

Multimedia Review

Etched in Bone

MARTIN THOMAS & BÉATRICE BIJON (directors, producers)

Canberra, Australia, Red Lily Productions (production company)

Duration 72 mins

DVD, 2018

An eight-year endeavour by Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon, *Etched in Bone* is a thoughtful and intimate exploration of the repatriation of human remains from the Smithsonian back to the Aboriginal community of Gunbalanya near Australia's northern edge in Arnhem Land. The documentary traces the history of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to this area, during which hundreds of human bones were stolen from their resting places and sent overseas. While *Etched in Bone* takes on the larger critical issue of the repatriation of Aboriginal human remains, the majority of this film emphasises the journey of community members as they endeavour to put their ancestors to rest in their home Country.

The opening scene depicts a smoking ceremony being performed on hard drives containing camera footage, which will protect the film's viewers. We are then guided to where human remains are traditionally placed. This sets the tone for a film that is acutely self-aware of its own production. Indeed, central characters and other community members are depicted watching and reacting to footage from the film. This self-reflexivity is particularly appropriate here, as it parallels the emphasis on the process of repatriation itself.

Etched in Bone is roughly divided into two acts. The first provides context and intermittent narration, while the rest of the film is largely observational and follows community members from Australia to Washington DC and back. The filmmakers incisively draw on archival footage from *National Geographic* to outline the removal of human remains in Arnhem Land in 1948. This theft was led by Frank Setzler, the head curator of anthropology at the Smithsonian, though the film also implicates iconic historical figures such as Alexander Graham Bell. This background is contextualised within broader histories of Indigenous land dispossession and race science. Furthermore, the film outlines deeper colonial histories of dehumanisation, including the 1904 World's Fair, during which Indigenous people were placed into human zoos for public display. This section culminates in a discussion of the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, though the

film tempers this victory by emphasising the crucial fact that it did not apply to overseas human remains.

Whereas Thornton and Gabrielsson's (2007) documentary *Dark Science* focuses on the colonial history of Western race science, the heart of this film is revealed in its final chapter about returning home. After travelling to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian to perform a ceremony with the ancestors' bones, community members bring them back to Gunbalanya. Here, the film slows down and patiently emphasises cultural protocols around welcoming ancestors home and placing them to rest. This includes long takes of Gunbalanya elder Jacob Nayinggul leading community members in talking to the bones, coating them in ochre, and preparing them within paperbark wrapping. Importantly, the filmmakers trace the ways in which such knowledge is transmitted between generations, as Nayinggul guides younger community members on the specific details of the process.

In this film, Thomas and Bijon synthesise their two acts in the conclusion, intersplicing archival and contemporary footage. Indeed, perhaps their most significant achievement is overcoming the artificial divisions between past/present and traditional/modern dichotomy that abound in most outsider representations of Indigenous Australians (Ginsburg 2011). Furthermore, they cogently engage a painful topic without leaving the viewer with Aboriginal suffering or victimhood as the primary theme (Sutton 2009). Indeed, the film suggests a cautious optimism regarding the power of community-led initiatives to attain some measure of justice. Furthermore, *Etched in Bone* joins current larger efforts around the repatriation of Indigenous Australian material objects and human remains, especially in relation to British institutions, which have the most numerous collections. Significantly, the largest repatriation of Aboriginal human remains was recently initiated from Germany in April 2019, in which 53 ancestors were returned to their home communities in Australia.

Throughout *Etched in Bone*, the filmmakers successfully integrate a sensitive attention to broad settler colonial legacies of dispossession alongside an eminently human engagement with Gunbalanya community members' personal experiences regarding ancestral theft and their long journey home.

References

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