

Essay on an analysis

[Law](#), [Evidence](#)



Jonathan Rosenbaum's essay 'A Perversion of the Past' is essentially an analysis of the highly-praised film, *Mississippi Burning*. However, Rosenbaum writes from the perspective of someone who had personal experience of taking part in the Civil Rights' struggle of the early 1960s and his thesis is essentially that the film simplifies and distorts what actually happened in the South. At its worst, he claims, the film contains deceitful information (downright lies) about the F. B. I. at the time and, presumably for the sake of box office success, ignores the black victims of the struggle in order to concentrate on the two central protagonists, played by Willem Dafoe and Gene Hackman. In short, the film presents a wildly inaccurate version of events – which is not true to the facts or to the general atmosphere of the time, and, as such, it should not be considered the great film that many people see it as.

'A Perversion of the Past' is actually a chapter in Rosenblum's much longer book, *Movies as Politics*, a collection of his writing on the political dimensions and implications of many popular films. Rosenblum's first page deals with his own memories of being involved as an 18 year old in the Civil Rights movement and he attempts to give us an impression of the violence and hatred of that era – especially the violence meted out to white activists who were active in the movement. In his fourth paragraph he focuses on the murder by the Ku Klux Klan of three activists whose only 'crime' was to be in the state of Mississippi encouraging and helping black voters to register. The activists were James Chaney, an African American, and two white men: Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. The F. B. I. did not discover their bodies for two months. Rosenbaum's uncle, a rabbi from Cleveland who was

involved in the Civil Rights movement, delivered the eulogy at the funeral of Andrew Goodman. Having admitted that he can hardly approach the film without some personal bias, Rosenbaum, on the second page, moves on to a critique of the movie. Rosenbaum dislikes the film, *Mississippi Burning*, because in simplifying the story (which he accepts a film must do), it covers up important aspects of the truth and deals in complete falsehoods. What he objects to in the film is mainly the presentation of the F. B. I. as a liberal organization and the two F. B. I agents as being “moral spokesmen without a hint of prejudice” (120) and yet as Rosenbaum asserts, “For most of its history... the F. B. I. has been a racist organization.” (120). In minor roles the film actually has some black F. B. I. agents – which is impossible at that time because the F. B. I. had no African American agents at all in the 1960s. Rosenbaum also objects very strongly to the way the film ignores and chooses not to develop any of the local black population who were working hard within the Civil Rights movement and the small number of local white people who made public statements against the activities of the Ku Klux Klan – ordinary citizens who were genuine liberals. (123). The film, according to Rosenbaum, also ignores the visits to Mississippi of famous national politicians during the investigation into the murders. (123). As Rosenbaum writes, in the film it is as if the F. B. I. were the Civil Rights Movement – and that is ultimately why he thinks it is a dishonest film. He is also appalled that the film had been praised so highly by many national film critics. (124).

In terms of ethos, Rosenbaum’s own experience of the Civil Rights Movement and that of his relatives gives him some authority to write about this film. In addition, he clearly communicates his values and attitudes which are anti-

racist and anti the Ku Klux Klan; at one point he describes the film's presentation of the F. B. I. as the "sole heroic defender of the victims of southern racism" as "more than a little disgusting." (120). Yet he speaks with a tone of admiration and wonder when he describes southern white activists who bravely stood up against the prevailing mood of prejudice and whom the film does not mention. He also makes it clear that the discovery of "several black corpses" in the course of the search for the murdered activists is "more horrifying" than anything in the film. (122). He successfully communicates his own moral revulsion and outrage at these nameless victims of southern prejudice, only discovered because of the national attention that Mississippi was then getting. What comes across clearly is Rosenbaum's humanistic dedication to the cause of civil rights, but also a sense of outrage – not just about the past and segregation, but also about the film's distortion of that past, its glib simplifications and outright lies.

There are some elements which appeal to our sense of pathos – often when he is referring to other sources or explaining the role of other citizens in the investigation. For example, he cites the case of Buford Pusey, a local white dissident who had joined the NAACP in 1946 because he believed that black veterans of the Second World War should have the right to vote and who, as a consequence, lost the right to vote and was denounced as a Communist – simply because he championed equal rights! (123). As readers we are expected to share Rosenblum's anguished astonishment at this, as well as the way that Martin Luther King was described by J. Edgar Hoover as a communist – a remark repeated, as it happens, in the film.

Overall, however, despite the strong emotions that Rosenblum feels himself and evokes for the reader, the main strength of his writing is that he provides a great deal of evidence for his claims. This evidence acts a strong authority and makes the reader more likely to be convinced of his argument and his view of the South in the early 1960s. He uses examples to show that there were southern white activists in the south and that to prove that not all southerners were members of the Klan. He quotes other authorities – especially on the racist nature of the F. B. I. and on J. Edgar Hoover’s reluctance to involve the F. B. I. in the original investigation. He also explains many facts and situations that the film either ignores or, worse still perhaps, distorts – such as the discovery of the bodies: in the film the sheriff’s wife reveals where the bodies are, but in real life it took a bribe of \$30, 000 to an anonymous local resident to discover the graves. (122). Rosenbaum also refers to other films to show that complex moral issues can be dealt with in a more truthful manner than that achieved by Alan Parker, the director of *Mississippi Burning*.

In short, this essay is packed with strongly-felt emotion, but its strength as an argument really comes from its evidence and the clarity of its explanations.

Work Cited

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. *Movies as Politics*. (1997). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Print.