Routledge
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'A Geography of Racism': Internal Orientalism and the Construction of American National Identity in the Film *Mississippi Burning*

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This article examines the contribution of the film Mississippi Burning *to the construction of American national identity within the context of the discourse of internal orientalism. This discourse consists of a tradition of representing the American South as fundamentally different from the rest of the United States, and an important strand of this tradition involves construing 'the South' as a region where racism, violence, intolerance, poverty and a group of other negative characteristics reign. In contrast, 'America' is understood as standing for the opposite of these vices.* Mississippi Burning *continues this tradition by creating a 'geography of racism', juxtaposing the brutality of white Southerners with the morality of two FBI agents sent to Mississippi to investigate the disappearance of three civil rights workers. A variety of the film's devices, including the comparison between the racist white Southerners and the FBI agents, reproduces an American national identity that stands for tolerance, justice and peace.*

Keywords: Internal Orientalism; American National Identity; US South; Film Analysis; Racism

Introduction

Since the earliest days of American cinema, the South has been a subject of intense fascination. D. W. Griffith's 1915 epic *Birth of a Nation* glorified the Lost Cause of the Old South and the role of the Ku Klux Klan in rescuing white Southerners from the predations of freed blacks and Northerners (see Chadwick (2001), for a detailed discussion of *Birth of a Nation*). The region has maintained a prominent presence on the silver screen ever since (Campbell, 1981; Kirby, 1986; Fischer, 1997;

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Langman & Ebner, 2001; Graham, 2001; Chadwick, 2001). From *Old Kentucky* (1909) to *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), movie audiences have been presented with visions of the South that have ranged from a sleepy, congenial Old South to a viciously racist and violent 'New' South. I argue that all of these representations are part of a larger discourse in the United States, that of internal orientalism, which characterises the South as fundamentally different from the rest of the country, thus separating the imagined space of 'the South' from that of 'America'. In doing so, representations of the South can then be used to inform an American national identity.[1]

Negative representations of the South have a special role to play in the formation of an exalted national identity, and I examine the contribution of the film *Mississippi Burning* to this process. I place the film within the context of the discourse of internal orientalism and demonstrate how the film uses the story of a truly execrable event in the South to produce a national identity that emphasises tolerance, enlightenment and respect for the law and human rights. I begin by giving a brief explanation of the notion of 'internal orientalism', followed by an elaboration of how this phenomenon operates in the United States.

Internal Orientalism

The framework of internal orientalism is based on Said's (1979, pp. 1–2) influential work on Orientalism, in which he argues that 'the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience'. In order to play this role effectively, 'the Orient' must be represented as fundamentally different from 'the Occident'; this process is commonly referred to as 'othering'. It is the distinction between these two territories that enables the othering of the Orient, which involves the creation of 'elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on' (Said, 1979, pp. 2–3). Said (1979, p. 3) describes Orientalism as a discourse, and this is key for him because this allows one to understand the systematic way in which the Occident managed the Orient in discursive as well as material terms. The discourse of Orientalism produces a binary that privileges European 'culture' over the 'culture' of the Orient, and 'Occidental' identity over 'Oriental' identity.

The encounter between 'Occident' and 'Orient' surveyed in *Orientalism* occurs primarily in the context of colonialism, but Said is careful to conceptually separate colonialism from Orientalism. To argue that 'Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact', and he notes that the division of the world into 'regions having either real or imagined distinction from each other' is a long-standing human practice (Said, 1979, p. 39). Orientalism, then, is not quite synonymous with colonialism.

Overall, Orientalism can be seen as: a relationship of domination of the Occident over the Orient in the overlapping political, economic and cultural spheres; a way of

representing the Orient that has an internal consistency and temporal durability; and the production of the geographic identities 'Occidental' and 'Oriental'. While certain details of the discourse of Orientalism, such as what the spatial referents of the term 'Orient' are, may change over time, what has survived is a particular constellation of material and discursive relations that allows the binary that underpins the Orientalist discourse to retain its currency and continue to make its contribution to the construction of essentialised geographic identities.

Orientalism produces national and supranational identities; the othering of a geographic space external to the state helps to (re)create a national identity. John Agnew (2000, p. 302) has argued for the possibility of 'internal others' (as in internal to a particular state), and in recent years scholars have begun to apply Said's framework to Orientalist discourses *within* states (Gladney, 1994; Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Piterberg, 1996; Schein, 1997). However, these studies do not extend Said's geographic imagination to conceptualise the internal other in spatial terms. From an explicitly spatial perspective, internal orientalism is a discourse that involves the othering of a region within the state and the simultaneous production of an exalted national identity (Jansson, 2003, 2004).

The difference in the spatial dynamic between Orientalism and internal orientalism means that *internal orientalism is not the same as Orientalism*. The fact that the other of internal orientalism belongs to the state where the othering is produced allows the residents of the othered region some degree of access to the national political, cultural and economic institutions. As a result, it becomes more likely that negative representations of the othered region will be complemented by positive representations. Moreover, this access to the national institutions suggests that the othered region will have a voice within this discourse that has no analogue in Said's initial formulation of Orientalism. To the extent that internal orientalism is hegemonic, the voices from the othered region are likely to be captured within the bounds of the discourse and replicate its terminology and overriding assumptions.[2] Oppositional voices that reinforce the hegemonic discourse have been termed 'derivative discourses' (Chatterjee, 1986; Said, 1988), and one might also see a kind of 'reverse othering,' where residents of the othered region turn the binary upside-down and portray the nation as a whole as degraded and inferior and the region as exalted and superior. Finally, there is a greater potential for what I call 'representational inertia' in the case of internal orientalism, since the internal other is more likely to be a consistent presence in the national consciousness; this consistency adds to the 'mass' of the discourse of internal orientalism such that changes within the spatial dynamics of the state that might alter the regional balance of power in some spheres of society may not affect the discourse of internal orientalism immediately.

American Identity and the Othering of the South

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have attempted to enumerate the traits of the mythic American identity.[3] The archetypal American has been seen as self-reliant,

optimistic, strong, ingenious, determined, adaptable, principled, moral, peaceful, democratic and prosperous (Renwick, 2000). Americans also draw upon a 'heroic self-image of the lone, self-reliant, upward-striving individual, sharing equal rights and opportunities with all' (Zelinsky, 1992). 'The national myth is that of creativity and progress, of a steady climbing upward into power and prosperity, both for the individual and for the country as a whole' (quoted in Robertson, 1980, p. 5). Of these researchers, Neil Renwick in particular pays attention to the construction of this exalted identity. He shows that a process of othering and exclusion infuses American identity with the archetypal virtues, an othering based on human characteristics such as race and gender, and as such Renwick and most other scholars ignore the role of *spatial* othering in this process. This neglect of the spatial has consequences for our understanding of the role of othering in identity construction, as a 'spatial dimension is usually inherent in the definitions of the Other' (Paasi, 1996, p. 13).

Thus one of the projects of internal orientalism is the creation of regional stereotypes that inscribe difference within the nation-state such that the othered region is construed as *different*, a difference that tends to convey inferiority (on the equating of difference with inferiority, see Morgan, 2001, p. 337). The signification of difference creates the discursive space that facilitates internal othering. In the case of the United States, the primary regional other is the South (Jansson, 2003). Because the South is seen as fundamentally different, it is able to serve as a receptacle for the country's shadow; if the collection of vices considered, as a whole, to be uniquely Southern can be contained within the South, then they can be washed clean from the national identity.

While one can point to other candidates for the distinction, such as Appalachia, the South has served most consistently and effectively in the role of internal other (for a consideration of Appalachia as an internal other, see Shapiro, 1978; Batteau & Obermiller, 1983; Whisnant, 1983; Hanna, 2000). The South has long been considered the most 'distinctive' region (i.e., the most divergent from the national norm) in the country. The region has been vilified and celebrated for this distinctiveness as long as there has been a United States of America (see Greeson (1999), for an analysis of othering of the South in the early days of independence). Negative representations of 'the South' (which typically refer to white Southerners) as racist, backward, intolerant, poor and xenophobic reproduce a vision of the national identity as tolerant, progressive, enlightened, prosperous and cosmopolitan (Zinn, 1964; Van Woodward, 1971a; Griffin, 1995). Even positive representations of the region reinforce the internal orientalist binary by their insistence on the fundamental 'differentness' of the South (Ayers, 1996); while the tendency of Orientalist representations was to highlight the inferiority of the Orient, Said (1979, p. 40) noted that positive representations of the Orient were not inconsistent with the functioning of the Orientalist discourse.

The internal orientalist relationship between the South and the rest of the United States echoes Orientalism in other ways. Many scholars have argued that the South has been an internal colony of the United States and that the relationship between the

South and the rest of the country has been characteristic of colonialism (Webb, 1937; Woodward, 1971b; Grantham, 1995). This relates in part to the 'sense of grievance at the heart of [white] Southern identity' (Reed, 1983, p. 70) a grievance that may be seen as frustration at, among other things, the second-class status that white Southerners occupy within the internal orientalist vision of the imagined community of the nation. The South has also been viewed as a special problem that needed to be solved (Griffin, 1995), in part through the methods of modern social science.[4] Some writers even argue for a distinctive Southern ethnic group, claiming that white Southerners as a group have a divergent ethnic background from white Northerners (Reed, 1975; McWhiney, 1988).

One must not assume that the identities called 'Southern' and 'American' are timeless essences that have not changed over time. However, what has been consistent throughout American history is the binary that places the two geographic identities in opposition (Ayers, 1996). The valorisation of the binary may change such that 'Southern' is favoured over 'American', but it is uncommon to break out of this binary. Even during a period where some observers consider the South to be a powerful and influential region (Sale, 1976; Conkin, 1998), there is evidence that this binary has a representational inertia that still envisions a South that stands in opposition to the rest of the country and is hobbled by its historical baggage (Bowles, 2002).

There have certainly been periods of American history when the South was celebrated and quite consciously welcomed into the national family (see in particular Blight (2001) and Silber (1993) for studies of the reconciliation between North and South after the Civil War). This may be taken as evidence that there are eras when internal orientalism may not be the dominant way of framing the South/North encounter. It may also be evidence of the ambivalence of internal orientalism; James Duncan has argued that the European discourse of the other is not uniformly negative, but rather fraught with ambivalence (Duncan, 1993, p. 44), and we saw earlier that Said identifies a similar Orientalist ambivalence. In any case, the internal orientalist encounter is more complex than a simple demonisation that places the national identity in a privileged discursive position relative to the subordinate regional identity (on the ambivalence of Americans toward mountain folk, or 'hillbillies', see Williamson, 1995).

This argument draws in part of the insights of post-structural identity theory, and in particular the work of Natter and Jones (1997, p. 146), who discuss the relationship between the 'self' and the 'constitutive outside':

> The constitutive outside is a relational process by which the outside—or 'other'—of any category is actively at work on both sides of the constructed boundary, and is thus always leaving its trace within the category. Thus, what may appear to be a self-enclosed category maintained by boundaries is found in fact to unavoidably contain the marks of inscription left by the outside from which it seemingly has been separated.

Thus 'the South' is the constitutive outside of 'America': the traces of the internal orientalist view of Southern identity are found within that discourse's construction of American national identity, and vice versa. What may initially appear to be self-enclosed categories are revealed as relational identities when viewed through the lens of internal orientalism.[5] Thus one identity cannot be understood without consideration of the other.

National identity is constructively viewed as a process rather than a static thing (Hage, 1996), and the ongoing scrutiny experienced by the South may reflect the continuing need to reproduce the national identity through denoting difference between the imagined spaces of 'America' and 'the South'. This national identity is reproduced through the daily activities of the academy, media, political system, entertainment industry and other institutions. The representations produced by the process of nationalism are founded upon what Said (1979, p. 255) calls 'summational statements': generalisations about the region that paint all its residents with one brush. However, summational statements may not in fact describe *everyone* within the othered region. For example, in the influential book *The Mind of the South*, Wilbur Cash offers this 'basic picture of the South':

> Violence, intolerance, aversion and suspicion toward new ideas, an incapacity for analysis, an inclination to act from feeling rather than from thought, an exaggerated individualism and a too narrow concept of social responsibility, attachment to fictions and false values, above all too great attachment to racial values and a tendency to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values, sentimentality and a lack of realism—these have been its characteristic vices in the past. And, despite changes for the better, they remain its characteristic vices today. (Cash, 1954, pp. 425–426)

In enumerating the South's 'characteristic vices', it is evident that he is referring to white Southerners, and to white Southern men at that. Cash places African Americans in the South outside the 'Southern' identity, and in his version even white women make barely a cameo appearance. Cash has ample company: it has been standard practice to use 'Southerners' to mean white Southerners (Kirby, 1986, p. xx; Cobb, 1999, p. 127; Webster & Leib, 2001, p. 288). While this is changing, on the whole, the othering of the South has admitted African Americans into the idea of the South mainly as a collective prop to be used or abused by white Southerners depending on the degree to which the latter group has achieved some measure of American enlightenment. As we shall see, *Mississippi Burning* relegates African American Southerners to the same silent role.

Cinema and National Identity

The representations that contribute to the discourse of internal orientalism can be found in a variety of cultural media, including the motion picture. For Aitken and Zonn (1994a, p. ix), 'space and place ... are inextricably integrated with social-cultural and political dynamics and thus have become indispensable to cinematic

communication'. One of the modes of communication within which cinema operates is the transmission of cultural and political values, and films can also play a significant role in shaping national identities (O'Regan, 1996, p. 19; Williams, 2002, p. 4). It is the contribution of films to the reproduction of regional and national identities that concerns me in this article; after all, a motion picture is form of representation, and as Del Casino and Hanna (2000, p. 24) argue, 'identity formation is a representational process'.

Said examined literature and other written texts, and othering can be discerned in cinema as well. Said emphasised that the 'Occidental' and 'Oriental' identities must be seen contrapuntally—that is, one cannot be understood without reference to the other. Similarly, 'every version (images, representations, films) of an *other* is also, and perhaps more so, the construction of a *self* and the making of a text' (Aitken & Zonn, 1994b, p. 14, emphasis in original), thus we would expect films to serve as vehicles for discourses that produce essentialised identities that are inextricably linked.[6]

In this article, I echo Natter's (2002) approach in his study of whiteness in three recent films. While not ignoring the visuality of the film,[7] I emphasise the way that the narrative and dialogue of *Mississippi Burning* produce essentialised 'American' and 'Southern' identities. This is accomplished through the encounter of the two protagonists with the local white population and the sentiments to which the characters give voice. As Cresswell and Dixon (2002, pp. 3–4) argue, films are 'the temporary embodiment of social processes that continually construct and deconstruct the world as we know it'. *Mississippi Burning* contributes to the continual construction of the South as racist, violent, xenophobic, intolerant, parochial and corrupt (as well as white)—attributes that were famously summarised by Cash in *The Mind of the South*. In this way, the film is the embodiment of the social processes that underlie and are reproduced by the discourse of internal orientalism. Though the film is now over 15 years old, it is worth study because, as historian Paul Gaston (1999, p. 40) has noted, it holds 'almost unique status as Hollywood's major effort to portray civil rights history', and we might expect to find in such a story representations that flag the national mythology.

In addition, this story recently returned to public consciousness with the manslaughter conviction in June 2005 of Edgar Ray Killen, who had been charged by the State of Mississippi with masterminding the murders which inspired the film.

Mississippi Burning

In 1964, two white New Yorkers, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, journeyed to Neshoba County, Mississippi, to participate in Freedom Summer, a civil rights and voter registration effort, where they met James Chaney, a local African-American activist. On 21 June, they were detained in the Neshoba County Jail on a trumped-up speeding charge. About seven hours later, the three were released, only to be stopped again by the local deputy sheriff, who then turned the young men over to a group of Klan members. Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner were

executed and their bodies buried in a dam under construction in a remote part of the county.

The 1988 film *Mississippi Burning* was based on this incident and the FBI investigation that followed. The film was directed by Alan Parker and starred Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe as two FBI agents sent to fictional Jessup County to solve the case of three missing civil rights workers. A disclaimer shown at the end of the movie announces that it 'was inspired by actual events which took place in the South during the 1960s. The characters, however, are fictitious and do not depict real people either living or dead.' Parker eschews a strict retelling of the historical events, allowing himself the artistic license necessary to create his vision of the South. Said (1979, p. 14, emphasis in original) suggests that 'we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were *productive*, not unilaterally inhibiting', and by providing a fictionalised account of the case of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, the filmmakers are drawing on the productive capacity of internal orientalism.

This productive capacity results in a film that presents a 'geography of racism' (Kempley, 1988). The South is represented as a landscape of violence and death, intolerance and hatred, corruption and complicity. The white Southerners are nearly all depicted as uneducated, ignorant and violently racist, while the main protagonist, a white Northerner, stands unequivocally for tolerance, respect for the law and morality. African Americans appear as passive victims in need of federal help to overcome their oppression. The film sets up an us/them distinction between 'America' and 'the South', and its way of representing the South invigorates the archetypal American virtues.

Parker introduces us to the two FBI agents as they make their way to Jessup County to investigate the disappearance of the civil rights workers. Hackman's character, Agent Anderson, a former sheriff from the South (one critic referred to him as a 'Mississippi redneck'; Canby, 1988), is seen flipping through photos of Klan activity, which inspires him to sing a Klan song. Anderson is apparently attempting to be ironic here, but Dafoe's character, Agent Ward, objects to Anderson's attempt at humour, which provokes Anderson to harangue Ward about being a 'Kennedy boy'. Ward tries to demonstrate his Southern credentials by describing his experience in Oxford, Mississippi, protecting James Meredith as he became the first black student to enrol at the University of Mississippi. Ward took a bullet to the shoulder during that assignment. Anderson: 'Well, at least you lived, that's important.' Ward's reply: 'No, Meredith lived. *That's* what's important.' Anderson then offers a joke: 'What's got four eyes and can't see?' He answers himself: 'Mississippi.'

The two agents arrive in an unidentified town in Jessup County and proceed to the Sheriff's office. Ward introduces himself to Deputy Sheriff Pell, and notes that he is from the FBI. Pell responds with a smirk: 'Federal Bureau of Integration?' As Ward's approach fails to get the Deputy's cooperation, Anderson steps in and threatens the Deputy, at which point the Sheriff emerges from his office. Sheriff Stuckey is

a rotund, coarse-looking fellow with an open-collared, rumpled, short-sleeved uniform, looking very much the part of the backward country sheriff. His asks the FBI men: 'You down here to help us solve our nigger problem?'

Later that day, Ward and Anderson are discussing the three missing civil rights workers. Anderson questions their sanity for venturing into such dangerous territory. Ward responds: 'Some things are worth dying for.' Anderson: 'Well down here they see things a little differently. People down here feel some things are worth *killing* for.' Again the morality and virtue of the nation, the willingness to lay down one's life for an exalted principle, receives voice through Ward, in stark contrast to the bigoted law enforcement officials. Anderson's response is also notable, because he refers to 'people down here', not '*some* people down here', which implies that all white Southerners hold these views.

Ward voices a similar sentiment later on. When he comes upon a black man who had been severely beaten by a group of whites, he groans: 'What's wrong with these people?' While the action takes place in rural Mississippi, references like this tend to generalise from the local context to the entire South. These are summational statements about the South, and the notion that the South is 'solid' and homogenous has an extensive pedigree (Grantham, 1995). Since one of the principle dogmas of Orientalism is the uniformity of the Orient (Said, 1979, p. 301), it is not surprising to see a similar homogenisation with internal orientalism. In addition, this presentation of violence is familiar, for as Grantham (1995, p. xvi) points out, the South has been 'perceived, with varying degrees of concern, as a national problem, a problem associated with Jim Crow [and] mob violence', among other things.

The townspeople are uncooperative and unappreciative of the FBI's presence. The Mayor expresses his desire that Ward and Anderson conclude that it is simply a missing persons case and wrap things up expeditiously. During a scene in a barbershop, the following exchange occurs:

> *Mayor*: You can tell your bosses, people got the wrong idea about the South. You know what I'm talkin' about. Everybody runnin' around draggin', backwards and illiterate, eatin' sour belly and cornpone three times a day. Simple fact is, Anderson, we got two cultures down here. White culture, and the colored culture. Now that's the way it always has been, that's the way it always will be.
> *Anderson*: The rest of America don't see it that way, Mr. Mayor.
> *Sheriff*: Rest of America don't mean jack shit. You in Mississippi now.

The Sheriff here voices the barricade mentality prevalent among the white Southerners in the film, suggesting that Mississippi will remain defiantly untouched by the enlightened liberalism and racial tolerance that characterises the rest of the country, while at the same time he generalises from Mississippi to the entire South. In Anderson's comment, we also get a reminder that the rest of the United States is different from the South. Here the Sheriff also embodies what Cash (1954, p. 320) calls the 'savage ideal', which refers to 'the patriotic will to hold rigidly to the ancient pattern', rejecting ideas and mores that are seen as coming from outside the South.

Anderson later visits a social club that clearly serves as a KKK hangout. He tells the group of men, which includes Deputy Pell, about his days as a sheriff in Thornton, Mississippi.

> *Pell*: We ain't too interested in your good ol' Mississippi boy stories, Anderson. You ain't from here no more. Why'd you leave, anyway?
> *Anderson*: I just wanted a change of scenery. Y'know, the grits started leaving a bad taste in my mouth.
> *Thug*: Well, if that's how you feel about it, Mr. FBI man, why don't you drink up that beer and get the hell on out of here and back to your commie nigger-lovin' bosses up North. . . . So you can tell your stiff suits up there in Washington, DC that they ain't gonna change us one bit, 'less it's over my dead body, or a lot of dead niggers. (snickers from the others present)

Again we see the barricade mentality. By associating the attempt to change race relations in Jessup with 'Washington, DC', the thug allows the viewer to contrast the progressive national agenda with the regressive intolerance of the South. This scene evokes previous ideas about the South, as in H. L. Mencken's assertion that Northerners associate the region with '[f]undamentalism, Ku Kluxry, lynchings, [and] hog wallow politics' (quoted in Grantham, 1995, p. xvi).

Parker and screenwriter Chris Gerolmo give Anderson a love interest, who just happens to be Deputy Pell's wife. Anderson eventually succeeds in getting the information he seeks from Mrs. Pell to implicate the Deputy in the crime, who then severely beats his wife, putting her in the hospital. Ward hears the news first and summons Anderson to the hospital without stating the reason. When Anderson arrives he is taken aback by the sight of the battered woman, and enraged rushes from the room. Ward, sensing that Anderson is about to seek revenge, chases after him.

> *Ward*: We're not killers! That's the difference between them and us.
> *Anderson*: That's the difference between them and *you*!
> *Ward*: You're not any more like them than I am.
> *Anderson*: Wrong! What do you care what I do to some som'bitch hiding behind a sheriff's badge? Don't you have the whole world to change?
> *Ward*: That's right, and I'm changing it!
> *Anderson*: Aw, you're just as arrogant as you are stupid!
> *Ward*: You're changing it too.

This dialogue is crucial, because the filmmakers are doing several things here through the Ward character. Ward is making an us/them distinction between the FBI agents (standing for the nation) and the people of Jessup (standing for 'the South'), while placing Anderson on Ward's side of the divide. Ward also voices a central component of American identity; for Renwick (2000, p. 24), '[t]he significant feature of American-ness was the act of changing the world.' This recalls the comment Ronald Reagan made about his administration: 'We weren't just marking time, we made a difference' (quoted in Renwick, 2000, p. 177). In the film, Ward is fully aware of his American duty to change the South, and he wants to bring Anderson along with him.

In the process, Anderson becomes less Southern and more American. To achieve this shift, Anderson must be somehow differentiated from the depraved white Southerners shown in the film. In the words of film critic Vincent Canby (1988): 'Anderson is one of those independently minded Southerners who confound all out-of-state preconceptions about Mississippi, or any other place in the supposedly solid South.' And it is this measure of independence from the solid Southern mentality that allows Anderson to be welcomed into the American fold.

At this point, sensing that he needs to take a new course to keep Anderson on board, Ward departs from his strict by-the-book approach and tells Anderson that they will start doing things his way. They will use Anderson's methods, his men, and do whatever it takes to solve the case. Anderson then flies in an African American FBI agent to play the role of a local man who abducts the mayor and takes him to a remote location, where the agent threatens the latter with castration unless the mayor reveals what he knows about the case. Anderson presents the fruits of his efforts to Ward, who objects to the coercion involved in obtaining the information. Anderson at first hopes for a murder charge, but Ward suggests that a murder prosecution would be difficult in state court, as the state would be reluctant to pursue such a case. Anderson persists:

> *Anderson*: Well we've gotta get 'em in federal court. Violation of civil rights!
> *Ward*: Just don't lose sight of whose rights you're violating!
> *Anderson*: Don't put me on your perch, Mr. Ward!
> *Ward*: Don't drag me into your gutter, Mr. Anderson!
> *Anderson*: These people crawled out of a sewer, Mr. Ward. Maybe the gutter's where we should be!

Again we have a reference to 'these people', and while Anderson likely intends his comment as a condemnation of the KKK members and sympathisers involved in this crime, I would suggest that it is possible to interpret it as an assessment of all white Southerners. Given the portrayal of the South thus far (in this film, and in other kinds of representations), the phrase 'these people' is especially vulnerable to this type of elision. (For example, many viewers who posted online reviews of the film stressed the Southernness of the story: '*Mississippi Burning* remains one of the most poignant, yet underrated films dealing with racism and justice in 1960s southern America';[8] 'It signifies perfectly what was going on in the south during the 1960s';[9] another exclaimed that after watching the movie: 'I was disgusted with the South.'[10])

Our FBI heroes eventually solve the case, and all the culprits save Sheriff Stuckey are convicted and serve jail time. After the convictions are won, the FBI discovers that the mayor has hanged himself. Noting that the mayor was not guilty of participation in the crime, one of the agents asks Ward why the mayor would take his own life. Ward responds: 'Mr. Bird, he *was* guilty. Anyone's guilty who watches this happen and pretends it isn't. No, he was guilty all right. Just as guilty as the fanatics who pulled the trigger. Maybe we all are.' Thus Ward acknowledges not only the ability,

but also the responsibility for Americans to change the world, a sentiment that is consistent with the American self-concept of exceptionalism.

> America and Americans are special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself and, at the same time, America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny—America must be as a 'city upon a hill' exposed to the eyes of the world. (Madsen, 1998, p. 2)

Ward clearly represents this striving toward 'a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment', while white Southerners, mired in the gutters as they are, need help from outsiders to achieve such heights. Thus together 'the South' and 'America' constitute a 'contrapuntal ensemble' (Said, 1979, p. 52), as the internal orientalist discourse endows the former with abhorrent qualities as a way to derive a lofty national identity.

I have focused thus far on the messages conveyed in the film through the dialogue and narrative, but Parker's visual approach is also important, and it contributes to the intensity of the viewing experience. For example, the film opens with a shot of segregated water fountains; the fountain on the left has a sign above it reading 'white' and the one on the right labelled as 'coloured'. After a moment, a white man enters the picture for a drink, and after he leaves an African American boy sips from the 'coloured' fountain. Parker then cuts to a scene of a burning church, thus linking the visual image of segregation with its implied outcome, violence born of racial hatred. Fire indeed is the dominant motif; crimson flames seem to be an inherent part of the local landscape.

Another aspect of the film's visuality involves the sequencing of the violence. Fischer (1997, p. 180) takes issue with this, noting that in the first hour and a half, 'eleven episodes of Klan thuggery occur almost precisely by formula at nine-minute intervals', which gives the impression that daily life in Jessup consisted of a constant stream of murders, attacks and arsons. This visual litany of violence wore heavily on some viewers.[11] In a review posted online (entitled 'House Burning Down'), one viewer complained that the film showed 'too many houses burning down, when all we needed to see was a couple: a couple of houses burning, maybe one or two acts of violence [sic]—we would have gotten the picture'.[12] Yet this focus on violent incidents emphasises the depravity of the local white population and highlights the contrast between them and the FBI agents, so in fact it is an important element of the production of a privileged national identity. The regular appearance of flames suggests the fires of hell, a theme in representations of the South Kirby (1986, p. 130) says emerged in the 1960s, as the 'devilish South' became useful for the 'purging of national sins'.

Reviews

It is one thing to make an argument about the larger meaning of a text, but it is another to show how this text is interpreted by the general public; it is clearly not

a given that the scholar's analysis of a text's messages, or the intended messages of the text's author, will be consistent with the actual reception of that text. Thus I want to consider the reactions to the film, expressed by movie critics and lay viewers, to explore the reactions to and interpretations of *Mississippi Burning*.

The film received generally positive reviews, and many raves. Roger Ebert (1988) gave it four stars and named it the best American film of 1988, an assessment echoed by the National Film Board. Several other critics praised its sensitive handling of serious material. Gene Hackman's turn as Anderson was widely praised. Vincent Canby (1988) called the film 'first-rate', 'one of the toughest, straightest, most effective fiction films yet made about bigotry and racial violence, whether in this country or anywhere else in the world'. Ebert (1988) claims to find 'no great villains and sadistic torturers in this film, only banal little racists with a vicious streak'. Banality, of course, implies something that is commonplace and ordinary, even expected. Perhaps Ebert finds this evil so banal because of its location and context— one wonders whether he would find a portrayal of the actions of vicious racists in his hometown of Chicago quite so prosaic. These reactions to the film suggest that it conveys to the viewer the generally accepted tropes about the South; *Mississippi Burning*'s South is a recognisable one, especially to non-Southerners.

However, *Mississippi Burning* was not universally lionised. It has been referred to as 'the Hollywood movie that stood history on its head by trivializing the work of movement activists and glorifying the FBI' (Dittmer, 1994, p. 432), which in turn created a controversy as many veterans of the civil rights movement excoriated Parker for ignoring their struggles in his story. As has been widely noted, the FBI was hardly an unequivocal force for justice during this period. In misleadingly elevating the role of the FBI, the film simultaneously presents African Americans as passive, largely silent, victims, ignoring the truly heroic struggles of civil rights activists (Chafe, 1995, p. 276). One writer claimed the film is a 'fanfare for white liberals who struggle mightily on behalf of the disenfranchised' (Staples, 1989). These comments are suggestive of the role the film plays in the construction of a particular kind of national identity: that of enlightened and virtuous (white) citizens whose primary responsibility is to fight for the downtrodden and oppressed.

The comments of lay viewers are of interest to me as well, as I do not want to assume that the general public will interpret any text in precisely the same way as critics or scholars. It can be difficult to assess audience reaction to films, as they leave no accessible record of their interpretations (Campbell, 1981, p. xii). However, one of the benefits of the Internet is that it is now possible to locate such evaluations online. I have examined over fifty 'amateur' reviews of *Mississippi Burning* posted on epinions.com and the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), and these reviews in fact mirror quite closely the range of opinion expressed by the professional critics.

Through this production, Alan Parker sought to inspire people to think about the prevalence of racism in *contemporary* society.[13] This message indeed got through to many viewers, based on the reactions posted online. Many lay reviewers also hailed it as the best movie of 1988, and praised the film's realistic portrait of racist violence

and oppression in Mississippi. One claimed: 'The best part of *Burning* is the portrayal of racism.'[14] The powerful portrayal of racist violence evoked strong emotions from many viewers: '[T]his film makes me angry. It makes me want to jump back into 1964 and try to do something to stop this. The film is that strong at showing us how terrible and pointless racism is.'[15] (Interestingly, the film mobilises this viewer's indignation toward racism in the *past*, rather than the present, while Parker claims to be using a past event to highlight racism in the present.) A native Southerner added: 'Great movie, and I wish it weren't so truthful about my part of the country. . . . There are great lessons to be learned, and every schoolchild should be shown this.'[16]

Much of the anger expressed by viewers targeted the racist white Southerners shown so vividly on the screen. One viewer commented that the film 'is an unflinching look at racism in the South'.[17]

> After watching *Mississippi Burning*, I was disgusted with the South. Sure, not all southern people are racist b***ards, but it does have its share. When I found out that this was a true story, I was sickened, but overall, not surprised. It is clear that the South doesn't have a very good record, but the fact is, this crap still happens, although not as much.[18]

For this person, *Mississippi Burning* was not just a story about Neshoba County, or Mississippi, but of the entire white South, and this generalisation suggests the influence of internal orientalism. For another viewer: 'The best thing with this film is that the public of Mississippi were shown to be absolute morons.'[19] It is interesting that this comment includes the common erasure of African Americans from 'the public', as they were certainly not shown as 'morons' in the film. The discursive separation between 'the South' and 'America' characteristic of internal orientalism was also emphasised through the comment: 'This movie gives new meaning to the phrase "I don't live in America, I live in Mississippi".'[20]

I do not mean to suggest this was the *only* reading of the film. Shohat (1989, p. 11) urges researchers to consider the possibility of 'aberrant readings' of films, interpretations that do not incorporate the text's intended meanings and messages, and in this case I would consider aberrant readings to consist of interpretations that are not consistent with the 'structures of expectations' (Paasi, 1996, p. 35) produced by internal orientalism. Thus, while the discourse of internal orientalism frames racism as a 'Southern' problem, something that is uncharacteristic of 'America', many of the posted comments placed the events in the film in a broader geographic context. 'Unfortunately, there is still prejudice in the south,' noted one reviewer, who then added a qualification: 'Hey, prejudice does exist anywhere in the United States.'[21] What we can gather from these and similar statements is that internal orientalism does not rigidly determine everything that is said about the South and its relationship to the rest of the United States. Internal orientalism produces tendencies rather than guarantees; while it may be hegemonic, it is not monolithic.

As if to further prove this point, there were also many viewers who excoriated the film as racist (or 'RACIST CRAP!')[22] for its caricature of African Americans as passive

victims. One viewer complained: 'Afro-Americans in this movie are scared, trembling and have no character. Every part of the investigation is done by whites. And this is meant to be about civil rights?'[23] Some were angered by the way the film exploited the suffering of African-Americans to glorify white heroes:

> This movie is a disgraceful revision of the 1960s South that glorifies the FBI (yeah, right) as the saviours of Black people (who apparently had nothing to do with their own salvation). Additionally, *Mississippi Burning* follows in the shameful Hollywood tradition of turning the story of racism into the story of white people. Avoid this movie at all costs![24]

As discussed above, the other main contrast in the film was that between Agents Ward and Anderson, which is employed in part to create an exalted national identity. Yet at least one viewer picked up on the awkwardness of Parker's attempt to differentiate these characters: 'As far as Willem Dafoe, he does a nice job with his role as the straight-laced agent, but the movie tries too hard to contrast him with the Hackman character.'[25] Parker's approach here is rather heavy-handed, and the dialogue reviewed earlier between the agents can understandably come across as forced and artificial.

Conclusion

Cinema is a powerful instrument for generating and spreading ideas (Jowett, 1976), and these ideas are important in producing a mental landscape, a way of thinking about reality (Moran, 1996, p. 4). I argue that in order to understand the role of a film such as *Mississippi Burning*, we need to consider the relationship between the film and the cultural context within which the film is produced and interpreted. For Hanna (2000), all representations are partial and embedded within a discursive context that guides the production of the representations. In the United States, that context includes the discourse of internal orientalism. Renwick (2000, p. 38) calls cinema 'the archetypal medium of Americanness' in the twentieth century, and Kellner (2000, p. 129) notes that films were historically viewed as tools to '"Americanize" immigrants and teach film audiences how to be good Americans'. I am arguing for a reading of *Mississippi Burning* that stresses its contribution to defining an exalted American national identity.

The Mississippi Delta region has been referred to as 'the most Southern place on earth' (Cobb, 1992) and thus while the film perhaps only explicitly generalises to the state of Mississippi, I argue that it can easily be seen as a symbol for the entire South. *Mississippi Burning*'s representation of the South infuses the self-image of America with all the positive traits that stand in opposition to the South's 'characteristic vices'. The South serves as a 'deflector of national guilt' (Van Woodward, 1965, p. 133), acting as a screen upon which the nation's dark side can be projected. 'Only to the degree to which the South could be construed as morally inferior could the North validate its claim to moral superiority' (Gerster & Cords, 1977, p. 575). Ward is able

to act as the moral centre of the film, voicing the attitudes derived from the mythic American identity, because Parker sets him apart from the white Southerners who do 'little else but kill, maim, torch, terrorize, and ignite fiery crosses' (Fischer, 1997, p. 180). The moral distance constructed between Ward and the South facilitates an othering of the South that endows Ward with the characteristic American virtues.[26]

I argue that the representations of the South contained in this film contribute directly to the (re)production of a national identity. I make this claim because, even in an age of hybridity and globalisation, national identity is still the most fundamental geographic identity in the contemporary world (Taylor & Flint, 2000, p. 234; Emerson, 1960, p. 95) (how long this condition will last is an open question). As noted above, the production of the self necessarily involves the concomitant creation of an other, and given the primacy of national identity the self most directly informed by the construction of a regional other is the national self. Thus representations of the South most directly inform American national identity (though they may also inform identities at other scales). As one scholar puts it, the South 'is where America locates the origins of its "Other"' (Sweeney, 2001, p. 145).

Ultimately, *Mississippi Burning* does more than tell a tragic story. The film allows the viewer to participate in the reproduction of American identity through the way it invites the audience to identify with Agent Ward and ascribe to the South a host of repulsive traits that, by implication, are absent from the national identity. In this sense, the 'geography of racism' inheres in a Southern, not American, landscape. All this is not to minimise the heinous nature of the crimes depicted in the film, and this article is certainly not intended as an apologetic for the white Southerners who participated in those crimes and others. For some, 'the film effectively and accurately depicts the reign of supremacist terror that permeated Mississippi's white community and enlisted its police chiefs, mayors, and prominent citizens' (Chafe, 1995, p. 276). However, it does no justice to the victims of these crimes to use them to construct a privileged national identity that blinds the rest of the country to the very real crimes that have occurred and continue to occur outside the South, especially when the true role of 'America' (through the actions of the federal government) in the civil rights movement is so blatantly distorted. Alan Parker could have told a story about the heroic efforts of the Freedom Summer participants from their point of view. He could have shown the struggles of the African Americans who fought and died for their rights. Yet Parker believed that a movie that highlighted black characters would not sell, so he saw no choice but to make his protagonists white so as to give the film the opportunity to get its message across (Gaston, 1999, p. 42). It is telling that the result was a story that presented a particular national identity, one that constructs the role of national institutions as uplifting the downtrodden and fighting for justice while simultaneously obscuring the presence of local people who fight on their own behalf. What results is an essentialised national identity that elides its own dark side. Just as there is nothing inherently 'Southern' about bigotry, there is nothing inherently 'American' about tolerance and peacefulness, in spite of what the essentialised

geographic identities produced through the discourse of internal orientalism would have us believe.

Notes

[1] I agree with Elizabeth Martinez (2003) that one should not use the term 'American' to refer solely to United States citizens. Thus I would prefer to avoid the term in this article, but as a primary subject of the article is 'American national identity', it is difficult to eliminate its usage as there are few feasible alternatives.

[2] Stephen Hanna (2000) discusses the possibility of contesting hegemonic discourses from outside their boundaries.

[3] See, e.g., Zelinsky (1992); Renwick (2000); Robertson (1980). American national identity is more complex than the national discourse would suggest, and in fact is not likely even one coherent entity (see Citrin et al., 1994) and is perhaps based more in conflicting political traditions and movements than in one hegemonic ideology (Smith, 1993).

[4] The sociologist Howard Odum (1936, p. 3) saw the South as 'a laboratory for regional research and for experimentation in social planning'.

[5] On the notion of relational identities, see Cresswell and Dixon (2002, p. 6), who argue that: 'It is always crucial, in an anti-essentialist framework, to keep in mind . . . the way in which identities are constantly created in relation to their "others." Identities, in other words, are relational.'

[6] As Roger Fischer (1997, p. 179) notes: 'It has been Hollywood's role to bring stereotypes to life, and to define and perpetuate them, through memorable performances viewed by vast numbers of Americans more likely to visit the Bijou than the public library.'

[7] Unfortunately I was not given approval by MGM to include stills from the film in this article to visually illustrate my arguments.

[8] Posted by 'thegame-1.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 30.

[9] Posted by 'dee.reid.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 50.

[10] Posted by 'mr_doright11., http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 70.

[11] Paul Gaston (1999, p. 40) argues that 'the Klan members are portrayed more as caricatures than as the frighteningly everyday persons they were. Their violent behavior is so gross that the film undermines belief in the reality of the violence that in fact did take place.'

[12] Posted by 'Evolvist.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 30.

[13] Interestingly, Parker is British, not American, though the film is a thoroughly American production. While he may have wanted to call attention to racism everywhere, by choosing a site so intimately connected with racial hatred and segregation, the extent to which his message would be expanded beyond that setting is hindered.

[14] Posted by 'Korova' www.epinions.com/mvie-review-2536-A7AA8EC-3A17583A-prod4.

[15] Posted by 'Dan Grant.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 60.

[16] Posted by 'Alice Copeland Brown.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 70.

[17] Posted by 'The_Wood.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 30.

[18] Posted by 'mr_doright11.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 70.

[19] Posted by 'mark_s16.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 30.

[20] Originally posted by 'Michael Scott Adams', but this review is no longer available on the IMDB site.

[21] Posted by 'kuiipo.', www.epinions.com/content_43117022852.

[22] Posted by 'anonymous.', http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?95647.

[23] Posted by 'Korova' www.epinions.com/mvie-review-2536-A7AA8EC-3A17583A-prod4.

[24] Posted by 'alex-306.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start = 30.

[25] Posted by 'Ryan Dallett.', http://imdb.com/title/tt0095647/usercomments?start=30.

[26]   I have simplified the treatment of the Anderson and Ward characters. It is quite reasonable that the audience could identify more with Anderson than with Ward, as Anderson comes across as more human than Ward, who is insufferably stiff and moralistic. However, Anderson still plays a crucial role in the production of American identity in the film, so regardless of which main character the viewer finds more sympathetic, the discursive thrust of the film may be preserved.

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