

Burning a powerful examination of racist attitudes

Mississippi Burning

★★★ 1/2

Cineplex Eaton Centre

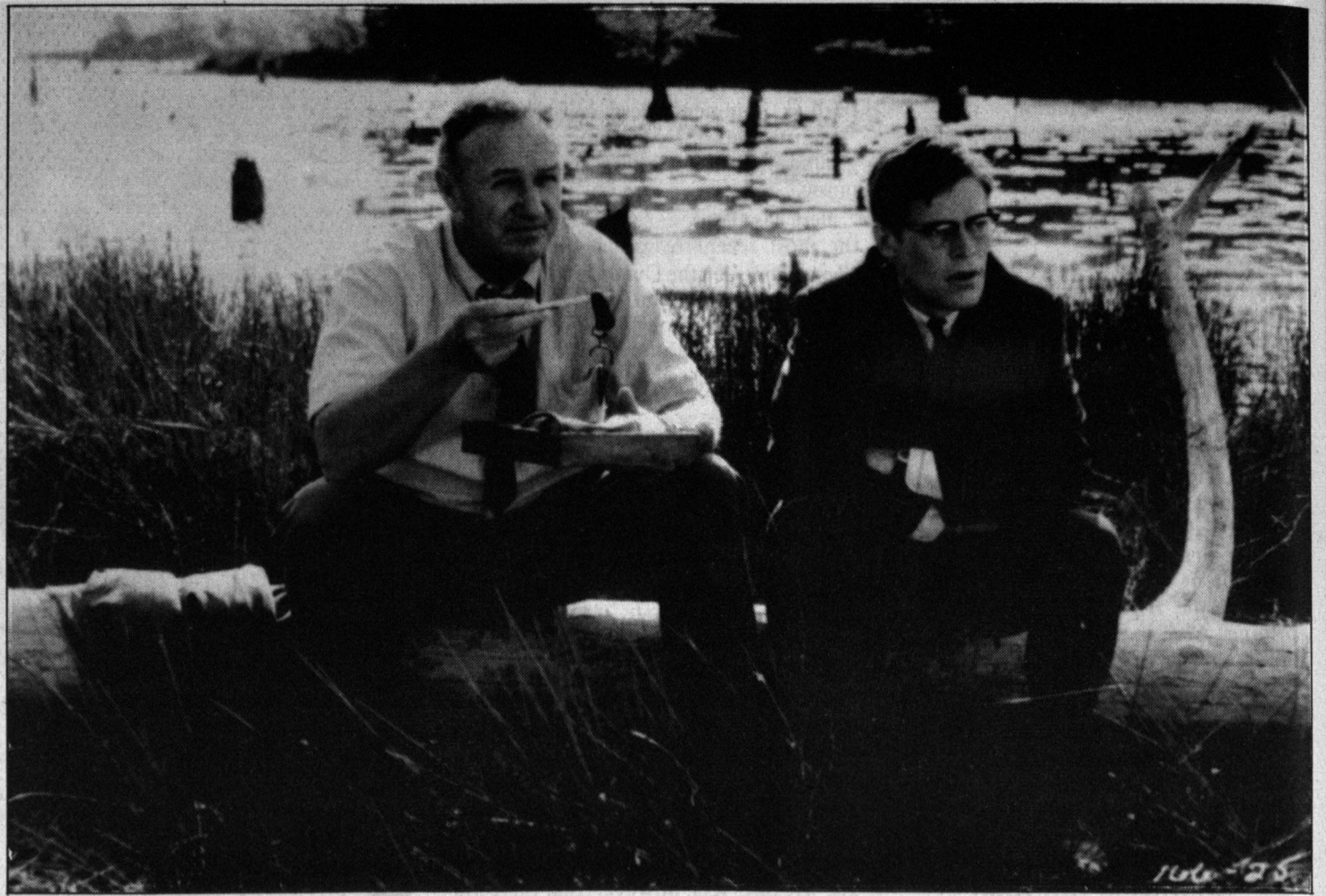
review by Paul Sparrow-Clarke

Question: What's got four eyes (I's) and can't see? Answer: Mississippi.

Mississippi Burning is a powerful new film that deals with racism and the black civil rights struggle. It takes as its basis a real-life incident, the murder of civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner. From this factual premise, the film weaves a fictional account of an FBI investigation of the incident, and in the process delivers a potent message against racial bigotry.

The movie opens with the aforementioned murder, which takes place on an appropriately dark and sinister backwoods road just outside the fictional town of Jessup, Mississippi. Two FBI agents come to the town to investigate the "disappearances," Agent Anderson (Gene Hackman) and Agent Ward (Willem Dafoe). These two have different ideas on how to crack the case. Ward, the senior of the pair, always plays it according to proper FBI procedure. Anderson is an ex-Mississippi sheriff who understands the community better, and understands how and where to apply pressure.

Ward tries to pry information out of a negro in a diner. The kid is later severely beaten for talking to the FBI, even though he did not say anything. Anderson nods knowingly. Ward, determined to solve the case, calls in hundreds of extra people. The



Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe are FBI agents with conflicting investigative methods in *Mississippi Burning*.

townspeople resent this intrusion into their affairs, especially by these "Commie Northern boys". It is at this point that the town of Jessup, Mississippi starts burning, both literally and metaphorically.

The visual imagery in *Mississippi Burning* is quite stunning, much of it involving fire. Scene after scene stays in the memory: a black farmer hanging from a tree, while in the background his barn is razed to the ground, flames pouring into the night sky;

a small black boy kneeling in front of a church praying, whilst all around him the congregation is being brutally beaten up; Ward and Anderson finding a burning cross planted in front of their motel room; the camera panning down and across a cotton field to reveal a bruised and bloodied black man lying prone in a wire cage. And so on.

The visual design of the film adds considerably to the power of the story, and helps to elucidate the messages contained therein. Many of the scenes have a nightmarish intensity to them, and they are flawlessly set up and stylishly photographed. The brutal violence is captured in such a way as to provide maximum impact; this has the effect of making the viewer emotionally drained by the end of the film.

Director and co-writer Alan Parker is no stranger to making powerful cinematic statements. His previous film, *Angel Heart*, was a suspenseful and ultimately terrifying mixture of film noir and black magic. If you have seen that film, then you also know that he does not shy away from showing disturbing violence on-screen. In 1978 he directed *Midnight Express* (from a screenplay by Oliver Stone), a harrowing account of incarceration in a Turkish prison. Parker consistently takes chances in his career; few directors have made films as wildly different as *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, *Fame* and *Birdy*.

Mississippi Burning is Alan Parker at his most intense and disturbing. The film moves at a lightning pace, never quite giving the viewer time to breathe in and relax. It is far better than Costa-Gavras' *Betrayed*, another film about racism, which suffered from a sometimes mediocre and unbelievable script. Almost everything in Parker's film convinces, most notably the settings and the characters. In the latter regard, the acting is uniformly excellent, especially that of the two leads, Dafoe and Hackman. There is a wonderful building

of tension between the two agents, leading up to Dafoe's realization that perhaps Hackman's somewhat unorthodox methods are the only way to win the battle against the Klan conspirators. Frances McDormand plays Mrs. Pell, the wife of the town's deputy, who eventually provides the key to the case. Her building interest in Hackman and her building conscience is very well portrayed: "...At seven years of age, if you're told it enough times, you believe it. You believe the hatred. You live it. You breathe it. You marry it."

With regard to the controversy that has sprung up arguing that *Mississippi Burning* distorts historical fact, I think that this is purely irrelevant. The film does not claim to be a true story, but instead takes a true

...the congregation is being brutally beaten up...

incident as its foundation and builds from there to make its powerful statements against racism. Moreover, the movie does not pretend to be the definitive film about the black civil rights struggle. It is impossible for any one film to say everything there is to say about this subject. Hopefully *Mississippi Burning* will provoke much thought and debate amongst its viewers.

One of the last dialogues in the film made me think the most. A man is found hanging, an apparent suicide, who was not involved in the murder of the civil rights workers. One of the agents wonders why he did it, when he was not even a Klan member. Ward replies: "Oh, he's guilty. Anyone's guilty who watches this happen and pretends it's not. All of them. As guilty as the lunatics who pull the triggers. Maybe we all are."

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