



# **Can the Native speak? Native American voices and the problem of representation and visibility in Hollywood: A Case Study of White American Directors Martin Scorsese and Stanley Kubrick in *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) and *The Shining* (1980).**

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## **Abstract**

The invasion of the Americas is a distinctive moment in history, which is also a vanishing point for intense cultural clash, dislocation, and trauma. This paper meditates on the thematic concerns of settler colonialism, ethnic genocide, and Native subjection that is concomitant in every imperial project, and the problem of translating Native experience on screen. Invader colonization with cultural imperialism hand-in-gloves with missionization led to the eradication of Native cultures, histories, and identities in America. Two classic films by two white American filmmakers Martin Scorsese and Stanley Kubrick considered Hollywood *Auteurs* have been analysed in this paper to explore the complexities of depicting Native American History on celluloid. Set as a Western in 1920s Oklahoma, *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) throws a spotlight on the Osage reign of terror; the unsolved murders of Native Americans by White Americans attempting to gain control over their oil rich land. Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), on the other hand, deviates from its source (Stephen King's novel) to blatantly address the genocide committed on the Natives by the founding fathers of America. This paper explores some of the theoretical concerns of Filmic Orientalism to debate who represented the Native voices best.

**Keywords:** Native American, Hollywood, Genocide, Orientalism, Representation.

## **Introduction**



This island's mine by Sycorax, my mother,

Which thou tak'st from me.

Tempest, William Shakespeare,

Act I, Scene 2

An apt fictional allegory of the colonizer-colonised dynamics is perhaps *The Tempest* (1611), one of the final plays of English playwright William Shakespeare that engages with the power struggle of a European task master Prospero, and his half breed, sub-human slave Caliban. The bone of contention in *The Tempest* was the island that Caliban inherited from his mother Sycorax, of which he was later dispossessed by Prospero. Patrick Wolfe in *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native* points out how land acquisition is the root cause of native subjection; " whatever settlers may say - and they generally have a lot to say - the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilisation etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element" (Wolfe, 2006, 388). Elaborating further, Wolfe observes how "the logic of elimination not only refers to the summary liquidation of indigenous people, though it includes that...Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base. The positive outcomes of the logic of elimination can include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate bio cultural assimilations; all these strategies including frontier homicide, are characteristics of settler colonialism." (Wolfe, 2006, 388).

This paper attempts to highlight the works of two prominent White American directors from Hollywood whose intentions to portray Native American experience on celluloid birthed two masterpieces, the contemporary *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) and a 1980 classic, *The Shining*. This research work attempts to deconstruct the film discourses of both in order to examine the role of white narrators/directors and their cultural privilege in documenting a minority culture. At the same time, the paper makes certain propositions grounded on the premises of filmic Orientalism which empowers dominant voices from the West to represent subaltern Cultures thereby robbing native agency. Both *The Shining* (1980) and *Killers of the*



*Flower Moon* (2023) allude to Native American history, particularly the racial subjection of natives and western expansionism in the early days of American history. In a time when woke culture is etched in public imaginary and in its daring to flaunt inclusivity, Hollywood redeems itself through films like the two on the radar. But who articulated the native voices best, can be only answered through an analysis of *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) in the following segment.

*Killers of the Flower Moon (2023) Myth versus Colonial Modernity?*

*In May when coyotes howl beneath an unnervingly large moon, taller plants such as spiderworts and black-eyes 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.*

David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, 2018. Martin Scorsese's 2023 *Killers of the Flower Moon* is a reworked script from David Grann's non-fiction book (quoted above). The plot is based on the Osage reign of terror - the 1920s Osage murders (in modern-day Oklahoma), which witnessed a genocide of oil-wealthy Osage Natives by white Americans seeking to control their oil-rich land. This era may well resonate with the Californian Gold rush era; the killings orchestrated by white male perpetrators has remained shrouded in obscurity and mystery till this day. The film narrative depicts the saga of Ernest Burkhart (played by Leonardo di Caprio) who is instigated by his uncle William Hale (played by Robert De Niro) to marry an Osage woman, Mollie Kyle (played by Lily Gladstone) in a wealth usurping bid. The miscegenation here is prompted not by federal policies of assimilation but for material acquisition.

*Uncle Hale to Ernest: Well, we mix these families together, and if that estate money flows the right direction, it'll come to us. That's a full blood estate. And she gets the money of the mother Lizzie. Now that's good business there.*

A non-indigenous storytelling, specifically from the vantage point/s of white murderer/s instead of Osage community members (victims) make the narrative complicated and biased. One can question the disavowal of Native epistemology and ontology in the film by pointing out how the Osage characters appear frail or stereotypical compared to the film's white lead characters. Also, by showing graphic scenes of murdered Native women, part of



that violence is normalised. However, the stereotypical representation of the members of Osage community including Native American women may owe something to the film's genre of a Western.

Britannica (Editors, 2025) classifies Western as an American creation "that are set in the American West usually in the period from the 1850s to the end of the 19th century".

Malgorzata Martynuska in her research article, *The Evolution of the Western genre* lists the basic concerns of a Western; "Usually the central plot of a Western is maintaining law and order in the frontier. It is normally rooted in a conflict- good versus bad, virtue versus evil, settlers versus Native Americans" ( Martynuska, 2009, 60). Martynuska concludes that; " In times when the philosophy of political correctness dominates, the Native Americans are no longer cruel savages but likeable characters exterminated by White colonists...Over time, Westerns have been redefined, reinvented and expanded, dismissed and rediscovered. In the late 60s and early 70s revisionist Westerns that questioned the elements of classic Westerns appeared" (Martynuska, 2009, 59).

Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) resonates with the basic features of a Western, set in the past, it exemplifies Manifest Destiny, and the spirit of American expansionism at the cost of native oppression, which through gritty images is often normalised, glorified, and celebrated onscreen. The documentation of Native American Culture in the film is effectively attained through the prism of filmic Orientalism. Eve Mullen, in her work, *Orientalist commercialisations: Tibetan Buddhism in American Popular Film* defines filmic orientalism as "exaggeration made purposefully or not, of Asian traditions and Culture, exaggeration that can be patronizing and damaging to the studied peoples" (Mullen, 1998, 41).

*Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), from the very outset, unfolds as a binary structured discourse; the Osage Indians as a community, rich with easy wealth, juxtaposed against the struggling white working class. Throughout the cinematic discourse, the Natives are exoticised as a people living in a different culture and time zone, believing in Indigenous folklores and rituals, irrational and lazy, the Native women sick and dying of mysterious ailments. One of the Osage men, a character called Henry Roan is suspected of suffering from melancholy which makes him an easy target for elimination (murder) later on. Mollie Kyle, the Osage woman who Ernest Burkhart marries, is diabetic and more acted upon than agential; part of Scorsese's orientalist schema is the depiction of Osage characters as passive recipients of white atrocities.



In spite of Mollie's assertion (*Evil surrounds my heart, And they say I ought to kill these White men who killed my family*); the only two autonomous actions that she engages in, are her recruiting a private investigator to probe the murder of her sister Anna and her personal appeal for help from the President in Washington. However, both these self-relying acts of Mollie are foiled eventually. Hence, Mollie one of the central characters, is granted minimal agency and zero volition by Martin Scorsese, she is a mere victim of her husband's gold digging instincts, slow poisoned by him, Mollie recedes to the background allowing the white male aggressors to propel the story telling forward like a typical Scorsese gangster classic.

Mollie Kyle's agency is thus strictly restricted and in Scorsese's hands she functions as a two-dimensional cardboard character. From the very outset of the film narrative, Scorsese positions himself as an observer to record the Osage culture with a detached interest of an ethnographer; essentialising their accidental discovery of oil while performing a native ritual (burying a calumet) as emblematic of their proximity to Nature. Pronounced as the richest people per capital on Earth, Scorsese supplies a biblical connotation by dubbing them as the chosen people of Chance; thereby hinting at their early doom much like the Jewish people. Throughout the cinematic discourse the Osage people are constructed through the prism of filmic orientalism, they are depicted as a regressive and myth believing community, heavily dependent on primitive ways of healing than modern medicine, confiding in superstitions and omens, having faith in afterlife, and in matrimony not divorcing even after multiple marriages for fear/the sake of tradition. Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other - How Anthropology makes its object* defines the idea of Time Anthropology as something that "strives to constitute its own object - the savage, the primitive, the Other. It is by diagnosing Anthropology's temporal discourse that one rediscovers the obvious, namely that there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, political act" (Fabian, 1983, 1). The Osage people in *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) are similarly constructed from a colonist's gaze: they are stereotyped as primitive people living in a different temporality, believing in a non-Christian, pagan religion and thriving under a primordial culture. An example of this orientalist construction is witnessed in the pronouncement of Ernest's scheming Uncle William Hale:



*Time will run out. This wealth will run dry, drier than the seven years of famine that plagued the Pharaohs of Old. They're a sick people - They're kindly people, big hearted people but they're sickly.*

Such essentialist construction of a community exhibits how cultural stereotypes are reinforced through cinematic depictions in popular Culture. *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) begins with a familiar montage in both monochrome and colour, snippets and images of Osage community members arranged like in an anthropological study, an exoticised Culture re-produced cinematically for the consumption of the West.

In *Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism in Literature and Film - Beyond East and West*, the authors emphasise that "Hollywood Films depicting foreign Cultures have invariably articulated otherness through a repetition of Clichés that paradoxically encapsulate a desire to engage this otherness" (Gabriel and Wilson, 2021, 7). In *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) Scorsese cinematically portrays a Native culture through standard cultural clichés that succeeding othering and stereotyping the Osage people, thereby justifying the atrocities committed against them as necessary evil.

*Colonial Amnesia: The Overlook Hotel (The Shining), a silent reproach to the unacknowledged crimes of History?*

Discussing the transitioning of an Art form through adaptation, Greg Jenkins in *Stanley Kubrick and the Art of Adaptation*, observes how "The Shining is perforated with technical and artistic deficiencies...the film begins with a constantly shifting aerial view of Jack's yellow Volkswagen as it motors along a thin, winding ribbon, mountain road...Differences between the paired texts, modest but meaningful, are announced instantly. Jack's journey to the hotel is not depicted in the novel, which begins in medias res with his job interview...We are likewise quickly made aware of the hotel's intimidating size, and of its apparent remoteness from the reassuring hubbub of country life" (Jenkins, 1997,7). Jack Torrance, his wife Wendy, and son Danny arrive at the Overlook hotel where Jack is entrusted to take charge of the hotel as its winter caretaker. But soon, one finds that there is more to what the naked eye meets, both Jack and the hotel have histories that twine and morph into each other eventually. While touring the hotel's Colorado Lounge, the Torrances witness a lot of Indian artefacts and motifs. They are told that the hotel has had an 'illustrious past' and the hotel manager, Stuart Ullman casually mentions that the hotel was constructed on an Indian burial ground. Jenkins notes, "Ullman's



revelation that the Overlook was erected on an Indian burial ground is not found in the source and the reference is either an intentional 'red herring' or a solecism in the film's rhetoric" (Jenkins, 1997, 79). On the other hand, sometime later, Wendy drops a hint about Jack's destructive behaviour in the past and his chronic alcoholism. *The Shining* (1980) foregrounds a core sub-text that pro-actively addresses Native American Genocide and the role of white American expansionists in it. Vincent Jaunas in his, *Inside the interpretative maze of The Shining*) states; "In this labyrinthine film, each sequence, each scene, is a 'semantic knot' which encourages spectators to multiple viewing hypotheses" (Jaunas, 2018, 80). He further elaborates how; "the horror of *The Shining* is not a horror of the hidden, but a horror of the too visible, by which viewers feel dread when faced with an apparent surplus of information they are invited to decipher; for instance a can of baking powder branded with a logo displaying a Native American is clearly visible in the background shelves that leads Bill Blakemore to interpret the film as a complex network of signs referring to the genocide of Native Americans" (Jaunas, 2018, 83).

Reviewing *The Shining* (1980) for the *San Francisco chronicle* Bill Blakemore opines; "The *Shining* is not really about the murders at the Overlook hotel. It is about the murder of a race - the race of Native American - and the consequences of that murder. If you are sceptical about this, consider the calumet baking powder cans with their Indian chief logo that Kubrick placed carefully in the two food-locker scenes. Consider the Indian motifs that decorate the hotel, and the way they serve as background in many of the key scenes. *The Shining* is also explicitly about America's general inability to admit to the gravity of the genocide of the Indians - or more exactly, its ability to 'overlook' that genocide. Not only is the site called the Overlook Hotel with its Overlook Maze, but one of the key scenes takes place at the July 4th Ball. That date, too, has particular relevance to American Indians. That's why Kubrick made a movie in which the American audience sees signs of Indians in almost every frame, yet never meets an actual Indian. The film's very relationship to its audience is thus part of the mirrors that this movie full of mirrors holds up to the nature of its audience" (Blakemore, 1987).

Both *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) and *The Shining* (1980) visually allude to a Native American ceremonial peace pipe that they hold ritualistically sacred. (Calumet is a peace pipe).



Let us re-examine the following statement of Stuart Ullman, the hotel manager from the film;

*The site is supposed to be located on an Indian burial ground, and I believe they actually had to repel a few Indian attacks as they were building it.*

The scene where a river of blood spills out of the elevator shaft is perhaps a graphic reminder of the horrors of this genocide. To borrow another observation of Blakemore, "The blood squeezes out in spite of the fact that the red doors are kept firmly shut within their surrounding Indian artwork embellished frames. We never hear the rushing blood. It is a mute nightmare. It is the blood upon which this nation, like most nations, was built, as was the Overlook hotel" (Blakemore, 1987). That *The Shining*(1980)is grounded on American imperialism and the history of brutal violence that American pioneers committed against the original inhabitants of the land is further corroborated by the intentional colour palette, specifically when most of the characters choose to wear outfits featuring red, white and blue. (Symbolically alluding to the American Flag). In the latter part of the film, when Jack eventually transforms into the perpetrator he chooses these prominent colours; thereby reinforcing *The Shining* (1980) as an allegory of white American imperialism. The cinematic discourse delves deep into the thematic concerns of racial violence against not just the Indians but also African Americans, strikingly portrayed when Chef Dick Hallorann, the only black character (in fact the only friend to Wendy and Danny), is murdered by Jack. The comparison between the persecuted status of Dick Hallorann, an African American and Native Indians is symbolically achieved through a rudimentary mise-en-scene: The can of baking powder (with the logo of a Native Indian) is placed in the same frame as Dick Hallorann. Clever dialogue too is a crucial accompaniment to such racist imagery; for instance, in a scene at the bar, Jack carelessly banter about the 'white man's burden', a poignant reference to Rudyard Kipling's colonial ideology.

In terms of fidelity in dealing with the hypo text, Kubrick is a bad translator. In this regard, Greg Jenkins concludes that; "Doubt-less Kubrick's most striking innovation is the murder of Dick, who, in the novel, has his cheekbone shattered by Jack's mallet, but who does survive. One might wonder why, rhetorically, a modestly heroic character- a man gifted with clairvoyance, which ought to warn him- would be imported from across the country in a rescue attempt, only to die pre-emptively in an ambush" (Jenkins, 1997, 102). The only clue to this



first real murder in the Overlook (the rest are described/narrated like the fact that Overlook is built on a burial ground or the fact that Grady, the previous care taker had killed his family) is the startling fact that Dick Hallorann is a black man (and one who genuinely wished to save Wendy and Danny). Therefore, Stanley Kubrick as a white American director deliberately violates the source material to articulate urgent concerns like Native genocide, racial violence and the complicity of white Americans in it. Kubrick also makes a striking connection between Native American history of the past and the current racial divide (the black & white dynamics), in contemporary America.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explores two Hollywood directors and their attempts at representing minority experience and culture to examine whose work stands out in terms of authenticity and genuine articulation. While Martin Scorsese in *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) attempts an honest portrayal of a segment of Native American history, however, his rendition severely restricts native agency compared to Stanley Kubrick whose classic *The Shining* (1980) drastically deviates from its source text to address upfront the issues of genocide, racial violence and atrocities committed on minorities by the racially dominant in American history. From the vantage point of filmic orientalism which cinematically constructs an East/West binary in depicting Eastern cultures in Hollywood, both the film narratives have been analysed to reach a certain conclusion.



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