

Killers of the Flower Moon: US director Martin Scorsese’s film about the “Reign of Terror” against the Osage Indians

David Walsh
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Veteran American director Martin Scorsese’s new film, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, takes up the wave of killings and other crimes committed against Native Americans in Oklahoma in the 1920s. The Osage Nation, after being driven from their homes in modern-day Kansas by US authorities, unexpectedly found themselves sitting on top of great oil wealth.

As documented in David Grann’s *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, the book on which Scorsese’s film is based, the attack on the Osage “was an elaborate criminal operation, in which various sectors of society were complicit.” The Indian Rights Association, in 1924, as Grann points out, conducted an investigation into what it described as “an orgy of graft and exploitation.”

The “Reign of Terror,” which lasted from the end of World War I to 1931, involved the murder of at least 60 wealthy, full-blood Osage Natives, but Grann argues that the actual total of suspicious deaths may number in the hundreds. In many cases, individuals were slain so that their rights to lucrative royalties could be stolen or inherited by members of the conspiracy, including in some cases husbands and wives of the victims.

This is an appalling episode and an entirely legitimate subject for a film, part of the history of the “blood-soaked rise to continental power” (Socialist Equality Party Statement of Principles) of American capitalism at the expense, in the first place, of the Native American population.

However, Scorsese does not treat the subject well. The three-and-a-half hour work is muddy, murky, repetitive and misanthropic, and even interminable in certain stretches.

Leonardo DiCaprio features as Ernest Burkhart, a World War I veteran, who returns to rural Oklahoma in 1919 and goes to work as a driver for his uncle, wealthy rancher William King Hale (Robert De Niro), who postures as a great friend and benefactor of the local Native population.

Ernest pays special attention, encouraged by Hale, to Mollie Kyle (Lily Gladstone), an Osage whose full-blood family possesses “headrights,” entitling the owner to a share of the Osage Mineral Estate, worth millions of dollars in oil revenue.

Ernest obediently becomes part of the conspiracy, headed by Hale, along with his brother and various lowlifes and criminals, to kill off members of Mollie’s family, so the rights will go to Ernest, Hale and their family and associates. Poisonings, bombings, shootings—the Hale gang stops at nothing. Moreover, Ernest becomes a willing accomplice in the slow, attempted poisoning of his own wife. She stays with him until his role in the filthy business, including the murders of two of her sisters, is exposed.

After years of inaction by state and local authorities, many of them bribed by Hale or indifferent to the fate of the Native Americans, the stench of scandal in Oklahoma becomes so great that the federal government and J. Edgar Hoover feel it necessary to intervene. What was then known as the Bureau of Investigation (BOI) dispatches Tom White

(played in the film by Jesse Plemons) to look into the series of crimes. It becomes evident to White and his fellow investigators that Hale is one of the masterminds, but the latter meanwhile busily covers his tracks, including by seeing to it that his own hired killers, potential informers against him, are done away with one by one. Eventually, the authorities get a break in the case.

The history is significant and virtually unknown. Scorsese deserves praise for bringing it to the public’s attention. Moreover, the presence of numerous Native performers, men and women one generally does not see in American films or television, is entirely welcome. It is not correct to argue, as some Native spokespeople have, that only a Native director should have taken on this assignment. Scorsese had every right to create the film.

However, there are major difficulties.

Scorsese’s film has a markedly different emphasis than Grann’s non-fiction work. Whereas Grann focuses on federal agent White and his investigation, the filmmakers place Ernest and his relationship with Mollie at the center of the film. It is not clear that anything is gained by this.

What are we to draw from Mollie’s supposed reluctance to give up on Ernest?

That theirs was a great love, which it eventually required evidence of utterly monstrous wrongdoing on Ernest’s part to overcome? The film doesn’t provide much evidence of this. DiCaprio grimaces and mutters his lines, and does what he can to make himself unappealing. His pronouncements of affection for the most part come across as forced and unconvincing.

That there is inertia (and the element of wishful thinking) in human relationships? That a woman who shares a life and children with a man will hold on to the bitter end, perhaps even beyond the bitter end? This doesn’t seem an important revelation, and we don’t know enough about the actual relationship even to draw that conclusion. Scorsese is largely speculating. Burkhart may have acted semi-decently in everyday life, and a Native woman, feeling besieged and threatened by white society, might have hoped he could offer her some protection. Mollie was horribly wrong, and once she realized this, never had anything to do with her husband again.

Scorsese has certain valuable instincts and feelings. He explains he has wanted to do something about the mistreatment of Native Americans for decades. Again, that is to his credit.

But what does one make of the *content* of this history, so pregnant with meaning? In the end, Scorsese has little of importance to say about it, other than common-sense banalities at best.

Speaking of the actions of Hale, Burkhart and the others, the director asks rhetorically, “Well, what is in us that makes us do that? What is our flaw in our own human nature, that makes us take advantage of others,

that sees us as superior?" In regard to the government of the time, "How did that government get into power? Well, a lot of good decent people let that government get into power. Look at the world and Europe between 1930 and 1940. There's a lot of good people who maybe through letting one thing slide and letting another thing slide and another thing slide, that they could have taken a moral stand on? They didn't. ... And they become complicit."

As for Hale in particular, "If he could do it, that means that in our own human nature, anyone could do it. And that's the fear: that maybe we're all capable of this sort of thing." Scorsese, as they say, should speak for himself.

Blaming historical crimes like this on "all of us" and "explaining" events by the rottenness of human nature doesn't illuminate anything, it only obscures. Nothing is more changeable, more flexible than human psychology. The "human essence," as was explained some time ago by Karl Marx, "is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."

Scorsese has all too often let the social order off the hook in this inexcusable manner. As we wrote about his *Gangs of New York* in 2002, "The real implication of this view is that the selfishness, greed and racism of humanity as a whole (including its suffering portion), not definite, capitalist socioeconomic relations, have brought about the current state of affairs, that people are essentially unworthy and one has no obligation to struggle against existing conditions because they are, after all, inherent in the human condition."

Scorsese told an interviewer recently that a director may make only "one film" over and over again. Of course, any serious artist develops themes that are critical to him or her and works away at them. But no serious artist remains essentially unaffected by social and historical events, as Scorsese claims to have been. Since he began making short films in the late 1960s, a good deal has happened in the world, including the economic, political and cultural transformation of American society. There is little conscious expression of this in his films, although of course it finds *unconscious, generally unhealthy* expression.

Intense violence and its traumatic emotional consequences comprise one of Scorsese's primary and recurring concerns, but as we noted in 2006 (in a review of *The Departed*), the filmmaker, "who once considered the priesthood as a vocation, has never taken the trouble to trace violence in the US to its roots in history and social relations, to the essential harshness of American class society. He prefers, self-servingly, to see violence as a part of fallen human nature, which both enthralls and disgusts him. Scorsese has a fixed, frozen view of life and human character that has not evolved or deepened in more than three decades of making films."

The static quality of his films is one of their gravest weaknesses. One feels a work like *Killers of the Flower Moon* rocking back and forth repeatedly over the same small bit of psychological-moral ground. One has the sensation that there are a hundred scenes between DiCaprio, with his turned down mouth, and De Niro, with his face assuming—as one commentator has described it—that by now well-known "pinched expression," which the actor has tritely relied on in film after film in recent decades, "mouth down, eyes pleading, wrinkles creasing sharply on his forehead and along his cheeks." Both leading performances are tedious and devoid of telling content. Unfortunately, there are no memorable lines or scenes to cite from the film, which is a succession of scenes in which people with almost entirely fixed characters merely bump up against one another. (Lily Gladstone does her best, in a losing cause.)

After each of the encounters between the central characters, one is tempted to ask, "Now what was the point of *that*?"

We perceive Hale's dishonesty and hypocrisy early on. Dozens of further examples are not helpful. Revealingly, the director admits that "I don't get how he can make that dichotomy in his thinking." What world does Scorsese live in? The American ruling class at every level has

developed that "dichotomy," piety and pacifism in words, and boundless violence and cruelty in action, to new heights, as we see in the present situation in the Middle East.

At the very time of the horrible goings-on in Oklahoma in the 1920s, Leon Trotsky, not one to be fooled, pinpointed American imperialism as "ruthlessly rude, predatory, in the full sense of the word, and criminal."

What was Hale, but a Woodrow Wilson on a miniature Osage County, Oklahoma stage, a shadow of that racist "provincial professor," as Trotsky described Wilson, "dripping from blood up to his knees and elbows," but who "appeared in Europe as the apostle of pacifism and pacification"?

Speaking of which, what was the impact of World War I, that imperialist slaughter? Neither Grann nor Scorsese make much of the fact that Ernest Burkhart was a war veteran, as was Kelsie Morrison (Louis Cancelmi), one of the worst of the cold-hearted killers, and no doubt others. The industrial-style killing helped brutalize them, and taught them as well that force and mass murder were legitimate, *irreplaceable* means in the pursuit of power and wealth. They were simply imitating their "betters."

Scorsese's gloomy view bears some relationship to the *1619 Project* version of American history, and it won't wash here either. As noted above, a generally misanthropic mood pervades *Killers of the Flower Moon*. While the Native characters are given a certain amount of dignity, the film implies that virtually every white person in Oklahoma at the time was a murderer, a thief or a racist. No doubt there were a good many of those, and the scent of oil money attracted some of the worst.

If Oklahoma had its share of greedy cutthroats and villains, it also had more than its share of working class and small farmer radicalism, socialism.

The Socialist Party in Oklahoma had thousands of members and tens of thousands of supporters. In several counties it received as high as one-third or more of the vote in state and federal elections during the 1910s. As the *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture* points out, "the Socialist Party of Oklahoma consistently ranked as one of the top three state socialist organizations in America." At the height of the party's success in the state, "in the elections of 1914, the Socialist Party candidate for governor, Fred W. Holt, received more than 20 percent of the vote statewide. In Marshall and Roger Mills counties, where the Socialist Party was strongest, Holt captured 41 and 35 percent of the vote, respectively. More than 175 socialists were elected to local and county offices that year, including six to the state legislature."

In the short-lived Green Corn Rebellion of August 1917, tenant farmers and others, belonging to the multi-racial tenant farmers' group, the Working Class Union, raised the prospect of marching on Washington and forcing Wilson to end the war. Hundreds were arrested as a result of the abortive uprising.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) also found fertile soil for its anti-capitalist teachings and activity in Oklahoma. Not coincidentally, Frank Little, whose mother was Cherokee, grew up in Oklahoma and became one of the IWW's most remarkable leaders and organizers, before being lynched during the strike by thousands of copper miners in Butte, Montana, in August 1917.

Unfortunately, this history is a book sealed with seven seals for Scorsese. He has never treated history or society in a serious fashion, preferring to pry individuals out of their actual, concrete social circumstances. The results for decades have been accordingly weak.

Grann, in his book, is relatively straightforward. He notes that the scheme against the Osage was organized by "crooked guardians and administrators" who "were typically among the most prominent white citizens: businessmen and ranchers and lawyers and politicians. So were the lawmen and prosecutors and judges who facilitated and concealed the swindling (and, sometimes, acted as guardians and administrators themselves)."

Why not concentrate on that, the egregious and unending criminality of the American ruling elite? Scorsese continues to gaze off in a different direction.



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