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## Review

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# FILM REVIEWS

## Mississippi Burning

Produced by Frederick Zollo and Robert F. Colesberry; directed by Alan Parker; written by Chris Gerolmo; cinematography by Peter Biziou; production design by Philip Harrison and Geoffrey Kirkland; edited by Gerry Hambling; music by Trevor Jones; starring Gene Hackman, Willem Dafoe, Frances McDormand, Brad Dourif, R. Lee Ermey, Gailard Sartain and Stephen Tabolowsky. Color, 127 minutes. An Orion Pictures release and an Orion Homevideo release.

Once content to scavenge only the soundtracks and styles of the 1960s, Hollywood in the 1980s has lately taken to replaying (albeit selectively) the political conflicts of America's most overwrought decade. Each of the era's two signature issues—the Vietnam War and civil rights—has been called up for a second tour of duty. If Oliver Stone's *Platoon* was the touchstone for the former, Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* has become the *Time*-certified landmark for the latter. As pop cultural fodder, a civil rights cycle might prove even more exploitable. The debate over Vietnam remains permanently divisive, maddeningly unresolved. The fight for civil rights is a grander, clearer story, a tale of black and white in moral no less than racial terms.

No wonder artists and academics have embraced the era with such fervor. Spurred on by the success in 1987 of Henry Hampton's splendid PBS series *Eye on the Prize*, books such as Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* and Steven Whitfield's *A Death in the Delta: The Life and Times of Emmet Till* celebrate and reclaim the heroes of the last great American revolution. From boom boxes 'rap 'n' roll' tunes thank Miss Rosa Parks and on afternoon TV Whoopi Goldberg takes complacent black youth back to their pre-*Cosby* Show status. On screen, meanwhile, John Waters's *Hairspray* and Taylor Hackford's *Everybody's All Ameri-*

*can* recast the battles from a campy streetsmart and corny whitebread perspective, respectively.

*Mississippi Burning* hits the crest of the wave. Its real life referent is a once-notorious, now-forgotten case, the murders of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, near Philadelphia, Mississippi, during the Freedom Summer of 1964. The representative power of their martyrdom and the callous complicity of the local law, broadcast on the evening news, helped to cement the nationwide revulsion to Jim Crow that led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act later that year. (The full story is well-told in Seth Cagin and Philip Dray's *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*.)

A carefully worded disclaimer in the end credits explains that the film was "inspired by actual events in the South during the 1960s. The characters, however, are fictitious and do not depict real people either living or dead." In another kind of Hollywood shuffle, then, the filmmakers seek to patch into the emotional currents of history without taking the heat for historical misrepresentation. Given the almost reassuring incredulity of the teenagers who comprise today's movie audience (to them, this vision of America is as remote and unlikely as *Alien Nation*), the recovery and appropriation of so crucial an epoch, even in attenuated, 'capsulized' form, demands a certain fidelity to the record—especially if there's more license than poetry in the piece.

The film begins promisingly. On a hot summer night, a caravan of vehicles pursues a lone car down the snaky turns of a deserted backwoods road. It is a stark and spooky sequence, the crisp efficiency of the textbook film grammar—isolating long shots of the vehicular pursuit and involving close-ups of the three tense youths inside their car—suits the ruthless suddenness of the crime. In jarring cross-cuts, the expected roust and verbal abuse becomes a bloodbath at close quarters.

The next image frames the signposts of a suppressed memory: the white and 'colored' designations on two water fountains. Parker's leisurely take accentuates the quiet impact of that tableau, a vision in its own way no less shattering than the stalking and killings.

As in 1964, the suspicious disappearance of two white kids galvanizes the dormant federal government to forgo states rights. Into the sultry swampland come the forces of justice and order, the mismatched FBI agents Anderson (Gene Hackman) and Ward (Willem Dafoe). Anderson is a folksy, job-of-work type, not above a race joke of his own (his one-liner on baseball merges to national pastimes: "It's the only game where a black man can wave a stick at a white man without starting a riot"); Ward is a by-the-book transfer from the Kennedy Justice Department, a bespectacled zealot who, like Mississippi, has four eyes but sometimes can't see. In the symbolic search to find where the bodies are buried, the *federales* can be counted to dredge up more than the Mississippi mud.

To a background of local color and a gospel soundtrack, the mechanics of the buddy film whirl into gear—the familiar tango between the avuncular pragmatist and the callow idealist. Ward proves his stupidity—it can't be mere naiveté—by edging up beside a hapless black in a segregated diner and thus making him a target of choice for Klan retribution; Anderson proves his mettle (and egalitarianism) by dueling, verbally and otherwise, with bad ol' boy cops and poolroom rednecks. After a ritual but still effective outburst of slapping and fisticuffs, the partners come to the ordained balancing act of sensibilities and skills.

Parker, who trashed Turkey in *Midnight Express*, depicts Mississippi as a land brightened mainly by the burning crosses and gasoline explosions that showcase cinematographer Peter Biziou's night-for-night chiaroscuro. The scorched earth policy makes for some great visuals—



crosses aflame, farms afire, churches exploding in holy tongues of yellow—but early on the film takes on the inevitable trajectory of a teen body count movie. After the authentically chilling opening, the depredations just keep on comin' at ya. Firebombings, castrations, lynchings, wife-beating—the denizens of Jessup County have the innovative resourcefulness of Freddy Krueger in full dungeon.

Thankfully, all this local color is truly local. Parker had the good sense not to compromise sense of place. The almost lost art of location work yields dividends here, lending a persuasive verisimilitude to its more outlandish liberties and plot twists. The red dirt of the marshland, the dilapidated shacks and farms strewn with animal carcasses, the courthouses and storefronts of small-town Mississippi, the thick atmosphere of the humid South—this is definitely not Toronto.

The key to what is, after all, a murder mystery is the conscience-stricken wife (Francis McDermott) of a 'po' white trash' deputy (Brad Dourif), who is the trigger man. Dourif's psycho/'cracker' screen persona readily identifies him as the perpetrator and logically disqualifies him as McDermott's mate. If this is the kind of town where a girl marries the first guy that makes her smile, it's hard to imagine Dourif as a high school cut-up—or why this sensitive, intelligent woman has stuck so long to a man so brutal and bigoted.

Historically, the film is muddled enough to garnish the kind of 'controversial' reputation that pays off at the box office. This should go with-

out saying, but it was the Justice Department, not the FBI, that finally insured the desegregation of public facilities in the Deep South, that obliterated the separate-and-unequal signs from the washrooms of every bus depot and gas station throughout the backcountry—which is why Bobby Kennedy's portrait, not J. Edgar Hoover's, shares with Martin Luther King a place of honor in the homes of so many southern blacks.

True, the FBI did open a field office in Mississippi to investigate the murders, but the agency was always more concerned, as Jimmy Breslin once noted, with pinkos handing out leaflets than with civil rights violations or organized crime. Catering to the law enforcement sympathies of a generation weaned on *America's Most Wanted*, *Mississippi Burning* gets the inter-agency hierarchy exactly backwards. The film seems intermittently aware of its duplicity—Hackman makes passing reference to Hoover's kinship with the Klansmen—but these straight-shooting, gray-suited feds are the Good Guys come to clean up the town.

Quite unintentionally, Parker portrays them as an invading army—presumptuous, righteous, and pushy—whom the indigenous population might have good reason to resent. Dafoe's humorless D.C. bureaucrat is a typical big-spending liberal. When the local motel manager tells him the FBI is bad for business, he buys the whole shebang; when the FBI team balloons to dozens of agents, he rents a movie theater for their central office. The choice of venue is more than appropriate.

As Hollywood social conscious-

ness, *Mississippi Burning* makes one yearn for the direct thematics of a Stanley Kramer melodrama. The first half of the film shows southern lawmen perverting the law. This is bad. The second half of the film shows federal lawmen perverting the law. This is good. That the force righting civil wrongs is Hoover's FBI is not the worst confusion. It is that they do so by recourse to the very same vigilante methods that the Klan embraces. There is even a parallel castration motif that links, without apparent irony, the FBI with the KKK. Reenacting a backwoods emasculation by the Klan, the FBI imports a black agent to coerce information, via straight razor, from a kidnapped white mayor. Neither the mayor nor the audience knows his 'real' official identity. The casual cynicism with which Parker and screenwriter Gerolmo exploit this blood-stained bugaboo of the white imagination is astonishing: the film-makers' own kinship here is not with *Light in August* but *Porky's*.

The film's only unqualified pleasure is watching Gene Hackman work. As seamless a performer as the screen has ever seen, he brushes aside Willem Dafoe like a gnat; only Francis McDermott holds her own. Whether courting a reluctant witness, talking downhome with the boys, dallying with the girls in a beauty parlor, or spinning out a double-edged race joke, Hackman demands attention.

Oh, the blacks. They're background. Noble victims, holy sufferers, rocks of ages, and very uncolorful 'coloreds.' Just as the Steve Biko bio-pic *Cry Freedom* managed to be more about a white journalist than a black revolutionary, *Mississippi Burning* manages to make civil rights a battle between two white law enforcement agencies, one southern and local, the other northern and federal. The struggle for civil rights, the citizen's crusade that Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney died in, serves basically as a MacGuffin for buddy-film bonding and FX pyrotechnics. In the press kit notes for the film, penned by Parker himself, the director speaks of the actual murders as only "the starting point for our film," though he wants to show his heart is in the right place: "Hopefully, one day someone will also make a film about the importance of these young men's lives."

It could happen. The inspiring morality play of civil rights and southern wrongs meets the demands of Hollywood liberalism and downtown demographics, but the main source of its appeal is that the racial

*Mississippi Burning*





past is a whole lot more comforting than the racial present. The King years had purpose and promise; the post-civil-rights era of the Eighties is all confusion and dismay. Causes and characters have changed and not for the better: from voting rights and lunch counter sit-ins to minority set asides and admissions quotas, from James Baldwin and Rosa Parks to Janet Cooke and Tawana Brawley.

For white northern liberals, the evaporation of hissable southern villains and the prominence of skin-deep tension in their own backyards have been similarly disconcerting and depressing. Today no Bostonian would presume to lecture an Atlanta businessman — or a Philadelphia, Mississippi deputy for that matter — on matters of racial sensitivity. Thus, to address the question of race in America, filmmakers go back in time to the racist past or across in space to the apartheid of South Africa. The camera is focused anywhere but on the present. In this sense, the obsession with paramilitary racists and neo-Nazi skinheads in *Betrayed*, *Dead-Bang*, *Talk Radio*, and *True Believer* is a soothing indulgence. Here at least there are again no shadings of gray. It is telling that among American filmmakers only Spike Lee regularly casts an unblinking eye on the inter-(and intra-) racial troubles of the late Eighties.

In the end, though, the decisive failure of Parker's backward looking tribute is not that it averts its eyes from the fire this time, but that it closes them to the true catalysts of the combustion last time. A meditation on the Deep South by William Styron quotes a pertinent insight from Ralph Ellison. "Southern whites cannot walk, talk, sing, conceive of laws of justice, think of sex, love, the family, or freedom without responding to the presence of the Negroes," wrote Ellison. It is a measure of Alan Parker's distance both from the American dilemma of race and the southern experience of it that he comes forth with a civil rights epic that screens out half of the necessary equation.

Thomas Doherty

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## Working Girl

*Produced by Douglas Wick; directed by Mike Nichols; written by Kevin Wade; cinematography by Michael Ballhaus; edited by Sam O'Steen; production design by Patricia von Brandenstein; music by Rob Mounsey and Carly Simon; starring Harrison Ford, Sigourney Weaver, Melanie Griffith, Alec Baldwin, Joan Cusack, Philip Bosco and Nora Dunn. Color, 113 minutes. A 20th Century Fox release.*

From the opening aerial shot around the Statue of Liberty and a breathless high-speed glide across the harbor from Staten Island to Manhattan, Mike Nichols's *Working Girl* is airborne, urbane, and rat-a-tat quick. This screwball comedy for the Eighties is timed so well and works so effortlessly that it seems unfair to pick on it for its politics. Since this movie purports to be *about* the deceptiveness of appearances, however, it seems appropriate to look beneath its dazzling boy-meets-girl surface to see just what kind of ideology is being perpetrated.

The movie raises two issues central to the Reagan-Bush era of kinder insider trading and gentler sexual discrimination, then wraps them up in romance ribbons: class and gender become topical fodder for formula. A dulcet and moralistic yuppie bedtime story, *Working Girl* demonstrates nothing so much as Nichols's unerring feel for his times. This is a man with his finger on the proverbial pulse, who directed the recent hit Broadway play *Waiting for Godot* and the films *Catch-22*, *Silkwood*, and, of course, *The Graduate*.

The distance between 1967 and 1988 is enormous, we know. But has the American RDA for healthy skepticism decreased so sharply? Although twenty years ago Benjamin Braddock could ponder a choice between 'plastics' and undefined ideals, the answer to a similar dilemma in *Working Girl* is media-defined and prepackaged: the homogenized American Dream. Everyone wants to be a yuppie in Manhattan.

At least Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) does. She's a brokerage house secretary who wears three shades of eyeshadow and has voluminous hair. Griffith's patented babyfaces voice is done up in thick Brooklynese, but Tess is taking speech classes to polish that rough-sounding exterior (and, within a scene, it's gone). Despite her lack of a Wharton degree, Tess's feisty talent suggests that she would succeed in business if only the guys would let her play.

Not incidentally, she is also

fashionably beautiful (as she puts it, "I've got a mind for business and a bod for sin"), a sexy, blowdried princess just aching to rise from beneath that graceless hairdo. That is, the movie has it both ways: she's gamy but feminine, smart but tractable. Tess's apparent strength of character is made nonthreatening by that body, presented in the most seductive of soft lights. This is no simple case of Ms. Cinderella meets Mr. Charming, nor even her triumph over an evil stepmother. The play on the title *Working Girl* tells the story. How much of herself will Tess sell to get ahead?

Ferrying to work each morning in the Downtown uniform—miniskirt and running shoes (with high heels in her bag)—long-legged Tess is what Wall Streeters call 'hungry,' which means she has ambition and will go places (read: off Staten Island). She's repeatedly fired from jobs for refusing to sleep with her male bosses and their friends, but she gets revenge on one by typing in a rude message over the numbers board, attacking his manhood by referring to his "tiny little dick." The office audience snorts and cheers. Hooray for bright, brassy, and indignant.

Still, this high profile individuality is hardly the path to success among the financial district's conformist crowd. As a last resort, her job placement officer (motherly Olympia Dukakis) sets her up with a woman exec, the ultra-cultured Katharine Parker (Sigourney Weaver), who shows Tess a few important classist tricks (including how to speak in nasal tones and wear silk blouses and pearls). Katharine is a one-joke character. We recognize her as a stereotypical shark almost immediately, but that the joke is generally on women only becomes apparent later. While on the one hand Katharine encourages Tess as an equal on "my team," on the other she condescends: "Rethink the jewelry," she sniffs, eyeing Tess's clatteringly inefficient bracelets.

Throughout, the women appear as light and dark adversaries instead of teammates. When eager Tess suggests serving a power dim-sum, calculating Katharine nods: "I like it, contributionwise." Cut to sweaty Tess pushing the dim-sum cart around the office. The film's most deftly composed sequence reveals Tess on her knees, buckling Katharine's new ski boots (a wry turn on the glass slipper story). When Katharine sits to take a phone call, we stay on the floor with Tess, with Katharine's fiberglass-encased foot kicking into the frame across Tess's