

Mississippi Burning

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Judy Richardson

In my home, we rarely talked about racism. My mother was a proud woman who, mistakenly, believed that she could protect her children from absorbing the restrictions of discrimination by simply not discussing them. There were, however, a few exceptions. Her remembrance of *Birth of a Nation* was one of these. Even years later, as she told me about the intense shame she felt after seeing the film, the rage was still present.

The film depicts the Klan as the saviors of white womanhood against the ravages of the black male during reconstruction. Interestingly, because of its advanced techniques, the film is often used by film schools as a teaching tool. However, my mother did not notice these new techniques. She remembered only that she and her date left the theater—and its primarily white audience—as quickly as possible, and with their eyes averted. The year was 1914.

Thereafter followed years of movie stereotypes: the black male as stupid and lazy, a la Stepin Fetchit and the black female as fawning maid and white mother figure, a la Hattie McDaniel. Now, seventy-five years after *Birth of a Nation*, Hollywood has become more sophisticated. Certainly, we are still bombarded by images of black male muggers and black female whores. But we are now also subjected to a different kind of racism. The studios have discovered the box office potential of human rights-related themes. But that poses a problem: what to do with the black characters who led and continue to lead these movements? The answer: put them so far in the background that they won't disrupt a white audience's perceived comfort level. And so we have films like *Cry Freedom* and *A World Apart*, both about South Africa's black-led anti-apartheid movement, but both focusing on the trials and tribulations of white protagonists.

This denial of the role of blacks in their own struggle reaches new heights

Judy Richardson is on leave from the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice and working on the second series of Eyes on the Prize, a television series (with related educational materials) on America's civil rights years. She served as content advisor on the first series.

in *Mississippi Burning*. Based on the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964, the film, with incredible double-jointedness, manages almost totally to ignore the movement (and thus the heroism of the local African-American communities throughout Mississippi), while at the same time lifting the FBI to heroic proportions. As a staff worker with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the early 1960s, I was based in Greenwood, Mississippi when we moved our national office there for the summer. I found both portrayals to be not offily insulting, but a gross distortion of history.

The film characterizes the local African-American community as passive victims of racist violence who simply cower or kneel in prayer whenever they are attacked. For example, the film depicts an evening gathering at an African-American church. As the participants leave the church, they are brutally beaten by Klansmen. With much good sense, everyone tries to escape. Everyone, that is, except the young black youth who has been set up as the strongest black male image in the film, even beyond his father. The youth exits the church and, with no Klansmen in evidence, does not run, but kneels in prayer. He is quickly found by a Klansman and clubbed into unconsciousness.

Since the filmmakers are intent upon disregarding the Movement, the reason for the attack is not explained. No mention is made at the church meeting of voter registration activity. The viewer could easily assume that black Mississippians were routinely attacked in 1964 for simply going to church. This omission not only abuses history, it lessens the dramatic impact of the scene, which, one would assume, should have been the primary concern of the filmmakers.

Alan Parker, the film's director, has been widely quoted as saying, "The two heroes had to be white. That is a reflection of our society as much as of the film industry. At this point in time, it could not have been made any other way." That quote is based on two false assumptions: first, that Hollywood should continue to play to the lowest

common denominator of the broad American viewing audience. Certainly, racism will keep some white filmgoers away from a film with black leads. But many other whites—and viewers of other ethnic groups (whom Mr. Parker seems to have dismissed without so much as a by-your-leave)—will still buy those tickets if the story is dramatically engaging.

Second, the quote assumes that films only reflect the racism of our society. In fact, they help to perpetuate it. When the primary African-American images, on both our film and television screens, are of pimps and prostitutes (as was true even in an otherwise lovely film, *Crossing Delancey*), one wonders whether Mr. Parker takes us all for fools. He reminds me of the southern restaurant owner of the early 1960s who professed that he would love to desegregate his lunch counter, but, alas, his customers just weren't ready.

Though the abuse of African-Americans in leading roles is a real concern, the stereotypical portrayals are even worse. As Barbara Reynolds, an African-American columnist for *USA Today* notes, "In *Mississippi Burning* blacks mostly pray, hide and sing, which could cause generations of young people to think blacks were hiding or sleeping under a magnolia bush while human rights battles roared around them."

The African-Americans I worked with in the southern civil rights movement were courageous, often putting their lives on the line to effect change. As opposed to the cowering images of blacks presented in this film, I am reminded of the Fannie Lou Hamers, the Amzie Moores, the Johnson and the Hudson families, and countless other local African-American families in Mississippi who offered leadership and protection when it was they, not the civil rights staff workers, who had the most to lose. They were the bulwark of that movement.

In the film African-Americans are pictured as mumbling with heads down, afraid to talk to anyone about the disappearance of the three missing civil rights workers. In fact, in his book *The River of No Return*, (Morrow, 1973) Cleve Sellers, a SNCC staff worker in Mississippi, tells a very different story.

He related travelling with two carloads of civil rights workers into Neshoba County right after they learned that Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman were missing. Sellers talks about the Jones family (a fictitious name, for their protection), which housed the staff workers. Mr. Jones was one of the local African-American leaders involved in voter registration work in the county:

Mr. Jones, who lived with his wife, son and two daughters, was expecting us. His wife had prepared a big meal of greens, cornbread, buttermilk, candied yams and ham hocks. While they ate, they told us what they knew about the church-burning and the missing men...

"Y'all welcome to stay here and search as long as you want, though. We got everything set up for you."

Mr. Jones told us that he had organized a twenty-four hour guard for the house.

"I'll be sitting on the front porch with my shotgun every night and there'll be a man in the barn behind the house with a rifle."

But the Jones family was not alone in their bravery:

The assistance we received from a group of black sharecroppers who lived in and around Philadelphia was crucial. Each day these men would leave home...they would spread out across the countryside searching for places where the three missing bodies might be buried. These men were native Mississippians who had no illusions about the perilous nature of their task. They knew that they were risking their lives and the lives of their wives and children by helping us.

"We gotta do it," one of the men told me one afternoon. "Somehow, it might make things better for the young kids. It's already too late for us old folks."

These are hardly the frightened "I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' babies" image perpetuated in the film. These were people who consistently stood strong long before the cameras arrived with the white volunteers of Freedom Summer, and long after they left.

Although I am presently on leave to work on the second series of *Eyes on the Prize*, I have worked for the past five years under Rev. Benjamin Chavis at the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. One of our projects focuses on the children who live in New York City's welfare hotels. I have watched them view *Eyes on the Prize*, with its powerful black images of leadership and courage, from the unsung heroines and heroes like Unita Blackwell to the more famous leaders such as Martin Luther King. I've seen

the pride they feel. When you're surrounded by images of powerlessness and degradation, it is essential, particularly when one is young, to know that other realities exist.

Certainly as we made the first, six-hour series of *Eyes on the Prize*, and as we produce the second, eight-hour series, we are ever mindful of the need to show the courage of every level of our community, both African-American and white. This is why *Mississippi Burning* enraged me so. They robbed all of us—but particularly the African-American community—of one of our greatest moments of unity and strength. And if you don't know you did it before, you won't understand that you can do it again.

But there is another reason why *Mississippi Burning* should be faulted. The film not only emasculates the power of the black community, it also plays the FBI as the cavalry, out-Ramboing Rambo. The reality was that FBI agents were famous in the movement for only taking notes, even while they witnessed brutal beatings in clear violation of federal statutes. We also knew that when you informed the FBI you were very likely informing the local Klan chapter. Many of the FBI's southern agents (at least the film was correct on this score) were culled from the crop of local white sheriffs, who ran their counties like minor fiefdoms.

Bob Moses, then director of SNCC's Mississippi project, noted that Herbert Lee, the local NAACP head with whom Moses had been working on voter registration, was killed by a white Mississippi state legislator. The incident occurred in Amite County in 1961. Louis Allen, an African-American resident of the county, who witnessed the murder, at first gave false evidence out of fear. He then told Moses he had lied, but would tell the truth at a hearing only if he could be protected. Moses pleaded with the Justice Department to protect Allen, but, according to Moses, was told that "there was no way possible to provide protection for a witness at such a hearing and that probably, in any case, it didn't matter what he testified because the legislator would be found innocent." Shortly thereafter a deputy sheriff broke Allen's jaw with a flashlight because, said Allen, the FBI had told the sheriff of Allen's desire to identify the legislator. On January 31, 1964 Louis Allen was shot dead, three weeks before he was to move to Chicago for protection. His killer was never found.

During the summer of 1964, I was one of the operators of the WATS tele-

phone line that kept us in twenty-four hour contact with the many movement field offices throughout Mississippi. When we called the local FBI offices in Memphis or New Orleans (no offices existed in Mississippi until after the three workers disappeared) to report incidents of violence during voter registration work, we were met not only by disinterest, but by outright hostility. Let us not forget that the FBI at the time was directed by J. Edgar Hoover, a man who thought all civil rights activity was a communist conspiracy, a man who did his best to destroy—not protect—the movement. And his agents reflected that attitude.

We cannot, as filmmakers, make heroes out of anti-heroes and expect to get away with it. Brent Staples, an African-American editor with *The New York Times*, noted: "The weight of *Mississippi Burning's* distortions crushes truth underfoot...This story was savaged, it seems, in service of a clearly reactionary and outmoded idea: that white Americans would shudder at the idea of heroes not cast in their images." I think that all right-thinking people should let Hollywood know that they are not the racist bigots Hollywood takes them to be...and that message should begin with *Mississippi Burning*. □

Eyes on the Prize

Educational materials are available related to the television series "Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965." These include: *A Guide to the Series* edited by Robert Hayden, \$1.50; *A Sourcebook* edited by Steven Cohen, an anthology suitable for grade school and high school, \$3.95; *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* by Juan Williams, a 305-page book that includes 125 photographs, \$24.95 and *Eyes on the Prize: A Reader and Study Guide* edited by Claborne Carson, David Garrow et al, a college level anthology, \$10.95. Please add 5% for shipping and handling.

Videocassettes of the series are also available for educational and institutional use.

To order or for more information write: The Civil Rights Project, Inc., 486 Shawmut Ave., Boston, MA 02118.