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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Mississippi Burning by Frederick Zollo, Robert F. Colesberry and Alan Parker

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Board of Education decision in 1954. Often his was a lonely voice, something driven home by film clips of the wild segregationist governors Herman Talmadge, George C. Wallace, Ross Barnett, and James Coleman, who are shown here ranting away.

It is hinted that C. Wright Mills's classic study *The Power Elite* (1956) can explain much of McGill's career in Atlanta. This is fit and seems a fair and effective view of the man and his town, but it needs elaboration. It goes unsaid that Atlanta's power elite of corporate managers, bankers, lawyers, and shrewd educators was not about to permit the coming of real racial justice through expanded economic opportunities. That would take the much less courtly militance of the real civil rights movement, and its work remains uncompleted.

This film is highly recommended. It is most useful for sparking discussion with already well-informed students.

John Herbert Roper
Emory & Henry College

Mississippi Burning. Prod. by Frederick Zollo and Robert F. Colesberry. Directed by Alan Parker. Orion Pictures, 1988. 120 mins.

Now that *Mississippi Burning*, mercifully, has failed to garner any major awards of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and has disappeared from the screens of local theaters, it is time to bury it for good. However brilliant the cinematography and the excellence of Gene Hackman's acting, *Mississippi Burning* is a dishonest distortion of the historical record. Rather than helping lessen this nation's woeful ignorance of its racial past, this film does such injustice to the events with which it deals that its ultimate lynching is of history itself. The trouble goes far beyond director Alan Parker's disregard for factual accuracy. *Mississippi Burning* is, after all, not meant to be a documentary. One might expect it to depict Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) diligence as the key ingredient in the solving of the case of the three missing civil rights workers, when, in fact, an FBI payoff to an informer led to the discovery of the bodies. But in pursuit of a box office bonanza, Parker glorifies the very violence and vigilantism he claims to denounce, makes heroes of FBI agents who gener-

ally did nothing to protect civil rights workers and often covertly hindered their efforts, and once again renders blacks as America's invisible men, so that even the Mississippi Summer project that blacks created and led is seen as primarily a white experience.

Mississippi Burning begins promisingly with an evocative image of two drinking fountains labeled *white* and *colored*. It ends poignantly with a picture of the vandalized tombstone of a civil rights movement volunteer. The two hours in between, however, are little more than a nerve-racking, fiery crime melodrama. Rehashing Clint Eastwood's less-than-subtle investigatory techniques, Charles Bronson's approach to cleaning up another western town, and the formula for countless white cop buddy movies, Parker gives us caricatures of the 1960s that are easy to accept in the 1980s. The racists are all loutish, pimply-faced red-necks. One could not visualize these ignorant tobacco-chewing "crackers" in Howard Beach. The young FBI agent Alan Ward, horn-rimmed and buttoned-down, out of Harvard Law School, is Kennedy-era liberal idealism incarnate. As self-righteous as he is humorless, Ward goes by the book and fails at every turn. Worse, his well-intentioned but naive efforts, as when he seeks to engage a black man in a conversation at a segregated luncheonette, stir yet more racist violence in response. Conversely, the earthy, middle-aged agent, Rupert Anderson, a good old boy from Mississippi who loves baseball and disdains the Warren court, succeeds because of his no-nonsense-about-due-process tactics. Anderson saves the day by utilizing brutality, entrapment, coercion, kidnapping, and a faked lynching. And this in a film purportedly supporting the principles of the nonviolent movement for racial justice. The obvious message is that the betterment of race relations requires sinking to the Ku Klux Klan's level of terror. To buttress this point, Parker even has a black FBI agent threatening the mayor with castration. Although there were no black FBI agents in Mississippi in 1964, the essential falsehood is the depiction of the FBI in 1964 as foe of those who violently opposed the black struggle for equality. Against the wishes of its director, J. Edgar Hoover, who was then orchestrating a vendetta against Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI had to be forced into protecting the civil rights volunteers in Mississippi and

aggressively investigating the disappearance of Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner in rural Neshoba County.

But the *truth* according to Parker's version is that blacks in 1964, ineffectual victims, could do nothing for themselves and had to wait for the "feds" to set them free. Not only do no blacks play major roles in *Mississippi Burning*, none even have names. They are merely frightened bystanders in this wham-bam Ramboesque story of the white FBI battling white racism. Rather than even alluding to the pivotal role played by blacks in the struggle for desegregation and enfranchisement, Parker presents them as sheep-like—unable to act. Symptomatically, and symbolically, he even places Chaney, a Mississippi black working for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the actual driver of the station wagon that was stopped by the Klan, in the back seat, and the white Schwerner in the driver's seat.

The fundamental issue is not fact versus fiction, but the ends that artistic license is directed toward. As the poet and novelist James Dick-ey once declared: "Art is a lie that makes us see the truth." *Mississippi Burning*, conversely, lies to hide the truth, making the summer's heroes those dressed in blue serge rather than those in blue jeans. Remembrance is necessary, and what this nation needs to be reminded of is why there was a Mississippi Summer in 1964, what blacks and whites working together actually accomplished, and how the events of that place and time helped to change Mississippi and the United States.

Harvard Sitkoff
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The Knife Edge of Deterrence. Prod. by Jim Levy and John Coney. KCTS-TV, 1987. 58 mins. (Films Inc., 5547 North Ravenswood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640)

The Knife Edge of Deterrence is a documentary produced in 1987 by a Seattle public television station as an epilogue to the excellent seven-part series *War: A Commentary by Gwynne Dyer*. Narrated by journalist Edwin Newman, the film also draws on interviews with United States secretaries of defense Robert S. McNamara, James Schlesinger, Harold Brown,

and Caspar Weinberger, as well as with other officials and military analysts of several Western nations, including Paul Nitze, James Abrahamson, Richard Perle, and Michael Heseltine. The subject is the adoption of nuclear deterrence by the United States and the Soviet Union and, particularly, the challenge posed to it by new arms control proposals and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

The history of nuclear deterrence provided by this film is rather superficial. Faced by what are portrayed as determined adversaries, the United States seems justified in bombing Hiroshima, maintaining its atomic monopoly, developing the hydrogen bomb, and pursuing all facets of the nuclear arms race. At the same time, the film conveys a sense that these are ominous developments. Both conclusions follow logically from the film's visual sources—the dramatic (and cliché-ridden) American newsreels and the unnerving pictures of nuclear bomb explosions and guided missiles.

There is greater depth to the analysis of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and the issues raised by SDI, if only because we escape from the hyperbolic newsreel to the more sophisticated, if flatter, interview. Conducted in this format, the debate over SDI is interesting, with Reagan administration officials touting it as the gateway to a world free of nuclear fear and their predecessors warning that it will destabilize mutually assured destruction and thus deterrence itself. If the argument seems to go to the critics, the visual effects may be quite different, for viewers see a marvel of technology—one totally imaginary, of course—demolishing rockets with uncanny precision. The spectrum of debate remains quite limited, with no one speaking for peace or nuclear disarmament movements (for example, the American nuclear weapons freeze campaign or Britain's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). Nor is there any mention of the vast European antimissile demonstrations of recent years. Indeed, the film implies that the only European worry is over the proposed elimination of nuclear weapons, which the narrator assures us have "kept the peace for forty years."

Fortunately, this weapons-centered view of the world—like the film, itself, with its focus on a relatively hawkish, pre-1987 debate over arms control and modernization issues—already