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L.A. Story

Charles Burnett's revered, rarely seen South Central-set film finally gets its theatrical due

Film



Boys and girls in the 'hood—1978's *Killer of Sheep*

Milestone Films

Killer of Sheep

Written and directed by Charles Burnett
Milestone Film & Video
Opens March 30, IFC Center

BY J. HOBERMAN

There are first films like *Citizen Kane* or *Breathless*, which, as radically new and fully achieved as they are, unfairly overshadow an entire oeuvre. And then there are first films, perhaps even more radical, which haunt an artist's career not through precocious virtuosity but because they have an innocence that can never be repeated.

This second type includes Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, John Cassavetes's *Shadows*, and Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*—impoverished productions all, shot on weekends over extended periods of time, pragmatic in their means, necessarily based on improvisation and consequently filled with rich, ingenuous mistakes. Charles Burnett's legendary *Killer of Sheep*, which was finished in 1978 and, despite its enormous critical reputation, is only now getting a New York theatrical release, belongs with these.

Made while Burnett was a 33-year-old grad student at UCLA, *Killer of Sheep* is a study of social paralysis in South Central Los Angeles a dozen years after the Watts insurrection. The subject matter harks back to the heyday of Italian neorealism but Burnett uses the film language of experimental documentaries like *In the Street*, *Blood of the Beasts*, and Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*. (Like Anger, Burnett never cleared the rights to his

extensive pop-music score—one reason why *Killer of Sheep* could not be commercially shown.) Sui generis, *Killer of Sheep* is an urban pastoral—an episodic series of scenes that are sweet, sardonic, deeply sad, and very funny. It's a movie of enigmatic antics, odd juxtapositions, disorienting close-ups, and visual gags, as when a guy sitting in the front seat of a car reaches through the nonexistent windshield to retrieve the beer can perched on the hood.

Killer of Sheep has an improvised feel and a studied look—as if Burnett decided on his often unconventional camera angles and then set his mainly nonprofessional actors loose. Songs of innocence and experience collide. Even before the opening titles, the movie makes it clear that life (or maybe history) is apt to hit you upside your head. Much of the movie considers children at play, staging rock fights in a rubble-strewn lot or frisking around some derelict railroad tracks or, shot from below, jumping from roof to roof. The kids, who almost always travel in packs, have their own subculture—half seen through their imagination. A little girl affects a hangdog mask, perhaps in imitation of her father, Stan (Henry G. Sanders).

The movie has an unusual protagonist: Depressed, dreamy, always worried looking, Stan works in an abattoir (hence the title) and has two kids and a pretty wife (Kaycee Moore). She loves him but he's curiously unresponsive—at one point they dance to Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth," then drift apart. Stan doesn't smile and he has trouble sleeping. For much of the movie, he wanders impassively from one scene to another. To the

degree that the movie has a narrative, it largely concerns Stan's ongoing attempt to get his friend's car together. In one lengthy scene, the guys buy a \$15 replacement engine—the motor is an image of futility so visceral that, rolling through the movie, it positively ungathers its moss.

On the one hand, Stan's neighborhood is a wasteland—devoid of commerce, isolated, and entropic. On the other, it's filled with vitality or at least everyday madness. People scowl and scrap their way through ramshackle lives, wandering in and out of each other's business—as when two guys dart on-screen lugging a stolen TV. The verbal jousting is often superb. (Language police should note that the zesty vernacular includes ample use of the N-word.) Neighborhood jivesters try to bring Stan in on their criminal exploits but he's stubbornly uninterested. "I'm not poor," he insists, "I give away things

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to the Salvation Army sometimes."

Stan is just about the only character in the movie who has a job—and it's the fact of the job, even more than its nature, that seems to oppress him. Intermittently he's shown at work, hosing down the slaughterhouse killing floor. At one point, Burnett uses Paul Robeson's pop front anthem "The House I Live In" to segue from an

empty lot to the abattoir; Robeson's "Going Home" provides the background for the sheep headed toward death. The bluntness with which Burnett employs music hardly detracts from the effect. This, as Little Walter reminds us, is a "mean old world." Stan's job brings him in intimate contact with the fate awaiting all living things. He is the reality principle. The only time he smiles—or nearly smiles—is when chasing those sheep who have dimly realized what might be in store for them.

However original, *Killer of Sheep* has had only a subterranean influence—primarily on Burnett's UCLA colleagues (Haile Gerima, Billy Woodbury, Julie Dash), who were surely inspired by his ability to get the movie made. More recently, there have been the movies of Southern regionalist David Gordon Green, whose 2000 debut, *George Washington*, mined much of its eccentricity from Burnett's film. But not even Burnett seems to have followed through on his youthful explorations; it was seven years before he completed a second feature, not that he has ever ceased working.

In the time since *Killer of Sheep*, Burnett's made several mangled or unreleased commercial productions, a number of striking telefilms on African-American history, and one fully realized, exceedingly unusual, and underappreciated feature, the 1990 *To Sleep With Anger*. Given this stoical tenacity, it's hard not to see Stan as a prophetic projection of the filmmaker.

In retrospect, it can be seen that the two great independent features of the late '70s were *Killer of Sheep* and *Eraserhead*. Perhaps when someone writes the reception history of American independent cinema, it will be explained how and when *Killer of Sheep*—which had its original screenings at museums and underground showcases—came to be considered not just a good but a great movie, placed on the Library of Congress's National Film Registry in 1990.

Clearly foreign film festivals had something to do with it—the movie won a prize at Berlin in 1981—as did the various black film series that booked it for years. It's striking that, as a 16mm production, *Killer of Sheep* first appeared in the context of avant-garde cinema. When it opened in New York in November 1978, as part of the Whitney Museum's ongoing New American Filmmakers series, *The New York Times* saw it as a study in "monotony and alienation," and scored the filmmaker's "arty detachment."

That apparently was the movie's lone notice. The closest *Killer of Sheep* received to a review in the *Voice* was the blurb filed by a callow part-time third-stringer:

Charles Burnett calls his well-observed first feature, made with nonactors in Watts, an ethnographic film. More a succession of linked images and anecdotes than a narrative, its power is in its accumulation of details and gesture. Burnett withholds judgment on his scuffling, self-absorbed characters, using a score that runs the gamut from Paul Robeson to Dinah Washington to Big Boy Crudup to comment on their lives. His hero works in a slaughterhouse but the film leaves little doubt that the real "killer of sheep" is America.

I hadn't seen the movie again until this past month. As fresh and observational as it was 30 years ago, *Killer of Sheep* seems even more universal now. Today, I'd change my blurb to note that the killer of sheep isn't only America, but life.