

You're Only as Good as Your Last Game: *Remember the Titans* (2000) Remembers Civil Rights

“Alexandrians have been mightily celebrating this week’s opening of the film *Remember the Titans*” reported the *Washington Times*. “Galas, rallies and fund raisers culminated in Mayor Kerry Donley declaring today [September 29, 2000] as ‘Remember the Titans Day’” (Washington C2). A grand accolade indeed, but perhaps such civic pride was understandable given the film’s subject matter. *Titans* had immortalised the city of Alexandria, Virginia, in an uplifting tale of triumph over adversity, and it was all based on a true story. Set in 1971, against the backdrop of federal government sponsored civil rights legislation – affirmative action policies and the desegregation program of public school “busing” – *Titans* chronicles how a successful championship football season helped assuage the racial conflicts ignited by these forced integration programs.

This essay locates *Remember the Titans* within a broader political and popular culture that had, throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, frequently revisited or “remembered” the struggle for civil rights in the US South. Providing a close textual analysis, I argue that *Titans* offered a challenge to popular representations of the civil rights movement that had appeared throughout the 1980s and 90s. Since the mid-1980s, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s has gained a prominent place in public memory (Marcus; Monteith 120-143; Hall 1233-1263; Romano and Raiford). Politicians, filmmakers and journalists have returned to and commemorated this era. The focus of this remembrance has, however, tended to be the early years, roughly 1954-65, rightly celebrated as a time when civil rights movements fought to overturn government

sanctioned segregation and discrimination. *Titans* moves beyond these years to an era that has been the subject of less positive commemoration. The period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s has been negatively associated, particularly by conservative commentators, with riots in Northern cities, the emergence of radical groups such as the Black Panthers and “unfair” government sponsored civil rights quota systems and legislations.

I argue that *Titans* transposes the “spirit” of early Southern civil rights remembrance onto an arguably far more controversial period in American history. The film, I suggest, depicts the struggle for civil rights in the South as an ongoing process, one which is not isolated to a single narrow historical epoch. Furthermore, this struggle is shown to require the active involvement of both African-American and white characters, and thus avoids the singular tales of “white redemption” that are said to have been common to the “civil rights cinema” of the 1980s and 1990s (Monteith 137). I conclude with reference to a range of reception materials, which highlight the manner in which *Titans* offered a lesson in cross-racial co-operation that resonated in the public sphere.

Hollywood and the Civil Rights Movement

Issues pertaining to the southern civil rights movement have been explored in the visual media since the 1950s. Alison Graham charts the “framing of the South” in film and television through the 1950s and 1960s. Examining a range of representations of southern race relations and civil rights, from television news coverage to cinematic

productions such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), Graham identifies several themes and characterizations that featured consistently in the visual media at this time and which continue to inflect more contemporaneous revisiting of the movement. Firstly, the South is constructed as “an arena of white – not black – heroism.” Secondly, white society is often split simplistically between “good” characters who are either pro-civil rights to begin with, or whose racism will evaporate by the film’s conclusion, and evil, ignorant, racist, (usually) working class “redneck” or “cracker” southerners. Thirdly, many of the fictional representations contain narratives that focus upon white characters as opposed to exploring seriously African-American participation in the freedom struggle (Graham 13-17).

Borrowing heavily from these earlier representations, films of the late 1980s have nevertheless been suggested to mark a historically distinct period in Hollywood’s representation of the civil rights movement. Sharon Monteith argues that films such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Heart of Dixie* (1989) and *The Long Walk Home* (1990) constitute an emerging “sub-genre” that she calls “civil rights cinema.” While 1960s and 1970s films may have referenced civil rights, it was during the late 1980s that a group of high-profile films self-consciously commemorated key events and personages of the late 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement: the Montgomery bus boycott (*Long Walk Home*), the Mississippi Freedom Summer (*Mississippi Burning*), the integration of Southern universities in *Heart of Dixie*, for example (Monteith 121; Graham 148). Appearing just after the establishment of Martin Luther King Day as a public holiday in 1986 and the successful documentary series on civil rights *Eyes on the Prize* of 1987,

these films intersected with an explosion of public memorials of the movement. By the time that *Remember the Titans* had reached cinema screens in late 2000, popular 1980s and 90s representations had consecrated a very particular narrative of the civil rights movement, one defined by set of prominent motifs and iconography.

Civil rights commemoration was part of a broader revisiting of this period of American history (the 1960s) that was taking place in politics and culture during the 1980s and 90s (Marcus). As Daniel Marcus has demonstrated, *Sixties*¹ commemoration was more than mere nostalgia. The very term “the Sixties” became a discursive battleground; an appellative armoury loaded with political significance (2-4). In terms of civil rights commemoration, it led to a distinct periodizing of the movement that celebrated what has been termed its “classical” phase in the US South (roughly 1954-1965) while simultaneously demonizing, or at least forgetting, the continued struggle that took place in the southern and *northern* American states across the late 1960s and into the early 1970s (Hall 1234).

By the mid 90s, museums dedicated to the movement proliferated across the South. “As visitors wend their way down a chronological path through the movement, walking past the burned-out hull of a freedom riders bus...many are moved to tears as they come upon the culmination of the tour and, in the minds of many, the movement itself” (Sacks TR12). So went a *New York Times* account of visiting Memphis’s National Civil Rights Museum, built in 1991. The climax to the tour is the assassination of Martin Luther King. In 2000, proposals to immortalise King with a gigantic “stone of hope”

statue in Washington's National Mall were received (Molotsky A24). Easily the most celebrated of civil rights figures, King was ever-present in political and cultural representations of the 1980s and 1990s. Memory of the civil rights leader provides an entrance point into the discrepancies that existed between memories of the 1950s and early 1960s movement and those of the later 60s and early 70s. As several historians point out, King in public memory "is a perennial dreamer frozen in time at his most famous address [the "I have a dream" speech] during the 1963 March on Washington." (Lawson 460). The later Martin Luther King has been largely forgotten in popular memorialisation. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes the erasure of "the King who attacked segregation in the urban North ... who opposed the Vietnam War and linked racism at home to militarism and imperialism abroad ... [and] who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People's Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation worker's strike" (1234). King's evolving politics and philosophies were forgotten; his anti-war beliefs, his activism on behalf of poor people in northern cities and his turn from attacking government sanctioned segregation to de facto economic segregation was lost. This selective remembering of the civil rights leader runs hand in hand with a selective remembering of the movement itself. It confines the civil rights struggle to the South. Economic segregation in the North – which King and the movement fought throughout the 1960s – does not receive the same amount of attention. As a result, the South is depicted as the "nation's 'opposite other,'" and ignores the "patterns of exploitation, segregation, and discrimination in other regions of the country" (Hall 1239).

Titans is significant for the very reason that it appears after a long line of civil rights films that had played a central role in promulgating this “declension” version of history. In many ways it offers an alternative to late 1980s and 1990s films such as *Mississippi Burning*, *Heart of Dixie*, *The Long Walk Home*, *Love Field* (1992), and *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996). These earlier films were set in the early 1960s (*Burning*, *Dixie*, *Long Walk*) or looked back to this historical period (*Ghosts*). With their evil rednecks and noble white protagonists these films tend, as Monteith notes, to foreground the white characters, their journeys from ignorance to activism and, the shedding of prejudice in favour of tolerance. They are “stories set in the ‘bad old days’”; films in which “morally charged action heroes succeed against evil racists by deploying the requisite quotient of violence” (137). By focusing on the pre-Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act South, they commemorate much positive activism and heroic action in the name of equality, but they also seem to be beholden to the message “look how far we’ve come.” In true 1940s social problem film style,² the films confine their “illness” (racism) within a fixed geographic area, in this case the South. With the problem identified and isolated it can then be dealt with or cured. The struggle for civil rights beyond the early 1960s is therefore rendered unnecessary or ineffectual.

Titans, on the other hand, re-imagines civil rights as an ongoing battle. It uses a southern setting and much of the iconography of “civil rights cinema” as a backdrop against which it promotes a temporally and spatially extended civil rights narrative. Touchstones of popular representations – Martin Luther King, white on black violence, racism and integration – are combined with issues of the late 1960s and 1970s and in

particular government sponsored civil rights legislations affirmative action and busing (explained and discussed shortly). This thematic content is incorporated into a formal framework that allows the film to reshape the boundaries of civil rights remembrance, and, at times, to provide an interpretation of these issues that transcends regional, southern, specificity. Rather than being America's "opposite other" – a racist backwater in which prejudice is contained and resolved – *Titans'* southern setting might almost be seen as a synecdoche for the nation. The issues explored in the film are not regionally but nationally resonant, and of relevance to the present as much as to the past.

***Titans* Frames the Civil Rights South**

In a contemporaneous review of *Titans*, *Washington Post* journalist Stephen Hunter complained that the film's "chief failing is its reinvention of that city [Alexandria], a sophisticated, multicultural suburb with an actual French restaurant or two, as a small, isolated Southern town somewhere between Selma, Ala., and Meridian, Miss" (Hunter C1). Quite how "multicultural" – in terms of positive race relations – the city was at this time was disputed by others (Anon A21). Nevertheless, it is true that the filmmakers went to great lengths to remake a suburb of Washington D.C. in the image of a Deep South enclave. Or, at least, a Deep South enclave as it has been commonly represented in civil rights cinema, for many of the stock characters and motifs that were present in *Mississippi Burning* and its contemporaries find their way into *Titans*; the rednecks, the white on black violence, the desperate attempts (on the part of some) to protect an archaic, unequal way of life. Yet the manner in which this material is mediated

receives a new spin. Visuals, dialogue, editing and cinematography contribute to the overriding tone of the film's political and historical representation. *Titans* does not seek to tell a white redemption tale, nor does it attempt to leave racism and racial discord in the distant past. Progress is not linear, but comes about through negotiation of conflict. Every political statement has its counter-statement; every perspective its opposite; every scene its double.

Titans' begins in 1981. A funeral is in progress. A procession of smartly clad black and white characters makes its way to the cemetery. It is fall and reddish leaves flutter from trees, scattering on the ground. A voiceover begins: "In Virginia, high-school football is a way of life: it's bigger than Christmas Day...Up until 1971 in Alexandria, there was no race mixing." The characters gather together – blacks and whites, men and women, side by side. Next appears the film's title, "Remember the Titans," suggesting, at this early stage, that the "Titans" are everyone present at this funeral. The integrated society is the Titans. "Then the school board forced us to integrate...the city was on the verge of exploding."

The film then flashes back to the summer of 1971. Autumnal mellowness is replaced by intense summer conflict. This emphasis upon seasons is the first of many devices used throughout that promote history as a cyclical process rather than a linear narrative. The juxtaposing of fall and summer offers a means to transcend chronology and view the fight for equality as an endless struggle, seasonal rather than linear. A crowd of blacks stand shouting and waving placards. A slow pan reveals a police car, on

the other side of which stand a group of whites shouting abuse. This sequence is a stark contrast to the previous scene of racial harmony; it re-segregates blacks and whites, igniting the battle that will be the film's central concern throughout. Racial conflict is then explicitly associated with what will become eventually its palliative – football. An object thrown through a shop window instigates a cut. The next image on screen is a close-up of a football helmet. The visual link is obvious: battles on the streets will become battles on the sports field.

Football serves as the crucible within which social and political ruptures are reconciled. This places *Titans* in a long line of films that used sports to mediate broader public concerns. Indeed, the sports film, and sporting activity in general, has long been associated with pressing political, social and cultural exigencies. According to the historian Harvey Green, the post-American Civil War era saw sports such as baseball and, especially, football adopted by top colleges in the hope that, as well as improving a young man's fitness levels they would promote "the desire and will to win." Green contends that "winning was a critically important result in the preparation of the social, economic, and political leaders of the new age." Success on the sports field was preparation for success in the modern age, i.e. the 20th century. Thus did "sports and culture become more and more intertwined" (Green 204, 208).

It is also worth considering the relationship between football and the civil rights movement more generally. Events in Alexandria were not a unique phenomenon. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the sport was inextricably linked to broader political

exigencies such as southern race relations and, in particular, desegregation. College football in the South was largely segregated until the 1960s when – facing enormous amounts of physical and verbal intimidation – a small number of black players turned out for previously all-white teams (Wolff). It has since been argued that the demonstrated abilities and courage of these players helped in no small part to bring about a change in southern racial mores, leading to a rapid desegregation of football teams throughout the region. Those colleges that fielded black players tended to be far more successful than their all-white counterparts. Not only did a winning streak begin to temper the furious criticisms of local whites angry at their team’s desegregation, it also encouraged others to follow suit. Jerry Claiborne, assistant to the legendary coach Paul “Bear” Bryant, at the University of Alabama, has claimed that losing to a desegregated team pushed Alabama toward integration. According to Claiborne, Sam Cunningham, a black full back for the University of Southern California who helped them destroy Alabama 42-21 in 1970, “did more to integrate Alabama in 60 minutes than Martin Luther King had done in 20 years” (Harwell). A bold statement, perhaps, but there is nevertheless a general consensus that sports, and in particular football, helped win hearts and minds during the civil rights struggles of this era.

It is no coincidence, then, that the “sports film,” as Aaron Baker argues, has consistently offered an ideal forum for the overcoming of obstacles and resolution of conflicts: “once the contest begins, success depends primarily on one’s determination and effort.” He does, however, state that individual achievement is privileged over communal action and social unity. In this sense “the team operates as a social structure to foster the

development of self-reliant individuals” (12). Since the silent era, contends Baker, the sports film has played a part in promoting normative versions of masculinity, white racial superiority and the mythic American Dream whereby individualism, hard-work and self-reliance is a pathway to riches (49-50, 141-42). Baker’s brief reference to *Titans* suggests that he views it as a slight deviation from the norm. It is “dialogic in how it portrays the successful integration of blacks and whites as requiring something from both sides” (147). Whilst *Titans* certainly has prominent individual characters, it is the way in which they function as a team that guarantees their success. In its wake, other civil rights themed sports films including *Coach Carter* (2005) and *Glory Road* (2006) offered something similar. In many ways, they exhibit similarities to another genre that is based on team action and communal effort: the war film. Discussing the characteristic traits of the war film, Steve Neale highlights the genre’s “regular stress on cooperative goals, [and] its frequent critiques of extreme individualism” (133). *Titans* refuses to allow us to view the story from the perspective of any single individual. Nor does it place complete moral legitimacy in the hands of any one character.

The divisions between black and white characters are, at least on the surface, pronounced. Head football coach Herman Boone (Denzel Washington) is introduced from the perspective of white football player Gerry Bertier (Ryan Hurst). Bertier at first seems to be fulfilling the role of the redneck: “I don’t want to play with any of those black animals,” he declares as, from his point of view, Boone comes into frame. We view Boone and his family moving into their suburban residence from the perspective of bigoted white characters. Perhaps the most malicious characters are those in the upper

echelons of society – the white members of the school board. They are the ones who possess the power to maintain the status quo. They bribe referees and threaten assistant coach Yoast (Will Patton) in the hope of ruining any chance of racial reconciliation. On the other hand, black characters initially express no great desire to co-operate with their white counterparts. African-American football players declare that they will not need their white counterparts. “This team is soul powered now!”, they proclaim.

Certain visual and editing techniques, however, undermine the characters’ attempts to separate themselves from each other along racial lines. One scene, for example, makes use of an ellipsis to bring blacks and whites together. Coach Yoast sits pondering over whether to remain with the Titans as assistant coach or to quit in protest at not being offered the head coach job. His young daughter Sheryl (Hayden Panettiere) asks him: “so, coach, what you gonna do?” Of course he does not answer. Instead, the film cuts to the gymnasium and one of the black players answers for him: “we’re gonna play some ball, ya’ll.” Similarly, scenes of the players dressed in the same outfits and exercising in unison counteract the racial conflicts that are raging around them. The linking of white and black characters through cinematic form and style becomes particularly pronounced when *Titans* engages with federal government programs of affirmative action and busing.

Titans and Social Policy

Affirmative action was a nationwide program started in the late 1960s. It dictated that the preferential hiring of minorities and women was a way of offsetting years of unequal hiring practices that favoured white men. In *Titans*, Boone is offered the job of high school football coach at the expense of the more experienced white coach, Yoast. After initially hearing the disgruntlement of the latter, the film cuts to a parallel scene featuring Boone and school board governor Dr. Day. We then see the issue of affirmative action depicted from the black character's perspective. He is hesitant to accept this preferential treatment. "I left North Carolina because I was passed over for a job that I had rightfully earned," Boone informs the governor. "Now you are asking me to do the same thing to this man", he continues, "I can't do that." In response to this, the following dialogue ensues:

Dr Day: Folks down in North Carolina said you marched with Dr King, said you stood toe-to-toe with the Klan. They said you were a *race* man.

Boone: That's right, I'm also a *family* man.

Taken at face value, a rather bizarre dichotomy – "race" man and "family" man – has just been bestowed upon Boone. Need his race and his family allegiances be mutually exclusive? In the context of this conversation, Boone uses the term "family" not simply to denote his own kin, but as a sign of empathy for his white counterpart. A "race man" he may be, but, when it comes to preferential hiring and its perceived "unfairness" toward

whites, Boone initially opts for the colour-blind social category: family. That *Titans* could have Boone march with Dr. King whilst simultaneously be dubious of affirmative action was not an unusual concept. Throughout the 1990s, political conservatives had sought to separate the civil rights leader from government sponsored civil rights programs.

For example, in his 1995 book *The End of Racism* Dinesh D'Souza declared: "We are confronted with a new civil rights program that is substantively different from that of Martin Luther King, Jr." D'Souza argued that "a demand for race consciousness in private and public hiring [and] public school assignments" were a "repudiation" of King's vision (205). In 1996, the California Republican Party proposed a television advert to demand the end to affirmative action. It closed with the following quotation: "Martin Luther King was right; Bill Clinton was wrong, end affirmative action now." (Bennet B11). Though King had spoken favourably of affirmative action as an acceptable remedy to years of inequality, a snippet from his "I have a dream" speech, where he looked forward to his children being judged "not on the colour of their skin, but the content of their character," supposedly proved he was against such policies (Dyson 12-29). Thus another affirmative action critic, Shelby Steele, referentially titled his book that attacks the policy *The Content of Our Character* (Steele 114).

One might conclude, on this evidence, that *Titans* was mediating conservative discourse by having Boone display his reticence in accepting the job. Through his marching with King and adversity to affirmative action, he might be seen to be

privileging early 1960s civil rights ideals over later civil rights legislation. However, the remainder of the scene re-aligns Boone and, by extension, King, with the positive value of these programs. Dr Day encourages Boone to accept the post because all the “black folks have never had anything in this city to call their own, except humiliation and despair.” Eventually, it is the sight of hundreds of black citizens cheering outside his house that spurs Boone to take the job. But, in keeping with the film’s dialogic approach to politics, affirmative action is once again re-negotiated when the football season begins in earnest. Dr. Day reports to coach Boone. This time the news is not so good. Day tells the coach that one losing game will cost him his job; the board have decided to renege on his preferential hiring. He must win every game to maintain his post, and, fortunately for him, Boone manages to do just that. Here is an attempt to reconcile the position of both pro and anti-affirmative action advocates. Regardless of the reasons for which he was hired, Boone turns out to be, as coach Yoast puts it at the film’s conclusion, “the right man for the job.”

The road to Alexandria’s integration begins by way of another civil rights program: busing. *Titans*’ representation of busing, the transportation of children to unfamiliar neighbourhood schools in order to ensure racial diversity, came at a time when its continued relevance was the subject of much debate amongst American thinkers and policy makers. In what was described by Glenn C. Loury, director of the Institute on Race and Social Division at Boston University, as “the end of an era in American social policy,” September of 1999 saw a judge order an end to busing in the city where it had begun, Charlotte, North Carolina (Yellin and Firestone A1). When, in 1969, the

authorities implemented busing there, it was hailed as a pioneer for public school integration, and, when the Charlotte plan was upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1971, numerous other state authorities started their own busing systems – Virginia, in *Titans*' case. But, by 1999, a federal judge had ruled that “forced integration was no longer necessary because all vestiges of intentional discrimination had disappeared” (Ibid A1).

With regards to busing, *Titans* once again goes about negotiating the political controversy with a great deal of care. On the one hand, this legislation forces blacks and whites together and thus integrates Alexandria; on the other hand, it is almost undercut by the slightly dubious suggestion that it was not really necessary in the first place. The fall semester has yet to begin, and the football team are about to embark on a pre-season training camp. Before the first integrated school bus arrives at T.C. Williams High school, *Titans* provides an allegorical representation of this program. Two buses arrive; black and white players board separate vehicles. “Listen up!” barks coach Boone. “I don’t care if you’re black, blue, green, white or orange; I want all of my defensive players on this side, and all of my players going out for offence over here.” The players are reassigned to integrated buses. This symbolic integration of school buses begins what the training camp completes. By the end of the camp the team are a paragon of racial harmony; their shared love of football overcoming any of the prejudices that they may once have held. And, it is the team, not busing, behind which the city of Alexandria rally when school begins. As the story unfolds, citizens progress from waving placards and banners reading “we love our kids, we hate busing” to cheering on the football team from an integrated sideline. It is not the policy, but the football team – integrated before this

unpopular program begins – that ends up being the deciding factor in Alexandria’s passage from racial conflict to comity.

Like its treatment of affirmative action, *Titans* veers from approval of the principles of busing to a celebration of the people’s own agency in integrating their city. Boone received the job through affirmative action but proved himself to have been the best man for the job anyway. The schools were forced to integrate by busing, yet it was the football team that “really” did the integrating. When shots of the team’s championship success and the players’ integrated celebrations appear towards the end of the film, one might wonder whether the filmmakers behind *Titans* are, like much conservative rhetoric of the 1990s and 2000s, dismissing the need for these legislations in the present. Such a question is, however, complicated by the final scene. We return to the funeral that pre-empted the main action. We know now that the deceased is Titans hero Gerry Bertier. The voiceover provides the closing commentary: “People say it can’t work black and white, well here we make it work every day. We have our disagreements of course, but before we reach for hate, always, always we remember the Titans.” The story has finished, yet it ends at the place where it started. This circular narrative suggests that race-relations is an issue that requires ongoing vigilance and care. The film began in fall, ends in fall and, was released in fall (September 2000): like the changing of the seasons there is no foreseeable end. This voiceover provides an example of looking back in order to look forward. “Always, always we remember the Titans” she says, a call, perhaps, for the audience to do the same and to take these lessons into their own lives. And, going on

reception materials, it would seem that some individuals and groups attempted to do just this.

Conclusion: *Titans* in the Public Sphere

Joining the *Titans*' cast and crew at its Washington D.C. premiere was a notable guest: President Bill Clinton. Afterwards, the President made a brief congratulatory speech in which he declared that the 1971 *Titans* were "a model for the whole country." He continued: "if only we could learn over again every day the lesson these young men...learned from each other" (Clinton 2222). Clinton's sentiments were echoed time and again by cultural commentators. For, in extending the civil rights narrative beyond the early 1960s and into more controversial territory of early 1970s government legislation, *Titans* was also representing issues that remained pertinent in late 20th and early 21st century America. The actual coaches Boone and Yoast upon whom the fictional characters were based, were propelled into the spotlight. They became spokespeople for cross-racial co-operation, invited to schools, conventions, business meetings even professional football teams to speak on the value of teamwork and tolerance (El-Bashir D3; Keating A1).

The film itself was also used as a motivational tool. At T.C. Williams High, the school at which *Titans*' is set, students were encouraged to view it as a way of stimulating cross cultural relations amongst the student body. Teachers and student leaders waxed rhapsodic over this cinematic tale of triumph against-the-odds. At a time

when there were complaints that the school – one of the most racially diverse schools in the country – was becoming “balkanised”, it was hoped that *Titans* would spur some students toward a greater understanding of other races and cultures (Wax B2). Looking back to 1971, remembering the Titans, was not, like previous civil rights films set in the South, a case of remembering a time long gone, the dark days of Jim Crow. The film’s engagement with issues that were still resonating in contemporary society gave it an endless quality, like the changing of the seasons (or the start of a new football season).

Within weeks of its release, millions of Americans had seen this movie. Exit polls and anecdotal evidence indicated that it had crossed age, gender, and racial demographics, appealing to a wide range of theatregoers.³ After watching the film in Washington’s Uptown Theater, one reviewer observed that the crowd gave *Titans* a “standing ovation. I can’t recall a time when I’ve witnessed so many blacks and whites having similarly positive responses to anything racial, even if it was only a movie”, he commented (Milloy B1). Such responses suggest that, for some, *Titans* acted as what Alison Landsberg calls a “prosthetic memory.” Landsberg argues that mainstream cultural institutions, including Hollywood, are capable of providing memories that an individual may not have physically experienced. When a film represents political or social injustices of the past, it can “produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender” (Landsberg 21). They can positively alter the ways in which one interacts with other people, groups and institutions. Given the impact *Titans* was reported to have had upon some, it might at least be said that the film was promoted as a “prosthetic memory” of sorts.

Admittedly, critical reaction to *Titans* veered from the laudatory to the hostile. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of its reception was the fact that most negative reviews appeared in mainstream newspapers and magazines, while the African-American press, virtually without exception, praised it for both its dramatic impact and its treatment of race relations. Reviews in the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* described it as “formulaic”, “predictable” and “ham-fisted” (O’Sullivan N43; Turan 1). *The New Pittsburgh Courier* on the other hand wrote that “[t]he production never gets too light or too sappy to trivialize its profound message. The payoff is huge when a movie can so convincingly convey a transition from intolerance to acceptance” (Williams B4). “If you’re an African American,” wrote the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, “you’ll probably love this movie” (Dungee B6).

Reviews aside, it would seem that *Titans* managed to cross demographics and enjoy a universal appeal. Its themes, its form and its style all contribute toward a re-imagining of the civil rights South in which the struggle for equality is ongoing and predicated upon black and white agency. It takes its fight beyond the years of government sanctioned segregation into a period of history which spawned several conflicts not yet resolved at the turn of the 21st century. Black and white relations, affirmative action, busing: wherever one turns in *Titans*, one does not find a definite answer but, rather, both sides of the argument. Here is a film that provides no simple answers, nor does it consign its conflicts to the dustbin of history. Rather, its cyclical narrative and dialogic address calls for constant debate, co-operation and vigilance with regards to the civil rights

struggle. In her book *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson argues that “in the South’s legacies, one might also find productive terrains for envisioning solidarity” (30).

McPherson criticises a number of visual representations such as Ken Burns’ *Civil War* and Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March*, that “attempt to bring black and white together [for] their inability to sustain a true double vision to see a joining that respects both commonality and difference” (30). However, one might consider her more positive suggestion in the light of *Remember the Titans*. “You don’t have to like each other, but you have to respect each other,” says Boone. He and *Titans* present a vision of solidarity that is reliant on constant dialogue, debate and even conflict. It is a solidarity whereby – to use a well-worn football phrase – you’re only as good as your last game.

Notes

¹ By this term he means the long *Sixties*, less a strict chronological entity than a conceptual category encompassing a wealth of political and cultural phenomena such as the civil rights, feminist and counterculture movements as well as the Vietnam War.

² Monteith suggests that these films are very much influenced by social problem films of the late 1940s and early 1950s such as *Pinky* (1949), *Intruder in the Dust* and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962). (125).

³ The film notched an impressive \$21.2 million in its opening weekend alone. Statistics offered by Buena Vista Distribution, the company charged with distributing *Remember the Titans*, found the film’s opening weekend audiences to be composed of 30% teens, 55% men and 45% women (Welkos 8; Natale 2).

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