

The Documentary Vision

Few movie documentaries focus on American city and state governments; indeed, the best-known of them touch on the subject only tangentially. *Roger & Me* (1989), Michael Moore's polemic against General Motors' layoffs at its Flint, Michigan plant, attracted an unusually large audience. The film details what Moore sees as the city's victimization at the hands of rapacious capitalism and the banality of the policy responses of the city government. More complex and ambitious is *Public Housing* (1997), by cinema verité director Frederick Wiseman. A many-layered investigation of the residents of a large Chicago housing project, the movie reflects the hopes, fears, and moral ambiguities of real life in the big city. Although neither *Roger and Me* nor *Public Housing* focuses principally on government, both address

References*Filmography*

- All the King's Men* (1949, F)
Angels with Dirty Faces (1938, F)
Batman (1989, F)
Beau James (1957, F)
Boss of Boys Town (1943, F)
Chinatown (1974, F)
City Hall (1995, F)
City of Hope (1991, F)
City of Promise (1995, TV)
A Dainty Politician (1910, F)
Dead End (1937, F)
Death Wish (1974, F)
Dick Tracy (1990, F)
Dirty Harry (1971, F)
8 Mile (2002, F)
Exclusive Rights (1926, F)
Far and Away (1992, F)
Gangs of New York (2002, F)
The Glass Key (1935, F)
The Godfather (1972, F)
The Godfather II (1974, F)
The Grafters (1913, F)
The Great McGinty (1940, F)
Her Honor, the Governor (1926, F)
His Girl Friday (1940, F)
JFK (1991, F)
Kansas City (1996, F)

major public issues affecting modern urban America.

City of Promise (1995), part of a Ford Foundation-funded PBS television series on the re-discovery of poverty in America in the 1960s, looks at Newark, New Jersey. It opens in the summer of 1965, after Lyndon Johnson had declared war on poverty and directed that the war was to be fought primarily in the nation's cities by empowering the poor to design and run antipoverty programs through their "maximum feasible participation." *City of Promise* contrasts the rise of urban black political power with the complacent inertia of the white power structure, recounting the bitter political battles and the racial rioting that erupted over the next several years. In the end, in real life as in the movies, the promise of the city did not materialize.

L.A. Confidential (1997)

- The Last Hurrah* (1958, F)
The Manchurian Candidate (1962, F)
Miller's Crossing (1990, F)
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939, F)
The Parallax View (1974, F)
The Politicians (1915, F)
The Power of the Press (1928, F)
Public Housing (1997, D)
Q & A (1990, F)
Roger & Me (1989, D)
Scandalous Mayor (1991, F)
The Secret Six (1932, F)
Serpico (1973, F)
Star Reporter (1939, F)
This Day and Age (1933, F)
Traffic in Hearts (1924, F)
The Yards (2000, F)
You and Me (1938, F)

Bibliography

- Molotch, Harvey. "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place." *American Journal of Sociology* 82.2 (1976): 309-330.
 O'Connor, Edwin. *The Last Hurrah*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1956.
 Riordon, William L. *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.

Civil Rights

The modern American civil rights movement is arguably one of the most important developments of the twentieth century. Rooted in the abolitionist movement and the postemancipation efforts of the Reconstruction era (1865-77), and nurtured by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) legal campaign against racial segregation and discrimination, the movement evolved into a sweeping struggle for social justice and human dignity. By prodding the nation to live up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, civil rights activists redefined the nature of American citizenship, bringing a measure of redemption to a society plagued by racial inequality and injustice. Partially inspired by the ongoing decolonization of the Third World, including the triumph of Gandhian nonviolence in India and the creation of independent nations in Africa, the battle for civil rights in the United States in turn provided inspiration for liberation movement across the globe. During the 1960s, figures such as Thurgood Marshall (the leader of the NAACP's effort to strike down legalized segregation and the first black to serve on the Supreme Court) and Martin Luther King Jr. (the founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC] and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize) became international symbols of that came to be known as the "freedom struggle." With the murder of King in 1968, the classic phase of the struggle ended, but the ennobling ideals

and innovative tactics of the civil rights movement left an enduring legacy that continues to influence everything from public policy to individual views about race, culture, and citizenship.

The periodization and parameters of the civil rights movement are subjects of continuing debate among scholars, but it is no longer fashionable to limit the movement to the activities following the Brown school desegregation decisions of the mid-1950s. Although the national civil rights movement did not reach maturity until the 1960s, the contributions of early activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, William Hastie, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Pauli Murray, and Mary McLeod Bethune—all of whom were actively working for civil rights in the 1930s and 1940s—are now considered to be an essential part of the civil rights story. However, beyond this recognition of the movement's pioneers there is little consensus about the evolution of the struggle. Among civil rights scholars, there are sharp differences of opinion about King's leadership, the significance of Malcolm X and other black nationalists, and the relative importance of various aspects of the movement: local versus national civil rights organizations; federal initiatives versus movement activities; legal versus direct action; and the contributions of the NAACP versus those of SCLC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Several important recent studies—most notably those of Taylor Branch, John Dittmer, and Adam Fairclough—have ac-

knowledgeed tensions within the movement and have attempted to demythologize national leaders such as King, Malcolm X, and Marshall. Other works, such as Joanne Grant's biography of Ella Baker, have stressed the critical role of women in the movement.

Civil rights scholarship has become one of the most vital areas of American historiography, but the motion picture industry has not kept pace with growing interest in the civil rights saga. Although a number of interesting films shed light on race relations in modern America, very few focus on civil rights activists or organizations. With few exceptions, the best civil rights films are adaptations of historical fiction, television docudramas, or documentaries. Feature films based on historical accounts of actual incidents or real adventures are rare, and the few high-profile civil rights features that do exist, such as *Mississippi Burning* and *Malcolm X*, have tended to create more confusion and misinformation than enlightenment. Nevertheless, these and other civil rights movies have had a significant impact on American popular culture and thus deserve attention, if not always respect.

Seedtime for Civil Rights: 1930–1945

In recent years, historians have developed a greater appreciation for the scope and vitality of the nascent civil rights movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Unfortunately, only a handful of filmmakers have taken advantage of the growing body of research detailing the early years of the struggle. *Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys*, a 1976 NBC docudrama based on historian Dan Carter's groundbreaking study *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, provides an accurate and gripping reconstruction of the arrest and trial of nine black men falsely accused of raping two white women on an Alabama train in 1931. The film features Arthur Hill's convincing and sympathetic portrayal of James Horton, the Alabama judge who sacrificed his career in an attempt to save the Scottsboro defendants, and an

equally strong performance by Ken Kercheval as prosecuting attorney Thomas Knight. A second docudrama, the 1993 production *Simple Justice*, focuses on the NAACP's early efforts to dismantle the Jim Crow system of legal segregation and discrimination. Based on Richard Kluger's magisterial 1976 book of the same name, the film traces the early life and career of Thurgood Marshall, paying particular attention to the mentoring role of Charles Hamilton Houston, who taught Marshall at Howard University Law School in the 1930s and who later collaborated with him in the development and implementation of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's complex legal strategies. Another notable and compelling television docudrama, *Miss Evers' Boys* (1997), tells the grim story of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study initiated by the U.S. Public Health Service in 1932. Alfre Woodard's performance as Miss Evers, the conscience-stricken nurse who helped expose the government's callous disregard for the lives of the black syphilis patients, is riveting, and the entire production—an adaptation of a play by David Feldshuh—is reasonably faithful to the historical record.

The only notable feature film to focus on civil rights during the 1930s is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the 1962 movie version of Harper Lee's celebrated novel. Though fictional, Horton Foote's Oscar-winning screenplay presents Atticus Finch, a white lawyer representing a black man charged with rape, as a historically credible (though clearly unusual) character. Gregory Peck's portrayal of Finch is unforgettable, and the entire production, despite obvious touches of sentimentality, successfully captures the mood of the small-town South during the Great Depression.

World War II was an important watershed for black Americans, who witnessed the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission in 1941, the Supreme Court's decision outlawing white primaries (*Smith v. Allwright*, 1944), and the proliferation of the Double V campaign—the determination to win twin vic-

tories over foreign enemies on the battle field and racial discrimination at home. Clearly, this era of racial transition warrants the attention of filmmakers, but to date such attention has been severely limited. Both during and after the war, Hollywood produced a flood of World War II films, but very few touched upon the experiences of black servicemen or the black home front. The most obvious exception is the classic 1944 documentary *The Negro Soldier*, produced as part of director Frank Capra's memorable *Why We Fight* series. Among World War II feature films, the earliest attempt to deal with the black experience was *Home of the Brave* (1949), a powerful drama based on a play by Arthur Laurents. Produced by Stanley Kramer and directed by Mark Robson, the landmark film depicts the wartime saga of a black soldier named Mossy, played by war veteran James Edwards. Tormented by his fellow GIs' racial prejudices, Mossy survives brutal combat in the Pacific but ends up in an army hospital, where he develops a redemptive friendship with a white amputee,

In *A Soldier's Story*, released in 1984, director Norman Jewison offers a less hopeful view of black army life in the 1940s. Based on Charles Fuller's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, the film tells the story of a black officer's murder at a Southern army camp. Strong performances by Howard E. Rollins Jr. and Adolph Caesar dramatize the connection between racial discrimination and pathological interaction among black soldiers during the Jim Crow era. An equally absorbing treatment of black military life can be found in the 1990 television movie *The Court Martial of Jackie Robinson*, based on a 1944 incident in which a black army lieutenant and future Hall of Fame baseball star faced an army court-martial after refusing to comply with a Texas segregated-bus-seating ordinance, this carefully constructed film reveals the indignities of Jim Crow transit, reminding us that the determination of Robinson and others to buck the system antedated the later heroism of Rosa Parks. The persis-



FIGURE 39. *Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys* (1976). Judge Horton (Arthur Hill) listens intently to a defendant. The NBC docudrama using trial transcripts focused on the human interactions during the trial of the major courtroom figures and the toll it took on their lives. Courtesy Tomorrow Entertainment.

tence of military segregation during the war is also the theme of the 1995 HBO docudrama *The Tuskegee Airmen*. Featuring an all-star cast led by Lawrence Fishburne, Cuba Gooding Jr., Andre Braugher, and John Lithgow, the film makes an honest attempt to depict the exploits of black flyers, the impositions of racial prejudice and condescension, and the common resolve among black servicemen to be treated with respect. Unfortunately, the script is too formulaic to do justice to the complexities of the Tuskegee airmen's bittersweet experiences. A more recent film with similar strengths and weaknesses is *Mutiny*, a 1999 docudrama that profiles the fate of fearful black munitions loaders following a deadly explosion at Port Chicago, California, in 1944, in which more than three hundred black servicemen died.

The Postwar Decade: 1946–1955

The "crucial decade," as historian Eric Goldman dubbed the immediate postwar era, witnessed important developments in civil rights,



FIGURE 40. *A Soldier's Story* (1984). Director Norman Jewison's film explores tensions in the closed community of African American soldiers during World War II. Courtesy Caldix and Columbia Pictures.

including the gradual desegregation of the military and a series of liberal Federal court decisions culminating in the *Brown v. Board of Education* rulings of 1954 and 1955. The first films to explore the changing character of postwar race relations appeared as early as 1946. *It Happened in Springfield* (1946) tells the story of a Massachusetts city rocked by interracial tensions. Based on an actual incident and filmed on location by Warner Bros., the early docudrama traces a grassroots effort to extend the "melting pot" ideal to black Americans. Unfortunately, in the final cut all references to homegrown racism are excised, leaving Nazi propaganda, not traditional American bigotry, as the designated culprit. A more courageous film, one that deals more directly with the social pathology and enforced limitation of Northern black life, is *The Quiet One* (1947), a semidocumentary on the all-black Will-

twyck School in Harlem. Utilizing nonprofessional actors, the film offers an unromanticized look at the life of a ten-year-old boy trapped in a life of crime and neglect.

As the 1940s drew to a close, Hollywood released a spate of "social problem" films focusing on contemporary race relations. *Pinky* (1949), a collaborative effort of producer Darryl F. Zanuck and director Elia Kazan, and *Lost Boundaries* (1949), a Louis DeRochement production starring Mel Ferrer in his first role, both focus on the theme of racial "passing." Jeanne Crain's melodramatic portrayal of a light-skinned "Negro" nurse and Ethel Waters's strong performance as her dark-skinned mother make *Pinky* an interesting if not altogether convincing film. Similarly, *Lost Boundaries*, which received widespread critical acclaim upon its release, is a well-intentioned but flawed production that skirts many of the im-

portant issues related to class and the color line.

A less pretentious and ultimately more interesting effort to dramatize the declining years of Jim Crow is the 1949 film adaptation of William Faulkner's novel *Intruder in the Dust*. Filmed in Oxford, Mississippi, and directed by Tennessean Clarence Brown, *Intruder in the Dust* focuses on a small band of fair-minded white Mississippians who prevent the lynching of Lucas Beauchamp, a fiercely proud black farmer falsely accused of murder. Parts of the film have an adolescent Disneyesque quality, but it remains an intriguing piece. Two other notable efforts to capture the racial aura of the 1940s on film are *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), a charming and disarmingly straightforward film starring Robinson himself, and *No Way Out* (1950), a Joseph L. Mankiewicz-directed crime drama that marked the film debuts of Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis. In *No Way Out*, Richard Widmark plays a cold-hearted, racist gangster who avenges his brother's death by inciting a race riot.

The films described above are useful sources for the study of postwar relations, but none of them deals directly with the emerging civil rights movement of this era. Fortunately, three creditable television movies fill part of the gap. *Separate but Equal*, a 1991 production written and directed by George Stevens Jr., is an outstanding dramatization of the final stages (1950-55) of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's campaign to strike down the separate but equal doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). With a few minor exceptions, the three-hour film is historically sound, and Sidney Poitier delivers a memorable performance as Thurgood Marshall, the attorney who spearheads the NAACP's efforts in the landmark *Brown* desegregation cases. A second docudrama that offers a somewhat longer view of the NAACP's campaign is *Simple Justice*. The 1993 PBS film's hour-long section on the post-World War II era offers a compressed but generally accurate description of the final twists and turns in the

long road to the *Brown* decisions. A third televised docudrama, *The Vernon Johns Story: The Road to Freedom* (1994), profiles the career of one of the postwar South's most courageous black ministers. Brought back to life in a brilliant performance by James Earl Jones, Johns—who preceded Martin Luther King Jr. as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama—is an unforgettable and inspiring character.

The Rise of Massive Resistance: 1955-1960

The tense period following the *Brown* school-desegregation decisions of the mid-1950s witnessed the emergence of nonviolent direct action during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, the crisis at Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, the growth of White Citizens' Councils and the rise of massive resistance among ultrasegregationists in the Deep South, and the birth of the student-led sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. Contemporary filmmakers studiously avoided the subject of the Southern civil rights movement, but they did produce several "race" films that implicitly endorsed racial tolerance and civil rights. Sidney Poitier starred in *Edge of the City* (1957), a provocative tale of working-class life in New York directed by Martin Ritt; *The Defiant Ones* (1958), director Stanley Kramer's masterwork about two shackled convicts, one black and one white, fleeing the police; and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), a powerful adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry's celebrated play about survival in black Chicago. Two films featuring Harry Belafonte, *Island in the Sun* (1957) and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), offered, respectively, a comparative look at contemporary racial struggles in the Caribbean and the unhappy story of an interracial band of bank-robbers stymied by racial dissension.

The first feature film to focus squarely on the racial dilemmas of the post-*Brown* South was *Black Like Me*, a 1964 release starring

James Whitmore as investigative journalist John Howard Griffin. From October to December 1959, after temporarily darkening his skin to achieve the appearance of a "Negro," Griffin wandered through Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana in an attempt to experience the difficult realities of black life. Based on a best-selling 1961 book, Whitmore's Jim Crow odyssey provided moviegoers with a believable and searing portrait of Deep South racism. An even better film, a major production that represents one of the first efforts to deal with the civil rights movement itself, is *The Long Walk Home* (1990). Set in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956, this carefully scripted drama explores the evolving relationship between a privileged white woman (Sissy Spacek) and her dignified black housekeeper (Whoopi Goldberg) during the bus boycott. John Cook's script is fictional, but the film's depictions of resolute white supremacists, vulnerable Southern moderates, and black Montgomerians discovering the power of a faith-based "movement culture" have the ring of truth. Perhaps most important, the strong and subtle performances by Spacek and Goldberg underscore the key role that women, both black and white, played in sustaining the boycott and other mass protests.

The Montgomery bus boycott also inspired the production of two well-made television docudramas: *Boycott* (2001), and *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002). Shown on the Home Box Office cable channel, *Boycott* successfully combined documentary footage and carefully rendered historical drama. Ably directed by Clark Johnson and filmed on location in Montgomery, it set a new standard for cinematic dramatization of King's emergence as a national civil rights leader and the internal dynamics of the bus boycott. Fine performances by Jeffrey Wright as King, Iris Little-Thomas as Rosa Parks, and Terrence Howard as Ralph Abernathy give the film an emotional power that few civil rights docudramas have been able to muster. The most recent effort to dramatize

the boycott, *The Rosa Parks Story*, is somewhat less successful as a re-creation of the complex origins and evolution of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Although the film's depiction of Rosa Parks, the forty-three-year-old seamstress and local NAACP leader who became a folk hero after refusing to give up her seat on a crowded Montgomery bus, is generally accurate, the consistently celebratory tone of the script is somewhat problematical.

The only other civil rights film to focus on the mid- or late 1950s is *The Ernest Green Story*, a television docudrama produced for the Disney Channel in 1993. One of the nine black students who desegregated Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, Green survived the taunts and assaults of angry white supremacists and went on to become an important official in the Carter administration and a successful business executive. The film takes a few liberties with chronology and melodramatic dialogue, but overall it offers a balanced and credible picture of the "Little Rock Nine."

The 1960s and Beyond

The sit-in movement that spread across the South in 1960, and the Freedom Rides initiated by CORE in May 1961 kicked off the most intense phase of the civil rights struggle. Throughout the turbulent decade of the 1960s, mass protests and militant activism complemented the NACCP's ongoing legal and legislative challenges to segregation and discrimination. Clashes with demagogic politicians and violent white supremacists attracted the attention of the national media and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, as thousands of civil rights activists took to the streets demanding an end to Jim Crow. Martin Luther King and the other movement leaders provoked major confrontations in Alabama, where Governor George Wallace "stood in the schoolhouse door" to prevent integration and Birmingham public safety commissioner Bull Connor used fire hoses and attack dogs to control demonstrators, and in Mississippi, where

the 1964 Freedom Summer voting rights campaign challenged the traditions of the South's most conservative state.

The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act represented major movement victories, but disillusionment born of rising expectations, economic hardship, and persistent prejudice helped fuel the Black Power movement and urban riots of the late 1960s. The assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, the diversions of the Vietnam War, the belated implementation of school desegregation and fair housing and employment laws, and white backlash against groups such as the Black Panthers brought the mass-protest phase of the movement to a close by the end of the decade.

Despite the obvious drama and historical importance of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, the motion picture industry has made only a half-hearted attempt to put this tumultuous era on film. A notable early effort is *Nothing but a Man* (1964), a powerful dramatization of a romance between a black railroad worker and a black middle-class schoolteacher. This low-budget film makes only passing mention of the civil rights movement but offers a sensitive and moving treatment of the complications of class and race in the early 1960s.

In the Heat of the Night and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*—the first major feature films to focus on race relations in the waning years of Jim Crow—broke new ground when they were released in 1967. In both cases, Sidney Poitier's suave upper-middle-class persona limited his character's relevance to the experiences of most black Americans, but the positive response to these films among whites suggested that sensitive topics such as interracial marriage and black empowerment were no longer taboo. In 1968, the release of *Up Tight!*, a remake of the 1935 classic *The Informer* reset in a Cleveland ghetto following the assassination of Martin Luther King, demonstrated that one producer was even willing to make a film

on contemporary black revolutionaries. Director Jules Dassin's collaboration with black screenwriters Ruby Dee and Julian Mayfield produced a hard-hitting, if somewhat unrealistic portrait of black militants shredding the remains of a nonviolent movement. A companion film, *Putney Swope*, a farcical comedy about black militants taking over a major New York advertising agency, appeared in 1969. After changing the agency's name to Truth and Soul, Inc., the militants wreak havoc with a clever parody of the Black Power movement. Less satisfying is *The Liberation of L. B. Jones* (1970), the last film of legendary director William Wyler. Based on a popular Jesse Hill Ford novel, the movie profiles the saga of a black, middle-class couple terrorized by white racists in a Tennessee town. Although the film's overall depiction of the black bourgeoisie is somewhat hackneyed, Roscoe Lee Browne's portrayal of the long-suffering undertaker L. B. Jones is convincing, as is Yaphet Kotto's role as a black radical who dispatches a white racist in a hay cropper.

Predictably, Hollywood's brief flirtation with civil rights themes all but disappeared in the early 1970s as the white backlash, propelled by Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" of soliciting the votes of disaffected segregationists, gained momentum. With the exceptions of *The Man* (1972), a mediocre adaptation of Irving Wallace's bestseller about America's first black president, and *The Klansman* (1974), a sensationalist potboiler based on William Bradford Huie's novel about racial turmoil and white resistance in the contemporary South, feature films studiously avoided the modern civil rights scene until the mid-1980s. Fortunately, in the interim, television took up some of the slack by offering several notable civil rights docudramas. In 1974, the ABC network broadcast a powerful adaptation of Ernest Gaines's novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Featuring an unforgettable performance by Cicely Tyson, this Emmy Award-winning film uses the reminiscences of a fic-

tional 110-year-old woman to trace the evolution of civil rights from the Civil War to the 1960s. The script's focus on ordinary individuals involved in local civil rights struggles makes the film especially valuable. Though well intentioned, a second ABC docudrama, *Attack on Terror: The FBI vs. The Ku Klux Klan* (1975), offers a more problematic view of the movement and its alleged allies. The first of several films to explore the murders of three civil rights activists—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—during Mississippi's Freedom Summer of 1964, *Attack on Terror* details and glorifies the efforts of white FBI agents but pays only fleeting attention to movement participants, black or white.

Television's most ambitious effort to interpret the civil rights movement—director-writer Abby Mann's lavish four-hour production, *King*—appeared in 1978, on the heels of Arthur Haley's spectacularly successful miniseries *Roots* (1977). Though marred by hagiographic reverence, Mann's script presents a vivid dramatization of Martin Luther King's life. Paul Winfield's portrayal of the martyred civil rights leader is mesmerizing, especially during the film's depictions of King's struggles in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma. Unfortunately, the film's tight focus on King and the SCLC leaves little room for a serious treatment of other civil rights leaders and organizations and at times gives the misleading impression that he alone created and led the modern civil rights movement. Despite this limitation, or perhaps because of it, Mann's effort attracted enough viewers to sustain the television industry's interest in civil rights dramas. In 1979 the four-part miniseries *Roots: The Next Generation*, extended Alex Haley's family saga from 1882 to the 1970s, including an episode on Haley's relationship with Malcolm X; in 1986 director John Korty (also the director of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*) and screenwriter Morgan Halsey Davis joined forces with actors John Lithgow and Morgan Freeman to produce *Resting Place*, the

moving story of a white army officer battling racism during an attempt to bury a black Vietnam War hero in an all-white cemetery in Georgia in the 1970s; a year later Louis Gossett Jr. led an all-star cast in a memorable televised version of *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines's story of a group of aging Louisiana blacks who belatedly take collective responsibility for the murder of a local white supremacist.

Television's reliance on historical fiction to dramatize the civil rights struggle continued in the early 1990s with the airing of a short-lived but remarkable weekly NBC series *I'll Fly Away* (1991–93). Reminiscent of *To Kill a Mockingbird* but more subtle in its depiction of southern race relations, *I'll Fly Away* presents the interrelated stories of two Deep South families in the 1960s. The lead characters—Forrest Bedford, a politically ambitious district attorney played by Sam Waterston, and Lilly Harper, a black housekeeper and single mother played by Regina Taylor—grapple with life's challenges amid the complexities of a changing racial order. Several episodes focus on Lilly's growing awareness of and involvement in civil rights activities, including a voter registration drive and a sit-in on the courthouse steps. Lilly's rising expectations and sense of self-respect clash with her employer's mixed feelings about the civil rights movement, but in the end the series offers a hopeful projection of racial adjustment and redemption. In October 1993, PBS broadcast a two-hour movie sequel featuring Lilly as a successful sixty-year-old novelist recounting the tumultuous civil rights era to her son. Although less satisfying than the original episodes, the sequel represents an interesting attempt to put the series in historical context, using Lilly's encounters with an aging Bedford and other figures from her past as an allegory of the New South.

Hollywood has never produced a civil rights film approaching the quality of *I'll Fly Away*, but after fifteen years of silence it finally re-



FIGURE 41. *I'll Fly Away* (1991–1993). District Attorney Forrest Bedford (Sam Waterston) and his black housekeeper Lilly Harper (Regina Taylor) personify the changing dynamics of southern race relations in the 1960s. Courtesy NBC Television.

turned to civil right themes with the 1988 release of *Mississippi Burning*. Directed by noted British filmmaker Alan Parker, this second attempt to dramatize the Freedom Summer murders of 1964 features a scathing indictment of Mississippi segregationists, Academy Award-winning cinematography, and strong performances by Willem Dafoe and Gene Hackman as the two FBI agents who cracked the case. Regrettably, what it does not feature is historical accuracy. Although marketed as a faithful reconstruction of the FBI's attempt to solve the murders, the film is riddled with factual errors and questionable interpretations. Downplaying the racial and political conservatism that pervaded the J. Edgar Hoover-led FBI in the 1960s, Chris Gerolmo's script offers

a seriously distorted view of the bureau's posture toward the Freedom Summer and the civil rights movement in general. The film also grossly understates the role of the media in forcing federal officials to investigate the murders and all but ignores the real sacrifices of the Freedom Summer activists and "local people," who risked their lives to bring a measure of justice to Mississippi. Not surprisingly, *Mississippi Burning's* highly publicized release triggered a firestorm of criticism among movement veterans and historians, prompting a third attempt to put the Freedom Summer case on film—the 1990 television docudrama *Murder in Mississippi*, a straightforward account that offers the most accurate and balanced treatment to date.

Mississippi is also the setting for four recent efforts to dramatize the interracial violence that punctuated the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. In *A Time to Kill* (1996), a faithful adaptation of John Grisham's first novel, Matthew McConaughey plays a white lawyer representing a black man (Samuel L. Jackson) who murdered two poor whites who had raped his ten-year old daughter. Although pure fiction, the film offers a nuanced and believable picture of Mississippi race relations and invites comparison with the 1949 film *Intruder in the Dust*. The same could be said for *Freedom Song* (2000), a sophisticated and moving exploration of SNCC involvement and local activism in a small Mississippi town during the 1960s. Directed by Phil Alden Robinson and starring Danny Glover, *Freedom Song* is the first film to provide a credible, fiction-based dramatization of SNCC's extraordinary impact on the freedom struggle in Mississippi.

Less concerned with the movement but perhaps more valuable as a cinematic depiction of black life in Mississippi during the post-World War II era is *Once Upon a Time . . . When We Were Colored* (1996). Based upon an autobiographical novel by Clifton L. Taulbert and directed by Tim Reid, this feature film chronicles a decade and a half (1946–62) of cultural and

political change among the black residents of Glen Allan, Mississippi. A carefully crafted script and powerful performances by Al Freeman Jr., Richard Roundtree, and Phylicia Rashad make this one of the most emotionally engaging "civil rights films" yet produced by Hollywood. An equally ambitious but ultimately less satisfying film, *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1997), tells the story of Assistant District Attorney Bobby DeLaughter's belated but ultimately successful prosecution of Byron De La Beckwith, the white supremacist who assassinated Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers in 1963. James Woods's portrayal of De La Beckwith is chilling, and Whoopi Goldberg's understated performance as Myrlie Evers, the long-suffering widow who questioned the resolve and integrity of DeLaughter and other white law enforcement officials, is convincing. Even so, for historians of the civil rights movement the film represents a missed opportunity. The filmmaker's decision to focus almost exclusively on DeLaughter and the 1990s retrial of De La Beckwith left no room for even a cursory treatment of Medgar Evers and the civil rights struggle in Mississippi. The film fails to communicate why Evers was willing to risk his life for the civil rights movement or why De La Beckwith was so determined to eliminate Evers. The script's inattention to historical context is consistent with the film industry's longstanding reluctance to explore the passions that animated and divided the contending forces of the civil rights struggle.

This tradition of avoidance has been especially true with respect to the white supremacist side of the struggle. Indeed, the only serious effort to dramatize the segregationist movement of the 1960s are the 1997 miniseries *George Wallace*, a melodramatic screen biography directed by John Frankenheimer, and *The Sins of the Father* (2002), a semifictional account of a man's attempt to come to terms with his father's involvement in the infamous September 1963 church bombing and murder of four young black girls in Birmingham, Ala-

bama. In *George Wallace*, Gary Sinise's riveting portrayal of the race-baiting Alabama governor has an air of authenticity, but invented characters, factual errors, and garbled chronology detract from the film's historical value. These problems are even more apparent in *The Sins of the Father*, though the film does have the virtue of making an honest effort to represent the psychological complexity and cultural context of the white segregationist mindset.

George Wallace's racial demagoguery is an important part of the civil rights story, primarily because his attempt to mobilize disaffected white supremacists in the presidential campaigns of 1964 and 1968 helped to precipitate the fragmentation of the civil rights movement. During the mid- and late 1960s, as Martin Luther King and SCLC conducted campaigns against de facto segregation and discrimination in Chicago and other northern cities, both the politics of white backlash and the civil rights struggle itself became national in scope. At the same time, major "race riots" erupted in Watts and other urban ghettos, fueling the fires of reaction and bringing black-nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers to the fore. By the end of the decade, the movement had devolved into a welter of competing ideologies and social confusion, which may help to explain why reliable scholarly accounts of this phase of the movement are rare and cinematic treatments are even rarer. Other than the 1968 film *Up Tight!* mentioned earlier, the only feature film to grapple with this subject is Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*. Released with great fanfare in 1992, Lee's three-and-a-half-hour epic recounts the remarkable life and death of the charismatic Black Muslim leader, assassinated in 1965. Anchored by Denzel Washington's riveting performance, Lee's mythic reconstruction of Malcolm X's odyssey from street hustler to prison inmate to national icon offers good drama—but bad history. Invented characters and a heavily politicized and fanciful reinterpretation

of Malcolm X's later years compromise the film's value as a work of history. Moviegoers in search of a more faithful account of the political and philosophical adjustments that followed Malcolm X's break with Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad should consult the excellent 1994 Blackside documentary *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*.

Documentaries

The struggle for civil rights has inspired a large number of documentary films. With a few notable exceptions, civil rights documentaries tend to be brief, low-budget productions that focus on a particular incident or individual. Most rely heavily on television news footage and videotaped interviews of activists, and more than a few are makeshift, semiprofessional productions initiated by movement participants. The filmography includes a listing of significant civil rights documentaries, ranging from Frank Capra's seminal 1944 film *The Negro Soldier* to Spike Lee's 1997 Academy Award-nominated documentary *Four Little Girls*, a heartrending account of the September 1963 bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, as seen through the eyes of friends and relatives of the four young girls killed by the blast. Nearly all of these films include stirring reminders of the sights and sounds of the movement, but only a few provide a contextual framework or serious historical analysis. Among the best are *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* (1968), a wrenching look at black soldiers fighting in Vietnam; *King: A Filmed Record . . . From Montgomery to Memphis* (1968), a well-edited biographical portrait produced just after King's death; *Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker* (1981), an inspiring profile of an important but often overlooked movement organizer; *Never Turn Back: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (1983), a biography of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party activist who caused a sensation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention; *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (1994),

the best available documentary on the most influential black nationalist of the 1960s; *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices* (1996), a carefully rendered study of the legendary black intellectual who helped found the NAACP; *First Person Singular: John Hope Franklin* (1997), an enlightening biographical portrait of a courageous African American historian and activist; *The Promised Land* (1997), an engrossing study of post-World War II black migration to northern cities; *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* (2001), a beautifully edited collage of photographs and interviews that easily supercedes the 1976 docudrama *Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys*; and *Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore* (2000), a sophisticated and eye-opening look at life and death of the controversial Florida NAACP and voting rights leader who, along with his wife Harriet, was murdered by Klansmen in December 1951.

The most ambitious and unquestionably most successful attempt to provide a documentary record of the civil rights movement is African American producer Henry Hampton's monumental PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*. Narrated by movement veteran Julian Bond, the fourteen-part series uses a skillful blend of news footage and retrospective interviews featuring movement participants, government officials, white segregationists, and other observers. In preparing the series, Hampton enlisted several leading civil rights historians as research consultants and assembled hundreds of rare and evocative photographic and video images of the civil rights struggle. The first six episodes, released as *Eyes on the Prize I* in 1986, trace the evolution of the movement from the Brown decision of 1954 to the Selma-to-Montgomery march of 1965. All of the episodes offer accurate and balanced accounts of the movement's triumphs, failures, and limitations, but episodes 2 and 3, *Fighting Back* (1957-1962) and *Ain't Scared of Your Jails* (1960-1961), are especially good. *Eyes on the Prize II*, released in 1989, extends the story

from the 1965 Voting Rights Act to the early years of the Reagan administration. With the exception of the episodes on the riots and black power movements of the mid- and late 1960s, *Eyes on the Prize II* is less compelling than *Eyes on the Prize I*, but the intellectual quality of the series is uniformly high. For a reliable and comprehensive survey of the modern civil rights movement, there is no better source, in print or on film, than *Eyes on the Prize*.

By proving that it is impossible to put an engaging and sophisticated version of the civil rights story on the screen, Henry Hampton pre-

References

Filmography

- Attack on Terror: The FBI vs. the Ku Klux Klan* (1975, TV)
The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1974, TV)
Black Like Me (1964, F)
Boycott (2001, TV)
The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson (1990, TV)
The Defiant Ones (1958, F)
Driving Miss Daisy (1989, F)
Edge of the City (1957, F)
The Ernest Green Story (1993, TV)
Eyes on the Prize (1986, D)
Eyes on the Prize II (1989, D)
First Person Singular: John Hope Franklin (1997, D)
Four Little Girls (1997, D)
Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore (2000, D)
Freedom Song (2000, TV)
Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker (1981, D)
A Gathering of Old Men (1987, D)
George Wallace (1997, TV)
Ghosts of Mississippi (1997, F)
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967, F)
Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters' First Hundred Years (1999, TV)
The Home of the Brave (1949, F)
The House I Live In (1946, F)
I'll Fly Away (1991-93, TV)
In the Heat of the Night (1967, F)
Intruder in the Dust (1949, F)
Island in the Sun (1957, F)
It Happened in Springfield (1946, F)
The Jackie Robinson Story (1950, F)
Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys (1976, TV)
King (1978, TV)
King: A Filmed Record . . . From Montgomery to Memphis (1968, D)

sented a series of challenges to other filmmakers: to overcome the film industry's traditional reluctance to deal with the history of social and political movements; to take full advantage of the recent proliferation of civil rights scholarship; to recapture the history, not the mythology, of the civil rights struggle; and, in general, to fulfill the educational promise of film in an area of American life that affects us all. More than a mere genre, civil rights films carry the potential to illuminate, and perhaps even to enhance, the ongoing effort to resolve the racial dilemmas of America's past and present.

- The Klansman* (1974, F)
The Liberation of L. B. Jones (1970, F)
Lilies of the Field (1963, F)
The Long Walk Home (1990, F)
Lost Boundaries (1949, F)
Malcolm X (1992, F)
Malcolm X: Make It Plain (1994, D)
The Man (1972, F)
Miss Evers' Boys (1997, TV)
Mississippi Burning (1988, F)
Murder in Mississippi (1990, TV)
Mutiny (1999, TV)
The Negro Soldier (1944, D)
Never Turn Back: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (1983, D)
Nothing but a Man (1964, F)
No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger (1968, D)
No Way Out (1950, F)
Odds Against Tomorrow (1957, F)
Once Upon a Time . . . When We Were Colored (1996, F)
Pinky (1949, F)
The Promised Land (1997, D)
Putney Swope (1969, F)
The Quiet One (1947, F)
A Raisin in the Sun (1961, F)
Resting Place (1986, TV)
Roots: The Next Generation (1979, TV)
The Rosa Parks Story (2002, TV)
Scottsboro: An American Tragedy (2001, D)
Selma, Lord, Selma (1999, TV)
Separate but Equal (1991, TV)
Simple Justice (1993, TV)
The Sins of the Father (2002, TV)
A Soldier's Story (1984, F)
The Strange Demise of Jim Crow (1997, D)
A Time to Kill (1996, F)
To Kill a Mockingbird (1962, F)

- The Tuskegee Airmen* (1995, TV)
Up Tight! (1968, F)
The Vernon Johns Story (1994, TV)
W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices (1996, D)

Bibliography

- Albert, Peter J., and Ronald Hoffman, eds. *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Freedom Struggle*. New York: Pantheon, 1990.
 Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Viking, 1973.
 Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.
 ———. *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
 Campbell, Edward D.C., Jr. *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981.
 Carnes, Mark C., ed. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.
 Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
 Cham, Mbye B., and Calire Andrade-Watkins, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988.
 Cripps, Thomas. *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
 Dittmer, John. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
 Egerton, John. *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. New York: Knopf, 1994.
 Fairclough, Adam. *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995.
 ———. *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conferences and Martin Luther King, Jr.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995.
 Graham, Allison. *Framing the South: Hollywood, Tele-*

- vision, and Race During the Civil Rights Struggle*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
 Grant, Joanne. *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*. New York: Wiley, 1998.
 Halberstam, David. *The Children*. New York: Random House, 1998.
 King, Richard H. *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
 Kirby, Jack Temple. *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.
 Kluger, Richard. *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
 Levin, G. Roy. *Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Filmmakers*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981.
 Lewis, John, and Michael D'Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
 Morris, Aldon D. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press, 1984.
 Morris, Willie. *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers: A Tale of Race, Murder, Mississippi, and Hollywood*. New York: Random House, 1998.
 Olson, Lynne. *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*. New York: Scribner, 2001.
 Payne, Charles. *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
 Raines, Howell, ed. *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered*. New York: Putnam's, 1977.
 Rollins, Peter C., ed. *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*. 2d ed. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998.
 Sitkoff, Harvard. *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1981.
 Toplin, Robert Brent. *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
 Tyson, Timothy B. *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
 Ward, Brian, ed. *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002.