

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

APRIL 17, 2001 (III:13): KILLER OF SHEEP (1977)

CHARLES BURNETT (13 April 1944, Vicksburg, Mississippi) also directed "Finding Buck McHenry" 2000, *Olivia's Story* 1999, *The Annihilation of Fish* 1999, "Selma, Lord, Selma" 1999, *Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland* 1998, "Oprah Winfrey Presents: The Wedding" 1998, "Nightjohn" 1996, *When It Rains* 1995, *The Glass Shield* 1994, *America Becoming* 1991, *To Sleep with Anger* 1990, *My Brother's Wedding* 1984, *The Horse* 1973, and *Several Friends* 1969. *Killer of Sheep* was in the first group of films selected by the Library of Congress for the National Film Registry 1990. Burnett won a MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1988. Visit <http://128.121.70.173/programs/1-97/cb/cb.htm> for summaries of his films.

HENRY GAYLE SANDERS (Houston, Texas) appeared in two films before *Killer of Sheep*: *No Place to Hide* 1970 and *Independence Day* 1975, and he'd had parts in the television series "The Young and the Restless," "Good Times" and "The Jeffersons." His subsequent work has been primarily in television series and made-for-tv movies. His theatrical films are: *Play It to the Bone* 1999, *Carnival of Souls* 1998, *Kuffs* 1992, *Child's Play 3* 1991, *The Man Inside* 1990, *Bull Durham* 1988, *Made in Heaven* 1987, *No Man's Land* 1987, *The Ladies Club* 1986, *Choose Me* 1984, *Heartbreakers* 1984, *Breathless* 1983, *Endangered Species* 1982, and *Hard Country* 1981. He has also appeared in several tv series: "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman," "Tenspeed and Brownshoe," "The Greatest American Hero," "Hill Street Blues," "Night Court," "Murder, She Wrote," "Hunter," "Starman," "Matlock," "Married with Children," "L.A. Law," "Murphy Brown," "E.R.," "Snoops" and others.

KAYCEE MOORE appeared in three films after *Killer of Sheep*: *Ninth Street* 1999, *Daughters of the Dust* 1991, and *Bless Their Little Hearts* 1984. All of **CHARLES BRACY**'s other acting work has been on tv: "The Ambush Murders" 1982, "Friendly Fire" 1979, "Human Feelings" 1978, "Happily Ever After" 1978, "Something for Joey" 1977, and "The Million Dollar Rip-Off" 1976. **ANGELA BURNETT** also appeared in *Bless Their Little Hearts* 1984. **EUGENE CHERRY**, and **JACK DRUMMOND** have no other film or tv credits.

KILLER OF SHEEP (1977) 83 min.

Henry Gayle Sanders... Stan
Kaycee Moore
Charles Bracy
Angela Burnett
Eugene Cherry
Jack Drummond

Charles Burnett: director,
writer, producer, editor
cinematographer:
Charles Bracy: sound

from "Sticking to the Soul" by Armond White; *Film Comment* 33 (1), 1997

Charles Burnett is the least well-known great American filmmaker.

Michael Tolkin saluted Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, "because it's formally one of the most interesting narrative films ever, since it suggests that poverty deprives people of a third act. If it were an Italian film from 1953, we would have every scene memorized." Intrepid filmgoers already have.

Burnett's 1995 short, *When It Rains*, also sticks to the soul. That 13-minute work ranks with the current wave of Iranian movies as a fresh way of seeing the world and putting it on the screen.

When It Rains is Burnett's response to the current crisis facing Black filmmakers (and rap artists) who must pander to racial stereotypes whether the well-financed project is about armored car robbers in whiteface (*Dead Presidents*), in wigs (*Set It Off*) or the Million Man March (*Get On the Bus*). For only \$9,000 Burnett made a masterpiece about the disparate elements of a modern American community and the humane art – the good humor – that binds it.

Burnett's output may not be widely known, but it challenges the loftiest, racist notion that white folks are keeping great film art to themselves. Enhancing authentic images of working-class life with his personal understanding of how people interrelate, Burnett surpasses Hollywood's narrative conventions. His "realism" verges into surreal clarity about foible, mischief, tradition, and ambition, crystallized in *Killer of Sheep*'s scenes of domestic squabbles ('77), *My Brother's Wedding*'s street mugging and foot chase ('83), *To Sleep With Anger*'s family gatherings ('90) – all complicated by characters' ambivalence or the pressure of abundant contradictory life happening on the periphery.

Burnett is the missing link in Black consciousness about film; *Killer of Sheep* and *My Brother's Wedding* are independent of Hollywood in the same way Altman movies abjure genre for the more important truths of living and seeing. These two films represent the highest example of contemporary Black American life put on the screen because of Burnett's integrity to view it purely, without typical corrupted Hollywood devices. The valor of his method is obscured by the recent Black Hollywood films, from the dismal *Straight out of Brooklyn* to the new, terrible *Love Jones* – filmed by people pledged to Hollywood, and as Spike Lee wannabes, they copy Hollywood's worst traits.

Burnett's cinema is tied to photography as a representational art, but cinema can also be evocative; evocation is its poetry when you see the truth through stylization. At the time he made *Killer*, Burnett clearly didn't trust the latter method, and stuck to the truth he knew, producing a phenomenal raw poetry, zeroing in on the blasted, pathetic nuisances of racial oppression – a motor falling off a truck bed, a crippled, deaf girl's pregnancy. These things are shown as mundane and horrific, yet Burnett avoids melodrama so that he may document.

There's no higher view as in Ray, DeSica, Renoir or Altman – perhaps because those great artists had class (and race) privileges that distanced them from the meanness they respected, whereas a Black American filmmaker who isn't a hustler still lives among us. But there is elevation in Little Walter in *Killer of Sheep* singing on the soundtrack ("It's a mean old world/ Try livin' by yourself/ Can't get the one you love/ Have to use someone else"), which proves a harsh view of life can be complex and sophisticated. Plainly, *Killer*, with its central metaphor of sheep led to slaughter, scared off the next generation of Black American filmmakers. Because Burnett's metaphor was such a grim, multileveled truth, they recoiled rather than learn from it, only to get slaughtered by Hollywood.

From American Films of the 70s

Ntingela Masilela describes Charles Burnett as a member of the first wave of the "Los Angeles School" of African American and African independent filmmakers. Other members of this group, who studied at UCLA in the 1970s are Haile Gerima, Ben Caldwell, Larry Clark, Jamaa Fanaka, Billy Mayberry, and the critic/historian Teshome Gabriel. The importance of the university setting was twofold: (1) it provided an opportunity for screening, discussion, and practice of non-Hollywood approaches to narrative film; and (2) the members of the group inspired each other and helped each other to make feature films. . . .this group produced two major talents (Burnett and Gerima), in addition to others who made promising films in both commercial and noncommercial styles.

Charles Burnett acknowledges the influence of the British documentary school of the 1930s and the Italian neorealist movement on his films. He studied at UCLA with Basil Wright, perhaps the most visually eloquent of the Grierson group of documentarists. Burnett describes Wright's approach to teaching documentary as follows: "In the films he discussed, every shot contained a human element or touch. The subjects in front of the camera were treated like *people*, not just props and objects and things to be manipulated." *Killer of Sheep* does have strong documentary qualities. It was shot on location, with hand-held cameras and inexperienced actors. The photography shows, without editorializing, the grim surroundings and the sometimes cruel, sometimes compassionate interactions between people in the neighborhood.

Since *Killer of Sheep* is scripted, fiction film using documentary techniques, a strong link can be made to Italian neorealism. *Killer of Sheep* is a portrait of a poor family in desperate trouble, and like *Claudine*, it bears some resemblance to Vittorio DeSica's *The Bicycle Thief*. However, in *The Bicycle Thief* the trouble facing the poor family is specific: the hero needs a bicycle to keep a job, and the bicycle is stolen. Aside from this problem, both the family and the cultural milieu are generally supportive. In *Killer of Sheep*, the trouble is diffuse: crime is endemic, violence is endemic, jobs are low-paying and spirit-sapping, people in the neighborhood have stopped trying to build a life.

What distinguishes *Killer of Sheep* from neo-realism, and previous African American films, is a unique, fragmented audiovisual style. Story is minimized in favor of observation, and the spectator is left to make his or her own inferences and conclusions. Many scenes have little or no dialogue but contain images verging on the symbolic. . . . Stan suffers from the surrounding conditions; he has problems with both insomnia and impotence. Yet he stubbornly persists, with the effort and patience of Sisyphus, in building a life. In the film's system, a simple scene of dancing with one's wife can become life affirming.

Killer of Sheep might be described as a non-Hollywood film at the boundary of narrative, documentary, and experimental. It requires that the spectator actively work at creating a meaning for the film. In this particular instance, at least, the formal experimentation leads to a new content, because *Killer of Sheep* presents the ebb and flow of ghetto life in a way unavailable to more conventional narrative.

from Chris Norton, "Black Independent Cinema and the Influence of Neo-Realism," *Images*

(online at <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue05/features/black.htm>)

Simply put, blaxploitation sought to be escapist while the black independent films discussed here sought to document and comment on the reality of black existence in America.

Killer of Sheep brings the reality of South Central to the forefront in a way completely different from the South-Central we see in later films such as *Boyz n the Hood*. We experience the inner-city from the inside, from the interior of a black family struggling to maintain their dignity and self-worth in the face of poverty, urban blight, and the near impossibility of meaningful employment. It is these realities of South-Central that Charles Burnett brings to the surface while avoiding any hint of sentimentality and melodrama. Burnett intended the film to be imbued with realism. He has said "*Killer of Sheep* is supposed to look like a documentary."

...While the story of the film may in fact be fictionalized, the reality of that fiction is what the film truly tries to communicate through its documentary realism. *Killer of Sheep* holds many of the trademarks of realist and neo-realist film.

...Contemporaneity is an important aspect in realist films only because of the social consciousness that these pictures strive to alert and awaken. A need to see reality dealt with as it truly exists.

Burnett grew up in South-Central and put on film that which he knew from his own life. *Killer of Sheep* deals exclusively with the day-to-day events of Stan's family. With humor, wit, and an eye for minutia, Burnett explores the issues of hope, longing, and futility, in short, the range of human emotions, through such events as a failed trip to the race track, the loss of a used car motor to make the American status symbol run again, and the drudgery of work in a slaughterhouse. This contemporaneity and actuality are not only a tie to Italian neo-realism, but also a link in allowing the film viewer into the reality of life for the inner city black family.

Thematically, *Killer of Sheep* delves mostly into the arena of hope.Hope ending in futility was also a common theme in neo-realist film. All six of *Paisan's* episodes end in futility.

Despite the many examples of futility in *Killer of Sheep*, Burnett does not leave us with this feeling. In the end, Stan forcefully herds the sheep into the slaughterhouse showing more emotion than he has for the entire film. Evidently, he has decided to persevere and fight on despite society's place for him. Burnett says of Stan, "Not only does Stan continue to struggle, but he does so without falling into an abyss or becoming a criminal or doing other anti-social things." Here, we have a departure from other neo-realist texts. Burnett has demonstrated hope and futility, aligning his work with other neo-realist texts, but he has placed the final emphasis on another hope, the hope that the continuing struggle for human dignity and a rightful place in American society is worth persevering. His film refuses to give into the futility that plagues the inner city.

Ntongela Masilela "The central theme of Burnett's work . . . [is] the impact of the discord of the past (of history) on the present". This implies a definite ideological statement that was largely absent from neo-realism. That statement involves the renegotiation of the representation of the black figure on the screen. This new figure has agency and refuses to give into white subjugation despite his repeated failures in the face of racism. While blaxploitation figures also shared this agency they did so in a fantasy realm with no realistic blueprint for blacks to seize. The black independent films discussed here provide that blueprint. While films such as *Killer of Sheep* and *Nothing but a Man* may seem superficially not to be overly invested in socio-political rhetoric (as blaxploitation films wear on their silk-ruffled sleeves right next to their coke spoons) they are in fact striving to provide hope through realistic images for the black community.

By 1984, South-Central hasn't changed, perhaps only gotten worse. Unlike *Killer of Sheep* and *Nothing But a Man*, *Bless Their Little Hearts* ends with futility.

Ed Guerrero writes, "*Bless Their Little Hearts* is set in an historical moment occurring only an instant before the genocidal explosion of drugs and gang violence in black communities across the nation."

From 1964 to 1984, these three films chart the struggles of black Americans from the inside, a place no Hollywood film dare go. As white American smugly believes they have done all they can for black Americans, the progression of the "struggle" as seen in these three films shows that white hegemony is as pervasive as always. Neo-realism quickly became removed from its social ties in Italy as post-war conditions returned to normal. Black independent neo-realism has lost none of its social ties and that is why these films are still making "history." They have not become a simple chronicle of the past. They are still making connections with the present and that is why these films need to be shown and viewed. While these three films vary in the depiction of hope, futility and struggle, they all share one underlying theme which has incredible social urgency. That theme is "we cannot let futility win." It is this social urgency that must be continually addressed if futility is to be permanently displaced by hope.

from Jim Ridley, "The Stuff of Legend: Charles Burnett's films are hard to find but their themes reverberate loudly," *Nashville Scene* 7 June 1999 (online at http://www.weeklywire.com/ww/06-07-99/nash_cover4.html), written when Burnett received the "Freedom in Film" award from the First Amendment Center and the Nashville Independent Film Festival.

With Danny Glover's newfound *Lethal Weapon* clout, however, Burnett was able to make a masterpiece. A sly, rich, and deeply humane comedy of manners, *To Sleep With Anger* stars Glover in the performance of his career as Harry Mention, a demon trickster summoned out of a middle-class African American family's past. Glover's Harry is a chicken-fried scoundrel, an agent of discord who zeroes in on his hosts' weaknesses. He represents the troubled, unruly Southern heritage the family has kept dormant, and his Staggerlee charm and fruit-jar likker are bad magic indeed. Only the mother's selfless intervention, a bit of spilled blood, and the good mojo of a vigilant broom protect the household from its own awakening id.

The film is spiced with autobiographical details, yet the film is most fascinating for its take on folklore and the uneasy role of the South in the African American tradition. A native of Vicksburg, Miss., Burnett moved to L.A. at an early age, and he says he was surrounded by a whole community of transplanted Southerners. "[The South] was something people always referred to when I was a kid," he remembers. "It became this mythological land, like Oz. It was both good and bad--no one thing, but a lot of things. It was almost like a creative force."

With that heritage, he says, came a stream of anecdotes, tall tales, and life lessons. "All the storytelling originates from there, the oral history and mysterious characters," he notes. "When I was a kid, it seemed like everyone knew you. They were always telling stories, mysteries of life." Sadly, he says that the studio, Samuel Goldwyn, demanded that he remove some of the more exotic

folklore from *To Sleep With Anger* because "audiences wouldn't get it."

Still, that experience was a cakewalk compared to what Burnett went through with his 1994 film *The Glass Shield*. A hugely underrated study of institutional racism and moral ambiguity in the LAPD, *The Glass Shield* tells the (true) story of the sole black officer (Michael Boatman) in an L.A. precinct house, who finds himself torn between sticking up for an innocent black defendant (Ice Cube) and perjuring himself to support his white fellow cops. It says a lot for the movie's unapologetic complexity that he chooses the latter. Burnett wrote the script without profanity or explicit violence, to make its political themes accessible to the broadest possible audience.

Nevertheless, Burnett's clueless distributor, Miramax, tried to pressure him into softening the movie's downbeat ending. It also reportedly wanted him to add some blood and a gangsta-rap soundtrack. Burnett altered the ending and some character details slightly, but he stood fast on the rest. As a result, according to a blistering essay in Rosenbaum's *Movies as Politics*, Miramax all but scrapped the PG-rated movie, postponing its release for a year and dumping it without fanfare in a handful of urban markets.

"The films I make are about black characters who don't do drugs or shoot each other," Burnett explains. "That makes them harder to market. You talk to young kids now about the films they see, they're one violent act after another. Everything is cut up, and that's what life is like to them. It's fragmented--there is no consequence or repercussion."

SUMMER'S COMING and there's only one more film in this spring's Buffalo Film Seminars, Akira Kurosawa's beautiful and moving *Dorsu Uzala*, next Tuesday night here at the Market Arcade. We'll be back August 27 with Buster Keaton's hilarious *The General* (1927), with live

musical accompaniment. The full fall schedule will be posted in a week or so on our website: www.buffalofilmseminars.com. If you'd like to receive email announcements about the fall series and you're not on our current email list, send an email to infolist@buffalofilmseminars.com and we'll see that you're kept informed.

If that brings on the blues, you'll perhaps find a transient cure at the 10-day **BUFFALO GUITAR FILM FESTIVAL**, part of WNED's Buffalo Niagara Guitar Festival. The Guitar Film Festival will run at the Market Arcade June 8-17 and the films will be introduced by well-known Buffalo guitarists Michael Lee Jackson (Animal Planet) and John Lombardo (10,000 Maniacs), and by Bruce. Screening times and a list of who will introduce which film when will be posted on the film festival's website in mid-May (<http://buffaloguitar.com>). Here are the films:

Friday 6/8 Taylor Hackford, *CHUCK BERRY: HAIL! HAIL! ROCK & ROLL!* 1987 . A documentary about Chuck Berry's 60th birthday concert at the Fox T Clapton, Bo Diddley, Don and Phil Everly, Etta James, John Lennon, Julian Lennon, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Roy Orbison, Keith Richards, Linda Ronstadt, and Bruce Springsteen.

Saturday 6/9: Michael Wadleigh, *WOODSTOCK* 1970. The greatest rock concert of them all, the 1969 music festival that became an American legend. With Richie Havens, Joan Baez, Roger Daltrey, Keith Moon, Pete Townshend, Joe Cocker, Country Joe MacDonald, Arlo Guthrie, David Crosby, Graham Nash, Steve Sills, John Sebastian, Carlos Santana, Sly Stone, Jimi Hendrix, Jerry Garcia, Janis Joplin, Johnny Winter, Grace Slick and the Jefferson Airplane, and others.

Sunday 6/10 Albert and David Maysles, *GIMME SHELTER* 1970. A documentary of the Stones' 1969 tour, ending with the deadly concert at Altamont. The Rolling Stones (Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Mick Taylor, Charlie Watts, Bill Wyman), Jerry Garcia, Grace Slick, Ike and Tina Turner, Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead, and others.

Monday 6/11, Tuesday 6/12, Wednesday 6/13: Gordon Parks, *LEADBELLY* 1976 A biopic about the great folk singer, filmed by Bruce Surtees. Starring Roger E. Mosley as Leadbelly and Art Evans and James Brodhead as Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Thursday 6/14, Friday 6/15: Wim Wenders, *BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB* 1999 The great film about Cuba's legendary musicians. Luiz Barzaga, Ry Cooder, Julio Alberto Fernández, Ibrahim Ferrer, and others.

Saturday 6/16: Richard Lester, *A HARD DAY'S NIGHT* 1964. The Beatles in their funniest and best film, supposedly about a "typical" day in their fictional lives. Some of the songs performed by John Lennon, George Harrison, Ringo Star and Paul McCartney: "A Hard Day's Night," "She Loves You," and "Can't Buy Me Love."

Sunday 6/17: Woody Allen, *SWEET AND LOWDOWN* 1999. Sean Penn plays a fictional great jazz guitarist of the 1920s and 1930s, a musical genius who is pretty much of a jerk the rest of the time, who drinks too much and obsesses about the only guitarist who has him beat, "That guy in France"—Django Reinhardt. Co-starring Samantha Morton, Uma Thurman, and featuring Woody Allen, Nat Hentoff, and many others, with great guitar solos by Howard Alden.

**For information on WNED's Buffalo Niagara Guitar Festival, go to <http://www.buffaloniagaraguitarfestival.com/>
email Diane Christian: engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu ... email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu**