

Mississippi Burning:
Civil Rights in The South

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American Civilization
HIST 1700 – 002
Instructor: Ken Hansen
November 10, 2012

Introduction

The African American Civil Rights Movement will always be remembered as the moment when Americans rose up from oppression and racial discrimination. It was from 1955 to 1968, where our constitutional rights were argued as being selective to a certain race, Caucasian. Key events included Brown vs. Board of Education, The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Sit-ins, Freedom Rides, Voter Registration for African Americans and many other important events that all led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The southern states were a focus during these years as many southerners strongly believed in the complete separation of whites and coloreds. One such event that became nationally recognized was the murders of three Civil Rights workers, James Earl Chaney, 21, Andrew Goodman, 20 and Michael Schwerner, 24 near Philadelphia, Mississippi on June 21, 1964.

These three Civil Rights workers were a part of the Mississippi Freedom Summer to promote voting rights and set up voting booths within the state. It was reported that on that evening they were jailed at the Neshoba County Jail on speeding charges in Philadelphia, Mississippi. After the three were released from jail they were followed by a lynch mob that included Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, Horace Doyle Barnette, Travis M. Barnette, James E. Jordan, Alton Wayne Roberts, Jimmy Arledge, Jimmy Snowden, Billy Wayne Posey, Jerry McGrew Sharpe, and Jimmy Townsend. According to witnesses and testimonies Price escorted them off Highway 19 out of sight and Roberts and Jordan did the shooting of the three men. After the shootings, the bodies were buried at the Old Jolly Farm dam to be found on August 4, 1964 by Federal Authorities. At the time of trial 18 individuals were charged with depriving the three men of their civil rights by murder.

Seven of were found guilty and began serving sentences ranging from 3 to 10 years.

Three of the conspirators were acquitted and the rest were not retried.¹

Mississippi Burning is a film that depicted many different controversial identities in the United States during the 1960's. For Mississippi, there were the dominant, white supremacists, filled with intolerance and hatred while the opposite identities depicted were passive African Americans and their 'heroes' the federal government that stood for equal rights and morality. This term paper serves to compare and contrast the identities of the film to the true events and identities that began the summer of 1964.

In previous research on the African American Civil Rights Movement I have come to find that victims are not passive. In fact it was a movement of strength, tolerance and belief in equal human rights. With every event that occurred during the movement, African Americans were not standing by and watching others 'fight' their battles. They were in fact creating and ending their battles towards an equal freedom. Every issue was dealt with in an appropriate manner, not by fighting, but refusing to be pushed into a segregated culture. Those three men did exactly that. They stood up of what they believed in even though they knew they were walking into danger. Up until they died they 'fought' for equal human rights. In the film I noticed many of the African Americans stayed 'out of the way' of the white control in the towns. This identity proves to be effective towards the film's intention to convey the inferiority of the African Americans and the need for a civil rights movement to come about.

Mississippi's past within Mississippi Burning

The film's reviews were overall positive with how it presented the key events of that summer. Some examples include the title that came from the FBI's codename MIBURN (Mississippi Burning), the car was in fact found in a marsh and like the film, the FBI's involvement turned into an enormous bureaucratic effort. However some argued that the film dramatized the victims and increased the terror of the FBI to find the murderers of the three men. One scene in the film that I found very important turned out to be a figment of the imagination. The involvement of the deputy sheriff's wife in the investigation was not a real event. In truth the FBI had issued a \$30,000 reward for information involving the murders.² Through these scenes the film creates a type of society in the south that I feel is an addition to the 'old southern colonies', a different America that expresses superiority versus inferiority. It is hard to argue that southern states have a colorful past filled with many racial issues. One question I had while researching this film was how did Mississippi get to the point of lynching and white supremacy? One article exposed the Sovereignty Commission that was part of the state legislature, a type of "state-sponsored racism."³ John Cloud and Timothy Roche compare the commission as a polite Mississippi KGB, such as the KGB of the Soviet Army in Russia. This commission based its ideals upon Jim Crow, which describes segregation laws, rules, and customs. Jim Crow Laws were a 'way of life' and the commission was one way that they remained intact.³ It was interesting to find that the film did not talk about the Sovereignty Commission but rather incorporated the ideals of the agency into the people living in Philadelphia, Meridian, Mississippi and the Meridian White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Comparisons: Cinema vs. Reality in Mississippi

Beginning scenes of Mississippi Burning closely follow the true events of the night of June 21, 1964. The film begins with the three boys driving down a quiet dark highway, representing Highway 19. The screen zooms out and shows three vehicles following, one a police car, and two others. The three vehicles contained the deputy sheriff and 9 other members of the Ku Klux Klan. Like the statements given during the trial, the ten men forced the Civil Rights workers off the highway on to a deserted road where the three boys were shot. However, in the film only one of the white Civil Rights workers is shot, the conclusion of this scene leads the audience to the assumption that all three were shot, killed and the evidence of the murders was disposed of by the ten white supremacists.

A great comparison of fiction versus fact is the scene where the station wagon of the three missing men is found. The FBI was in communication with the Choctaw Indians who led the men to a marsh where the car had been burned and almost all evidence destroyed. The American Historical Association states that, "In a number of small ways the movie portrays the case history accurately... FBI agents found the missing car in marshy terrain with help from a Choctaw Indian".²

How accurate the film could have been to history case is irrelevant, but how accurate the film could have portrayed the identities of the people is definitely to be questioned. The finding of the three bodies was not found until rewards were posted and people came forth for the money. This identity is very different than the one portrayed in the movie by the deputy sheriff's wife. While watching her involvement in the film, I felt

a silver lining moment come about. The whites were shown as racists and almost always being ignorant. Yet her character gives the silver lining to a culture depicted in the film.

Contrasts: Cinema vs. Reality in Mississippi

In previous sentences I explained what the Jim Crow laws were and how many southerners believed it was a ‘way of life’. Mississippi Burning contrasted historical fact when incorporating the ‘way of life’ into the identities of the characters. In a newspaper article written after Edgar R. Killen was convicted of murder, many Mississippians were relieved to see justice brought forth. Carol Henderson is one such person that commented, “I’m hopeful we can get beyond this ugly period in our history. Everyone thinks we’re divided here, but in reality, Blacks and whites get along just fine.”⁴

My final contrasts that stood out were how the FBI portrayed violence to bring the murderers to trial and how the media and reporters were presented. One of the final scenes shows Gene Hackman, the hero, who represented one of the FBI agents, using less than professional means to solve the case. He used violence, not to the extent that the Ku Klux Klan used towards the Civil Rights workers, but none the less a violent tactic. Through my research the historical case does not have any written proof that the FBI used violent means to solve the case. In fact their true identities seem to express a standoff appearance. In the historical case the exact opposite identity is represented. They did not approach the case in a violent manner but rather allowed the media, reporters and reward money to bring the case to trial.^{2,5}

In the film the media and reporters are shown in a small segment just after the station wagon is found in the marsh. There are several interviews by white characters that

all portray the identity of ignorance. One woman that was interviewed in the film commented, “They’re not like us, they don’t take baths, they stink, they’re nasty. They’re just not like white folks.”⁶ My belief that this is a contrast from what I researched on the historical case. According to the American Historical Association and the National Identities article, the extensive reports and media coverage brought national repulsion towards the violence happening in the south, and brought protection to blacks in the south.^{1, 2} The film does not accurately portray how strong an influence the media had on the case, or the Civil Rights Movement.

Conclusion

The murders of James Earl Chaney, 21, Andrew Goodman, 20 and Michael Schwerner, 24 near Philadelphia, Mississippi on June 21, 1964 will not be forgotten. The African American Civil Rights Movement was a time of rising against oppression and racial discrimination. It did not only occur in Mississippi but throughout the United States. Mississippi Burning documented an important moment in our past, no matter the comparisons and contrasts of the film. The director of the film Alan Parker conveys a message much stronger than what any historical document can express, the importance of human rights and the strength against oppression. In ending my research I came across a quote by George Santayana that concludes this topic perfectly. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Footnotes

1. Jansson, David R. 2005. "A Geography of Racism": Internal Orientalism and the Construction of American National Identity in the Film *Mississippi Burning*." (*National Identities* 7, no. 3: 265 -285. *American History & Life*, EBSCOhost), 275.
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2. Toplin, Robert Brent, professor of history, University of North Carolina. "Mississippi Burning Scorches Historians." (*Perspectives: Film Review Column*, April, 1989. *American Historical Association.*), 2.
3. Cloud, John and Timothy Roche. 1998. "The KGB of Mississippi." (*Time* 151, no. 12:30. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost), 1.
4. Watson, Jamal and Craig Witherspoon. "JUSTICE SERVED, Forty-one years later, Klan member is found guilty on manslaughter charges." (*New York Amsterdam News, The new Black View* 96 no. 26: 1, 34. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost), 34.
5. *Mississippi Burning National History Day Documentary*, Video, directed by Allison Nichols, Brittany Saltiel and Sara Siegel (2004; Lincolnshire, Illinois: NHD, 2004).
6. Gene Hackman, Willem Dafoe et al., 1988, *Mississippi Burning*, (Film, directed by Alan Parker. New York: Orion Pictures Corporation.) 53:00 minutes in.

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