

Unearthing Forgotten Injustice: 'Killers of the Flower Moon' by Martin Scorsese and Its Cinematic Exploration of the Osage Murders

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ABSTRACT

This paper thoroughly examines Martin Scorsese's movie "Killers of the Flower Moon," focusing on its depiction of the 1920s Osage murders and their historical importance. The research delves into Scorsese's directorial methods, the film's treatment of historical accuracy, and its portrayal of Osage culture. It explores themes of greed, racial injustice, and the darker aspects of the American Dream, in addition to scrutinizing the performances of key actors. Furthermore, the paper assesses the film's cultural impact, its role in conversations about racial equality, its position within Scorsese's body of work, and the broader scope of historical dramas. It also examines the reception from critics and potential awards recognition. This in-depth analysis argues that "Killers of the Flower Moon" is a noteworthy cinematic accomplishment, shedding light on a lesser-known part of American history while pushing boundaries in historical filmmaking.

Keywords: Osage murders, Martin Scorsese, historical representation, Native American cinema, racial justice.

Historical Overview

David Grann's non-fiction book "Killers of the Flower Moon" serves as the foundation for the 2023 crime drama of the same name directed by Martin Scorsese. The movie portrays the actual events of the Osage murders during the 1920s in Oklahoma, where Osage Nation members were targeted for murders as oil reserves were found on their land. This film serves as a poignant depiction of a somber period in American history, unveiling the connections between greed, racism, and malfeasance and urging audiences to acknowledge the enduring effects of mistreatment towards Native Americans.

Morska Mentions:

Grann's account reveals how white citizens, ranchers, and townsfolk conspired against their Native American neighbors in a scheme involving poisoning, arson, deception, and falsified death certificates. The direct motivation for these crimes was greed triggered by income from oil deposits discovered in the land where the Osage were relocated after a century of broken treaties and other misfortunes.(97)

The Osage Nation, originally occupying territories in what is now Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas, was forcibly relocated to a reservation in northeastern Oklahoma during the 1870s. This reservation land, deemed less desirable by white settlers, was selected by Osage leaders due to its rugged landscape, which they believed would discourage agricultural development and reduce the risk of encroachment. Unexpectedly, extensive oil reserves were found beneath Osage territory in the early 1900s, radically transforming the fortunes of the Osage Nation. In 1906, each tribal member was allocated a portion of the mineral rights, known as a "headright," by the U.S. government. With the surge in oil production, these headrights became extremely valuable, propelling the Osage into immense wealth by the 1920s. Renowned as "the wealthiest individuals per capita globally," the Osage enjoyed opulent lifestyles, residing in grand estates, driving luxury vehicles, and securing top-tier education for their children.

Nevertheless, this sudden affluence attracted the interest of unscrupulous outsiders. Fearing the Osage's ability to manage their newfound riches, the government instituted a guardianship program, mandating that white guardians oversee many Osage members' finances, purportedly to shield them from exploitation. Regrettably, this system frequently resulted in further mistreatment and manipulation. Rhy Brignell rightly observes in his research that "Broadly, the colonial practice of extracting resources away from Indigenous lands can be traced across the centuries since first contact and still affects many communities in the present day(8)."

The era known as the "Reign of Terror" commenced in 1921 and persisted until around 1926, although its repercussions endured for years thereafter. During this period, numerous Osage individuals perished under dubious circumstances. The exact count of fatalities varies, with certain sources indicating upwards of 60 or more deaths directly linked to this wave of violence and avarice. The methods of homicide were varied and frequently brutal. Some victims were poisoned, a tactic that could be disguised as natural illness, while others were shot, their remains discovered in isolated

locations. Instances even involved residences being bombed with occupants inside. Perpetrators took extensive measures to conceal their actions, often making the deaths appear accidental or stemming from natural causes. Initially, local law enforcement's response to these deaths was inadequate. Many cases were inadequately probed, with some deaths hastily classified as accidents or suicides. This deficient scrutiny fostered suspicions of corruption and complicity among local officials. The gravity of the situation ultimately drew national attention. In 1925, the newly established Federal Bureau of Investigation, led by J. Edgar Hoover, intervened in the investigation, marking one of the FBI's earliest significant homicide inquiries. The "Reign of Terror" was ultimately recognized as a calculated scheme by white settlers to seize control of the Osage oil wealth. The conspirators deployed various tactics, including marriage, murder, and legal maneuvering, to gain access to headrights and the associated oil riches. The case laid bare an entrenched network of corruption spanning from local entrepreneurs to law enforcement figures. This dark segment of American history underscores the nexus of racism, avarice, and corruption. It exposes the lengths to which certain individuals were willing to go to exploit the Osage people and their assets. The "Reign of Terror" had a profound and enduring impact on the Osage Nation, leaving lasting scars and prompting crucial inquiries into justice, sovereignty, and the treatment of Native Americans in the United States.

Core Elements of the Film

Iconic filmmaker Martin Scorsese took on "Killers of the Flower Moon" as a labor of love, drawing attention to this historical tragedy and using his credibility to illuminate a lesser-known aspect of American history. His directing style seamlessly merges with a compassionate depiction of the Osage people and their struggles. Scorsese collaborated closely with screenwriter Eric Roth, who was celebrated for his work on movies such as "Forrest Gump" and "The Insider," bringing David Grann's non-fiction book to the screen. Together, they strived to create a screenplay harmonizing historical precision with compelling storytelling.

The film features a star-studded cast led by Leonardo DiCaprio as Ernest Burkhart, a white man who marries an Osage woman and becomes entangled in the conspiracy. DiCaprio's performance showcases the moral complexity of his character, portraying Burkhart as both a perpetrator and a man torn by his actions. The New York Times review says:

The story's romance is warmly inviting, and DiCaprio and Gladstone work beautifully together, their different performance styles — Ernest is physically demonstrative while Mollie is reserved — creating a contrapuntal whole. You believe in these characters, but also, crucially, you believe them as a couple and in the tenderness of their love. (*"Killers of the Flower Moon" Review: An Unsettling Masterpiece*)

Lily Gladstone, an actress of Blackfeet and Nez Perce descent, plays Mollie Burkhart, bringing authenticity and depth to her portrayal of an Osage woman navigating the treacherous landscape of 1920s Oklahoma. Her performance has been widely praised for its nuance and emotional power. Robert De Niro takes on the role of William Hale, the mastermind behind the murder plot. De Niro's portrayal of Hale as a charismatic yet ruthless figure adds layers to the film's exploration of evil and corruption. The supporting cast includes numerous Native American actors, adding authenticity to the portrayal of the Osage community and culture.

Renowned cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, who often collaborates with Scorsese, vividly portrays the 1920s Oklahoma landscape with breath-taking visuals in the film. The cinematography skilfully captures both the splendour of the Osage land and the ominous undertones of the evolving tragedy. The production design intricately reconstructs the era, from the bustling oil-boom towns to the luxurious lifestyles of the Osage people. This meticulous attention to detail not only transports viewers to the historical backdrop but also underscores the stark disparities between the wealth of the Osage and the destitution of numerous white settlers.

Robbie Robertson, a Mohawk descendant and a long-time collaborator of Scorsese, composed the score for the film. Robertson's music seamlessly combines authentic sounds from the time period with elements that accentuate the film's themes and emotions. Additionally, the film incorporates genuine Native American music, specifically Osage songs and rhythms, enhancing the cultural richness and authenticity of the soundtrack.

While drawing from Grann's book, the film undergoes significant changes during its adaptation process. Scorsese and Roth opt to delve more profoundly into the relationship between Ernest and Mollie Burkhart, utilizing their marriage as a narrative device to explore the broader conspiracy. In contrast to the book's emphasis on the FBI investigation, the film shifts its focus towards the Osage perspective and the gradual revelation of the conspiracy, giving prominence to the victims' stories.

This approach enables a deeper exploration of the emotional impact of the crimes and the intricate dynamics between the Osage and white communities. Consequently, "Killers of the Flower Moon" transforms beyond a mere historical crime tale, evolving into a thought-provoking examination of cultural conflicts, greed, and the contrasting human capacities for wickedness and resilience.

Plot and Theme Analysis

"Killers of the Flower Moon" is set in 1920s Oklahoma, focusing on the Osage Nation, who have amassed wealth from oil found on their land. The plot centres on Ernest Burkhart, a war veteran who starts working for his influential uncle, William Hale, in Fairfax. Ernest marries Mollie Kyle, a wealthy Osage woman, as part of Hale's scheme to control the Osage's oil rights. The narrative unfolds as members of the Osage community, especially Mollie's family, die under suspicious circumstances, known as the "Reign of Terror." Ernest is torn between his loyalty to Hale and his love for Mollie, eventually becoming complicit in the murders orchestrated by his uncle. The arrival of Bureau of Investigation Agent Tom White exposes a vast conspiracy involving Hale, Ernest, and others who have been systematically killing Osage people to inherit their wealth through deceitful methods. As White closes in on the perpetrators, tensions escalate, leading to Ernest's confession and the unraveling of the scheme during a gripping trial. The film candidly portrays the crimes and systemic racism that enabled them, depicting their profound impact on the Osage community and addressing broader themes such as justice and exploitation of Native Americans. The story leaves viewers to consider the dark history and its implications for contemporary issues of racial justice and indigenous rights.

"Killers of the Flower Moon" delves deeply into a complex exploration of themes, examining the detrimental impacts of avarice and dishonesty, racial inequity and mistreatment, familial and communal betrayals, and the sinister facets of the American ideal. Morska observes:

The Osage whom we encounter on the pages of Killers of the Flower Moon have just shed or are in the process of shedding their traditional names, clothes, their pastimes and celebrations, and finally, the faith of their ancestors; women no longer braid their hair but rather cut or style them.(115)

The film illustrates how greed can corrupt individuals and entire systems, as illustrated by William Hale's intricate scheme for amassing wealth. This corruption seeps beyond individuals to taint institutions, underscoring how greed can erode societal norms. The fusion of greed and racism fosters a noxious environment where exploiting the Osage community becomes normalized among wrongdoers. Primarily, the film harshly portrays racial bias and the victimization of Native Americans, demonstrating how ingrained racism facilitated and sustained atrocities against the Osage people. The movie highlights the guardianship system, which granted white men authority over Osage finances, as a blatant example of institutional racial prejudice. Betrayal is a prevalent motif throughout the storyline, evident in various relationships and community dynamics, notably in Ernest's disloyalty to Mollie and Hale's treachery towards the Osage community. In addition, the film conveys a somber outlook on the American Dream, demonstrating that aspiration for success and wealth can have some serious consequences on a person's character and how brutal society can be. It challenges notions of American exceptionalism and romanticized portrayals of the American frontier. By interweaving these themes, "Killers of the Flower Moon" crafts a layered narrative that encourages contemplation of the darker facets of American history and their relevance today, suggesting that addressing historical injustices is indispensable in tackling contemporary struggles with racial inequality and economic exploitation.

Cinematic Techniques

Martin Scorsese uses his distinctive film style when he adapts the story of "Killers of the Flower Moon" for the big screen. He successfully carries over that style and makes it work within the film's historical context. Many of Scorsese's familiar techniques that we know and love are present in "Killers of the Flower Moon": the extensive voiceover narration, the expressionist lighting and colour palette, and the expert juxtaposition of violence with the cleanness and banality of everyday life. While it's true that Scorsese has used these techniques before and they don't feel as fresh as they did in, say, "Goodfellas," it's hard to fault him when he uses them so well. Robbie Robertson's original score and historical sound effects set the tone and emotional depth of the film. The actors' performances also add considerable depth and richness to the story.

Leonardo DiCaprio, playing Tom White, excels in his role, letting little moments unfurl on screen and allowing audiences to see both his thoughts and his thought process. His performance is further enhanced by his interactions with Native American actress Lily Gladstone, whose portrayal adds historical richness to the characters. Scorsese's talent shines through in his ability to effortlessly combine history, personalism, and the push and pull of identity to create an engrossing and, I would argue, all-around fabulous narrative.

Historical Accuracy and Cultural Representation

The historical authenticity and representation of "Killers of the Flower Moon" have made it remarkable. It is a film that highlights a desperate yet remarkable history, one that many Native Americans find necessary to reclaim. The film must adhere to established truths and avoid the inaccuracies or premises that have been conveniently perpetuated for a long time, partly because it is about the secret history of the rise of law enforcement in Osage County. Like all historical adaptations, some details are altered or exaggerated for compelling visual storytelling. In press appearances for the movie, Scorsese has openly discussed this practice and its purpose. In a movie as meaningful as this one, every deviation from the historical record should be seen as deliberate, with a specific desired impact.

"Killers of the Flower Moon" aims to offer the Osage people the kind of respectful and serious treatment that past Hollywood films about Native Americans failed to provide. Critics have praised Lily Gladstone's portrayal of Mollie Burkhart for its dignity and depth. They feel she has given a face to the Osage and brought audiences into a world that many might not fully understand. One fascinating aspect of Mollie's character is that she does not fit the standard mold of a woman of her time. When I first read the book, I skimmed over Mollie's story because it seemed secondary. I was wrong. Mollie's desire to keep her family together while protecting them from threats, both seen and unseen, makes for a compelling story.

Scorsese's artistic vision, combined with the depth of character development, ensures that the film demonstrates the significance and truth of the events. The creative control exercised by Scorsese's team maintains the fidelity of the historical record. Scorsese and his co-creators employ the kind of license that all screenwriters do; they have to. Fictionalization is part of this world, where sticking strictly to the script of actual events would render a work lifeless and unintelligent. The drama does not suffer from the weaving together of necessary historical threads.

Critical Reception and Impact

"Killers of the Flower Moon" has received a very positive reception. Everyone is happy with the movie, with some people even saying they are amazed. They describe the film as monumental in scale. The filmmakers did not shy away from depicting the terrible and gruesome events of the past. The film explores a rarely depicted time in American history and does so unflinchingly, which might be one reason why some critics just don't know what to make of it. The movie looks great, too. It captures the beauty of the Oklahoma landscape and the rainy-day pallor of the streets and shadows with equal majesty. Actors like Leonardo DiCaprio, Lily Gladstone, and Robert De Niro have been celebrated for their delicate, and sometimes breath-taking, performances. Though a few critics have said the movie feels too long, most reviewers are satisfied with the extended runtime. Most professionals believe that the film's pace and intricate narrative more than make up for its length.

What pundits can't agree on is its originality. The debate remains fresh because everyone wants to discuss its look, feel, and talking points. The film's excellence in technical aspects—cinematography, production design, and costume design—has also been noted. Lily Gladstone's portrayal of Mollie Burkhart has been excellent. What the movie has achieved for many people and critics, however, can't be captured by any awards. A significant appreciation can always be gratifying for all the people who worked tirelessly to make this film happen and may lend seriousness to Mollie's story that might not have been seen otherwise.

The profound cultural influence of "Killers of the Flower Moon" shines a light on a forgotten chapter of American history. The tragic events serve as an entry point for many people into a conversation around racial justice. By engaging with and including the Osage perspective, the movie challenges established historical narratives and, like the book, prompts us to re-evaluate American history. Importantly, both David Grann and Martin Scorsese manage this without appearing opportunistic or appropriative. They are simply two storytellers for whom the Osage tragedy means a great deal and serves an important narrative function. The way the film tells the story of the Osage murders makes it relevant to current discussions about systemic racism in the United States. It has also rekindled conversations about Native American rights. By hiring so many indigenous actors, Scorsese, and his team have contributed to ongoing discussions about who gets to represent whom in the film industry. This demonstrates the long-term importance of historically and profoundly moving dramas. In an era dominated by franchises and superhero movies, it is refreshing to see a film that is not only competently made but also leaves a lasting impression on the viewer.

Comparison with Other Historical Dramas

"Killers of the Flower Moon" occupies a unique place in Martin Scorsese's filmography, representing both continuity and evolution in his body of work. The film's exploration of violence, corruption, and moral ambiguity aligns with Scorsese's long-standing thematic interests, while its direct engagement with a specific historical event marks a new direction for the director. The epic scope and historical sweep set it apart from much of Scorsese's more intimate, character-driven work, reflecting the maturity of vision of a master filmmaker grappling with complex historical and moral questions in the twilight of his career.

When compared to other films addressing Native American issues, "Killers of the Flower Moon" stands out for its narrative perspective, giving significant weight to Osage perspectives rather than focusing solely on white protagonists. Its historical specificity, focusing on the particular events of the Osage murders, distinguishes it from more generalized portrayals of Native American experiences. While set in the 1920s, the film draws clear connections to ongoing issues of racial justice and Indigenous rights, enhancing its contemporary relevance. Perhaps most significantly, the level of collaboration with the Osage Nation in the production process sets this film apart from many earlier Hollywood productions about Native Americans, potentially setting a new standard for respectful and authentic portrayal of Indigenous histories in mainstream cinema.

CONCLUSION

The movie 'Killers of the Flower Moon' is an extraordinary film achievement that is memorable for its compelling story, historical importance, visual beauty, thematic depth, and cultural consciousness. With Martin Scorsese at the helm and featuring exceptional performances, the film captivates its audience. The story told in 'Killers of the Flower Moon' has not received the attention it deserves in depictions of American history. By working with the Osage Nation, the movie sets a high standard for the accurate presentation of Indigenous history in film. It is impressive in several ways. It reasserts the importance of past historical events, rendering them not just as obscure episodes but as morally complex tales to be told in American cinema. This film is part of a broader re-evaluation of American history, particularly its treatment of Native Americans. The movie doesn't just prompt controversy—it takes an extended, nuanced look at it. Simply put, 'Killers of the Flower Moon' is a significant cinematic achievement. It offers a weighty examination of a dark moment in U.S. history and makes an urgent contribution to current conversations about justice and our still-insufficient understanding of our shared past. This is a film that will matter, making a lasting impression on its audience and contributing to the ongoing discourse about historical justice and representation.

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