political discourse or moral ambiguity. By pitting Bond against these outliers of the global order, the narratives construct a simplistic binary of good versus evil. This framing justifies any and all methods used to defeat them, making extra-judicial violence, mass destruction, and interference in the affairs of other nations appear not only acceptable but heroic. Bond's core mission is to protect the interests of the United Kingdom and its assets around the world, retain control over resources such as gold and oil, and maintain economic power. The genius of the franchise is that it rarely frames conflicts in these crudely economic terms; instead, the fight is abstracted into a battle for the very survival of a civilised world order against pathological chaos.

Furthermore, the aesthetic dimension of Bond's world is crucial to this laundering process. The violence is choreographed with balletic precision. The locations are glamorous, and the technology Bond uses is cutting-edge and desirable. The inherent ugliness of political murder is glossed over by a sheen of high production values and witty one-liners. This aestheticisation creates a persuasive fantasy – the exercise of global power is not a messy, morally compromised business but a stylish adventure. As scholars like Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott have argued (1987), Bond's career is fundamentally about the "political career of a popular hero" who naturalises a specific set of social and political arrangements. The franchise sells the *idea* of benevolent British authority by appealing to audiences' senses of affect and consumptive, and even libidinous, desires. In doing so, it performs the essential work of imperial image laundering: it dissociates the act of intervention from its consequences, laundering the violence of the state into the stuff of thrilling, uncomplicated spectacle. This foun-

dational template would later be adapted by corporate actors like Diageo, who sought to apply a similar aesthetic sheen to their own exercises of power in the neocolonial marketplace.

Beyond aestheticising violence, the James Bond franchise performs an equally crucial form of image laundering – it seamlessly merges geopolitical allegiance with consumer desire, thereby selling a vision of consumer citizenship. The franchise is a pioneer of modern product placement, but these branded commodities are far more than incidental advertising – they are fundamental pillars of the Bond fantasy. The Aston Martin, the Omega watch, the tailored Brioni suit, and the Bollinger champagne are not mere accessories but potent symbols of a lifestyle that Bond's actions protect and to which his victories grant him access (Nitins 2011, 5). This creates a powerful, implicit argument: alignment with the Anglo-American political order is the pathway to a world of luxury goods and sophisticated pleasures.

This strategy effectively launders the franchise's political project through the allure of consumerism. Bond's missions may ostensibly be about defeating villains, but they are equally about showcasing a curated world of globalised luxury. Bond's narrative function is to naturalise a world where the "right" kind of global citizen – the one who upholds the Western-led order – gets to enjoy the material spoils of that system. This hegemonic vision masks the inequalities and exploitations of global capitalism as the glittering promise of commodity access. The franchise offers a form of passive citizenship defined not by political participation or critical engagement, but by acquisition and taste. The viewer is interpellated not as a citizen who might question the system, but as a consumer who aspires to its rewards.

This extends to the treatment of people, particularly the "Bond girls", who often function as consumable trophies, their conquest symbolising another privilege of Bond's sanctioned authority. The promise is one of trickle-down cool: by buying into the mythos of Bond, by purchasing the products he endorses, the audience can, in a limited way, participate in the fantasy of Western superiority and the lifestyle it affords. This fusion of consumerism and ideology creates a potent feedback loop. The franchise doesn't just sell tickets and merchandise; it sells consent for a political and economic order by framing it as the gateway to a life of style and excitement. This blueprint of linking identity, allegiance, and consumption proves highly adaptable for the neocolonial marketplace, where the goal is not to promote a state, but a brand, and where the promised reward is not the spoils of empire, but the dignity of perceived modernity.

As such, part of the enduring power of the James Bond franchise lies not in its static adherence to a Cold War formula, but a demonstrable resilience in its capacity to adapt its image-laundering project to new geopolitical anxieties while retaining its core function. The franchise's self-awareness acts as a strategic asset, allowing it to acknowledge shifts in the global order in order to reinvent its hero's relevance. This adaptability proves that the template is not tied to a specific enemy but is a versatile mechanism for legitimising Western agency.

This was most evident following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was correlated with the longest pause between Bond films after 1989's *Licence to Kill*. The franchise returned with *GoldenEye* in 1995, which directly addressed Bond's potential obsolescence by having a new M denounce him as "a relic of the Cold War". This acknowledgement, however, was not an admission of failure but a narrative strategy for updating his mandate. The film, and the Pierce Brosnan era that followed, pivoted to confronting the detritus of the collapsed empire – rogue ex-Soviet generals (*GoldenEye*), stateless media moguls (*Tomorrow Never Dies*, 1997), and nefarious agents posing as hyper-capitalists (*Die Another Day*, 2002). In doing so, Bond was reinvented as an agent of neoliberal consolidation, tasked with taming the chaotic aftermath of history and securing a new world order predicated on open markets and Anglo-American security interests. The Pierce Brosnan era marked a shift away from the conflict between the First World (the West) and the Second World (the USSR and global communist states) which had characterised the franchise up to that point (Bennett and Woolacott, 18), and the Michael Power campaign functioned as a real-world Bond incursion into the Third World (unaffiliated states), not in the form of a secret government mission, but as corporate spectacle.

The franchise repeated its adaptive manoeuvre in the Daniel Craig era, rebooting the character for a post-9/11 world defined by paranoia, shadowy networks, and the trauma of betrayal from within. The Craig films present a grittier, more psychologically damaged Bond, yet his core mission undergoes a similar laundering process. The violence is more visceral, but is framed as a necessary response to the existential threat of global terrorism before the series gradually reintroduces SPECTRE as the overarching, familiar symbol of bureaucratic, organised evil, standing in for spectacular, imagined threats such as the global terrorist network "axis of evil" asserted by the administration of George W. Bush.

This ability to absorb and aestheticise the anxieties of each new era demonstrates the template's profound utility. The specific threat may change from Cold War spies to rogue algorithms, but the core work remains constant:

making the projection of Western power appear indispensable, stylish, and ultimately righteous. This resilience establishes Bond not merely as a cultural icon, but as a durable and highly transferable blueprint for legitimising power and spectacularising hegemony. The franchise proves that a successful laundering operation must be dynamic, using narrative cleverness to reframe its hero's violence and consumerism as the appropriate response to contemporary crises.

The Guinness Michael Power campaign represents a strategic adaptation of this blueprint from the imperial to the corporate sphere. In the neocolonial context, where direct political control has ceded to economic dominance, the primary agents requiring reputational cleansing are multinational corporations. These entities, whose operations in the Global South can involve resource extraction, environmental strain, and the shaping of local economies to their advantage, face the constant challenge of maintaining social license to operate (Rodney, 279). Image laundering becomes an essential corporate strategy, often taking the form of “branding nationalism”, where corporations align themselves with progressive values to build emotional capital and obscure less savory practices (Banet-Weiser 2012, 46). As critics like Anand Giridharadas argue (2018), this often takes the form of an “elite charade” in which corporate-sponsored solutions are offered for problems the corporate system itself helped create.

The Michael Power campaign is a textbook case. Diageo, a beverage giant with a significant water footprint, produced a feature-length film, *Critical Assignment*, the plot of which revolves around the heroic struggle for clean water access. By associating itself with this critical social cause, the company engaged in a profound act of image laundering, attempting to position itself as a benevolent partner rather than one of the very entities monopolising the water in the first place. This strategy, however, contains an inherent and explosive contradiction. The narrative sponsored to launder the corporate image can, as we will see, inadvertently expose the very system it is meant to obscure. Thus, the concept of image laundering provides the crucial link between the imperial fantasies of James Bond and the corporate-sponsored heroism of Michael Power, revealing both as two sides of the same coin in the ongoing project of legitimising power in the postcolonial world.

THE MICHAEL POWER CAMPAIGN: LAUNDERING THE NEOCOLONIAL

The Michael Power campaign was born from a pressing corporate exigence. The 1997 merger that created Diageo was followed by a stark realisation – Guinness was facing stagnant sales in a number of markets such as Africa. This was not a minor setback but a significant threat to a key market. The pressure was palpable;

as reported at the time, the company acknowledged that its iconic brand was in danger of being left behind and that a major rebranding was essential to connect with a new generation of consumers (Simmons 2004, n.p.). The campaign, developed by Saatchi & Saatchi, was therefore a direct and calculated solution to a crisis of global capital. This context frames the creation of Michael Power not as a benevolent gift but as a strategic, even desperate, manoeuvre to protect profitability, heightening the stakes of its neocolonial rhetoric.

The choice of Saatchi & Saatchi to lead this rebranding was highly significant. The agency was already infamous for its mastery of ideological persuasion, most notably for the 1978 “Labour Isn’t Working” campaign that contributed to the Conservative Party’s electoral victory and ushered in the era of Thatcherism (Yeoman 2008). This pedigree meant Diageo was not merely hiring an advertiser, but a specialist in crafting narratives that shaped political and economic consensus. The deployment of this specifically British political propaganda machine to redefine an African identity for corporate ends creates a powerful through-line from the imperial past to the corporate present. Just as the Bond franchise laundered the image of the British state, Saatchi & Saatchi was now tasked with laundering the image of a British corporation, applying its expertise in hegemonic persuasion to the neocolonial marketplace. The creation of Michael Power was, in this light, less a marketing campaign and more a political operation for commercial hegemony.

The initial series of advertisements, dubbed “The Action Adventures of Michael Power”, functioned as a direct and deliberate act of mimicry, designed to grant instant legitimacy and aspirational appeal by associating the new hero with the globally recognised James Bond archetype. This mimicry was the primary mechanism of what can be termed aspirational identification, inviting African audiences to see themselves in a figure possessing the cool sophistication and narrative prestige of a Western action hero. The early episodes are, in effect, a meticulous translation of the Bond blueprint into an African context, replete with its core iconography.

The narrative presents a classic Bond-style villain in Hector Dexter, a grotesque figure who sits in a robotic chair and wears a headset with a telescopic eye, making him appear part-cyborg. His massive hideout, large enough to accommodate an airplane hangar, is improbably located in the side of a mountain, mirroring the remote, impractical evil lairs of Bond antagonists. The archetypes of the *femme fatale* (Dexter’s unnamed, scowling right-hand woman) and the virtuous “Bond girl” (Amy, who helps with the rescue) are faithfully present. Most

notably, the ads feature the implausible use of gadgets, here centring ingeniously on the product itself – a bottle of Guinness. In a climactic sequence, Power distracts Dexter’s henchmen by using the bottle to jam a jet’s accelerator before making a dramatic escape. When the jet crashes into the hangar doors and explodes, the only object to survive unscathed is the bottle of Guinness, which rolls perfectly back to Power’s hand as he hangs from the hangar ledge. This moment is a direct, albeit product-centric, parallel to Bond’s gadget-laden escapes, rhetorically equating the consumption of Guinness with the resourceful coolness of the spy genre. Power even taunts the villain with a Bond-style pun – “Hectic days, Hector!” – before leaping backwards with the bottle in hand.

However, this identification through mimicry is imperfect and reveals its inherent limits. The campaign’s internal “giveaways” signal a qualified, second-class version of the global action-hero fantasy, exemplifying what postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha identifies as the constitutive ambivalence of colonial mimicry – the desire for a reformed, recognisable “Other”, which is “almost the same, but not quite” (1984, 122). Bhabha argues that this mimicry is never a perfect reproduction. It inevitably produces flaws and excesses that mock the original and reveal the anxiety of the colonial power. The narrative and production details in the Michael Power ads function as these telling fissures. Hector Dexter’s paltry \$50 million ransom, the henchmen on bicycles, and the cardboard hangar doors that buckle on impact are not merely signs of a lower budget but the textual manifestations of this ambivalence. They are the “not quite” that subtly mocks the Bond archetype even while emulating it, simultaneously offering the aspiration of equivalence and reinforcing the hierarchy that denies it. These textual details are not mere oversights but rhetorical fissures in the aspirational facade. They demonstrate that the hegemonic ideal being offered – the chance to identify with a global standard of cinematic power – is a diluted version, a budget-conscious imitation that inadvertently reinforces the very global hierarchy it purports to help the audience overcome. The message encoded in these details is not that Africa can produce an equivalent to Bond, but that it can produce a derivative, corporately-approved version whose power, like the campaign’s budget, has its defined and visible limits.

This phase of the campaign successfully established Michael Power as an icon by leveraging the Bond formula, yet its exaggerated fantasy also created a distance from the lived reality of the audience, prompting a strategic pivot toward a more potent and insidious form of hegemony based on curated verisimilitude. As the Michael Power campaign evolved, it underwent a significant rhetorical shift, moving decisively away from the fantastical, Bond-aping adventures

toward a more nuanced and carefully constructed verisimilitude that couched Power in a more believable reality (and one that lacked potentially-embarrassing armies of bicycle-riding terrorists). This transition marked a strategic deepening of the hegemonic project. Instead of offering a distant, imported fantasy, the campaign began to choreograph a model of African modernity that was grounded, relatable, and, most importantly, defined by a specific set of non-threatening values. The most crucial of these values was a resolute and corporate-mandated pacifism.

This pivot is evident in advertisements/episodes like “Race Against Time”, which balances action with a more plausible narrative; a parallel story of a footrace competition, the local star runner being threatened to throw the race or his kidnapped wife will be harmed, intercut with Power racing to rescue the star runner’s kidnapped wife. The stakes are personal and communal, rooted in local sport and blackmail. This push for realism relied on narrative cleverness rather than spectacular set pieces, aiming to reflect the world of the consumer back at them, strengthening the bond of identification.

The evolution of the campaign’s tagline encapsulates this hegemonic pivot. The change from “Guinness brings out the power in you” to “Guinness reflects the power in you” is a masterful recalibration of the campaign’s ideological address. The initial phrase, “brings out”, posits the product as a catalyst that unlocks a latent potential. This model maintains a power dynamic where the brand is the bestower of qualities the individual lacks. The shift to “reflects” performs a crucial ideological sleight of hand, disavowing the brand’s role as an external, metropolitan force, and positioning it as a mirror recognising the greatness already inherently residing within the African consumer. This is a quintessential move of transitioning “passive citizens” into “active citizens”, a hallmark of neoliberal thought that champions the autonomous, self-responsibilising individual as sentinel of the political-economic system (Rose 1999, 164). It frames empowerment as an internal trait to be displayed through savvy consumption, diverting attention from collective action or systemic critique.

The identification strategy relied on constructing Michael Power as a pan-African everyman, deliberately devoid of specific ethnic or national markers to achieve the widest commercial appeal. This is evident in the setting of *Critical Assignment*, “a nameless African state, an amalgam of assorted scenic swatches from several African nations” (Scheib 2004, n.p.). This generic, composite Africa was a commercial calculation to avoid alienating any particular market. This identification is evident in 2004 Nigerian interview conducted with the actor Cleveland

Mitchell entirely *in character* as Michael Power. The article never reveals he's an actor but presents Power as a real person, who states, "I am a man of Africa" and "I have travelled wide but no matter how much I travel, I always love to come back home to Africa". This direct address is a masterful act of corporate ventriloquism, using the hero's voice to persuade audiences that Guinness's interests are identical to a pan-African identity. The character espouses neoliberal platitudes, naming his greatest fear as "failure" and insisting that "hard work and determination can get rid of poverty, especially if one believes in oneself". Simultaneously, the article reinforces a consumer-citizen model by noting that "Giorgio Armani supplies all his outfits", explicitly linking African success to the consumption of Western luxury brands, much like Bond (Ogujiuba 2004, n.p.).

This constructed identity reveals a hierarchy of aspiration dictated by the corporate mandate. The implicit comparison between Bond and Power illustrates what their respective audiences are permitted to dream. Western audiences are sold a fantasy of hyper-individualistic agency, violent sovereignty, and luxurious consumption (Bennett and Woolacott, 24). For African audiences, the aspiration is qualitatively different: moral suasion, non-violence, self-belief, and a more modest, brand-loyal form of consumption. The very need to create a "generic" African hero signals that non-Western audiences, in the eyes of global capital, must settle for a less politically potent and more commercially safe form of aspiration. As the campaign's producers emphasised, *Critical Assignment* was "written and directed by Africans and for Africans" (Onuh 2003, n.p.), using the rhetoric of local empowerment to legitimise a hegemonic, corporately-defined version of African modernity.

This newly grounded, "reflective" hero was fully realised in *Critical Assignment*. The plot is ostensibly a straightforward tale of a journalist battling villains – corrupt local politician Secretary Ojuka and greedy English businessman Thomas Rhines – to protect a president's plan to provide clean water. Here, the differences between Bond and Power become central, revealing the precise contours of the African hero that corporate interests would permit. Power's personality is consistently compassionate and community-oriented. Whereas Bond is a secret agent, Power is a respected public journalist who wins the "Special Journalist of Merit" award, and operates with transparency. Bond is a lone wolf; Power is a dedicated family man who visits his relatives (and drinks Guinness with them). Bond is sullen or disinterested; Power is preternaturally happy and friendly, even to his foes. Bond seems detached from other human beings (and more abstractly interested in peace, law, and order); Power is compassionate and sincere. He takes a genuine romantic interest in his "Bond girl" Sabina (Thami Ngubeni)

rather than seeing her as a sexual plaything and/or a means to an end. When he discovers she's been playing both sides of the conflict, he helps her to see the error of her ways and forgives her for her wrongdoing.

The most profound and telling difference lies in their relationship to violence. Power is, by corporate mandate, a pacifist; "The character, [Guinness] said, doesn't carry a gun or resort to violence, but overcomes obstacles through perseverance and reliance on inner strength" (Foster, n.p.). This mandate is a hegemonic necessity. A narrative endorsing violent resistance against corrupt politicians or exploitative foreign businessmen would be fundamentally destabilising to the neocolonial order that corporations like Diageo depend upon for their stable operations and market access.

This mandate creates severe narrative contortions in *Critical Assignment*, particularly in the deaths of the villains. When the henchman Willem Le Trois kidnaps Power's love interest, the ensuing chase ends not with a shootout, but with Le Trois's car crashing into a vibrant street parade. As Le Trois pursues Power on foot, he knocks over a bucket of gasoline, trips, and is subsequently set ablaze when a stray torch from a juggler lands on him. The film lingers on the horrific scene in slow-motion. Power, mortified, backs into the crowd as Le Trois screams in agony and is completely engulfed in flames. Similarly, the foreign mastermind Thomas Rhines, upon being captured by Power in a helicopter, calmly states, "I'm far too old to go to prison", and chooses to jump to his death. In both cases, the villain is dead, but Power remains a pacifist.

The film goes to extraordinary lengths to ensure the hero's hands remain clean, preserving his moral purity and, by extension, the non-threatening image of the consumer-citizen he embodies. The hegemonic message is unambiguous – true, modern African heroism is pacifistic because the global system, even when corrupt, should not, cannot, and must not be challenged through force. Change must come from within the existing framework, through moral suasion and individual integrity – qualities that are "reflected" by choosing the right brand – and maybe something bad will happen to the villain, or the villain will choose their own demise. Power's heroism is thus carefully circumscribed to a form of resistance that is acquiescent to the underlying power structure, defining a mode of agency permissible within the neocolonial bargain, and entirely dependent on the agency of the "villains".

The meticulous rhetorical architecture of the Michael Power campaign contained a fatal flaw: the narrative it sponsored could not be fully controlled. In its attempt to create a compelling, socially-conscious story, *Critical Assignment* inadvertently exposed the neocolonial structures it sought to obscure. The corporate-produced text becomes a site of contradiction, where the logic of the drama clashes with the objectives of the brand, leading to a powerful, unintended critique, as the dialogue and characterisations of *Critical Assignment* consistently point beyond individuals to implicate the entire system of neocolonial extraction. This is most powerfully articulated in a climactic confrontation between Ojuka and Rhines. When the politician attempts to confront his partner-in-crime, Rhines arrogantly dismisses him, stating, “Presidents are only as powerful as men like me allow them to be. You're just another corrupt politician”.

Ojuka's response is when the film's carefully managed facade cracks open. He grabs Rhines and excoriates him on behalf of the African people: “you have lost nothing...You don't come from here. You can simply pack your bags and move on to another deal”. This line of dialogue exposes the fundamental power dynamic of neocolonialism: the mobility and impunity of international capital, versus the entrenched vulnerability of the local population and their leaders. The film, in making a villain like Rhines, cannot avoid revealing that his villainy is not an anomaly, but a feature of a system that allows external actors to exploit and abandon postcolonial nations with minimal consequence. The film avoids directly pointing at any real-world entity, but the implication is clear. The narrative, sponsored by a massive international corporation, ends up arguing that the real problem is the structural power of entities like itself.

This exposure is further compounded by the film's treatment of Ojuka. Corrupt politicians like Ojuka are ultimately redeemable, as they're capable of remorse, while Rhines remains unrepentant. This narrative choice to partially blame the colonised – the “corruptible local” trope – is the classic strategy of Giridharadas's “elite charade”; systemic problems are reframed as failures of local integrity, thus deflecting blame from the external actors who create the conditions for corruption. Yet, by giving Ojuka the film's most piercing line of dialogue, the text undermines its own attempt at balance. It acknowledges that the ultimate responsibility and power lie with the Rhineses of the world, who “can simply pack [their] bags”. The image-laundering effort, in trying to appear even-handed, ends up highlighting the profound inequality it was designed to justify.

The villain is not just Thomas Rhines; the villain is the system that empowers him, a system from which Diageo, the campaign's creator, benefits enormously. And yet, Ojuka's line ultimately cannot serve as a moment of catharsis, as it exists within a commodity ultimately created to propagandise its audience and funnel money back to the Rhineses of the world.

The most profound irony of the Michael Power campaign, and the ultimate expression of its image-laundering ambition, lies in its central thematic concern: water scarcity. This choice creates a rhetorical situation so laden with contradiction that it threatens to unravel the entire project. *Critical Assignment* concludes not merely with the narrative resolution but with a direct address to the audience. As the screen fades from the celebratory scenes of villagers enjoying clean water, a message from the United Nations Environment Programme appears: "safe drinking water is a basic human right. The world population without access to safe water is 1,100,000,000".

This post-script represents the apex of Diageo's image-laundering strategy. It is a deliberate, paratextual move to position the corporation, through its branded hero, as a socially conscious ally in the fight for a vital resource, by publicly highlighting its own charitable "Water for Life" programme, which supported clean-water initiatives in several African nations. This was explicitly framed as part of the Power ad campaign. Keith Richards, managing director of Guinness Nigeria, stated the film was "concerned with the issue of water and good governance, two cardinal needs in Africa", and promised that "the company would deliver bore holes to needy Nigerian communities in the course of Michael Power's visit" (qtd. in Onuh, n.p.). This public relations masterstroke was designed to build a deeper relationship with consumers by appearing to give back (Britt 2003, n.p.). And yet, in the context of the film, this move is analogous to Rhines extolling his own charitable work at a press conference, a moment the film itself frames as hypocritical.

The contradiction, however, is material and inescapable. The campaign's principal objective was to sell more Guinness, a notoriously water-intensive product. Estimates suggest it takes anywhere from sixty to three hundred litres of water to produce a single litre of beer (Kaye 2011, n.p.). Therefore, Diageo produced a feature-length advertisement in which it ostensibly positioned itself as a hero fighting for clean water, while its core business operations contributed to the very resource competition the film decried. This reflects a broader pattern of corporate behavior where, as journalist Lola Okolosie argues, Western corporations treat Africa as a zone of impunity, operating with a disregard for environ-

mental consequences that would be unthinkable in their home markets, effectively leaving their “grime” on the continent (2016, n.p.). This is the equivalent of laundering money obtained through dubious means; here, Diageo is attempting to launder its image *using the very resource its practices impact*.

This creates an unresolvable cognitive dissonance at the heart of the campaign. The narrative sponsored to launder the corporate image ends up directing scrutiny toward the material practices of industrial actors like Diageo. The more successful the campaign was at raising the issue’s profile, the more it risked exposing the company’s own role. If *this* story were narrativised, it would read like a postmodern James Bond story. The image-laundering effort, in its profound ambition, becomes a self-undermining prophecy. It attempts to create a narrative so positive that it would overshadow the negative. Here, Debord’s concept of *recuperation* (the co-optation of radical sentiment) becomes useful; concerns about the Guinness plant using up all of the local water supply are alleviated by Guinness feigning similar concern, as though they’re not doing it, or at least as if there is some middle ground wherein they still get to use as much water as necessary to produce their product.

The qualified promise of the Michael Power campaign – the hegemonic bargain of consumer citizenship in exchange for acquiescence – proved to be inherently unstable. The character offered a model of African modernity that was pacifist, pro-business, and defined by consumption choices, a vision perfectly encapsulated by the film’s happy ending, its final scenes of community celebration centered on sharing a Guinness. Yet, this was a deliberately constrained form of agency, a second-class citizenship on the world stage where power was expressed through moral suasion and brand loyalty rather than sovereign authority; the campaign implicitly encouraged Africans to embrace being second-class citizens on the world stage and things will go easier for them (for instance, being given access to the products of the world market, such as Guinness). Unlike James Bond, who wielded the violent, state-sanctioned authority of the metropole, Michael Power’s power was strictly moral and consumerist, a distinction that revealed the fundamental inequality of the neocolonial relationship.

This limited form of agency could not sustain its appeal indefinitely. The campaign was suspended in 2006. While part of this can be attributed to the constant quest for novelty in advertising, there’s also the deeper reason of the inability to maintain the tightrope walk. The dissonance between the laundered image – the heroic, compassionate Michael Power fighting for water rights – and the material reality of Diageo’s corporate practices created a rhetorical fissure that widened over time. The narrative contortions required to maintain Power’s

pacifism, such as the absurdly accidental deaths of his foes, strained credibility. More importantly, the longer the spotlight remained on the issue of water scarcity, the more likely audiences were to connect the dots between the fictional crisis and the real-world operations of industrial actors like Diageo.

The campaign's distribution model, while initially a masterstroke of accessibility, also contained the seeds of its own critique. By organising free screenings in town halls and via mobile cinemas, Guinness ensured maximum reach, framing the film as a gift to its consumers. As Ekwuniele Okoli, Africa brand director for Diageo, stated, its principal objective was "to create something we could give back to our consumers in Africa in order to build a deeper relationship with Michael Power and thus the brand" (qtd. in Foster, n.p.). The distribution strategy for *Critical Assignment* was a masterful manipulation of the spectacle, transforming the film from mere advertisement into significant cultural event. For many, this was their first encounter with a film on a large screen, an event characterised by the novelty of the technology, the collective anticipation, and the shared space of the theatre. The spectacle became a tangible, immersive event. This was perfectly captured at the premiere in Douala, where, as one report noted, the audience erupted in a "huge cheer of delight" at the first glimpse of a major local landmark on screen (Foster, n.p.). However, this social experience was the mechanism for delivering the hegemonic message. The collective joy of seeing oneself represented was inextricably linked to the product being sold. The applause for the familiar landmark was, unconsciously, also an applause for the brand that put it there.

This distribution method didn't just show a film; it created a lived experience where audience affirmation and corporate branding became inseparable, making the spectacle's power to naturalise the neocolonial bargain feel not like an imposition, but like a gift. However, the fact that the film was "free" was a bit disingenuous, as the entire point was to recoup costs through sales of Guinness. This *quid pro quo* – a free film in exchange for brand loyalty and increased consumption of a product that exacerbated local resource pressures – perfectly encapsulated neocolonial logic, but became increasingly difficult to frame as a benevolent act. The thrill of seeing oneself on screen, while powerful, ultimately proved to be an insufficient distraction from the grim reality of the transaction. The feeling of being recognised by a powerful foreign entity was marked by an enormous asterisk – audiences were not being recognised as *people* but as *economic actors whose resources could be collected*. This, too, is the *quid pro quo* – at long last, recognition of personhood, but as *homo economicus*.

The demise of the Michael Power campaign, therefore, is not merely a footnote but a critical part of its story. It demonstrates the ultimate limitation of such corporate image-laundering projects. They can obscure and distract for a time, leveraging identification and hegemony to create a compelling fantasy. But when the narrative they sponsor inevitably points back to the systemic inequalities they represent, the carefully constructed facade begins to crack. The campaign's legacy is a testament to the fact that, while corporate rhetoric is powerful and far-reaching, it cannot indefinitely reconcile the irreconcilable. The unstable bargain of consumer citizenship, for all its initial appeal, collapses under the weight of its own contradictions, revealing the neocolonial dynamics it was designed to conceal.

CONCLUSION: THE UNSTABLE BARGAIN

The Guinness Michael Power campaign stands as a quintessential case study in the rhetorical mechanics of neocolonialism in the globalised era. Its evolution reveals a telling trajectory. Its initial phase leveraged aspirational identification through Bond mimicry, but the narrative "giveaways" signalled a second-class, derivative version of global heroism. The strategic pivot to a more "realistic" Michael Power represented a deeper hegemonic move, culminating in an unsustainable tightrope walk of being unable to reconcile the audience's base desires of autonomy and local control with corporate goals of resource extraction.

The case of Michael Power is not an isolated one, but rather a revealing template in the corporate toolkit. Just as the James Bond franchise provided a blueprint for imperial image laundering, the success of the Michael Power campaign itself became a blueprint for corporate identity laundering in other markets. In 2002, shortly after Power's rise in Africa, Guinness launched an almost identical, and shorter-lived, campaign in Asia (specifically, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong) centred on a hero named "Adam King". described by Guinness's global marketing director Jane Keightley as "our aspirational model for inner strength. When overwhelmed, the Asian individual should be able to look to him for inspiration". Keightley explicitly acknowledged the formula, stating, "[i]n Africa, we have the Michael Power character who embodies a different set of values from Adam King. We take different execution routes for different markets in order to tailor the execution to the drinker" (qtd. in Nathan 2002, n.p.). This admission reveals the cynical, modular nature of the strategy: the specific "values" of the hero are not deeply-held principles but interchangeable variables tailored to maximise market penetration. The archetype of the corporate-crafted, non-violent, consumer-hero is itself a global product to be rolled out and adapted,

proving that the unstable bargain of Michael Power was never about authentic empowerment but about a scalable, repeatable model for manufacturing consent and moving units of Guinness across the Global South.

In a final twist of irony, the story of Michael Power is one that needs to be told. The world genuinely needs heroes who fight for clean water, pursue truth with compassion, and embody integrity. The campaign's suspension, however, serves as a critical reminder to be wary of heroes created by those with a vested interest in the problem. The unstable bargain of Michael Power demonstrates that in the neocolonial marketplace, even empowerment can be a branded commodity. The price of admission – the thrill of seeing oneself on screen – is ultimately complicity in a system that offers a constrained identity in exchange for acquiescence. The campaign's rise and fall underscore a sobering truth: the most effective neocolonial power is not that which is imposed by force, but that which is willingly embraced through a compelling, yet ultimately unsustainable, fantasy of inclusion.

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