



Killer of Sheep

It's hard to believe there was a time when *Killer of Sheep* wasn't widely recognised as a canonical work. The operative word however, is 'widely': it got great reviews from its premiere in 1978. So why the recognition gap? In some ways the story parallels the film itself: it lacked the cultural privileges of other contemporary productions. *Killer of Sheep* was made on a shoestring while its writer/director Charles Burnett was a student at UCLA, studying under luminaries including Basil Wright and Elyseo Taylor. Despite Hollywood's looming presence, Burnett found inspiration in the Italian neorealist films he saw in class and, defying expectations, adapted the department's resources to tell tales of an undocumented America: everyday lives among the Black community he knew in east Los Angeles.

But just as the film's subjects were in a sense ghettoised, so was the film. Without funds, music rights couldn't be cleared, and for decades, despite being lauded, the film was known only on the margins. I first saw it in a poor 16mm print in the mid-1980s: the only way it could be seen at the time. The picture was soft, the dialogue muffled, leaving me with the memory of a feeling as much as anything. It wasn't until I restored the film for the UCLA Film & Television Archive in the early 2000s – when improved lab techniques allowed Burnett's brilliant photography and dialogue to emerge – that I realised its genius. The visionary team at Milestone Films agreed, going through Herculean battles to clear music rights, and launching its first international 35mm release in 2007, 30 years after completion.

Suddenly, audiences across the world saw scenes that have since been etched in collective memory: children filmed from below as they leap across the gap between tenement rooftops; a hard-won car engine teetering precariously on the edge of a departing truck; the sad lonely dance of slaughterhouse worker Henry Sanders and his wife, Kaycee Moore.

After the film had been restored, I was occasionally fortunate enough to present the film with Charles in attendance, and would introduce him not as one of America's 'great Black directors' but rather as one of the 'great American directors'. Now I think it's probably time to omit the limiting descriptor 'American' as well: he's simply one of the world's great directors.

Ross Lipman, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23

Charles Burnett on 'Killer of Sheep'

Did you plan Killer of Sheep as a 90-minute film?

I planned it as a much longer film, as a trilogy, with the guy first in the slaughterhouse. In the second part he gets off work and goes on vacation, then refuses to go back to work because he's become a human being. But then in the third part he's forced by economics to go back to work.

I'd already extended my stay at UCLA, and they told me I had enough credits to get a degree without doing a film. I was taking everything – Russian, Italian – just to stay there. But I said, 'No, I want to do my film.' They agreed in the end but they gave me a time limit – if they hadn't kicked me out, I'd still be there, making films. I think most of us would. There was a group that was

outside the university – who may have been there at one time – who came and made films at night.

It's not like that now. I lectured there, and the students have professional people working on their films. Their films are a lot more expensive, and their only concern is, 'How do I get in?' It's not about art, or 'I have this to say,' or 'These are the stories I want to get out.' When we were doing our films, there wasn't any means of exhibiting them, but we didn't worry about that. There was a passion just to make the film. Looking back, it was good and bad. Most of us didn't survive, but I think if we'd taken it more as a business, we'd have been wiser. But then we probably wouldn't have done it. Because when you think too much you don't get things done.

Did you shoot Killer of Sheep all in one block?

All in one block, but at weekends.

How many weekends?

It's hard to say. When you use non-actors you have a lot of scheduling problems. You'll get there with the camera and they don't show up. That's why it was such a small crew. It got to the point where it was just me and the kids making the movie, which was appropriate as the idea of doing the film was to demystify filmmaking in the community – to teach kids how to make films. I was into a group that was doing political films, that saw film as a tool to educate people, to do other things than to entertain.

You shot the film yourself?

Yes. My idea was to get a 'scratchy' look, but one of the things I realised afterwards was that I shouldn't have tried to do everything in the camera. Later the timing becomes problematic. The kids did the sound, helped with the lighting. In some ways the film suffers from that, because the sound was done by people with no knowledge. In terms of lighting, I lit it as minimally as possible otherwise you'd realise it was all set up.

So you were just shooting the bits you needed, the John Ford thing?

Killer of Sheep wasn't meant to be screened outside UCLA. It was a response to those films with a romanticised social-realist plot, like *ABC*, where the guys all band together to solve a workplace problem, form a union, there's a strike, things get resolved and life is happier. It didn't happen like that in my life. Trying to get a job was one thing, then trying to hang on to it. These were not 'issues' – you had to pay the bills, try to stay out of trouble. Then there were historical problems keeping people down that needed to be addressed more than the middle-class view of their needs.

That's basically what the film is about. It wasn't showing what Black life is about – it's only an impression. And I was in a radical mood, right? Now we can smile at that – you're in college and you think you're in this revolutionary mix, but when you get into the real world, it's different. I lived in Watts and I used to go to a barber's shop. There were these old guys there, from the South, who'd seen a lot of horrendous things and yet were very patriotic. I remember one day it was Paul Robeson's birthday. And I came in with this, and they were so anti-Paul Robeson, and I said, 'What? This is a guy who was fighting for you, standing up for your rights.' And they said, 'Paul Robeson shouldn't have said anything about this country.' So I discovered how conservative a lot of people in Watts were, particularly the older people. The Watts Riots were a young people's thing, a kids' thing. I realised everyone wasn't ripe for revolution – we were in a dream world, trying to get

people to march. Civil rights was one thing; but the Panthers was a young thing.

I recognised that because I'd been to college, I'd become 'different'. I couldn't be a spokesman for the Black community; everybody has to speak for themselves. So I had to make *Killer of Sheep* in such a way that it would be about events you would see in the community, but without imposing my views to the extent where it would be moving from one point to another with a resolution at the end. I was trying to show over a period of time what might have happened or what did happen. Because everything in this story did happen – these were all things I witnessed.

Interview by Alex Cox, *Sight and Sound*, July 2002

KILLER OF SHEEP

Director: Charles Burnett

Production Company: Charles Burnett Productions

Producer: Charles Burnett

Screenplay: Charles Burnett

Director of Photography: Charles Burnett

Editor: Charles Burnett

Sound Recording: Charles Bracy

Assistants Sound Recording: Willie Bell, Larry Clark, Christine Penick, Andy Burnett

Cast

Henry G. Sanders (*Stan*)

Kaycee Moore (*Stan's wife*)

Charles Bracy (*Bracy*)

Angela Burnett (*Stan's daughter*)

Eugene Cherry (*Eugene*)

Jack Drummond (*Stan's son*)

Slim

Delores Farley

Dorothy Stengel

Tobar Mayo

Chris Terrill

Lawrence Pierrott

Russell Miles

Homer Jai

Johnny Smoke

Paul Reed

Steven Lee

Charles Davis

Cecil Davis

Carlos Davis

Dorothy Daniels

Jannie Whitsey

Bill Williams

Calvin Walker

Sammy Kay

Le Roy Seibert

Cassandra Wright

Junior Blaylock

Charles Cody

Sheila Johnson

Lisa Johnson

300 Lbs.

Menorie Davis

Tony Davis

Carl Davis

Roderick Johnson

Crystal Davis

Peggy Corban

Vincent Smith

Susan Williams

Saul Thompson

Pat Johnson

Bobby Cox

Cadillac

Arthur Williams Jr.

Calvin Williams

Alvin Williams

Patricia Williams

Brenda Williams

Bruce Warren

Dian Cherry

Latishia Cherry

Jonathan Cherry

Vernell Cherry

Margrenet Clark

Ronnie Burnett

Regina Batiste

Henry Andrews

Danny Andrews

Marcus Hamlin

Divinoni Hamlin

Ricky Walsh

Gentry Walsh

Michael Harp

Derek Harp

Reggie Williams

Robert Thompson

Ray Cherry

Verrane 'Slinky' Tucker

USA 1977

80 mins

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