

Charles Burnett: Interviews (March 10, 2011)

INTRODUCTION

Charles Burnett is a ground-breaking African-American filmmaker and one of this country's greatest directors, yet he remains largely unknown. His films, most notably *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), are considered classics, yet few filmgoers have seen them or heard of Burnett. The interviews in this volume explore this paradox and collectively shed light on the making of a rare film master whose work brings to the screen the texture and poetry of life in the black community.

As a supremely talented and fiercely independent film director, Burnett makes movies according to his own unique artistic vision and socially engaged viewpoint. His films' best qualities—rich characterizations, morally and emotionally complex narratives, and intricately observed tales of African-American life “subtly layered with cultural references and mythic overtones”—are precisely what make his films such a “tough sell” in the mass marketplace (see Nelson Kim's profile of Burnett in *sensesofcinema.com*, 2003; not included in this volume). Hollywood, as the interviews presented here reveal, has been largely inept in responding to the challenges of marketing Burnett's films. And no one is more aware of it than Burnett, who told Terrence Rafferty in 2001, “It just takes an extraordinary effort to keep going when everybody's saying to you. ‘No one wants to see that kind of movie’ or ‘There's no black audience.’”

Against the odds, Burnett did keep going. This book provides a window into three decades of his directorial career, during which he produced an extraordinary body of work. It focuses on his status as a true independent filmmaker and explores his

motivation for involving himself in films that all chronicle some aspect of the black experience in America.

As a film student in UCLA's Graduate Program in Film and Television Production during the 1970s, Burnett, along with fellow students like Julie Dash, Haile Gerima and Billy Woodberry, set out to tell stories that rejected Hollywood stereotypes that depicted the black community in strictly negative terms—drug infested, violent, malevolent and dysfunctional. Eventually this group of young filmmakers would come to be known as alternatively the “L.A. School of Black Filmmakers” and the “L.A. Rebellion.” Burnett's student films included two shorts, *Several Friends* (1969) and *The Horse* (1973) and his feature-length MFA thesis film, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), an unusually complex and poetic vision of African-American life set in the Watts section of Los Angeles. As Burnett saw it, these three films (and the rest that would follow) “offered insights” to black viewers about their own experiences growing up black in America. His films were in sharp contrast to the “action-packed dramas” produced by Hollywood that, according to Burnett, had reduced the black community to “drugs and mothers who prostitute themselves ... I can sell a plot to a studio, I believe, about situations where a girl is on drugs, her brother is on drugs, their mother is on drugs, and their father disappeared and there is this white guy who is going to come and save the young boy or something like that” (*American Film*, 1991). “When I was in UCLA,” recalls Burnett, “we were making independent films because we wanted to do something positive. Not necessarily to entertain” (*Boston Globe*, May 28, 1995; not included in this collection). “It was a period [the late 1960s and 1970s] when there was a lot of social activism [and] people were

really using arts as a means to social change. Film was there, and I gravitated towards it” (*Sight and Sound*, 2008).

Burnett’s first feature film, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), made the rounds at a number of European film festivals during the late seventies and early eighties, and went on to win the prestigious Critics Award at the 1981 Berlin Festival. Yet, as he reflected on this early phase of his career in an interview (Ponsoldt, 2007), Burnett recalled: “When *Killer of Sheep* won the Critics’ Award at the Berlin Film Festival it was in all the European newspapers but when I came back to the U.S., there was no press.”

In fact, by the early 1980s, Burnett’s work had begun to capture a glimmer of critical attention, principally in European film publications. This book opens with two interviews from that period published in France (McMullin, 1980; Arnaud and Lardau, 1981; see also “Black Independents: Interview with Charles Burnett” in *Skrien*, a film magazine from the Netherlands, April 1981, not included here).

Catherine Arnaud and Yann Lardau, writing in *La Revue du cinéma* in 1981, explore early influences that motivated Burnett to become a filmmaker and how those influences helped shape his approach to the medium. We learn that in film school at UCLA Burnett took a course from the British documentary filmmaker Basil Wright, who, says Burnett, “made me understand that the cinema was something serious, capable of expressing the nature and the dignity of man. He also made me understand the value of the documentary, the importance of not imposing your own values on the topics you film ... He brought a certain humanism to my way of seeing things.”

... Monona Wali's interview with Burnett, the first to appear in an American film publication (*The Independent*, October 1988), gives the reader a profound sense of what it was like for Burnett and other Black Americans of his generation growing up in the South Central section of Los Angeles during the 1950s and 1960s. "I was a product of that [period just before the] Civil Rights Movement. You really felt your limitation. Your reality was a few square blocks. You felt this was your only world, and the only way to get out of it was to join the service." Burnett, instead, chose college (his way, we will learn in later interviews, to avoid the draft) and "began to see another world—that there's something more to life than thinking that by the time you're 20 you're going to be dead ... And then I saw all these other people who seemed healthier—enjoying life—particularly when I went to UCLA."

The interview includes an insightful discussion of *Killer of Sheep*. We learn that at UCLA Burnett had seen a number of films about working class life but could not relate to them in terms of his own experiences growing up in South Central Los Angeles. In these films, according to Burnett, "issues were idealized, and ... conflicts ... reduced to problems between management and labor." Management exploits the workers, the union calls a strike, and the workers are saved. These were films, says Burnett, with a built-in resolution. By contrast, the issues in Burnett's neighborhood, as he saw them, were completely different. "What was essential was finding a job, working, making enough money, and then, at the end of the day, coming home and still trying to show signs of life." In fact, according to Burnett, that was what *Killer of Sheep* was really all about: "It's about how Stan, the main character, loses his sensitivity and still tries to maintain a certain kind of dignity. You can see at the very beginning [a child] traumatized by a fact

of life. The father tells the little boy, ‘If you see your brother’s in a fight, you help him, whether your brother’s right or wrong. You don’t stand and watch. You go and help your brother.’ Which is OK, but you can imagine what effect this has if you have a conscience and are developing a moral concept. It was that kind of conflict that I was interested in trying to portray. How do you work in this environment? How do you maintain a certain amount of dignity? I wanted to show what price it takes to survive. How you survive is a personal choice. I don’t think a film should tell you A happens, and then B, and then C will necessarily follow. Life isn’t necessarily that simple. Films have a tendency to generalize, to reduce complex issues.”

The release and critical reception of *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) mark an important turning point in Burnett’s career. Tackling the fractured struggles between good and evil within a middle-class black Angelino family, the film appeared at a number of film festivals (including Sundance, Cannes, Toronto, and New York), winning a special jury prize at Sundance. It opened to mostly enthusiastic reviews, and went on to win Independent Spirit Awards for Best Director and Best Screenplay and special awards from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association and the American Film Institute. Not surprisingly, a number of interviews with Burnett were published around this time and several are included in this volume. Particularly newsworthy for this period are the Burnett profiles published in the *Village Voice* (August 22, 1989 and October 16, 1990), *LA Weekly* (October 12, 1990), the *Los Angeles Times* (August 12, 1989 and October 24, 1990), and the *New York Amsterdam News* (November 3, 1990) — among the first media to introduce and, in some cases, actively champion Burnett’s career in the United States. (*The Village Voice* and *LA Weekly* profiles are included in this volume.) It would be

several years before detailed profiles of Burnett start appearing in influential dailies like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Boston Globe*...

Lisa Kennedy's 1990 profile of Burnett appeared in the *Village Voice* less than two weeks after *To Sleep with Anger* opened in Manhattan. Kennedy, who is African-American, was the *Voice*'s senior film and arts editor at the time of the interview. Clearly this is a self-initiated assignment and one Kennedy felt strongly about doing, as she presents to her readers the strongest case possible for viewing Burnett as a major visionary artist: "*To Sleep With Anger* is not artful docudrama, not comedy," asserts Kennedy, "but the work of a visual novelist. The company Burnett keeps is not with his would-be peers— [Spike] Lee or the Hudlins [Reginald and Warrington] or the Wayans [Marlon and Shawn]—but with Toni Morrison or playwright August Wilson; being a filmmaker though, this makes him hard to pigeonhole and harder to market." According to Kennedy, Burnett is a master at revealing (in both *To Sleep With Anger* and *Killer of Sheep*) that African-American lives "are symbolically rich." Other films, she acknowledges, have touched on this. What is unique about Burnett's films, argues Kennedy, is that they are black "without trying to explain blackness" to whites—"a subtle, important shift." Significantly, his films visualize the ambivalence that many Northern blacks feel about their Southern roots. Burnett was born in Mississippi but when he was a small child his family moved to South Central Los Angeles. "My mother hated the South," says Burnett. "My grandmother was always telling stories about it, my mother hated it, she never wanted to go back, never went back. My uncle's the same way. But I have a cousin who's a country preacher and when we go to visit him, you're in church all day. We've always had this love/hate thing in the family about the South. I

think there was a kind of denial at work. I remember a time when being called ‘country’ was the worst thing that could be said about you.” Elsewhere in the interview, Burnett admits his own ambivalence about his Southern heritage. Growing up, he would on occasion posture about “hating the blues” (clarified during a personal exchange between Burnett and the editor, Los Angeles, March 2010), but his films, as Kennedy notes, are “buoyed” and “swayed” by them. “I couldn’t understand,” says Burnett, “how people liked [collard] greens.” Then all of a sudden, as a teenager, he developed “a craving for greens.” And now, as Kennedy informs us, “They’re a staple in his movies.” Adds Burnett, “You can only stay away from home so long.”

The *LA Weekly* profile by Lynell George, appearing around the same time as Kennedy’s piece, focuses less on Burnett’s artistry and more on the special challenges he faced as the director of films like *To Sleep With Anger*, which are such a tough sell in the mass market place. The *LA Weekly* profile is also effective in uncovering clues to Burnett’s character and sense of self. For example, his serious yet unassuming nature is captured in the following description: “The director prefers the low profile that has allowed him to traverse his neighborhood streets unnoticed ... [I]f you ‘take a meeting’ with him on home ground, he’ll suggest someplace low-key and convenient for both parties, Sizzler or I-Hop. He arrives—out of breath—casually dressed in a fresh white T-shirt, the factory creases still at sharp points, a warm-up jacket and crisp blue jeans. Lowering himself into a booth, he politely requests coffee or a single glass of white wine that he’ll nurse for three hours ... ‘Make sure you have Charles tell you a story,’ an old school friend of his insists, ‘any story. Charles tells a great story.’ That’s clear from his new film which, like his conversations, is full of storytelling. Burnett tells stories with his hands, with dark

serious eyes, continually tempering and reshaping them.” What emerges from this interview and subsequent ones (see. e.g., Rafferty, 2001) is a portrait of Burnett as serious, fearlessly independent, hard-working, gentle, soft-spoken, unassuming, resilient, serene, and always bemused by the idiocies and cruelties of the human condition. Indeed, several interviewers observe that when Burnett “recounts battles with other producers and distributors,” he does so “in a serene, matter-of-fact tone”—never voicing anger, outrage, or bitterness (see Rafferty 2001).

European journalists and critics continued to respond enthusiastically to Burnett’s work. In fact, the interview by Michel Cieutat and Michel Ciment published in *Positif* in November 1990 is one of the most detailed, comprehensive, and impassioned pieces included in this volume. Unlike most of the other interview/profiles appearing in the early 1990s, the *Positif* piece focuses as much on film technique, cinematic vocabulary, and style as on content. Especially engaging is Burnett’s discussion of the importance of music in his films, where he states his preference for southern blues over more urban-based jazz. Another highlight of this interview is an unexpected discussion of Van Gogh’s paintings in relation to Burnett’s own allusive way of telling a story. The question that triggered his discussion of Van Gogh is reproduced below along with Burnett’s response.

You mentioned Russian literature. One could think in particular of Chekhov because your way of telling stories is very circuitous, in contrast to Spike Lee, who addresses himself directly to the public. Your own commentary on the society is just as strong but you express it implicitly.

I prefer to remain allusive, to proceed by metaphor. It gives more meaning and poetry to things you can't explain. I've never met a person who wasn't complicated. There are always several layers of meaning, several intentions in what people say. So it's necessary to be suggestive ... I am a great admirer of Van Gogh. I love his paintings. I read the complete edition of his letters to his brother, and one of the most interesting things you find there is that, according to him the essence of expression is situated in gestures. It's by gestures that you can express the exact temperature of a bath, the right shoes. That's the case in *The Potato Eaters*, where you can feel the heat escaping from the potatoes through the exaggerated expressions of the characters. It's better to capture the essence than to be limited to photographing reality.

Bérénice Reynaud, then the New York correspondent for *Cahiers du cinéma*, interviewed Burnett prior to the 1990 Cannes Film Festival, where *To Sleep With Anger* opened to mostly favorable reviews. An updated version of this interview appeared in the *Black American Literature Forum* (1991). One of its many revelations is Burnett's speculation that "a serious speech impediment" may have led him to become a filmmaker: "I always felt like an outsider—an observer—who wasn't able to participate because I couldn't speak very well. So this inability to communicate must have led me ... to find some other means to express myself ... I really liked a lot of the kids I grew up with. I felt an obligation to write something about them, to explain what went wrong with them. I think that's the reason I started to make these movies."

One of the most disturbing aspects about the whole *To Sleep With Anger* phenomenon was that, despite all the rave reviews and prestigious awards, few people actually went to

see the film. Even more puzzling, according to a marketing piece appearing in the *New York Times* a month or so after the film's release, was the fact that *To Sleep With Anger* typically performed five times as well in white neighborhoods as in black areas (*New York Times*, November 20, 1990; not included in this volume). The film's poor performance among blacks obviously upset Burnett, who told the *Times* that he thought this was due not to a lack of interest but rather to inept marketing on the part of the film's distributor, the Samuel Goldwyn Company. "It's not that the black community is not responding," says Burnett, but that the film companies have not really tried very hard to "communicate with black audiences." Goldwyn executives interviewed for the story claimed that they did work hard to get the black press interested in the film but that, with few exceptions, the effort failed. The *New York Amsterdam News* turned out to be almost the only leading black publication to interview Burnett about the film (November 3, 1990; not included in this collection). The lack of response from black publications, argues Burnett, is due to the fact that the Hollywood studios "just call [them] up out of the blue once every two years or so instead of having an ongoing relationship." According to Goldwyn's vice president for theatrical distribution, the film appealed primarily to the "middle and upper classes, both black and white, not blue-collar blacks [and blue-collar] whites." In other words, it was drawing the "classic art-house crowd." Still there were no signs that Burnett had abandoned his efforts to attract his target audience—working-class blacks—to the film. "People have been going around putting up posters in Washington and Chicago, and we've been going on [all black] radio stations," he said.

In 1991 *American Film*, the official magazine of the American Film Institute, published a scintillating conversation between Burnett and fellow African-American director Charles Lane about the seemingly insurmountable challenges facing black directors (especially those like Burnett with an uncompromisingly independent predisposition) working in the white-dominated film business. From this exchange it becomes clear that Burnett continued to view himself as a political activist filmmaker who used the film medium to effect social change. Implicit in Burnett's critique of what's wrong with Hollywood is the desire for a more socially engaged cinema:

Sometimes to make a film gives the impression that everything is fair and that whenever you depict the dominant culture, you have to show it in a good light. It's like a committee imposing on the structure. That's one of the reasons why we haven't made social progress. We just saw Rodney King get beaten to a pulp, and in Boston where this guy killed his wife and blamed it on the black community, the whole nation wanted to hang everybody there. You can't walk down Little Cicero or even drive through Beverly Hills now without being harassed. We don't use film as a means to confront real issues that over time will create a better society.

After *To Sleep With Anger*, Burnett co-directed a documentary about immigrants, "America Becoming," which aired on public television in 1991. The 90-minute film focused on how the U.S., a country that was becoming increasingly multicultural, was relating to new waves of migration from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Central and South America. Burnett told Aida Hozic ("The House I Live In: An Interview with Charles Burnett," *Callaloo*, 1994) that the project fell far short of his expectations. "When we

started filming,” says Burnett, “I thought that we were supposed to be objective about what was going on in this country.” PBS and the Ford Foundation, the sponsors of the project, saw things differently. According to Burnett, they wanted the film to “paint a rosy picture of American immigrants”—to show that the “melting pot [is] working, that immigrants do well, that they bring a lot of resources to this country.” “What saddens me the most,” said Burnett in this interview, is that the documentary “could have anticipated all these riots and problems that different ethnic groups are facing in America today—and we did not.”

Burnett’s collaborator on “America Becoming” was Korean-American filmmaker Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, who produced, co-directed, and co-wrote the documentary. A *Korea Times* profile of the two filmmakers reported that they were working together on a new project, a feature drama about Korean-black relations (January 13, 1991; not included in this collection). “What we are trying to do,” explained Burnett, is “make a story that not only deals with the conflict between blacks and Koreans,” but also probes the differences between “Korean and black cultures.” (The finished product, a short film titled *Olivia’s Story*, was released in 1999.)

The next three interviews presented are from 1995—the year that *The Glass Shield*, a police procedural drama set in Los Angeles, opened in theaters. This film was Burnett’s first feature since *To Sleep With Anger* in 1990. During this five-year period, his credentials as an “art house” director had solidified. Published pieces about him routinely mentioned his \$275,000 “Genius Award” from the MacArthur Foundation, the acclaim his films received at international film festivals, his prestigious fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the Rockefeller and Guggenheim foundations,

and, most recently, that his original screenplay for *To Sleep With Anger* had received the National Society of Film Critics Award for best screenplay of 1990. None of these accomplishments, however, helped his reputation with the Hollywood studios that, increasingly, viewed him as just another one of those “art house” directors not fit for the big time.

On the other hand, the *New York Times* and other upscale publications found Burnett’s art house reputation attractive. In 1995, Michael Sragow’s passionate and detailed profile of the director appeared in the Sunday Arts and Leisure section of the *Times*. It was the first extensive interview of Burnett to be published there. What precipitated the interview was news that the American Museum of the Moving Image (AMMI) was holding a two-day retrospective of Burnett’s feature films and a preview of his fourth, *The Glass Shield* (see “A Pinewood Dialogue with Charles Burnett,” 1995; not included in this volume). The profile fills in some of the specifics about the MacArthur genius award Burnett received in 1988. The award gave him \$275,000 over five years. The prestige of the award helped launch *To Sleep With Anger*, while the generous stipend, distributed in equal amounts over the five year period (1988–93), enabled Burnett for the first time in his career to focus exclusively on making his own films. One learns that Burnett had experienced lean times before the award, “struggling to make his own films,” explains Sragow, “while seeking grants and mowing lawns, doing cinematography and screen writing for friends and messenger work and script reading for a talent agency.” Interestingly, Sragow erroneously classifies Burnett as essentially a director of art films. This surfaces while Sragow is describing what he believes was the motivation behind Burnett’s latest feature film: “Like all of Mr. Burnett’s movies,” says Sragow, *The Glass Shield* was done on the

cheap; nevertheless, it tries to blend realism and flashy stylization. It marks a transition for the director. After two decades of making art films, Mr. Burnett is trying to appeal to a wider audience.” Sprinkled throughout Sragow’s profile of the director are direct references and allusions to famous artists whose concerns, apparently, Burnett shares, starting with William Faulkner who, says Burnett, “was aware of . . . black psychology.” “The right to exist, how to exist, [and] the power to endure,” says Burnett, “were always part of his theme.” Faulkner comes up again during a discussion of *The Glass Shield*, Burnett’s police drama about how a black rookie cop, the first minority officer in an all-white L.A. County sheriff’s office, is forced to deal with the blatant racism he experiences there. “Mr. Burnett was drawn to the plight of the black police officer,” says Sragow, “because he—like . . . Joe Christmas in Faulkner’s *Light in August*—exists ‘in a white world and a black world at the same time.’ Faulkner, says Mr. Burnett, understood how people with a foot in each world are forced to adjust, ‘how it affects their speech when they’re in one or the other.’” Other artists mentioned or alluded to in this piece include Ernest Hemingway, Albert Camus, Jean Renoir, Roman Polanski, and the black writers of the “Harlem Renaissance.”

Also on the occasion of AMMI’s two week retrospective, the *Voice* (January 10, 1995) featured a short profile on Burnett that was attuned to some of the problems he was having with *The Glass Shield*, particularly with Miramax, the distributor. Many of these problems are discussed more fully in an *LA Weekly* (June 2, 1995) profile that appeared in conjunction with the general release of the movie in theatres. One of Burnett’s frustrations revolved around Miramax’s fateful decision to pitch *The Glass Shield* as a *Boyz n the Hood* type of action film that would appeal mainly to black males aged 14 to

24, rather than treating it as a thoughtful and morally ambiguous police drama that might attract a broader audience. As a result, the film was test marketed in the South Bronx, where the youthful black audience thought they were going to see an action movie with rap music starring Ice Cube, who figured prominently in the ads and posters but who, in reality, played only a supporting role in the film. Despite the disastrous outcome of this decision, Burnett told me that it was not his greatest problem during production. He said that from the beginning, Miramax had been “upfront about how they wanted to market the film.” “The major conflict,” he says, “was with Pierre Rissient, who was representing CBY 2000, the French company that produced the film. Pierre disagreed with the casting of the film and was never happy with it. He made life difficult from preproduction on. If we had given in to his demands, the film would have been a disaster.” (Interview with Burnett, Los Angeles, March 2010; cf. interview with *LA Weekly*, June 2, 1995).

Another problem had to do with the ending. The audience attending the special screening had reportedly screamed in protest at the original downbeat ending. As a result, Miramax decided that the ending needed to be changed and Burnett, according to the *LA Weekly* piece, “reluctantly” agreed. When I spoke with Burnett about this in 2010, however, he stated categorically that the changes he eventually made were exactly what was required. “I needed to cut down on the crying of the main character at the end. I didn’t have the material to make the scene shorter, so Miramax gave me the money to change the scene.” The new ending, as he told the *LA Weekly* interviewer, suggests a more positive resolution. “It’s more obviously upbeat,” said Burnett, “rather than sort of ambiguous. More of a closure.” In any event, and unfortunately for Burnett, Miramax’s campaign to package *The Glass Shield* as a “hood” movie failed miserably, and the film, despite the

many enthusiastic reviews it received from leading critics, never reached the more upscale audience that Miramax should have targeted.

After *The Glass Shield*, Burnett worked on two back-to-back film projects that created quite a stir among leading film critics such as Jonathan Rosenbaum, Armond White, and Terrence Rafferty. Chicago critic Jonathan Rosenbaum would characterize one of the projects, the 12-minute jazz-inspired *When It Rains* (1995), as “one of those rare movies in which jazz forms directly influence film narrative” (*Chicago Reader*, November 13, 2003). In an interview by Susan Gerhard from 2007, we learn that the film came about because Burnett wanted to do something more personal. “We had the use of a camera, and a group of us just shot [*When It Rains*] over a couple of days. It was kind of therapeutic and refreshing.” His other project, *Nightjohn* (1996), for the Disney channel—his first feature for television—was about a slave who sacrifices his freedom in order to teach his fellow slaves how to read and write. In 1998, *Nightjohn*, based on a children’s book by Gary Paulsen, would receive a special award from the National Society of Film Critics for a film “whose exceptional quality and originality challenge the strictures of the movie marketplace”—in other words, it is a TV movie made for children that is a masterpiece.

In 1997, the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival honored Burnett with a two-week retrospective of his films that showcased *Nightjohn* as the centerpiece of the series. For this occasion, both the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice* featured interviews with Burnett. While the *New York Times* profile (January 30, 1997; not included in this collection) chose not to mention *Nightjohn*, preferring instead to concentrate on Burnett’s earlier masterworks and their limited mass

appeal, the *Village Voice* interview by Gary Dauphin focused almost entirely on the Disney film (February 4, 1997). Taking his lead from critic Armond White, who once wrote that “[Burnett’s] films not only depict black life but sustain it,” Dauphin shows that “Burnett’s vision comes through quite clearly in *Nightjohn*.” Here was a case, according to Burnett, of “an ordinary event” (learning to read) turning “ordinary people into extraordinary ones.” “Learning how to read was a dangerous, secretive thing for slaves,” says Burnett; “it required quite a bit of courage. You can see that courage echoing in the later lives of great leaders and orators like Frederick Douglass, but also in the commitment to education that still exists in large numbers of people.”

...Between 1998 and 2000, Burnett directed three television films: *Oprah Winfrey Presents: The Wedding* (1998), a two-part TV miniseries, adapted from Dorothy West’s novel, that deals with issues of race and class in mid-twentieth century black society; *Selma, Lord, Selma* (1999), a TV docudrama about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that aired as part of “The Wonderful World of Disney”; and *Finding Buck McHenry* (2000), about a white Little Leaguer’s fascination with a school janitor who may have been a legendary pitcher in the old Negro Baseball League, that aired on Showtime and received a Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Performer (Ossie Davis) in a Children’s Special. None of the TV work mentioned above was based on material written by Burnett himself. In 2001, Terrence Rafferty asked Burnett how he felt about directing other people’s work. “I’d love to do my own films,” Burnett says, “but it takes so long [and] you have to pay the rent” (*GQ*, 2001).

As it happens, during this TV film-for-hire phase of his career, Burnett was also involved in more personal projects, such as *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*, about the 1831

slave rebellion in Southampton Virginia led by the black slave, Nat Turner. Part documentary, part fictional re-creation, the completed film, which aired on Public Television in 2003, doesn't present one definitive "Nat Turner" but instead, following a Rashomon-like narrative structure, re-creates episodes from Turner's life from six contradictory texts in which six different actors play him. In 2001, while the film was still in production, Burnett explained to Gerald Peary (*Village Voice*, September 2001) that his approach and that of his collaborators (Frank Christopher and Kenneth Greenberg) to the source material was to faithfully capture the essence of each of the six contradictory stories about Nat Turner that make up the core of the film—to "take the [various] stories we're given [about Turner] as almost etched in stone." "[Harriet Beecher] Stowe's Nat," says Burnett, "is a simple, angelic innocent, so we show him with a skunk and a mountain lion. In another story [William Styron's version], there's the murderous Nat, so this violent person emerges with a sword." When asked about his own Nat Turner, Burnett is unequivocal in his reply, "He's every man who'd fight for the liberation of others, who realized the evils of slavery and wanted his people to live in a normal way. Everyone has inalienable rights, and he, in a sense, was interpreting the Constitution. Nat Turner was more American than those whites who denied him."

During a lively discussion about the film that took place after a special screening at Cal Tech, Burnett spoke candidly about some of his own reservations about the finished product—the difficulty of securing funding for the project, how the final version was a compromise in length (initially conceived at two hours, the film now clocks in at 58 minutes) and emphasis (too much time devoted to William Styron's suggestion that Turner was a psychologically disturbed murderer and not enough attention to Burnett's

vision of him as a heroic warrior fighting to overthrow the horrific system of slavery). At this point in the discussion, we learn that several white college students begin to “openly question Burnett’s perspective.” Throughout, soft-spoken Burnett holds steadfast to his views (The filmmaker’s appearance at Caltech is reported by Doug Cummings in *filmjourney, weblogger*, 2003).

Around the time of the Turner project, Burnett also became involved in another deeply personal assignment, joining forces with Martin Scorsese, Clint Eastwood, Mike Figgis and other distinguished directors for the documentary miniseries “The Blues” that aired on PBS in 2003. In an interview that appeared on the series’ website, Burnett describes what led him to *Warming by the Devil’s Fire*, the semi-documentary that he came up with for the series. We learn that unlike the other contributors, Burnett decided to frame his documentary around a fictional story. “The story’s told from the perspective of the narrator, [a] young kid,” says Burnett, “who returns to Mississippi and becomes aware of the blues as an art form. It’s through his eyes that we, the audience, meets the blues. It’s through his ears that we listen to the blues and come to appreciate them. The film includes a wide range of music, from raw gutbucket blues to the more sophisticated R+B, and is representative of both male and female singers”

(www.pbs.org/theblues/aboutfilms/burnettinterview.html). As in earlier interviews, Burnett once again reveals how he uses the power of film to capture the rich legacy and poignancy of his southern roots, in this instance, showing how the blues “came out of the South . . . and it speaks to the [oppressive] circumstances for blacks of an earlier time.”

In a 2007 *New York Times* profile, Dave Kehr focuses on Burnett’s 1977 debut feature *Killer of Sheep* and the news that the film is about to have its first theatrical release after

being “hidden in shadows for almost 30 years.” For this story, Kehr interviews Burnett as well as other collaborators, such as colorist Kathy Thomson, who were involved in the process of transferring *Killer of Sheep* from film to video for its first DVD release (March 25, 2007). According to Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* “was never meant to be shown in public” and that, says Kehr, “is why he had never obtained permission to use the musical passages—marvelously apposite choices of blues, pop and jazz—that accompany and accentuate his images.” In April 2007, after the music rights for the film had been cleared, *Killer of Sheep* finally received its long-awaited debut theatrical release. Several interviews with Burnett appeared on the occasion of the film’s release, and three are included here: McNamara, *Los Angeles Times*, 2007; Ponsoldt, *Filmmaker* (a magazine devoted to independent films), 2007; and Lowery, road-dog-productions.com (a filmmaker’s blog), 2007. All focus almost exclusively on *Killer of Sheep*, exploring many different aspects of the film, especially interpretative issues, production history, and reception.

Understandably, the interviewers are preoccupied with questions having to do with change: What was it like returning to the film after so many years? Has your craft as a filmmaker changed between 1977 and 2007? Does *Killer of Sheep* remain as relevant today as when it first came out in 1977? Is the film business less racist now than when you first started? Overall, what is perhaps most striking about these interviews is how little Burnett’s concerns and perception of the world had changed since his student days at UCLA. For example, according to Burnett, racism remains widespread in Hollywood, as succinctly conveyed in the following anecdote reported in the *Los Angeles Times* profile from this period. “[Burnett] tells a story to illustrate what he sees as the continuing

arrogance, and racism, of the [film] 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.’”

Other post-2000 interviews include discussions of recent projects such as *Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation*, 2007 (see Sippl, 2007), older films like *When It Rains* (1995) issued for the first time on DVD (see, e.g., Gerhard, 2007), as well as more broadly conceived profiles looking back on Burnett’s career from the vantage point of the first decade of the 21st century (see e.g., Rafferty, 2001; Foundas, 2006; and Bell, 2008, which are among the most insightful interviews in this collection).

In conclusion, I would like to add a few words about Burnett’s unrealized film projects. In the mid-1990s, for instance, Burnett revealed in several interviews (such as Hozic 1994) his ambition to make a film of epic proportions about the life of the great orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. However, as he told Hozic, he wanted to be in a position to do the film “the way I want it,” without the limitations imposed by the marketplace and studio bureaucrats. Unfortunately, Burnett has yet to arrive at that position. In March 2010, he described to me a number of other films he had wanted to make or had begun development on (interview with Burnett, Los Angeles, March 2010). They include feature-length films about the lives of African-American cultural icons Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois, and two projects set in New York City, “Man in a Basket,” based on a Chester Himes crime novel about the Harlem cops Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, and “145th Street,” adapted from a collection of short stories for children by Walter Dean Myers. There were also two projects that touch on the

extremes of the African-American experience—"The William and Ellen Craft Story," about two slaves who escaped from Georgia in 1848, Ellen Craft, who disguised herself as a white man, and her husband William, who posed as her servant, and "Stanley Ann Dunham: A Most Generous Spirit," a documentary on the life of President Obama's mother that Burnett is currently seeking funding for. It remains to be seen whether Burnett's future holds the realization of some or all of these plans.