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Reel Blacks

A Kinder, Gentler FBI

by
Patricia A. Turner

Revisionist interpretations of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) role in enforcing civil rights legislation and its monitoring of black activists have proliferated during the last decade. *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* by Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Racial Matters* by Kenneth O'Reilly, and *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* by David Garrow are just a few of the numerous books to chronicle the FBI's somewhat embarrassing record on race-related issues. Given this wealth of documentation in print, it is even more startling that in the world of cinema, the FBI is still being depicted as heroically as it was in the days when J. Edgar Hoover manipulated the agency's public image. Costas Gavras' *Betrayal* and Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* feature celluloid FBI agents who no doubt would have been sources of great pride to the late director.

In *Betrayal*, Debra Winger stars as a 1980s agent whose first undercover assignment requires her to establish ties with a group of homespun midwestern white supremacists who assassinate surly Jewish radio talk show hosts and go on hunting trips in order to shoot itinerant blacks. As the film unfolds, a pattern emerges in which she goes back and forth between her assumed identity as a farm machinery operator falling in love with a stalwart, handsome, young widower and her genuine identity as an FBI agent romantically involved with her supervisor. Winger's superiors are zealous in their pursuit of this group and bemoan her initial reluctance to see through the supremacists' home-boy facades. When she is with her FBI colleagues, they have to continually push her to pursue the farmer Klansmen. After she falls in love with the redneck group's leader and sees firsthand the strength of his commitment to his rather unorthodox pastime, she has to be cajoled into using her privileged position with him in order to fulfill her assigned task of exposing the group's plots.

While all of this makes for a good story, the whole notion of white and black FBI agents working diligently to undermine the efforts of neo-Nazi, white supremacists, and/or Ku Klux Klanners strikes those of us even moderately familiar with the bureau's agenda as somewhat far-fetched. Even since Hoover's death and the appointment of more

moderate directors, the FBI has been sluggish, at best, in pursuing such groups. During their sloppily-conducted investigation of the Atlanta child murders they managed to insult not only the southern city's African-American residents, but the local law enforcement community as well. At one juncture they suggested that some of the deaths and disappearances of the young blacks were most probably caused by the victims' own parents. After Wayne Williams was sentenced on circumstantial evidence, it was later discovered that one of the witnesses whose testimony incriminated him was in fact linked to the Klan. Whereas interest in neo-Nazi, skinhead, KKK, and other white supremacists groups has increased during 1980s, the FBI has not mounted a successful crusade to stop their illegal activities. Indeed the FBI, contrary to the image of cooperative biracial teams depicted in *Betrayal*, has faced internal conflicts resulting from alleged discriminatory practices directed at their own agents.

Whereas *Betrayal* offers a fictional narrative celebrating heroic FBI activity, *Mississippi Burning* promotes itself as a reasonably accurate account of the events of 1964 in Neshoba County, Mississippi, where local Klansmen killed two white and one black civil rights workers. Almost as soon as the movie was released in early 1989, two competing bodies of commentary emerged. In those accounts favorable to the film—which was nominated for “best picture” in the 1989 Academy Awards—reviewers claimed that any inaccuracies contained in the film did not distort its power and potential for educating a viewing audience unfamiliar with the extent of racial violence in recent American history. Critics opposed to the film responded that the inaccuracies were so heinous that they resulted in a complete whitewash of the era. In particular, they pointed to the fact that while in reality Hoover and his FBI operatives felt coerced into investigating these deaths, the film's landscape includes only local, ostensibly terrified, blacks who refuse to cooperate with the driven FBI agents. Whereas in the film the identity of the culprits is realized when the wife of a Klansman/policeman decides that she can no longer condone his brand of racism, in reality the FBI paid a still unknown informant for this information. Probably the most difficult issue for those of us inclined to condemn the film is the fact that it gives the audience the misguided impression that the FBI was vigorous in its efforts to seek justice for the civil rights workers while, in reality, an organized, courageous group of activists were responsible for demanding that the FBI do the job that Hoover never wanted it to do.

Some cinema experts believe that it was the revelation of these and other inaccuracies that resulted in the “best picture” Oscar being awarded to another film. However, in spite of the attention given to the gross factual distortions that characterize the film, it

made Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic Roger Ebert's list of the ten best films on the decade. Like *Betrayal*, it was also a very hot rental during the first month of its release on video cassette. Indeed, it is the permanence and accessibility of popular movies on video cassette that makes the flaws inherent in these films of such concern. As is the case all too often with Americans, we tend to prefer to "see the movie" rather than "read the book." And these movies demonstrate all too clearly that Hollywood is still catering to the outlines for FBI agents dictated by J. Edgar Hoover decades ago. Moviemakers obviously think that audiences prefer to see movies about noble, institutionally-based, white heroes rather than be confronted with the law enforcement establishment's history of hostility and indifference to justice for African Americans.

Unfortunately, far more people will be exposed to

the Gravas and Parker interpretations of the FBI than those contained in the books identified in the first paragraph of this article or even Henry Hampton's praiseworthy documentary installment on the event in Mississippi. Long after the negative film reviews printed at the time of the movies' release are forgotten, consumers will read the positive ones on the boxes at video rental stores and assume that the FBI can be trusted to curtail racial violence whenever it surfaces. Unfortunately, the development of a kinder, gentler FBI has yet to be demonstrated, and until it is we would be wise to question portrayals of such on film.

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