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1-1-2009

Burning Mississippi into Memory? Cinematic Amnesia as a Resource for Remembering Civil Rights

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Burning Mississippi into Memory? Cinematic Amnesia as a Resource for Remembering Civil

Rights

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Abstract

The 1988 film *Mississippi Burning* drew extensive criticism for its misleading portrayal of the FBI's investigation of three murdered civil rights activists in 1964. As critics noted, the film ignored the role of black activists who struggled for racial justice even as it graphically depicted the violence that activists and other blacks faced during the civil rights era. This movie's selective depiction of events surrounding the activists' deaths constituted the film as a site of cinematic amnesia, a form of public remembrance that provokes controversy over how events ought to be remembered. An analysis of the film and its ensuing controversy illustrates how provocatively forgetful texts can simultaneously prompt media attention to political activism and deflect attention from contemporary racial injustice.

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In the heat of late June 2005 a jury found Edgar Ray Killen guilty for manslaughter in the

1964 murders of civil rights activists George Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew

Goodman. The three activists came to Mississippi in June 1964 as part of the Mississippi

Freedom Summer Project, a joint effort of several civil rights organizations to bring over a

thousand black and white activists from the North to register blacks to vote across the state

(Cagin and Dray, 1988; Marable, 1984; McAdam, 1988; and Mills 1993). Several months after

they disappeared, the men's bullet-ridden bodies were found buried in an earthen dam. Despite

strong evidence against several men suspected of involvement in the activists' deaths, no one had

been indicted for their murders until 2005. National broadcast media consistently referred to the

2005 case against Killen as the "*Mississippi Burning* trial" after the commercially successful film

that was loosely based on the events surrounding the men's disappearance (Cooper et al., 2005;

Gibson, 2005; Sawyer, 2005; and McLaughlin, 2005).

Media attention to Killen's conviction is but one example of popular culture's ongoing

investment in remembering civil rights' past. Most recently, national broadcast news media

commemorated the fortieth anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination as a platform to

discuss ongoing racial struggles. Working in collaboration with African-American radio station

WDIA in Memphis, CNN broadcast "the voices of black America" in its retrospective; in its

coverage, CNN both advanced the narrative of racial progress typical of mainstream civil rights

depictions and featured individuals who called for recommitment to King's program for

economic justice (Lemon et al., 2008). CNN's coverage points to popular culture's continued

─and perhaps intensified─ drive to remember civil rights' traumatic past. It also points to the

functions and limitations of mainstream press to mediate shared remembrance. Critical media studies may glean additional insights about the social implications of commercial media's ongoing attention to civil rights by attending to the processes by which mainstream media give meaning to traumatic events from civil rights past.

Mississippi Burning and its subsequent media attention provide an emblematic case study for interpreting this process. When the film was released, the film's director Alan Parker told reporters that he made the film because he wanted to bring people "largely ignorant of the events from two decades ago" to "some level of understanding [about events] that radically changed the South and the nation" (Hall, 1988, p. C01). As if taking a cue from Parker, the American Broadcasting Network used recreated footage from the film to illustrate events surrounding Killen's indictment (Gibson, 2005; Sawyer, 2005). News media characterizations of Killen's trial in terms of the popular Hollywood film attest to the movie's significance as a resource for remembering Mississippi's civil rights struggles.

The motion picture initially received positive reviews and commercial box office success. After it was released to theaters in December 1988, the film generated $34 million at the box office ("Business data," 1988). In 1988, the movie was nominated for six Academy Awards, including one for best picture. Gene Hackman and Frances McDormand received Academy Award nominations for best actor and best supporting actress (respectively) for their performances, and the film won the Oscar for best cinematography (Curry, 1988, p. D01). Months following *Mississippi Burning's* release, however, film critics, journalists, and former activists derided the movie for relegating blacks to the background of the story about their own subordination (Marquand, 1989; Milloy, 1989; Ringel, 1989; Simon, 1989). Challenging the film's narrative of the FBI's efforts to bring the activists' murders to justice, several critics,

citizens, and journalists wrote alternative histories of civil rights injustices for mainstream

newspapers (Italie, 1988; Peterman, 1989; Staples, 1989). By identifying ongoing instances of

institutionalized racism and black people who have struggled to resist them, these writers gave

color to *Mississippi Burning's* white-washed history.

 Mississippi Burning is a well known historically based film, sharing its status with other

films such as Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991) that drew strong criticism for presenting

misleading depictions of past events (Romanowski, 1993; Zelizer, 1992). This movie is not

necessarily remarkable for presenting a limited and partial portrayal of events surrounding the

FBI's investigation of the three activists' murders, for any depiction of the past is bound to be

selective, partial, and contested (Hasian & Carlson, 2000). *Mississippi Burning* is remarkable,

however, for the strong criticisms it received from both former civil rights activists and the

mainstream press.

 By exploring both the film and its journalistic reviews, this paper draws renewed

attention to the dynamic interplay between media executives, writers, and critics who have their

own particular ─and often conflicting─ investments in how particular events are remembered in

popular culture. To highlight the rhetorical implications of the process of remembering and

forgetting within popular culture, this paper explains how filmic depictions of social injustices

from the past constitute forms of cinematic amnesia. These forms of forgetting reflect the

negotiations of the Hollywood filmmaking industry with filmmakers who wish to draw attention

to traumatic and troubling events from civil rights' past. I interpret *Mississippi Burning* as an

enactment of cinematic amnesia by explaining how the film portrayed the FBI's investigation of

the murdered activists within the narrative conventions of the cop action drama, a popular film

genre that bears little resemblance to historical narratives about events surrounding Mississippi

Freedom Summer. *Mississippi Burning* simultaneously remembered white Southern brutality

against blacks in Mississippi, credited the FBI for advancing the cause of racial justice, and

forgot the Mississippi Freedom Summer activists who struggled against the state's brutal racism.

Through this narrative framing of events surrounding Mississippi Freedom Summer, *Mississippi*

Burning ultimately reinforced the legitimacy of white hegemony and obscured the perspectives

of civil rights activists.

Further, I explain how the tensions expressed in this motion picture opened spaces for the

mainstream press to contribute additional depictions of Mississippi Freedom Summer and of the

civil rights movement more generally. I describe how mainstream news media both extended and

challenged *Mississippi Burning's* narrative in the initial months following the movie's release.

Particularly, I examine the mainstream press coverage surrounding the film during the first two

months following the film's release from December 1988 through January 1989. This coverage

includes ten journalistic articles and twenty journalistic reviews of the film that appeared in U.S.

newspapers with the broadest national circulation according to the Lexis-Nexis and Factiva news

databases as well as *Time* magazine's feature article about the film.[1] Although other less

mainstream newspapers also covered the film, I focus on more widely circulating print media in

order to assess the possibilities and limitations of commercial media as resources for

understanding civil rights struggles. Thus, this study addresses the frameworks that contributed

to and contested the film's meaning as a civil rights narrative that were available to a majority of

print news media audiences after the film's release. Mainstream press coverage expanded upon

Mississippi Burning's depiction of Southern racism, contested the film's depiction of FBI agents

as civil rights heroes, and provided alternative memories of black activists central to the civil

rights struggle. Several journalistic articles also referenced the film as a context for critiquing

more contemporary instances of racial inequity.

  Mississippi Burning and its ensuing controversy in national print media illustrate how

memories of traumatic events propagated by popular culture emerge, not through selective

instances of remembrance in individual texts, but through the discursive relations among

multiple media sources. It also indicates that instances of cinematic amnesia may contribute to

shared meanings of past events by prompting additional forms of remembrance in response to a

film's egregious depiction. By exploring the relationship between the film's cinematic amnesia

and journalistic coverage of the film, this essay highlights how depictions of the past not only

provide *sites* of rhetorical action- but comprise intertextual rhetorical *processes*. Patterns of

discourse in mainstream newspapers engendered by the film shed light on the political and social

implications of hegemonic depictions of the past.

<div align="center">The Rhetoric of Popular Memory</div>

Mississippi Burning and its presence in press coverage of Killen's trial constitute what Nora

(1989) refers to as "*les lieux de memoire*" or sites of memory. Sites of memory, textual or

material remains of the past, provide rhetorical resources for shared or collective remembrance.

A variety of memory sites, including commemorative structures (Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci,

1991; Blair and Michel, 2000; Bodnar, 1992; Ehrenhaus, 1989; Mandzuik, 2003), speeches

(Browne 1993, 1999), museums (Gallagher, 1999), photographs (Zelizer, 1998), and films

(Biesecker, 2002; Ehrenhaus, 2001; Hasian 2001; Hasian and Carlson, 2000; Owens, 2003)

constitute rhetorical expressions of cultural knowledge and values about past events. Indeed,

widely shared depictions of the past may tell us more about contemporary issues than they do

about past events. In his explication of the connections between rhetoric and history, Gronbeck

(1998) explains that present needs or concerns are "examined by calling up the past, shaping it into a useful memory that an audience can find relevant to the present" (p. 57). For Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci (1991), public commemoration function as "registers of present and future political concern" (p. 263).

Commercial media in particular provide predominant sources of shared remembrance. Rhetorical scholars frequently refer to memory sites in terms of "public" (Browne, 1993, 1995; Eberly, 2004; Gallagher, 1999; Mandzuik, 2003) or "collective" memories (Hasian & Carlson, 2000; Hasian, 2001). In this paper, I distinguish public or collective memories from depictions of the past circulated by dominant corporate media.[2] Referencing commercially available depictions of the past as public memories may erroneously conflate media representation with audience interpretation, and conflates audiences with publics. As McChesney (2004) argues, the financial imperatives of commercial media frequently run counter to the interests of publics who have challenged corporate life or dominant social values. Thus, depictions of the past in popular culture are not necessarily constructed in the interests of the publics who observe them. To avoid the conflation of commercially available texts with the memories of publics, I refer to the range of discourses in popular culture that commemorate the past in terms of popular memories, or memories that are *popularized* by mainstream commercial media (Hoerl, 2007).

Sites of memory also comprise an important terrain of ideological struggle that reflect a culture's political dynamism. As Lipsitz (1990) writes, "culture forms create conditions of possibility, they expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future; but they also engender accommodation with prevailing power realities . . . internalizing the dominant culture's norms and values as necessary and inevitable" (p. 16). Such memories have implications for the future. Those who define and interpret the past for a society are

empowered to shape its meaning and values, its power relations, and its possibilities for political and social change. Several historically based films have garnered critical scholarly attention for providing rhetorical and ideological depictions of past conflicts including World War II (Biesecker, 2002; Ehrenhaus, 2001; Owens, 2002), and the Vietnam War (Sturken, 1997).

Films about racial struggles in United States history also illustrate the political and ideological struggles over memory in popular culture. Hasian and Carlson (2000) argue that the movie *Amistad* privileged mainstream understandings of the Amistad case to the exclusion of perspectives from marginalized groups. Media scholars have similarly noted *Mississippi Burning's* implicit support for white hegemony. These scholars observed that the movie focused on the heroism of whites and featured blacks solely as victims (Bourgeois, 1992; Brinson, 1995; Madison, 1999). Brinson (1995) contends that *Mississippi Burning's* narrative communicated the myth of white superiority to resolve cultural tensions about the authority of the exclusionary power structure during the late 1980s. Madison (1999) concludes that *Mississippi Burning* reasserted the authority of the white establishment that the films' main characters purported to critique.

Scholarship attending to patterns across multiple texts points to the intertextual construction of popular memory. Madison's analysis included a series of "anti-racist-white-hero" films including *Cry Freedom*, *Amistad*, and *A Time to Kill* that implicitly exonerated whiteness from culpability for racial injustice and helped to provide a basis for white paternalism at the end of the 20th century. By attending to several mainstream films, Madison suggests that the Hollywood film industry plays a central role in establishing and legitimating white hegemony in popular culture. This approach suggests that mass media offer structured meaning systems that limit and circumscribe popular memories of racial struggles. In a study of cinematic and

journalism depictions of Byron de la Beckwith's conviction for the murder of Medgar Evers, Hoerl (2008) notes that the confluence across film and news media texts naturalized the hegemonic narrative of Beckwith's conviction as the conclusion to the civil rights struggle, deflecting critical attention from contemporary racial inequities in the United States. Elsewhere, Hoerl (2007) explains how patterns across newspaper reviews of the counter-hegemonic film *Panther* challenged the film's credibility as a source of historic information about the Black Panther Party.

Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci (1991) offer an alternative approach to the intertextual construction of memory by observing that the scope of a text itself, or the discourses that are included within the range of what counts as a text, enables a particular type of interpretation that would be different if the scope was enlarged or constrained. In the conclusion to their analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the authors call for a suspension of the material unity of a given work "in order to grasp the multiplicity of any discourse" (p. 282). Hasian (2001) suggests how this perspective may be used to glean insights about the rhetorical implications of the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Characterizing the film as an "intertextual rhetorical fragment," Hasian (2001) explores the multiple and competing interpretations of the movie to illustrate how the film served the needs of different audiences who struggled over the meaning of World War II (p. 339).

The intertextual approach to the construction of popular memory in this analysis acknowledges that the popular memory of a past conflict is never a complete or finished product; rather, different sites of memory including films, news broadcasts, and film reviews engender additional discourses that alter the popular memory landscape. The discursive relations among various sites of memory in popular culture constitute the terrain where a majority of people may

access resources for making sense of the past. Thus, while this perspective attends to mainstream

media products as predominant sites for sense-making about the past, it also highlights the

processes by which popular culture constructs, remedies, and transforms possibilities for

interpretation. The rhetorical processes enacted by both the film and journalistic responses to it

suggest that films functioning as preeminent sites of cinematic amnesia not only bring partial and

ideological memories into being; they also prompt additional discourses about controversial

struggles from the past. Through this perspective, rhetorical and media critics may begin to

identify ways in which particular depictions of the past ─even decidedly hegemonic ones─ invite

remedial spaces for remembering the past.

<p style="text-align:center">*Mississippi Burning* as Cinematic Amnesia</p>

As a partial and largely fictionalized account of the FBI's investigation of three slain civil rights

activists, *Mississippi Burning's* narrative expressed the clash between competing impulses in

Hollywood. Film director Alan Parker explained his interest in depicting racial struggle in the

United States originated from his identification with civil rights protesters as a white working-

class youth growing up in England: "It was the first time those of use who admired America

from abroad saw that life wasn't perfect there. That even American suffered profound injustices"

(Cagin, 1988, p. 337). Parker admitted that his film could not be the "definitive film of the black

civil rights struggle" because his heroes were white, but conceded that "the film would probably

have never been made if they weren't" (Ringel, 1989, K01).

Parker's statements reflect the challenges filmmakers face when they seek to address

themes of racial exclusion and injustice. Movies featuring black leaders may portray the interests

of historically subordinated groups better than films featuring whites, but they are also perceived

as less marketable, thus reaching fewer audiences. As Winn (2001) notes in his analysis of

Malcolm X, another film about racial conflict, Hollywood filmmaking can "be a site of struggle between the views of the filmmakers and the demands of the film industry" (p. 453). Paradoxically, motion pictures about racial injustice frequently feature whites. Other films about race featuring white characters such as *A Time to Kill* (1996), *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Windtalkers* (2002), and movies about non-white characters featuring white actors including *Gandhi* (1982) and *The Last Samurai* (2003) expose Hollywood's tendency to foreground white culture at the expense of minority depictions. This propensity suggests that the Hollywood film industry frequently caters to white audiences presumed unlikely to watch films featuring black actors.[3]

Parker's choices also reflected his presumption that most film-going audiences are not interested in watching historically based depictions of controversial political events. He told the press that he crafted the film with a dramatic, rather than documentary lens, because he wanted to "reach an audience who knows nothing about the realities [of social struggle] and certainly don't watch PBS documentaries" (King 1988, p. 2.15). The outcome of this struggle, as Parker saw it, was a "work of fiction" that evoked the "heart of the truth" of the civil rights era (King, 1988, p. 2.15). Parker concluded that "to cause [audiences] to react to it viscerally, emotionally, because of the racism that's around them now . . . [is] enough of a reason, a justification, for the fictionalizing" (King, 1988, p. 2.15). Ostensibly to appeal to mainstream audiences, Parker evoked conventions of Hollywood entertainment film to tell the story of the FBI's struggle to solve the infamous murders of three civil rights activists. The following description of the plot's development illustrates how the film's adherence to conventions of Hollywood drama both enabled and constrained the film's portrayal.

Remembering racial injustice within a cop action drama

Mississippi Burning's narrative evoked the history of the South's racist oppression during the civil rights era yet displaced activists' resistance to racial injustice during Mississippi Freedom Summer. The film revolved around the heroic efforts of two fictional FBI detectives ─Rupert Anderson, played by Gene Hackman, and Alan Ward, played by Wilem DeFoe─ sent to solve the mysterious disappearance of three unnamed civil rights activists in a fictional town in central Mississippi. The heroism of Ward and Anderson contrasted sharply with the actions of the film's central antagonists Sheriff Ray Stuckey and Deputy Sheriff Clinton Pell. Throughout the film, local police under Stuckey collaborated with local Ku Klux Klan members to undermine the FBI's investigation. The two agents labored fruitlessly to find the bodies of the missing men until Anderson convinced the deputy sheriff's wife to tell him where the bodies of the missing activists were located. After the agents found the men buried in an earthen dam outside of town, the agents searched for evidence tying the police and other local whites to the activists' deaths.

Much of the film focused on the tension between Anderson, a former Mississippi sheriff-turned FBI agent, and his superior, Ward, a by-the-books agent in charge of the case. Ward's strategies for solving the case alienated both the black and white Southern community; conversely, Anderson sweet-talked Mrs. Pell, the deputy sheriff's wife, into giving the FBI crucial information to solve the case. Anderson also ignored FBI protocol by threatening white police suspected of murdering the activists. In one climactic scene, Ward and Anderson nearly came to blows over Anderson's insubordination. Conflict between Ward and Anderson followed the conventions of what Brown (1993) refers to as a "cop action drama". Within this film genre, protagonists form an antithetical partnership in order to root out an inhumane villain who threatens the community. This genre was reminiscent of other commercially successful

Hollywood films popular at the time of *Mississippi Burning's* release. Brown (1993) explains

that the commercial success of early cop action dramas such as *Die Hard* (1988) and *Lethal*

Weapon (1987) prompted a series of sequels and low budget films with similar themes and

action sequences (p. 85). This series of films indicates that the good cop versus evil villain plot

development and spectacular action sequences typical of the cop action genre is a formula for

commercial success. The box office success of these earlier motion pictures indicates that

Mississippi Burning's filmmakers may have strategically employed conventions of the cop

action narrative to bring the movie's civil rights themed narrative to commercial media

audiences. Indeed, executives for Orion Pictures, the film's distributors, marketed the movie as a

"police investigation film" (Gold, 1989, p. 13).[4]

Although marketers characterized the motion picture as a cop action narrative,

Mississippi Burning featured images of Southern white brutality against blacks rarely depicted

by Hollywood prior to the movie's release. The film's opening scene depicted a local police car

chasing a car of three men, two white and one black on an otherwise deserted country road at

night. The three men invoked the memories of Chaney, a black Mississippi native, and

Schwerner and Goodman, white activists from the North. After the car pulled over, a local police

officer called the driver a "nigger loving Jew" and shot him at point blank range. As the screen

went black, sounds of additional shots rang out, and another man's voice declared, "At least I

shot me a nigger." This scene closely followed events that took place on the night Chaney,

Goodman, and Schwerner were murdered (Cagin & Dray, 1988). Additional scenes depicted

Klan brutality, including one in which several white men severely beat a young black man who

was approached by the FBI for information. In another scene, Klan members punished the family

of a boy who dared to speak with FBI agents by setting the family's barn on fire, striking the

boy's father, and then hanging him from a rope tied to a tree in the front yard. (The boy saved his

father's life after the Klan members drive away.) The film's contrasting images of poverty within

the black neighborhood and relative wealth within white households similarly reflected racial

inequality existing throughout Mississippi during the time of the activists' murders.[4]

The film's graphic portrayals of Klan violence against the black community resonated

with the brutal conditions of Southern life for many black people during the civil rights era;

however, Anderson and Ward's efforts to bring civil rights violators to justice sharply departed

from events following Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman's disappearance. Instead, the

protagonists' responses to Klan violence closely adhered to conventions of the cop action drama

in which law enforcement agents are compelled to go outside the law in order to pursue justice.

For Anderson, Ward's commitment to formal procedures for FBI conduct would never pose a

challenge to the local authorities who sanctioned violence against blacks. Thus, Anderson

concluded that federal agents would have to use illegal measures to attain evidence necessary to

apprehend the killers. According to Ames (1992), villains in crime dramas take actions that

"place them outside the pale of civilization," and "grant their pursuers the moral right to abandon

the restrictions of law" (p. 52). Ames explains that the depiction of the unconscionable villain is

an essential element of action films; "it provides the legitimating premise for the extreme

violence (and the elaborate special effects needed to depict it), which is a primary selling point of

the movies" (p. 52).

After Mrs. Pell was brutally beaten by her husband for confiding in the FBI, Ward

handed the case over to Anderson. The following scenes portrayed FBI agents tricking and

terrorizing Klan members to confess their involvement in the activists' deaths. Through coercive

actions, FBI agents attained the evidence they needed to prove that Klan members had violated

the activists' civil rights. Thus, the threats of violence against Klan members, which were warranted by the Klan's own disregard for the law, enabled Ward and Anderson to find some justice for the community. The film's final scenes depicted the men who helped to murder the activists, including Sheriff Stuckey and Deputy Pell, being arrested by federal agents. As Stuckey, Pell, and other Klan members were arrested in the film's final minutes, captions at the bottom of the screen described the length and severity of their prison sentences. Although the names of the men provided on screen were fictional, these men had real-life counterparts who were arrested for violating civil rights laws in connection with the activists' deaths (Douthat 1989, p. 19). Paralleling the real life sentences of Deputy Cecil Price and Sheriff Lawrence Rainey, captions noted that Pell was given a prison sentence and Stuckey was acquitted.

Displacing activists in the civil rights struggle

By adhering to narrative conventions of the cop action drama, *Mississippi Burning* fundamentally departed from the historical accounts of events surrounding Mississippi Freedom Summer. The movie's focus on two renegade FBI agents as central agents for community justice displaced the ordinary people, including many Southern blacks, who were central to Mississippi's civil rights movement during the 1960s. The film never mentioned the names Chaney, Schwerner, or Goodman; nor did it depict events surrounding the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. The film also excluded images of local black citizens who challenged Mississippi's racist policies despite threats that local whites made to their lives and their families. Indeed, black activists brought the informant who knew where the bodies of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman were located to the attention of the FBI (Cagin and Dray, 1988, pp. 336-370).

As *Mississippi Burning* deflated the role that activists played in finding the bodies of the missing activists, it inflated the FBI's role in securing justice for African-Americans during the 1960s. Other historical accounts of the civil rights struggle suggest that the FBI was not committed to furthering the goals of the civil rights movement (Branch, 1988) and was closely linked to Southern law enforcement officials (White 1989, p.62). Cagin and Dray's (1988) history of events surrounding the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project explains that John Proctor (the FBI agent in charge of investigating events in Neshoba County, Mississippi) had an amicable relationship with Rainey and Price, and regarded Price as "a nice guy who would do anything for you" (p. 324). By telling the story surrounding the missing activists from the perspective of fictional FBI agents, *Mississippi Burning* obfuscated how federal authorities contributed the climate of racial violence in Mississippi.

These omissions and misrepresentations in the movie were not lost on reviewers who indicated that the film's portrayal of fictional FBI men as agents for racial justice contributed to racist depictions of the past in which only white people appeared politically empowered. *Mississippi Burning's* simultaneous depiction of civil rights atrocities and deflection of civil rights activism illustrates how "terministic screens" embodied by popular culture texts produce ideological narratives out of complex experience (Cloud, 1996; McMullen and Solomon, 1994). However, the film's narrative had added rhetorical implications. Indeed, two screening devices contributed to the motion picture's partial depiction. By portraying white racist violence common to the brutality experienced by Southern blacks, the movie filtered depictions through the lens of the historic record during the civil rights era. By following the narrative conventions of cop action drama, the film added an additional filter that selected only those historically resonant events that contributed to its generic story line, thus omitting activists' collective

challenges to white supremacy in Mississippi. Responses to the film's narrative indicate that the film's own filtering apparatus exposed the motion picture's limited fidelity to Mississippi's civil rights struggle, thereby opening its cinematic narrative to criticism.

Mississippi Burning's conclusion intensified the tensions caused by the film's selective amnesia. Moments before the scenes listing the sentences of men involved in the activists deaths, the film broke with conventions of cop action drama by asserting a moral lesson to the film's narrative. During this scene, Ward and a lower ranking agent discovered that the town's mayor hung himself in the wake of the mass arrests of the town's police officers. The lower ranking agent asked Ward, "Why did he do it? He wasn't involved." Facing the camera, ostensibly toward the direction of the lower ranking officer, Ward answered, "Anyone is guilty who watches this happen and pretends it isn't. No, he was guilty all right, just as guilty as the crazy fanatics who pulled the trigger. Maybe we all are." By facing the camera and invoking everyone who has witnessed racial injustice as guilty for violence against subordinated groups, Ward implied that mainstream, or privileged audiences who have observed brutality against subordinated groups are also culpable for hate crimes in the United States.

By encouraging audiences to assume responsibility for racial injustices in the South, the film's conclusion suggested that memories of past injustice have implications for the present. The film's conclusion encouraged audiences to consider the film as a social commentary about race relations during the 1960s and attested to Parker's interest in constructing a fictional narrative critical of prevailing race relations in the United States. Moments before the film's closing credits, the movie focused on the headstone of the unnamed black activist who was murdered which read, "1964-Not Forgotten." This scene reasserted the film's relevance to civil rights and urged audiences to resolve the film's unfinished narrative. By focusing on these

words, the film suggested that audiences had a moral imperative to remember the slain activist

and take action on his behalf.

Given the film's moral imperatives to remember, it is paradoxical that the movie

portrayed FBI agents as the moral voice for racial justice when, in real life, these agents did not

assume responsibility for bringing the killers to justice. Likewise, the film's omission of

Freedom Summer activists who struggled for racial justice is at odds with the film's appeal to

Chaney's memory. Indeed, Parker's purported interest in serving racial justice was compromised

by the movie's glorification of the FBI. The film's progressive potential was also cut short by its

attention to a racist past that was ostensibly overcome. Predominant civil rights narratives have

typically presented racial struggle in terms of historic progress toward racial equality. As

Gallagher (1999) remarks, such narratives muffle voices critical of the social system's current

failings (p. 316). *Mississippi Burning* is one of several civil rights films that have deflected

critical attention from more contemporary instances of racism (Hoerl, 2008; Madison, 1999). By

foregrounding the FBI's struggle to bring civil rights violators to justice, the film offers symbolic

resolution to the cultural contradictions exposed when expressed social and political

commitments to racial equality are contradicted by ongoing instances of racial injustice and

racially motivated violence. By drawing attention to the movie's simultaneous remembrance and

forgetfulness, this conclusion helped to promote a range of audience reactions to the film's

selective depiction.

Amnesia as a Resource for Invention about Civil Rights

Media attention to *Mississippi Burning* in the months following its release responded to the

film's conflict between its depiction of Klan brutality and its deflection of civil rights activists.

All of news print coverage of the film referenced the disappearances of Chaney, Goodman, and

Schwerner. Otherwise, the movie elicited a variety of responses from the mainstream press in the

first two months following the film's theatrical release. Despite Parker's disclaimer that the film

was a fictional narrative, many newspaper reviews heralded the film as a welcome depiction of

racial struggle (Higashi, 2001, p. 226). The film also prompted additional media attention to civil

rights. Television programs *West 57th* and *CBS This Morning* used the movie as a point of

departure for their own civil rights retrospective (Gold, 1989, p. 13). As the film gathered media

attention, it also drew critics, many of whom were former Freedom Summer Activists. By

covering complaints about the film or by offering criticism of their own, reporters and reviewers

contested the film's role as a source of historical understanding and social awareness. Thus,

journalists engaged criteria of cinematic authenticity and racial inclusion to evaluate the merits

of the film. Several journalists also offered alternative depictions of the civil rights struggle to

remedy the film's amnesia. These therapeutic reports featured the actual agents of civil rights,

the FBI's complicity with Southern racism, and more contemporary instances of racial injustice.

Establishing Mississippi Burning as an "authentic" depiction of racial injustice

Reviewers suggested that *Mississippi Burning's* stirring portrayal of Klan violence and

segregation gave meaning to the film as an important source of historical awareness about the

viciousness of Southern racism during the civil rights era. Several critics noted that *Mississippi*

Burning was one of few movies that accurately depicted the brutality that blacks and activist

faced in Mississippi during the 1960s (Barnes, 1989; Champlin, 1989; Kaufman, 1989; King,

1989; Lipper, 1988; Maslin, 1988). One of the first critics to review the film, *New York Times*

critic Canby (1988) wrote that the film was "utterly authentic" as "one of the toughest,

straightest, most effective fiction films yet made about bigotry and racial violence" (p. C12).

Many other film critics shared Canby's praise for the movie's representation of Southern

brutality against blacks during the 1960s. Carter (1988) declared that the film was "at its most honest" when it portrayed "the raw brutality of Klan terrorism" (www.wsj.com/archives). Another critic who acknowledged the film's selective and fictional portrayal conceded that the film rang true, "emotionally at least" (Salamon, 1988, p. LA1). Well-known *Chicago Tribune* film critic Ebert concluded, "No other movie I've seen captures so forcefully the look, the feel, the very smell, of racism" (p. 41).

Additional critics alluded to the *Mississippi Burning's* authenticity by suggesting that the film elicited their personal memories of racial injustice. For *Miami Herald* film critic Rose (1989), *Mississippi Burning* deserved special praise because it was the first in recent history to draw national attention to Klan violence, "Until this movie came along I could not explain to friends in Miami just how scary it could be in Mississippi during the 1960s" (p. 1C). Peterman (1989) wrote that the film prompted a "flood of memories:" the death of Medgar Evers in 1963, the Birmingham, Alabama church bombing in 1965, and his own experiences of being harassed by whites when family members agreed to testify against several white people in his community (p. 1D). Reviewers' emphasis on the movie's authenticity reveals how the movie's portrayal of Klan violence was a resource for shared remembrance of racial injustices. The motion picture provided a focal point for both former activists and audiences who had not directly experienced or witnessed civil rights atrocities to recall traumatic events from the civil rights era. By portraying racially motivated violence on screen, the film created an opening for critics to put a public spotlight on racial atrocities rarely depicted in popular culture. Thus, *Mississippi Burning's* ability to elicit additional remembrances of racial injustice illustrates how hegemonic films may indirectly prompt further media attention to historical social injustices.

Despite reviewers' positive acclaim, many critics contested *Mississippi Burning*'s

resonance to the broader civil rights struggle. Most reviews and reports acknowledged that the

film focused on white characters even though it was purportedly about racial injustice. *New York*

Times reporter Minor (1989) quoted veteran civil rights worker, Hollis Watkins, who called the

movie a "falsehood," as well as Jackson State Professor Gene Young, who stated that the film

"neglected to tell about the role of black people back then" (p. 1.16). Several critics also

complained that by focusing on whites, *Mississippi Burning* presented blacks solely as victims

(Carr, 1989; Gabrenya, 1989; Westbrook, 1989; Will, 1989). Reporting on the controversy

surrounding the film, the *Christian Science Monitor* featured several former civil rights activists.

Bob Moses, who headed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (or SNCC) in 1964

complained that the film's representation of blacks was reminiscent of America's historic racism.

"'We'd been working in Mississippi for years before 1964, and America never saw us. Now

again they don't see us. Blacks in the movie are a plot device - a backdrop for the white heroes'"

(Marquand, 1989, p. 11).

Reviewers similarly concluded that the film was a manifestation of racism in the United

States. *New York Times* critic Staples (1989) concluded that the film was an example of

"cinematic segregation." Staples also compared Parker's defense that the film had to focus on

white heroes to appeal to society with "what a Montgomery, Alabama bus driver told Rosa Parks

in 1955: Get up and go to the back of the bus, that's just the way things are" (p. 2.1). For *Atlanta*

Journal-Constitution film critic Ringel (1989), the movie represented white man's "hatred and

fear of that which is Other" (p. K01). In addition to contesting the film's racial bias, press

coverage critiqued *Mississippi Burning* for heralding the FBI as civil rights movement heroes.

Reporters and reviewers frequently noted that the film's conclusion belied the real tactics that the

FBI used to find the bodies of the missing activists and explained that the bureau paid $30,000 to

a former member of the Ku Klux Klan who was willing to act as their informant (Barnes 1989;

Canby, 1989; Carr 1989; Kaufman, 1989; Pollack, 1989; Staples, 1989). This critical media

coverage suggested that the film ignored the struggles civil rights activists faced even though the

film gave representation to the Southern brutality that led blacks to organize for civil rights.

Reviewer's attention to the tensions in the film indicates that the movie exposed its own racial

biases, which was particularly egregious to audiences with memories of those who had struggled

for racial justice.

Remedying Mississippi Burning's civil rights amnesia

Many newspaper critics and reporters critical of the film's selective portrayal responded by

providing their own short civil rights histories. According to these histories, activists, not federal

officials, were primarily responsible for ending segregation and securing voting rights for

African-Americans. This news coverage highlighted the dynamic interplay between cinematic

and journalistic memory. News media attending to the centrality of ordinary activists for civil

rights victories suggests that journalists' own screening devices for selecting news coverage

emerged, at least in part, to correct the memories of activism constructed by *Mississippi*

Burning's narrative. These journalistic screens have implications for both the role of journalism

and film for the process of memory construction in popular culture.

By prompting newspaper critics to extend and remedy its depiction of racial struggle in

Mississippi, *Mississippi Burning* provided an inventional resource for the construction of

additional journalistic memories of civil rights. The *Los Angeles Times* emphasized that young

black students were chiefly responsible for civil rights achievements (Benson 1988, p. 44). *St.*

Louis Post-Dispatch film critic Barnes (1989) noted that blacks in Mississippi were far from

being fearful victims and fought racist policies (p. 3C). Other reporters emphasized that black

activists including Fannie Lou Hamer (Italie, 1988; Marquand, 1989), Medgar Evers (Italie

1988; Marquand, 1989), and Bob Moses (Staples, 1989) were central to the movement's

achievements. Journalists also emphasized that it wasn't lone individuals who made a difference

in the movement; instead, the sacrifices of "countless SNCC workers" (Marquand, 1989), and

"the bravery of thousands of black Mississippians" (Carter, 1988) prompted civil rights

legislation and an end to formal segregation in the South. As Kaufman (1989) eloquently stated,

the collective efforts of ordinary people "provided the organizational and emotional backbone of

the movement" (p. B1). Other reporters Cohen (1989) and Nossiter (1989) similarly recounted

the contributions of working-class black people to the civil rights struggle. Through such

reports, the press offered remedies for the film's misleading portrayal of FBI agents as central

leaders in Mississippi's struggle for racial justice.

Additional reports also sought to remedy the film's characterization of events

surrounding the murders of the Freedom Summer activists. The press frequently referenced

Mississippi Burning as the context for remembering incidents of racial injustice excluded from

the film. As examples, the *Houston Chronicle* noted that Florence Mars was forced out of

business after she testified against whites suspected of murdering Chaney, Schwerner, and

Goodman (Douthat, 1989, p. 47); and the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that when FBI agents

searched for the missing activists, they found the bodies of three other black males they weren't

looking for, including a 14-year-old boy, never identified, wearing a CORE T-shirt (Lipper,

1989, p. 2.15). The mainstream press also provided additional accounts of the FBI's treatment of

civil rights injustices to challenge *Mississippi Burning's* characterization of FBI agents as

dedicated to civil rights. Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* asserted that there

were no black agents working for the FBI at the time of the activists' disappearance (Staples, 1989 p. 2.1; Williams, 1988, p. C1). Benson (1988) told *Los Angeles Times* readers that the FBI had been "notoriously diffident in acting on complaints of civil rights violations" (p. 44). This journalist explained, "The FBI had certainly not turned out in force . . . when four little black girls were murdered in Birmingham, Ala., as the Ku Klux Klan dynamited their church" and added, "The sympathies of many of the agents who were also Southerners were hardly a secret" (p. 44).

Some reports featured personal memories of the FBI's quick dismissal of activists' concerns. Former activists Myrlie Evers and Mary King told *Houston Chronicle* reporter Italie (1988) that FBI agents collaborated with Southern whites who harassed civil rights demonstrators. According to King, "FBI agents could be seen watching a demonstration while fraternizing with sheriffs and local law officers . . . It has now become commonly accepted that some of these agents were themselves members of the Ku Klux Klan" (p. 5). *St. Petersburg Times* film critic Peterman (1989) recalled a personal childhood memory: "Two agents . . . came to my family's home after my father complained to the U.S. Justice Department about violations by the Macon County Board of Registrars. We opened the door, the agents walked in and said: 'What you niggers complaining about now?'" (p. D1). The most extensive mainstream news coverage of the controversy surrounding *Mississippi Burning* appeared in *Time* magazine. This magazine featured the FBI's complicity with Southern racism at the time of Chaney, Schwerner's and Goodman's disappearance. Following an extensive report about the controversy surrounding *Mississippi Burning*, film critic White (1989) highlighted Hoover's "lethargic" response to civil rights violations (p. 62). According to White, the FBI ignored activists' repeated requests for protection during Freedom Summer activities and waited to investigate Chaney,

Schwerner, and Goodman's disappearance for a full day despite activists' repeated appeals for help. White also suggested that the FBI's response to the Mississippi case fit within a larger pattern of racial prejudice within the agency under J. Edgar Hoover's direction, which was also exemplified by Hoover's illegal surveillance of Martin Luther King to dig up proof that King was under the influence of communists.

These journalistic reports sharply departed from press coverage and documentary films that have routinely depicted the civil rights struggle as a Southern problem. Implicit in these routine depictions is the assumption that the racial injustices endemic to the southern United States did not apply as well to the rest of the nation. Criticisms of the FBI's treatment of civil rights protesters challenged this assumption. By drawing attention to the FBI's complicity with Southern law enforcement, reports about the FBI's own racism pointed to the broader political structures that stood in the way of black empowerment. Press accounts of the FBI's complicity with Southern racism are also examples of what Lipsitz (1990) refers to as counter-memories, or ways of remembering and forgetting based on local, immediate, and personal experiences. These forms of remembrance feature the perspectives of groups typically excluded from traditional histories, thus providing new lenses for understanding how marginalized groups have experienced social relations in their daily lives. As Lipsitz remarks, these forms of remembrance "prompt revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past" (p. 213). By highlighting former activists' personal struggles with racist FBI agents, journalists offered counter-memories that called for revision of *Mississippi Burning's* skewed narrative to include patterns of harassment against blacks that extended beyond Mississippi.

Extending civil rights critique of race relations

Press attention to the movie suggested that racial inequity reached beyond the civil rights era of the 1960s as well. By making connections between the film's racism and the racial political climate at the time of the film's release, reporters suggested that civil rights injustices continued in the present. Some journalists writing about the movie indicated that racism has not yet been eradicated from public life or from the federal government. Peterman (1989) asserted that "racially motivated violence has continued throughout the United States. The only difference, the film reviewer added, is that it's "the 1980s instead of the 1960s" (p. 1D). *Miami Herald* movie critic Rose (1989) described continued racial discrimination within the FBI in a lukewarm review of the film. After recounting a more recent incident in which an African-American FBI agent was harassed by white colleagues, Rose noted that "about 9 percent of the bureau's 9,500 agents are African-American or Hispanic. Of the 59 field offices nationwide, only one, in Philadelphia, is headed by an African-American. None is headed by a Hispanic" (p. 1C). By highlighting contemporary examples of racial inequity within the FBI, these film critics attended to the film as a context for challenging the narrative of progress typically advanced by other sites of civil rights memory. They also extended criticisms of the film's depiction of FBI agents as heroes fighting for civil rights by noting that, even today, such characterizations inflate the FBI's commitment to racial equality.

Time magazine's feature article about the film concluded that the movie was "as much a reflection of attitudes in today's Hollywood, and in the rest of America, as it is a window on the 1964 South." This unusually candid article drew parallels between the film's rather colorless depiction of civil rights and the 1988 presidential election:

In last year's presidential campaign, blacks were once again America's invisible men.

Faced with the electorate's comfortable cynicism, Democrats chose not to evoke

sympathy for the poor black (hence the virtual disappearance of Jesse Jackson), while

Republicans chose to exploit fear of the rapacious black (hence the toxic stardom of

Willie Horton). Why should Hollywood be more progressive than Peoria? (Bland et al.

1989, p. 61)

These journalists engaged the film with contemporary political interests in mind. According to

Time's reporters, both the film and the 1988 election season signaled ongoing systemic racism in

the United States and exposed the narrative of racial progress as a myth. By making connections

between the film's racism and the racial the political climate at the time of the film's release,

reporters drew the need for civil rights out of the past and into the present. *Mississippi Burning*

and press attention to the deaths of Freedom Summer activists thus called for renewed attention

to racial injustice.

The film and its ensuing controversy also drew additional political and legal attention to

Mississippi's racial climate at the time the film showed in theatres, particularly because the men

involved in the deaths of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman were never tried for murder.

According to Nossiter (1989a), the Mississippi's political leaders believed the film had created a

public relations crisis for the state (p. 225). In 1988, Ray Mabus hired the political relations firm

Ogilvy and Mather to repair the state's reputation (Nossiter, 1989b, p. C01). In June of 1989,

Mississippi's Secretary of State Dick Molphus delivered the state's first public tribute to Chaney,

Schwerner, and Goodman (Nossiter, 1989a).

The movie also inspired Mississippi journalist Jerry Mitchell to investigate the unsolved

case of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner's murders for the *Clarion-Ledger*, Mississippi's

leading newspaper. In an interview with NPR news anchor, Mitchell told NPR news anchor Farai Chideya (2007) that the film "was the beginning of [his] education." The reporter explained that he was particularly bothered that men involved in the activists' deaths were never prosecuted. Mitchell seized upon the state's renewed attention to civil rights memory in 1989 to persuade state leaders to release the Sovereignty Commission papers. Sealed previously by the state legislature, the papers revealed how public officials in Mississippi barred blacks from service on trials during the 1960s and kept men suspected of killing blacks and activists from prosecution despite strong evidence against them.

Prompted by a phone call from Mitchell announcing the release of the Sovereignty Papers, Myrlie Evers (1999) pushed state prosecutors to reopen the case against Byron de la Beckwith for her husband Medgar's 1964 murder. Beckwith's conviction in 1994 gave state prosecutors a reason to reopen many decades-old civil rights cold cases, and enabled subsequent trials and convictions of Bobby Frank Cherry in 2002 for the 1963 church bombing that killed four black girls in Birmingham, Alabama and Killen in 2005 for the deaths of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. These convictions illustrate how popular memories can inadvertently contribute to legal action in the present. In a report covering Killen's trial, Axtman (2005) noted that had the film not "cast Mississippi in such a damning light" the state would not have been pressed to prosecute (p. 01).

<div align="center">The Rhetoric of Cinematic Amnesia</div>

Depictions of racial struggle in *Mississippi Burning* and its journalistic coverage exemplify the rhetorical processes of memory construction in popular culture. The motion picture's portrayal of civil rights activism was an outcome of cinematic framing devices that simultaneously remembered grave injustices from civil rights past and forgot the key individuals and

organizations that resisted these injustices. Individuals such as Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bob Moses, and Dave Dennis were central leaders of civil rights organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that advanced the cause of racial justice in Mississippi.

I argue that *Mississippi Burning's* selective amnesia functioned rhetorically by creating an opening for other sources in popular culture to critique and correct the film's portrayal. Consequently, the movie's simultaneous remembrance and forgetfulness provided an inventional resource for the mainstream press to provide alternative memories of civil rights activism that complemented the memories of many former activists and historians. Indeed, *Mississippi Burning's* suppression and containment of civil rights memory created the impetus for counter-memory. The clash between the film's dramatic narrative and its resonance to events from the civil rights movement, as evidenced by the film's depiction of the FBI's savior role in the civil rights movement, exposed its own racial exclusivity and opened a limited space for journalists to feature the perspectives of civil rights protesters who resisted and challenged racial subordination. Likewise, the movie prompted political leaders' renewed popular interest in racial justice in Mississippi. By inciting news media to address the film's racial bias, *Mississippi Burning* inadvertently brought atrocities against civil rights activists to bear in the present.

This analysis also suggests that the mainstream press also played a role in constructing popular memories of civil rights in Mississippi following *Mississippi Burning's* release. By suggesting that journalists offered remedial counter-memories to the film's depiction of civil rights, I do not want to infer that journalists provided a complete civil rights narrative. Nor do I wish to suggest that journalistic responses to this film provided the only accounts of civil rights.

Indeed, much more could be said about civil rights than appeared in journalistic responses to Parker's film and other richer accounts of Mississippi Freedom Summer have appeared outside of news media attention to the movie (Branch, 1988; Cagin & Dray, 1988; McAdam, 1988). However, the mainstream press contributed to the popular memory of civil rights by enlarging its story for audiences unlikely to seek out books or more specialized media about civil rights history. Journalistic critics also called for critical engagement with popular depictions of the past, not only offering alternative frameworks for remembering Mississippi's civil rights era, but also critiquing Hollywood's portrayal, thereby drawing attention to the rhetorical features of filmic depictions of the past. These observations suggest that scholars interested in understanding how films contribute to shared remembrance of past social struggles may glean insights by looking not only at how films depict past events but at the popular media discourses that circulate in response to these cinematic portrayals.

The dynamic between cinematic amnesia and journalistic memory has implications for the rhetorical dimensions of popular memory. This analysis indicates that the potential for shared memory does not exist exclusively within the terrain of any particular text but through the process of engagement across varied memory sites. The discrepancy between the counter-memories that emerged in journalism reviews of *Mississippi Burning* and those that the narrative of civil rights expressed in the film itself also indicates that the rhetorical implications of cinema lie not only in filmic depictions but in how critics and publics interested in those depictions respond to the movie. Disagreements between these sites reveal the presence of situated publics who engage cinematic depictions with their own investments in how the past gets remembered. The process of remembrance enacted through multiple and competing texts in popular culture illustrates how popular culture mediates the divergent memories of various publics.

Disagreements over depictions of black struggles in popular culture prevents white hegemonic memories from ossifying by encouraging audiences to think critically about whose version of the past is selected and how those remembrances shape social and political realities in the present. Popular films that provide startling and distorting portrayals of injustice may provide fertile resources for provoking additional remembrance of social struggles that have otherwise been forgotten.

Although the landscapes of popular memory may reveal a broader array of perspectives about particular racial conflicts than an analysis of any individual site would alone, popular memory's potential for critiquing the state or to celebrate black activism is limited. Many journalistic reviews providing counter-memories of civil rights also commended the film. Critics thereby encouraged audiences to embrace the film's attention to racial injustice even as they condemned the film's omissions of activists and blacks. For audiences who paid scant attention to these reviews, such reviews may have propelled the film's popularity without drawing critical attention to the film's omission of civil rights activism. Texts responding to popular films have the potential to critically engage audiences in questions about the role of the state and of activism; however, counter-memories may be confined to non-fiction that attract narrower audiences relative to Hollywood fiction. Thus, spaces for counter-memory are constrained in popular culture.

Further, the processes of popular memory construction obscure the presence of counterpublics critical of contemporary race relations. Because commercial news media are guided by many of the same market imperatives that influence the entertainment media (McChesney 2004), they tend to frame political conflicts from the perspectives of predominant institutions and already empowered groups and depict counterpublics and social movements

seeking fundamental structural change as outside the bounds of legitimate social controversy

(Gitlin, 1980; Watkins, 2001). These observations may also pertain to news coverage of

controversial films. A comparison of press attention to *Mississippi Burning* with newspaper

reviews of a film about a more controversial political movement for racial justice, Mario Van

Peebles's (1995) *Panther*, exemplifies this point. Journalistic coverage of *Panther* (a dramatized

portrayal of the Black Panther Party) was far more critical of this film than it was of *Mississippi

Burning* just six years earlier, and characterized the later motion picture as an untrue fiction.

Although, both *Panther* and *Mississippi Burning* blended events from the histories of racial

justice movements with generic conventions for fiction film, no mainstream news report or

review acknowledged the scenes from *Panther* that depicted the brutal repression that Panthers

faced at the hands of local police and the FBI; nor did journalists acknowledge ongoing racial

profiling by police that created the impetus for the Panther's organization (Hoerl 2007). One

explanation for such disparate coverage is that the mainstream press is more likely to attend to

events from the Civil Rights Movement because, unlike the Black Power Movement that

proceeded it, civil rights efforts have been regarded as less politically challenging to white

governed institutions. The contrast between news media attention to the Civil Rights Movement

and its attention to Black Power thus exposes mainstream news media's own investment in white

hegemony.

News media coverage of the film as a subtext for the state's renewed interest in the case

of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner's murders also reasserted predominantly white-governed

institutions as the central proponents of racial justice. In the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's*

feature article about Mitchell's role in solving cold cases of murdered civil rights activists,

Mitchell asserted that he wasn't "motivated by race" but was pursuing the cause of justice

(Jubera, 2005, p. 12A). Mitchell's quote illustrates how this popular Southern newspaper simultaneously celebrated this lone journalist's contributions to the justice system and evacuated the problem of ongoing racial injustice from consideration in the coverage of Killen's indictment. Paradoxically, this news treatment framed the central issue underlying Killen's case –systemic racism in the United States- as irrelevant. Press characterizations of Killen's indictment in terms of the *Mississippi Burning* trial also deflected attention from efforts by the Philadelphia Coalition, a racial justice organization in Mississippi that formed in order to pursue Killen's conviction (Minton, 2005). Similarly, while mainstream journalists widely credited Mitchell for his investigative reporting leading up to Beckwith's trial, newspapers rarely mentioned Myrlie Evers' pursuit of justice for her husband in the decades following Medgar Evers' death. In her autobiography, Myrlie Evers (1999) notes that she regularly returned to Mississippi to seek evidence of Beckwith's culpability, but had ultimately given up the possibility that Beckwith would ever be convicted despite common knowledge (and Beckwith's own admission) that he had shot Evers. It wasn't until attention to *Mississippi Burning* propelled state legislators to improve the state's national image that the state attorney's office seriously considered reopening the case.

Evers's hesitancy to seek a conviction for her husband until nearly three decades after his assassination provides one example of the ways in which racial justice has not been embraced by mainstream politics despite political rhetoric honoring the memory of civil rights struggles. Mississippi's attention to the memory of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, as well as Hollywood's depiction of the activists' deaths, reaffirms critical race theorists' conclusion that empowered institutions have been impelled to support civil rights initiatives only when they stand to gain material capital, institutional power, or political authority (Wilson, 2004). These

observations indicate that the landscapes of popular memory are only as fertile as the institutions that tend to them. By featuring a well known Hollywood film that ignored the agency of black activists, mainstream press attention to Killen's trial suppressed criticism of white hegemony from flourishing within the terrain of popular memory. As scholars interested in the relationship between rhetoric, shared remembrance, and mainstream media, we must remain attentive to the ways in which films both nurture and suppress important memories about previous social struggles.

Notes

[1.] These newspapers are: *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, The Boston Globe, The Buffalo News, The Chicago Sun-Times, The Christian Science Monitor, The Columbus Dispatch, The Houston Chronicle, The Los Angeles Times, The Miami Herald, The New York Times, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The St. Petersburg Times, The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post.*

[2.] The term public memory has been used to refer to both memories *that are available to* publics and the memories *of* publics (Eberly, 2004; Phillips 2004). Social and rhetorical theorists have distinguished publics as discursive formations within democracies that have emancipatory (Habermas, 1996) and hegemonic (Ely, 1997) implications. A critical conception of publics also suggests that publics comprise spaces for political critique and challenge to dominant discourse and ideology (Eberly, 2004; Fraser, 1997).

[3.] Parker's speculation about the commercial appeal of a historical civil rights film is arguable. Other filmmakers who have made films about racial conflict that featured blacks centrally within that struggle such as Spike Lee's (1989) *Do the Right Thing* received 27 million dollars at the box office according to the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com). The success of Spike Lee's (1992) biographical film *Malcolm X,* which received 48 million dollars in box office returns, indicates that films that closely follow biographical narratives may also attract large audiences. However, the lack of financial support from white Hollywood for films that feature black struggles also attests to the difficulties filmmakers face in creating these films. Indeed, Lee had to secure much of the film's funding from outside of the Hollywood film industry and relied heavily on the support of black actors and the African-American community to complete production of *Malcolm X* (Winn, 2001). Although the Hollywood industry has more recently

given positive attention to films featuring strong black performances and black characters including *Dreamgirls* (2006), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), *Monster's Ball* (2001), *Ray* (2004), and *Training Day* (2001), the themes in these films do not advance greater awareness of racial struggles in the United States. Recent historically driven films, such as *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), have focused on international conflicts that avoid criticisms of the white power structure in the United States. Other movies such as *Glory Road* (2006) *The Hurricane* (1999), and *Ray* (2004), have contributed to white hegemony by depicting instances of racial discrimination as historic events that have been overcome in recent decades.

[4.] Cop action films typically pair an unhinged white cop with a more civil black officer who collaborate to defeat a powerful villain (Ames, 1992). It is intriguing that *Mississippi Burning* engages the dynamic between two law enforcement officers as a plot device in a film explicitly about race relations, yet both of the film's central characters are white. Parker's choices reflect his blending of filmic conventions where it suited his interests; given that there were no black FBI agents at the time of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman's murders, an emphasis on a black law enforcement official in Mississippi might have made its historical relevance inconceivable.

[5.] Economic disparities between blacks and whites were ongoing in Mississippi when the film showed in theatres. Lipper (1989) reported that blacks held less than 12 percent of management positions as of the 1980 census. Lipper also cited the Mississippi Research and Development Center's findings that blacks frequently earned less than whites in comparable jobs.

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