

# CINEASTE

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## THE FINAL WORD

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Source: *Cinéaste*, 1989, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1989), p. 64, 46

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41687670>

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# THE FINAL WORD

**W**hat does an American film mean beyond the shores of the U.S.A.? How does our self-image — and often self-deception — translate in other political contexts?

Stories are told about how we regaled the Russians with *White Nights*, how *Out of Africa* really boiled black Africa, how *The Wind and the Lion* put John Milius on Arab hit lists, and I've personally seen Vietnamese bristle over *Bat 21*. At the 1979 Berlin Film Festival, *The Deer Hunter* caused all East Bloc countries to pull their films from the festival in protest.

Most recently, a screening of *Mississippi Burning*, sponsored by our embassy in Czechoslovakia, cast that film in a light otherwise overlooked by its many critics. The controversies at home disappeared beneath the message discovered by the Czechs, further complicated by their attempt to figure out the signal we were sending with an official screening of this movie. (Given their experience with censorship, Czechs have a tendency to see a political manifesto in art and a hidden agenda in its exhibition.)

I was in Prague as the specialist with an exhibit on American Film-making sponsored by the State Department's cultural and information branch, USIA. My job was to introduce or "set in context" four films that would enjoy the imprimatur of "Ambassador's Screenings." This meant that some 120 opinion-makers were invited to the theater for a single screening. My job was to ensure that they didn't go away with any wrong impressions of us or of our movie industry.

When I had first seen *Mississippi Burning* on a list of films selected to expose current American trends (along with the genteel *Madame Sousatzka*, the Wall St. fairy tale *Working Girl*, and the New Sensitive Male-satire *Three Men and a Baby*) I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. I was sure of only one thing: *Mississippi Burning* would somehow create as much controversy in Prague as it had in the U.S. Would

they recognize factual discrepancies, disdain the moral righteousness of G-men? How would they translate a tale about racism and political oppression, two matters of firsthand experience for most Czechs?

Waving a copy of the January 9th issue of *Time*, with *Mississippi Burning* emblazoned on its cover, I began by announcing that Americans love controversy, and Hollywood is more than happy to oblige us about once a year. In fifteen minutes I recited developments and small victories in the Civil Rights movement up to the night on which the three students were killed — the opening scene of the film.

In brief, I assured the Czechs this film did not represent the first stages of a struggle, nor the essential experience of those who struggled, but, rather, the conflict between state and local government officials in finding methods to deal with what had been a clear moral injustice. When the U.S. Senate passed the Civil Rights Bill on June 19, 1964, two days before the triple murder by Jessup County KKK members, moral injustice became legal injustice. It was the duty of the FBI to persevere, if Washington, D.C., wanted that high-profile Bill to have any teeth whatsoever. I cited Alan Parker's own claim that his film was not about this Civil Rights crime but, rather, about the need for a Civil Rights Movement.

Then I listened to them gasp, groan, cringe and survive a movie

Alan Parker (left) and KKK member (extra) in *Mississippi Burning*



that, by their standards, is very violent. In addition, only the day before, news from China had reminded us that violence is always just beyond the bridge of change. Since the demonstrations in Prague's Wenceslas Square during the first weeks of 1989 had been quelled by water cannon, the lesson of China was not lost on them.

One exchange in the film between Willem Dafoe and Gene Hackman painfully recapitulated the local situation: "Some things are worth dying for." "Some people think those same things are worth killing for." Over the next two weeks, every discussion of the film moved toward that dilemma.

The level of interpretation remained quite happily on the level of the buddy movie plot, a conflict of white men over how to exercise power. The *raison d'être* of this conflict — racism — was more difficult to address. When I asked their response and opined that every society was racist, several people actually shrugged. My prodding about racism in Czechoslovakia — a subject addressed in films, after all, such as *Shop on Main Street* — brought little more than a caveat to mind my own backyard, if what the film showed was true.

Nevertheless, a sense of shame about the Holocaust was palpable, if unspoken. After the screening, one film critic introduced himself and invited me to lunch. He chose to surprise me by taking me to the kosher restaurant in the renovated Jewish townhall. The ambience of the old Jewish quarter of Prague is so dense with historical significance that our discussion of *Mississippi Burning* was limited to its specific inaccuracies. The results of racism could be seen around us in a once thriving community reduced to a tourist attraction. The parallel with the once thriving Civil Rights Movement reduced to the victory of G-men was not lost on our lunch party.

At one point, my own sense of shame reared up in a brutal way, driving home to me the way histori-

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sented by that ultimate consumer, Zippy the Pinhead, whose creator, Bill Griffith, confesses to the serious satirical intent behind Zippy's seemingly innocuous non sequiturs.

For the Eighties, we have some of the artists associated with the post-punk graphics magazine RAW, including Art Spiegelman (*Maus*), Charles Burns (*Big Baby*), and the hard core politico Sue Coe. Mann features another group of artists who specialize in portraying the quotidian, such as Jaime Hernandez (*Love and Rockets*), Harvey Pekar (*American Splendor*), and the incomparable Lynda Barry.

Mann covers this expanse of history well, although sometimes rather cursorily. Adapting a strategy from *Poetry in Motion*, Mann has the artists read their own work. In addition to these readings and interviews, he keeps the film moving with a lively use of Filmograph animation and a well-chosen musical accompaniment.

This is not to say that the film doesn't have its problems. Some momentum is lost when the historical line of the narrative reaches the present. At this point the film just seems to present one artist after another, with a somewhat arbitrary choice of artists. While Mann commendably has Shary Flenniken talk about the role women have played in the industry, I would have liked to have seen a black artist—say, Denys Cowan—describe typical experiences of cartoonists. Along similar lines, aficionados will be annoyed at the inevitable exclusion of some of their favorites. Nevertheless, Mann deserves credit for providing a fascinating survey of this often despised art form. —David Segal

### Letters (contd.)

between males in the service of a sacred goal—triumphs over man's love for woman; and so on throughout the book. I thought such analyses sufficiently helped the reader understand Balázs's works and their present-day significance. Is it possible that "the closing of the American mind" has progressed further and "cultural illiteracy" runs deeper than I have assumed?

Musser wants a biography "much more oriented toward thought" than mine. (Musser seems unable to comprehend that unlike Lukács, Balázs was not an ideologue but an *artist*.) The thoughts that Musser offers for this kind of biography are often absurd and his ignorance in film theory sometimes becomes painfully palpable. For example, I do not "derisively dismiss" Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*, as he claims—I simply point out the irrationality of Kracauer's theory whose ultimate conclusion is that the

### The Final Word (contd.)

cal crimes never lose their edge. A man too young to know better looked at me in the wake of the movie and said, "I'm glad I don't live in your country." Irritated beyond control, I told him he should think more precisely, and that what he really wanted to say was, "I'm glad I didn't live in Jessup County in 1964." I added that I was glad I didn't live in Prague in 1942, glad I was not Milos Forman's mother (who was marched away when the 8-year-old Forman was home sick from school).

If there is any lesson in all this, I suppose it rises out of the way national pride or shame can eclipse the attempts to reach across borders with a cultural manifesto. Being candid about historical tragedy is seen as an American virtue, as is our need to share our remorse. Yet the films of a world power send not only the message of "vey is mir," but also a challenge to others to measure up in action and art—or at least to decide what's worth dying for. In our enthusiasm for human rights, we sometimes lose sight of the arrogance inherent in flaunting our own movie-scenario methods. "You must think we are cowards," said a Czech novelist, "but we have no FBI. Our dissent has no authority."

"You must realize we know you botched the job," said a Czech broadcast journalist, "and this movie is a form of compensatory denial." An ironic amnesty was offered by an Oxford-trained woman philosopher: "American superiority and 'know-how' angers us just as much as you are surely angered by this Englishman Parker projecting his colonial guilt onto your Civil Rights struggle."

Karen Jaehne

Jewish filmmakers of Weimar Germany were somehow responsible for Hitler's rise to power. Many distinguished scholars in the past—I cite nine of them in my book!—indicted this preposterous "Kracauerism." Musser, in attacking me, betrays a lack of knowledge of these writings; it is also clear that he has not read this part of my book. And since he maintains that Kracauer "understandably criticized" *The Blue Light* as Nazi in spirit, he once again betrays that he—like Kracauer—has never seen the film. (Interestingly, in my book I write about a habit of certain scholars and pseudo-scholars—criticizing films they have not seen and books they have not read.)

Musser asserts that Jean Epstein "never" (emphasis is Musser's) surfaces in my book. Wrong again. I write repeatedly of him both as an experimental filmmaker and a theoretician inspired by Delluc. Did Musser read my book? Or has he only read into it following his "adven-

turesome approach" he would have liked me to use? Musser's review is riddled with inaccurate statements and false inferences too numerous to list all of them here; e.g., Kracauer had "many affinities with Balázs," Balázs's "theoretical writings on film were not very systematic (never mind the first)," etc. Musser clearly is unfamiliar with Balázs's early works in German. Nevertheless he is forced to acknowledge that Balázs's "contribution to film theory should garner recognition." On this I agree with him.

Joseph Zsuffa  
Los Angeles, CA

Charles Musser replies:

The thrust of my review was to encourage people to peruse and possibly purchase Béla Balázs: *The Man and the Artist*, which I read carefully from cover to cover. Obviously I also had several significant reservations about the book and, furthermore, suggested what I felt to be important but neglected points of convergence between Balázs's writings and those of other film theorists. All of this I continue to find valid. Rather than defend or elaborate my views, I suggest that interested parties find a copy of Zsuffa's book, read it, and judge for themselves. They might then compare Zsuffa's analysis of Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light* to Eric Rentschler's astute (and critical) reading of that film in a recent issue of *October* (No. 48, Spring 1989).

### Arab Stereotypes

As a person who comes from the Middle East I truly enjoyed your recent issue on "The Arab Image in American Film and TV." It was the most thorough coverage of the kind of stereotyping that goes on in this country. As a Middle Easterner I am often questioned by Americans if I had my own camel rather than a car. At times I don't blame those who ask me, for all they've ever seen on the M.E. has been a silhouette of a camel riding on a hill at sunset. Exotic and quite an unorthodox scene even for a Middle Easterner.

I would like to praise all your editors and writers and the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee for providing the invaluable information on the topic. It was an excellent, informative issue, and one which I read cover to cover, and have passed on to many friends.

Jackie Abramian  
Watertown, MA