

THE BONES - Thoughts on Colonialism

I see THE BONES as a bit of a bait and switch.

At first glance, the film is a character driven adventure story about a passionate group of people scattered around the world, embroiled and enmeshed in the International Dinosaur Bone Trade. They are all at odds with each other. Big egos and globe trotting all couched in the fantastical world of dinosaurs.

It's tantalizing. For many folks, the first reaction when they hear about the film is, "Wait, what?? That's a thing? There are people buying and selling dinosaur bones?"

But once you scratch the surface, it quickly becomes clear that, at its core, it's actually a much bigger and more profound story about colonial legacy and the colonial entanglements of science and commerce.

The history of paleontology is inextricably linked to colonialism. A hundred years ago, adventurers from the West traveled to far flung parts of the world to discover, collect and bring home million year old fossils. Some sold them. Some used them to make their names as famous scientists or bolster the reputation of museums and other institutions in Western metropolises like New York, London and Berlin. And some did a bit of all of it.

THE BONES taps into the current zeitgeist by casting light on our global moment of Colonial reckoning.

Institutions in the West that have made their names with countless artifacts, art works, sculptures and religious articles that were plundered from former colonies and displayed in famous museums such as the Louvre, the British Museum or American Museum of Natural History are being taken to task and called upon to return them. And to acknowledge and rectify past abuses.

It is no different with fossils.

But while there are other films out there about the repatriation of art works and cultural artifacts in which the question of theft and ownership are brought into focus, there's something different about THE BONES. The moment you start looking at fossils that are 66, 100 or 250 million years old, you bring into question the very NOTION of ownership. Can anyone really *own* the dinosaurs?

The idea of trading fossils on the open market, black market or art market or using them to garner academic accolades misses the greater lesson those bones have to teach us — the fleeting nature of our existence on earth. They expose our myopia. And radically decenter human history.

Like the dinosaurs, we too will disappear.

And perhaps their plight 66 million years ago holds clues for how we can possibly survive the current mass extinction we are living through...or at least stave it off for a while.

THE BONES is built around several intertwined stories tracing veins of history from over a hundred years ago to how they play out in the present day.

One of the stories begins with the legacy of Roy Chapman Andrews and the American Museum of Natural History's famous expeditions to Mongolia where the first dinosaur nests were discovered and brought to New York over a hundred years ago. At the time, Andrews signed a contract with the Mongolian government to eventually return the bones. To this day, they are still squirreled away in the vast bone rooms in the catacombs beneath the museum.

Fast forward a hundred years and Bolor Minjin, one of Mongolia's first female paleontologists is on a mission to reverse the Colonial legacy of pillaging-in-the-name-of-science. After she discovers a rare stolen Mongolian Tarbosaurus Bataar skeleton up for auction on the floor of a prominent New York auction house for over a million dollars, she, with the help of the Mongolian government, stop the sale, "arrest" the dinosaur and eventually get it repatriated Mongolia — the first time fossils were ever repatriated anywhere in the world.

Bolor's true mission, however, is not just repatriating fossils, but returning the knowledge that was systematically stolen from her country. Her's is a David and Goliath story in which she takes on a global market by setting out to educate children and nomads about their scientific cultural legacy and to train the next generation of Paleontologists to uncover the mysteries of life on earth. Ten years later, she has actually teamed up with the American Museum of Natural History to train young Mongolian scientists for the first time in over a hundred years.

Through her effort and others like her, the centers of scientific inquiry are slowly (very slowly) shifting away from the traditional colonial centers of power and becoming dispersed as former colonies attempt to build museums and institutions to discover, house and study fossils and the big questions of life. But this capacity building is a monumental task.

It's complicated by the fact that the legacy of Colonialism is inseparable from the birth and explosion of Capitalism. In the world today, colonial excavations have morphed into both a legal market for fossils as well as an illicit black market.

Those fossils, whether sold on the black market or the high end art market, are transformed into objects of value; commodities, plucked from their broader contexts. The glitter of the auction houses obscures and hinders the aim of scientists who try use them to piece together entire lost ecosystems burried in the recesses of deep time. It's these ecosystems that they hope may hold the key to how we might survive the current

mass extinction we are living through.

From Nizar Ibrahim, the Moroccan/German wunderkind, on a race against time in Morocco to save as many fossils as possible for science before they disappear onto the black market to Jingmai O'Conner, the brilliant and unconventional Chinese/Irish paleontologist trying to convince farmers in the Montana badlands to forego possibly millions of dollars and donate fossils found on their land to museums, a life and death struggle emerges.

On the other side of the fence we have fossil dealers like Francois Escuillier in France, who simply sees himself as a realist trying to survive in a capitalist world. Or auction experts like Iocopo Briano who sees high end public auctions as a way to undermine the power of the black market. Or the army of poor Moroccan fossil diggers who have not other options but to sell fossils to feed their families and survive.

The aspirations of the characters at the center of THE BONES quickly slip into grey zones, where there are no simple answers. They find themselves batted around at the mercy of powerful colliding forces, such as deep time, colonial history, late stage capitalism, mass extinction, personal ambition and poverty. Just tiny insignificant creatures trying to navigate the vastness of time and space by looking rocks and star dust.

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