

## Document Citation

Title	<b>A vision of Watts still frozen in time</b>
Author(s)	Mary McNamara
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	2007 Apr 01
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	E1, E10
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Killer of sheep, Burnett, Charles, 1977

FILM CLASSICS

# A vision of Watts still frozen in time

LA Times 4/1/07 PE1

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**M**OST student films, mercifully, do not get theatrical distribution.

Certainly not 30 years after they were shot or with the combined efforts of crack film preservationists and a most persistent specialty film distributor. But "Killer of Sheep," which will open Friday at the Nuart, is not an ordinary film.

The UCLA film-school thesis project of Charles Burnett ("To Sleep With Anger," "The Glass Shield") is instead a cinematic tone poem, an elegy, perhaps, or an ode to a certain time and place. Set in Watts during the mid-'70s, "Killer of Sheep" refers to Stan, the main character, a husband and father trapped by his job in a slaughterhouse. There is a loosely constructed plot, but the film focuses on the quiet beauty of the mundane: a group of kids throwing rocks in a train yard, a young woman announcing her pregnancy, a couple dancing in their living room. The message that emerges — life is difficult but lovely just the same — is as

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# A slice of life by Charles Burnett

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understated as it is heroic, and in a sense, applies to the man who made the film.

Shot on 16mm film, using mostly nonactors — friends and neighbors and kids — “Killer of Sheep” was Burnett’s response to the era’s blaxploitation films, his attempt to show life as it really was for many black families.

“Hollywood, I don’t think, tries to portray things realistically,” he says. “When they make movies about the community, you only see drug movies or violence. That perception of black people,” he adds, “still exists.”

He went into Watts and used regular people rather than actors, he says, because he wanted to demystify filmmaking for members of his neighborhood. “When I was growing up,” he says, “the idea of becoming a cinematographer was like going to the moon. Kids came up to us, they didn’t even know what the camera was. Spike [Lee] has done a great job since then. He’s pretty much a household name.”

Burnett, however, is not, unless your household includes one or more dedicated cinephiles. Then his name evokes reverence; bring up “Killer of Sheep” and reverence turns to awe.

## Earning high marks

**W**ITH its almost palpable tenderness and artistic imagery, the film became a film-school favorite, used in classes as an example of an exemplary student film and making the festival rounds until it won an award in Berlin four years after it was made. The Library of Congress chose it as one of the first 50 films on the National Film Registry, and the National Society of Film Critics selected it as one of the “100 Essential Films” of all time.

Meanwhile, the world changed, not only in Watts but in the film industry, where film school became too often a mere steppingstone to the studios and independent film took on a brand. But Burnett remained as he was — devoted to telling stories from real life. “To Sleep With Anger” (1990) considered the impact a sweet-talking con man has on a family, “The Glass Shield” (1994), often cited as a

precursor to the more over-the-top “Training Day,” takes on fear and racism in the Los Angeles Police Department.

Burnett, a soft-spoken man who looks years younger than his age (60), is best known in the film community as a man of reserve and integrity. “Charles is often called the best black American director,” says Ross Lipman, a film preservationist at UCLA. “I think he is simply one of the best American directors, and ‘Killer of Sheep’ is one of the best American films ever.”

Lipman is the man behind the film’s theatrical release. Seven years ago, he was part of a team that received a Sundance grant to restore eight films, including “Killer of Sheep.” Although the film reels were deteriorating, Lipman and his colleagues were able to painstakingly pull out the quality of the original and blow it up to 35mm.

Lipman was so impressed with the finished product that he called Dennis Doros at Milestonefilms. But quality is not the only reason student films are not distributed theatrically — Burnett had used a lot of music in his film, and none of it had been through the licensing channels. It took Doros six years of nagging and persuasion and \$142,000 worth of check-writing to get the necessary permission. “I just couldn’t give up on this film,” says Doros.

“Charles is one of the most humane directors in cinema,” Doros says.

For Burnett, the process has evoked, understandably, a good deal of nostalgia. “Seeing it now,” he says, “it’s more emotional. It’s a community that doesn’t exist, a place that doesn’t exist. Now there is so much violence, so many drive-by shootings.”

But if being seen as an underappreciated artist bothers Burnett, it doesn’t show. He is working on “Nujoma: Where Others Wavered,” a feature film funded by the recently formed Namibian Film Commission about the life of that country’s first president. After that, who knows?

“I’ve had chances to make commercial films,” he says, “but I have an attitude problem.”

It’s not that he’s arrogant or belligerent, he says, he just doesn’t want to do films that exploit people. “One time they

wanted me to do a film but concentrate on the drugs and violence [in the African American community]. I said, ‘People have already seen that, and it doesn’t reflect necessarily the whole picture.’ That,” he adds with a rueful smile, “doesn’t go over well.”

After 30 years in the business, he says, he still doesn’t understand why people talk the way they do in meetings. “You have to really sell your projects, and I’m not good at that. It’s like they’re speaking a different language. Sometimes,” he says with a laugh, “I don’t even have to say anything to get in trouble. They can tell by the look on my face.”

He remembers a time, he says, when people made films to make films, not to make money. “Not that there aren’t people doing that today,” he says. He cites the Pan African Film & Arts Festival as a refuge for filmmakers telling real stories. And every year a few righteous movies go mainstream. “I think it’s good that independent films are being recognized,” he says. “‘Brokeback Mountain,’ ‘Little Miss Sunshine.’ All films that deal with social issues are good, they just take a different angle.”

Over coffee at the corner of Motor and Venice, Burnett radiates a calmness that borders on serenity. He is, as they say, very real. He lives with his wife and two sons in Viewpark. He answers his own phone, sets up his own interviews. There will be no industry air-kisses here.

Danny Glover remembers the imperturbability of Burnett from years ago, when he starred in “To Sleep With Anger.” “Everything would be crazy on the shoot, just crazy,” says Glover. “And there would be Charles, perfectly calm, like the eye of the storm.”

Whether he’s speaking about the idiosyncrasies of filmmaking or the drug problem in present-day Watts, Burnett’s tone is matter-of-fact. In conversation, as in his films, the ugly truths of life are just that — ugly, true and part of life.

He tells a story to illustrate what he sees as the continuing arrogance, and racism, of the industry: A film crew had set up in his neighborhood and Burnett, riding by on his bike, asked what was going on. “This grip looks at me and says, ‘It’s too difficult to explain,’” Burnett says with a

smile that is truly amused. “Too difficult to explain. To me.”

So yes, he and Spike Lee have done a good job of demystifying filmmaking in the black community, but filmmakers remain fairly mystified about the black community, which, Burnett says, is continually portrayed in a stereotypical way.

“They said this year’s Oscars was so diverse. Why? Because two black people won? Two? Because there were a few Spanish people nominated?” He raises his eyebrows skeptically. “That’s diverse? Come on,” he adds. “The entertainment-type movies they make are all a distortion.”

Not that he denies that drugs and violence are a problem in Los Angeles. “I don’t know if you believe the conspiracy theories about Iran-Contra,” he says, “how [the CIA] came into the community with guns and the drugs and destroyed it. But I do know that overnight there were AK-47s on the street and these kids, none of whom were scientists, suddenly knew how to make crack. I think that would be a good movie, if you could figure out how to tell it.”

## Wounded by injustice

**U**NLIKE other filmmakers who he says exploit the violence in neighborhoods like South-Central, Burnett would like to make a film that addresses the issues without blaming the victims.

“You go to the schools today and they look like prisons,” he says. “The blacks and the Hispanics are fighting over crumbs. Where else can a child be shot in the head — something that occurs on a regular basis — and it goes in the back of the paper and no one cares? We might as well be living in Iraq. If this had been in a white community, there would have been an emerging plan.”

He speaks and there is passion in his voice, passion and indignation, but not necessarily anger, at least not how anger normally plays, though he says he has been harassed by police officers and has had to teach his sons that cops don’t need a reason to pull a tall young black driver over or give him a hard time. He may not be happy at the state of the city or the state of the

industry, but he also knows that his life has turned out better than many of those around him.

“A lot of the people I was at school with don’t make movies anymore. So by that light, I am very, very successful,” he says. Sure, he’d like to make a big film that would make a lot of money so he could take even better care of his family, but he still does what he does for the reason he began.

“I like to do good movies. A good movie has such a positive impact. It can humanize people, explain conflicts that are significant in a way people can understand.”

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