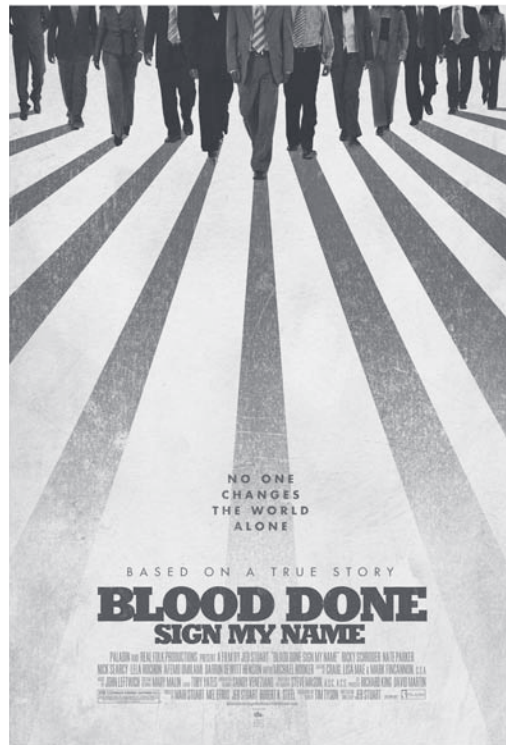


HISTORY V. HOLLYWOOD:

CIVIL RIGHTS MEETS SILVER SCREEN; OR, “writing history with lightning”¹

A TRUE STORY: HARROWING TALES OF NARROW ESCAPES AND NEAR-DISASTERS IN WHICH OUR WAYWARD HERO LAUNCHES HIS BUMBLING CRUSADE TO MAKE JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS; TO SEEK THE GOOD, THE TRUE, AND THE BEAUTIFUL; AND TO MIGHTILY IMPRESS THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES, THOUGH APPARENTLY WITHOUT EFFECT

Historians wince when Hollywood turns historian. We have our reasons. Film-makers see history as mere backdrop for their stock stories of hard-boiled cops and boy-meets-girl. In the movie business, “historical accuracy” tends to mean getting the makes and models of the cars right – staggering untruths about history are perfectly acceptable. The movie *Mississippi Burning* (1988) is a classic example of what happens when the historian’s subject becomes Hollywood’s set. British filmmaker Alan Parker shovels up 1960s cars, clothes, and Deep South accents, “authentic” in mindboggling topical detail, while black Southerners become moral wallpaper for his mendacious Western. Parker reimagines the Civil Rights-era South as his own private badlands. Here the best and brightest conquer the New Frontier by setting aside civilization and cracking the heads of some savages, in this case



by Timothy B. Tyson

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¹ Upon viewing D.W. Griffith’s motion picture at the White House on February 18, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson reportedly said, “It’s like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true.” Thomas Dixon, the novelist whose work provided the basis for the film and who was able to arrange the screening at the White House because Wilson was a former classmate at Johns Hopkins University, reported the comment to the press. Wilson’s press secretary issued a disavowal of the comment soon afterward, when the film began to generate controversy. See Mark E. Benbow, “Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and ‘Like Writing History with Lightning,’” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9.4 (2010): 509.