

# Rosenbaum's: a perversion of the past essay



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Oleh Jonathan Rosenbaum's critique of the 1988 film "Mississippi Burning" draws much of its intellectual and emotional response to the film from Rosenbaum's personal experiences as a participant in the civil rights movement of the 1960's. The article — which casts the movie "Mississippi Burning" in a pretty much unfavorable light due to what Rosenbaum feels is a deliberate series of distortions of historical fact — recounts in equal portions, Rosenbaum's direct experiences of the era and the experience of the era as it is presented by the movie's director, Alan Parker, who Rosenbaum immediately identifies as a former advertising director. Rosenbaum also remarks that Parker's previous films: "all reek of advertising's overheated style" (Rosenbaum, 119). and Rosenbaum also makes it clear that he is not, himself, an impersonal interpreter of the era of the civil rights movement that Parker's movie attempts to cover. Rosenbaum's article appeared in a book-length collection of his essays entitled "Movies as Politics" published in 1997. The book contains numerous essays on Hollywood films and attempts to shed light on the political repercussions of the all-too-routine historical inaccuracies and poetic license which is deeply embedded in contemporary commercial films.

Rosenbaum's thesis, relative to "Mississippi Burning" is that damage to American culture is, indeed, done by the making of a movie which focuses on superficial imagery: churches burning, people being beaten, etc — and in fact distorts the truth of factual occurrences — in order to fulfill the attributes of a successful commercial film. Rosenbaum claims that "Mississippi Burning" is a dangerous re-visioning of history for many reasons, foremost among them: the fact that the film features two white protagonists,

both of whom are federal agents, plus the undeniable fact that Parker in shaping his protagonists as unambiguously moral agents with no trace of personal racism or fear of racists, completely distorts the historical truths behind the events of the film. For example, Rosenbaum remarks that in his personal experience, no agency or authoritative bureau seemed the least bit interested in helping civil rights activists: “ the answer was no-one. Certainly not the local police or the FBI as I quickly learned” (Rosenbaum, 119) and his conclusion that Parker has not only re-envisioned, but wilfully perverted the historical facts behind the event of “ Mississippi Burning” to create a more salable film are rational and just in my opinion.

Within the format of the essay, which is more conversational in tone than scholarly, Rosenbaum relies primarily upon anecdotal remembrances and personal experiences than on solidly researched historical evidence or upon sociological references of any kind. His assertions are certainly emotionally convincing because it doesn't take much effort to persuade me, or probably many other people, that a big-money director of commercial films would distort or change whatever was necessary in order to make a successful film in economic terms. If it were not so, then said director would still be directing TV commercials. This seems to be the most onerous flaw in Rosenbaum's thesis, as I am not entirely convinced that Parker or anyone else associated with Hollywood movies ever intended to make anything other than a piece of entertainment posed as drama with a more or less obvious historical “ hook. However, the use of serious cultural issues for the purpose of making money is usually referred to as exploitation and I think Rosenbaum does a quite convincing job of painting Parker as an exploitative director bent first on

making money and success and only secondarily, if at all, interested in the issues of substantive historical record of the events the movie ostensibly was meant to cover.