

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY JOHN KENDALL HAWKINS

02.01.2024

The Black Gold God That Dirtied Us All



Photograph Source: Canal22 – Festival de Cine de Cannes 2023 con Jean-Christophe Berjon | Capítulo 6 – [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

It would be pointless to bring up the subject of greed and covetousness, as history has provided so many lessons in our human failures to get along as a result of wanting more than the next guy has. Still, in reflecting on Martin Scorsese's latest film, *The Killers of the Flower Moon*, and comparing it to the book by the same name that I just recently finished, carnal hunger came to mind.

I thought of Moses. I thought of how Michaelangelo carved out his features in a statue, the one with horns growing out of his head, the key concept here seeming to be that Moses and the Israelites were not far removed from the animality that moved humans back then, three thousands years ago or more. And yet, this leader of men, and this vital prophet, was stepping out of the darkness, stepping into the wilderness for 40 days and nights, we're told, to confer with God to develop rules of law to civilize the sneaky and jealous masses who killed and stole each others wives and property and flirted each day with chaos.

He came back with the mighty Decalogue and saw that his people had, in his absence, devised the likeness of a golden calf and were worshipping it, which enraged Moses so much he broke the tablets, maybe thinking, “Why did I bother?” But he mended the tablets and presented the 10 Commandments. These millenia-old laws against criminal acquisitiveness are the foundation of the three Abrahamic religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Indeed, they are arguably the basis for the evolution of “our” ethics in the West. So, I was thinking about Moses and the riffraff he left behind to seek wisdom in the wilderness and how moral conditions had worsened in his absence, seeing upon his return folks worshipping Baal. No ethical standards were evident. Gold fever ran hot through the community.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27Moses%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU160.jpg#/media/File:'Moses'_by_Michelangelo_JBU160.jpg

I recalled descriptive passages early in *The Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the F.B.I.*, the book by David Grann, on which the Scorsese film was based. The setting is frontier Oklahoma circa 1923. The Westward Expansion was underway and the fever for gold that came with the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Buffalo were wiped out. Indigenous lands were stolen and tribes beaten down. Chinese laborers worked as virtual slaves on the railroad expansion. As part of this vast movement, with all its energy and spirit of acquisitiveness, the Osage Nation had been forced to migrate from decent land they occupied in Kansas to what was thought to be rocky and hard scabble terrain in Oklahoma.

Instead, one of the largest deposits of oil was discovered beneath Osage reservation land, making them filthy rich overnight, and setting white opportunists fantasizing about how such riches could be exploited. Grann sets the scene in Gray Horse, where part of the story takes place:

Gray Horse was one of the reservation’s older settlements. These outposts—including Fairfax, a larger, neighboring town of nearly fifteen hundred people, and Pawhuska, the Osage capital, with a population of more than six thousand—seemed like fevered visions. The streets clamored with cowboys, fortune seekers, bootleggers, soothsayers, medicine men, outlaws, U.S. marshals, New York financiers, and oil magnates. Automobiles sped along paved horse trails, the smell of fuel overwhelming the scent of the prairies. Juries of crows peered down from telephone wires. There were restaurants, advertised as cafés, and opera houses and polo grounds.

But that's not all it brings. Grann writes that with the rise and spread of these so-called "boomtowns" frontier law and order, such as it was, broke down. Grann observes:

Once, the tribe's enemies had battled them on the plains; now they came in the form of train robbers and stickup men and other desperadoes. The passage of Prohibition had only compounded the territory's feeling of lawlessness by encouraging organized crime and creating, in the words of one historian, 'the greatest criminal bonanza in American history.'

And he adds,

By one account, the amount of oil money had surpassed the total value of all the Old West gold rushes combined, and this fortune had drawn every breed of miscreant from across the country.

Criminal bonanzas seem to be the American elite's forte.

The Killers of the Flower Moon

And this is the energy dynamic that the Scorsese film describes and depicts. White opportunists everywhere, offering to chauffeur, working as servants, providing wares to the Osage at exorbitant prices to Osage buyers. Natives* living the highlife, flaunting their wealth, going through cars like they were disposable Dixie cups and wearing the latest French fashions. Reminds me, for some reason, of that scene in *Malcolm X* when Spike Lee and Denzel Washington are juking down a Roxbury street in zoot suits, jazz piano confection background sound.

The first problem to address is what the title means: Killers of the Flower-Moon? What's this, some kind of Native thing? Yes and No. Grann tells us:

In April, millions of tiny flowers spread over the blackjack hills and vast prairies in the Osage territory of Oklahoma. There are Johnny-jump-ups and spring beauties and little bluets...In May, when coyotes howl beneath an unnervingly large moon, taller plants, such as spiderworts and black-eyed Susans, begin to creep over the tinier blooms, stealing their light and water. The necks of the smaller flowers break and their petals flutter away, and before long they are buried underground. This is why the Osage Indians refer to May as the time of the flower-killing moon.

Think of the white settlers as the spiderworts and black-eyed Susans creeping and strangling the little colorful confetti culture underneath, and you get the picture. We killed the Flower Moon.

Scorsese's *The Killers of the Flower Moon* stars Leo DiCaprio, Robert De Niro, Lilly Gladstone, and Jesse Plemons (*Breaking Bad*). DiCaprio plays Ernest Burkhart, a Texan

veteran who moves to Oklahoma's Osage territory to work for his cattle baron uncle William Hale, played by De Niro. Gladstone plays Mollie Burkhart, a diabetic "squaw" who falls for Ernest's charms and marries him. Plemons plays Tom White, an investigator for the nascent FBI.

A succinct summary of the storyline tells us, "When oil is discovered in 1920s Oklahoma under Osage Nation land, the Osage people are murdered one by one – until the FBI steps in to unravel the mystery." [IMDB] Tom White is J. Edgar Hoover's man in the Osage, and Plemons carries the load of depicting the work of the book's subtitle: *The Osage Murders and the Birth of the F.B.I.* The film begins with quick cut black-and-white clips of Osage Indians dancing under a newly discovered geyser of oil, followed by the Natives flaunting their wealth for the camera. It's unsettling and seemingly unnatural. I wondered why Scorsese chose to go this route. Oil is filthy. The materialism flaunted was brought in by the whites to remove wealth from the Natives, almost, it seemed to me, the way blankets, guns, and hootch were distributed as part of the Original Sin of First Contact.

The opulence seemed derived, as far as you could get from a buffalo-chasing culture. For a moment, I took the film's start as a critique of the neoliberal hegemony all we Baalists must suffer through now. But when a screen note tells us that the oil made the Osage the richest people in the world per capita. I dunno. I kinda shrugged and wondered, "Is that a good thing, Marty? Did I miss something?" Of course, the film depends on the book and the book crows:

(In 1923 alone, the tribe took in more than \$30 million, the equivalent today of more than \$400 million.) The Osage were considered the wealthiest people per capita in the world. "Lo and behold!" the New York weekly Outlook exclaimed. "The Indian, instead of starving to death...enjoys a steady income that turns bankers green with envy."

So, it was kinda like the Beverly Hillbillies and the bubbling crude. "*Jed!*"

Anyway, the manner in which the eastern papers were writing up the discovery of the oil and the new lifestyles of the Osage Nation opened up channels of hungry acquisition seemingly requiring the most devious plots to remove the wealth from the "undeserving" Indians. The Osage oil profits were administered by the federal government who oversaw the payment distribution. As Grann describes it:

Like others on the Osage tribal roll, Mollie and her family members each received a headright—essentially, a share in the tribe's mineral trust. When, the following year, Oklahoma entered the Union as the forty-sixth state, members of the tribe were able to sell their surface land in what was now Osage County. But to keep the mineral trust under

tribal control, no one could buy or sell headrights. These could only be inherited. Mollie and her family had become part of the first underground reservation.

The Killers of the Flower Moon essentially unfolds the devious plot by William Hale to serially kill members of Mollie's family, her sisters and mother, with their headrights getting inherited by Mollie, who was married to Ernest, who was involved with some of the killing, and would, if Hale had his way, inadvertently kill Mollie, leaving Ernest sole beneficiary of all that inherited wealth, and with Hale having Ernest under his thumb. For Hale it was "just business," because he was clearly a patho of some kind — be it psycho or socio. The three hour flick is really just the telling of this tale.

Ernest had met Mollie after an introduction by Hale, who urges him to make a move on her affections. He does so, but Mollie sniffs out the potential motivation as money-driven, and remains skeptical at first. She seems unique in the community in her suspicion of Hale's goodness. She can see that Ernest is seemingly naive in his devotion to Hale. Gladstone, raised on the Blackfeet Indian Reserve, does a nice quiet job of projecting her Native "wisdom" with respect to Ernest. What wins her over is a brief conversation about religious values. She asks and he tells her he was raised a Catholic, which lights up the devoted church-goer. (Maybe he ain't a scoundrel after all.) She doubts his sincerity by telling she hasn't seen him in church, and next thing is he's there in a pew near here, gazing at her, and eventually, feeling watched, she returns a furtive gaze, and Scorsese shows us that the lovebirds are singing in the same choir. Marriage and kids follow, as they do. Nobody's happier than Hale, as he can already see the dividends paying off.

Since this is the key dynamic of the film — Hale executing his business model, and we see the dominos falling, one by one, with the film's focus on Mollie's family but elders telling us that the murders of the Osage are an epidemic that may amount to hundreds of dead 'Ind'gens.' White people are willing and able to come to Osage country to grift, murder and/or steal their wealth. It's just the business of playing cowboys *over* indians. It's so wicked in its execution that, really, Scorsese doesn't have much to work with in a way. The film doesn't dwell on the implicit genocidal motivation of the economic expansion in Osage country and the general corruption of Das Kapital enough for this lefty. Some of the Osage don't send some of their kids to elite boarding schools and dress themselves in the latest, finest French fashions because they need to (nobody does), but because whites have brought these frills to them in order to extract some of their wealth by extravagantly raising the retail price of the goods. In this sense, the Osage are like cattle. An apt

metaphor, given Hale's status in Osage country as a cattle baron—indeed, he's known as “King of the Osage,” a cattleman not there for the oil: What a cover!

The film is not so much “I-will-fight-no-more-forever” or “Once-was-a-warrior” boo-hoo fest where we wring our hands over what the evil Whitey has done to the Red Man. It seems to me that that kind of hypocrisy (we never do anything about it, never change our ways), was lampooned out of existence long ago — say, in the 70s, when loads of middle class kids were going around saying *Hi-how-are-ya*, while dancing like Elaine Benes in the Seinfeld series, and seeking Chautauqua branches the way albies seek AA groups, hoping to reform one step at a time. Instead, Scorsese makes it a character study — De Niro, DiCaprio and Gladstone. And they play marvelously off each other.

De Niro and DiCaprio are back to together in a tete-a-tete for the first time since they played together in *This Boy's Life* (1993), although the dynamic was the opposite — a young DiCaprio resisting the tyrannical Boy Scout leader De Niro's stepfatherly directives in ethics that are rigid and often hypocritical. In *The Killers of the Flower Moon*, the most you could say is that DiCaprio's Ernest is slow-witted and gullible, and apparently Mollie tragically finds his seeming vulnerability attractive, something she can work with, the deal sealed when he shows up in church essentially as an exercise in wooing her.

Eventually, Ernest falls deeply in love with Mollie and the arrangement of their courting by the devious Hale leads to the birth of his children, which bind him to Mollie, and to the birth of conscience. He seems too slow to understand that he's helping kill Mollie's people and that she, too, is a target of Hale's business interests, which makes him, at least potentially, a target, since Ernest is in his control. But I don't see *The Killers of the Flower Moon* as a tragedy; just another great character-driven story by Scorsese, in which the societal mores are worked out in situ and in non-analytical contexts.

The Osage Murders and the Birth of the F.B.I.

Probably my slight disappointment at the Scorsese project derives from having read the book the film is based on, and finding it comparatively rich in nuance and characterization. Not to mention that the book devotes significantly more time establishing how the FBI was established — by J. Edgar Hoover — and providing in depth details of federal investigator Tom White's life in Texas and how he joined the bureau and what he did after the Osage case was resolved by Justice. It's actually quite extraordinary — his journey. The book is sectioned into three parts, with the Osage segment played out in the first 98 pages. The FBI story actually has more coverage, with author David Grann

devoting 126 pages to telling the Osage story from the POV of White. The third section is 46 pages long and essentially an epilogue that begins with the chapter titled, “Ghostlands.” Grann co-wrote the screenplay for Scorsese’s film, and I have to wonder if he didn’t feel in the end that he’d compromised his own story to help shore up Scorsese’s character-driven tale of victimization at the expense of featuring the White Hats (FBI) who come in and provide eventual relief to those victims. Was it because we don’t praise the FBI if we can help it, especially J. Edgar Hoover’s autocratic regime of some 50 years? Whatever, White’s story piques one’s interest. For instance, he was a Texas Ranger prior to joining the bureau of investigation out of Washington. Apparently, being a Texas Ranger wasn’t as full of justice and integrity and tough coppers as I had been led to believe.

I’ve been watching the Coen Brothers’ remake of *True Grit*, with Jeff Bridges as Rooster Cockburn and Matt Damon as LaBoeuf, a former Texas Ranger, both of them on the hunt with a 14-year old girl who has hired them to find the killers of her dad. Rooster and LaBoeuf at one point trade insults, with Rooster reminding LaBoeuf that the Rangers were essentially glorified vigilantes not far removed, morally, from the criminals they pursued. Anyway, *True Grit* reminded me that back then you had to pay for law enforcement out of pocket. Mollie and her diminishing extended family had to pony up the clams to get “lawmen” to look into and provide justice (rough or courtroom). Grann, in his book, tells us how much the pony cost:

The Osage had been forced to finance part of the federal investigation with their own money—an amount that would eventually reach \$20,000, the equivalent today of nearly \$300,000.

In a way, you could argue that even the feds were reaching into the fashionable French pockets of the Osage reservationists. Filfy.

Filfier still, in the film, Hale makes a big deal about his deputyhood, points to his badge to impress his newly arrived nephew, Ernest, as he explains how he can get things done in Osage country, being, essentially, what passes for the law in them there parts. Just about everyone is corrupt in Osage country, including some Natives on the hooch who participate in some of the killings and/or other criminal activities schemed up by Hale. Hiring law folks to investigate and “prosecute” criminals in Osage risks seeing the lawmen killed or turning over their findings to Hale. The introduction of Tom White, FBI man to the story is, IMHO, a huge turn storywise, relief from the unbearable tension of bodies flying everywhere with apparently nothing standing in the way of Mollie going down like the others after Hale has lit the fuse on her family.

In the early days of the FBI, the agency had no power of arrest and could not carry guns (not legally, anyway). So, White had to deal with local “law enforcement” to get folks arrested and tried. At the time there was no national police force, and the bureau of investigation belonged under the umbrella of the Department of Justice (as it does today). The DoJ was often controversial back then, as it is today. He describes how the Bureau’s first director, William Burns, “After being appointed director, in 1921, Burns had bent laws and hired crooked agents, including a confidence man who peddled protection and pardons to members of the underworld.” This corruption led to the notorious Teapot Dome scandal of 1924, during which oil baron Harry Sinclair connived his way into being allowed to tap into the federal petroleum reserves by paying people off. Grann writes of the bureau’s response to this scandal:

...the ensuing investigation lay bare just how rotten the system of justice was in the United States. When Congress began looking into the Justice Department, Burns and the attorney general used all their power, all the tools of law enforcement, to thwart the inquiry and obstruct justice. Members of Congress were shadowed. Their offices were broken into and their phones tapped. One senator denounced the various “illegal plots, counterplots, espionage, decoys, dictographs” that were being used not to “detect and prosecute crime but...to shield profiteers, bribe takers and favorites.”

The Teapot Dome and its aftermath of corruption sounds like a macro version of what was happening in Osage country under the Hale regime.

The reform to the FBI was supposed to come in with the new director, J. Edgar Hoover. But Grann doesn’t give that hoping ship shelter: “Though Hoover had avoided the stain of Teapot Dome, he had overseen the bureau’s rogue intelligence division, which had spied on individuals merely because of their political beliefs.” Indeed, some wise caps have fingered J. Edgar as the place we should start looking for the institutionalization of the surveillance state apparatus Americans now face. Grann suggests that the FBI’s overreach began with the new forensics, such as fingerprinting. He adds, “Hoover would rapidly reshape the bureau into a monolithic force—one that, nearly five-decade reign as director, he would deploy not only to combat crime but also to commit egregious abuses of power.” COINTELPRO? Suicide letters to MLK? Leonard Peltier? Watergate (associate FBI director Mark Felt, aka “Deep Throat,” only divulged information to WaPo after Nixon spurned his candidacy to replace the dead Hoover, making the FBI a kind of abettor to the Watergate break-in). All and more happened under Hoover.

There was a lot to work with on the FBI front. One nifty detail that was left out of the film that got plenty of detailed coverage in the book was the fate of Tom White after he successfully saw Hale and John Ramsey prosecuted for their crimes. White, tired of the traveling involved with being an FBI agent and wanting to have his family together and happy in one place, resigned from the FBI and became the warden of Leavenworth Prison in Kansas. By spectacular coincidence, this is where William Hale and John Ramsey were sent to do time. Later, Warden White is almost killed during a prison break. This is good story fodder, but not picked up by Scorsese. Perhaps the Flower Moon story will be retold in a streaming series.

Various Takes on the Osage Killings

There have been a variety of depictions of the Osage murders of 1923. A less theatrical version than Scorsese's is one aired by the 2022 PBS Short Film Festival, titled "Osage Murders." It is only 13 plus minutes long. Or you could go the other way, into more theatricality, and wax sentimental at the same time, viewing James Stewart starring in *The FBI Story* (1959), which devotes a portion of its corny narrative to the Osage killings. The Scorsese film ends with an enacted radio play that tells listeners what happened from the white POV. But you could also skip that and watch an Osage opera production, *Wahzhazhe: An Osage Ballet* that incorporates the Reign of Terror period.

<https://youtu.be/ipwe0Jluhpo>

In addition, readers interested in the story can read the *New Yorker's* reprint of an excerpt from David Grann's book, "[The Marked Woman](#)" from the March 1, 2017 issue.

In addition, an extended angle on the story is forthcoming from investigative journalist Greg Palast, who will be releasing a documentary early in 2024 about the Osage, titled *Long Knife*. Palast worked with Leonardo DiCaprio's father, George, to produce the film. Palast's documentary will focus on the continued exploitation of Osage oil by the Koch Network. The exploitation amounts to billions of dollars. Writes Palast, "We reveal how Koch got the federal prosecutor replaced by Koch's oil-patch buddy, and the lucrative reward the I-won't-prosecute prosecutor received. You'll also learn the identity of the Kochs' political toy boys and the toys they got for their service to Koch." This sounds reminiscent of the Teapot Dome era of corruption. More information can be found [here](#).

#####

Maybe here at the end stage of capitalism, and perhaps the eschatological end of human beings, few folks care anymore. Still, the Osage trip is a chance to reflect on how much damage dinosaur's revenge has done to us and our civilization really, since the discovery

that fossils could be converted to energy and plastics, and the lust for the power that such energy brings — and new wars with insane costs to taxpayers and the global environment, including Climate Change catastrophe.

Such reflection brings a new perspective to how Scorsese's film opens with Osage Natives seemingly playing in a gush of oil. That was some meteor shower that took out the dinos and left us in charge of the fossils.

We need a new Moses, I reckon.

John Kendall Hawkins is an American ex-pat freelancer based in Australia. He is a former reporter for The New Bedford Standard-Times.

CounterPunch 01.01.2024