Mississippi Burning

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-themed movies. 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

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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 may 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 not 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-