

Charles Burnett: A Major American Filmmaker .

by

Ntongela Masilela

(An Introductory Comment to a discussion with Charles Burnett, following the showing of *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep With Anger* At Pitzer College [Claremont Colleges] on Wednesday, March 25 1992)).

Though it had been apparent to many of us who were studying together with Charles Burnett at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) in the late 1960s and early 1970s that he was a person of enormous abilities, it is only in recent years that the public at large has had the opportunity to confirm what we felt intuitively two decades ago. The occasion for the creation of this consensus was the showing of one of Burnett's latest film, *To Sleep With Anger* (1990). Many American publications, among them, *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Weekly*, acclaimed Charles Burnett as a major artist. It must be said in all honesty, that this acclamation from influential American opinion makers is very much belated, for in Europe Charles Burnett has been held in high esteem from the moment of his first feature film, *Killer of Sheep* (1977). To be sure, racism did not play a minor role in this belatedness.

Although Charles Burnett's achievement is singular, impressive and very much original, it is/was not an isolated phenomenon since he belongs to the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers, which was in existence from approximately 1974 to about 1978; the latter date marking the moment of a remarkable conversation Glauber Rocha, the late great Brazilian film-maker, had with some members of the School in Los Angeles on his way to Brazil after a decade of European exile. (I'm well aware that in saying Burnett was a member of the Los Angeles School, I run the risk of incurring his wrath for in an interview published in one of the recent issues of *Black American Literature Forum* he denies that this artistic movement ever existed or that he was a member of it. I think this is a controversial matter perhaps best left for another occasion). The extraordinary vitality of the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers was ratified two-weeks ago with the release of Julie Dash's first feature film, *Daughters of the Dust*, which took her over a decade to make. Whatever the flaws of its allusive narrative and disconnected structure, the film is an extraordinary phenomenon. Together with Charles Burnett, Julie Dash was a member of the Los Angeles School, which included among others, Haile Gerima, Billy Woodberry, Ben Caldwell, Jamaa Fanaka.

The Los Angeles School, which consisted of African-American and African students then studying at UCLA, was a direct product and cultural expression of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Culturally, preceding it was the Black Arts Movement led by Amiri Baraka in the late 1960s. Within the context of film culture, the Los Angeles School was uncompromisingly anti-Hollywood, particularly because then Hollywood was producing blackexploitation films, which were demeaning and condescending towards black people all over the world. In other words, the Los Angeles School's historical project was to re-establish the tradition of black independent filmmaking which Oscar Micheaux had brought to such impressive heights in the 1930s, and had subsequently been suppressed by Hollywood.

The historical coordinates which define the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers are those of cultural nationalism, revolutionary nationalism and African Marxism. Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright, Amilcar Cabral, Amiri Baraka and Kwame Nkrumah were the political and intellectual figures who defined our cultural and political space. The Latin American cinema, and particularly the Cuban National Cinema within it, was a tremendous inspiration. The then emerging African cinema, especially Ousmane Sembene at its center, was exemplary for the Los Angeles School. This author still remembers an exhilarating occasion in the Fall of 1970 when a congregation of African filmmakers arrived at UCLA to present their films in an African Film Festival, probably the first of its kind in North America. In other words, the Los Angeles School belongs to the theatrical space of Third World culture.

Charles Burnett is arguably the commanding light of the Los Angeles School. His roots in film culture are international. Basil Wright, a leading member of the British School of Documentary Filmmakers of the 1930s, was Charles Burnett's teacher at UCLA in the late 1960s. It is therefore not by mere coincidence that *Killer of Sheep*, the most poetically visual of Burnett's films, exemplifies the architectonics of spacing that the British School held in high esteem. The composition of shots and the configuration of architectural objects in this film would have amazed John Grierson and Alberto Calvacanti had they lived to see the film. But the real roots of Charles Burnett are in the black American South. The extraordinary and haunting sound track of *Killer of Sheep* is a collocation of great American music: Negro spirituals, jazz, and the blues sounds of Dinah Washington vie with each other in a crescendo of marvelous movements. The profound unity of sound and image to produce spiritual pleasure or to elicit intellectual reflection apparent in this film is one of the real achievements of the Los Angeles School. In Burnett's films, we encounter an astonishing series of diverse cultural forms. This achievement can also be seen in Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1974), which was brilliantly photographed by Charles Burnett.

To Sleep With Anger (1990) is an elaboration and deepening of the historical project of the Los Angeles School on the part of Charles Burnett. The crucial sociological object at the center of most of the films which form the Los Angeles School has been the African-American family: its nature, structure, and resiliency in withstanding the destructive forces of European-American racism. The earlier films of the School were scrutinizing the vicissitudes of the black working class family. These films examined the impact and consequences on the working class family of the exploitation of 'black' labour power by 'white' capital. Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1983), photographed and written by Charles Burnett, is a trenchant examination of this theme. Recent films of the School, especially *To Sleep With Anger* and *Daughters of the Dust*, have shifted to scrutinizing a different sociological object: the black middle class family. Whereas the earlier films were preoccupied with class relations, the recent vintage of films have concerned themselves with the disjuncture between the New History of the North and the Old History of the South. The breakdown or the contesting of the lines of continuity between two temporal spaces, representing different historical moments of the same History, is what concerns the most active members of the Los Angeles School today.

Charles Burnett's last film, *America Becoming* (1991), which was shown on PBS last October, is again a portrayal of the lines of historical continuity. Taking the title from Langston Hughes' poem, this documentary film is primarily concerned with the new immigrants from Asia and Latin America: the grafting of the new historical experience of the First World onto the old historical experience of the Third World. In many ways the film resembles Mike Davis' *City of Quartz*: in that both, in different ways, look at recent spectacular historical experience of the transformation of Los Angeles into the Third World capital of the First World in the service of Japanese capital.

It is the combination of both an acute mind and an exemplary sensibility which makes Charles Burnett one of the outstanding poets of the American cinema today.