



FILM: **KILLER OF SHEEP**

FDG RATING: 3.4 ☺☺☺○○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Charles Burnett: *director/writer*
Henry G. Sanders: *actor, Stan*
Kaycee Moore: *actress, Stan's wife*

DATE: August 21, 2022

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: KILLER OF SHEEP

Writer/Director Charles Burnett submitted his first feature, *Killer of Sheep*, as his thesis for his MFA in film at UCLA. The film was shot in 1972 and 1973 on location near his family's home in Watts in a series of weekends on a shoestring budget of less than \$10,000, most of which was grant money. His friends and neighbors populated the cast. Finished in 1977, it was screened sporadically, but its reputation grew. The film received the Critic's Award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1981. In 1990, the Library of Congress declared it a national treasure and placed it among the first 50 films entered in the National Film Registry for its historical significance. In 2002, the National Society of Film Critics selected the film as one of the 100 Essential Films of all time. Not bad for a student film!

We had diverse opinions about the film noting that it felt like a student film. A continuous montage of black and white scenes captured daily life in Watts in 1970. The loose plot is driven by the main character, Stan, who works in a slaughterhouse, has two kids and a pretty wife but he is curiously unresponsive to her. One discussion participant thought it was because he is feeling so down trodden, underscoring the obvious theme. Stan tries to help fix his friend's car, buys a \$15 replacement engine, and watches helplessly as the truck lurches forward causing the engine to fall out of the back of the truck, breaking apart. Burnett uses this situation and others to symbolize how Stan, representing the poor black segment in America, is demoralized, pigeon holed, and restrained from upward mobility by an unfair capitalist system. It was suggested that the slaughter house represents the capitalist system and the sheep are the poor black people.

The overt symbolism was overstated in the opinion of several discussion participants. Another criticism was that the acting was a bit wooden. The characters drift from scene to scene. And snapshots of peoples' lives as interspersed vignettes seemed unconnected. One person described the effect as movie gumbo. On the flip side, the scenes felt real, every day mundane life in Watts, kids playing in vacant trashy lots, staging rock fights, or hanging around some derelict railroad tracks. One favorite scene was when a group of teen girls stood up to the teen boys and said with an attitude, "Don't mess with us!"

The cinematography had a unique perspective putting us below and looking up at what was happening such as seeing children above us jumping between buildings and all we see is their feet, the bottom of their shoes. Or we are behind what is happening rather than alongside or in front of. We feel like we have been pushed down and are being left behind as we try to catch up. There were many cropped frames so we purposely don't see the complete person.

The sound track was filled with familiar songs and the lyrics were appropriate commentary on what was happening. But Burnett did not get legal permission to use the music which is the main reason the film was not commercially distributed. At one point Stan and his wife slow dance to Dinah Washington singing *This Bitter Earth*.

It was interesting to hear Stan says he's poor but he has things and even gives things to Salvation Army while comparing himself to another man who is really poor, doesn't have what Stan has and, of course, can't donate anything to charity.

A published film critic noted that "*Killer of Sheep* is a powerful treatment of how working class people are oppressed and crushed and exploited by the weight of capitalist industrialist America. The sheep (a symbol of innocence) are killed not by the butcher but by society's economic structure ... *Killer of Sheep* offers a sympathetic and humane glimpse into inner-city life. ... [the film] doesn't ask the viewer to feel sorry for the characters in the film, but simply to respect them, to listen to them, to recognize that they aren't giving up, and that they deserve a dignity most films would deny them."

It helps to judge *Killer of Sheep* in the context of a student film made on a \$10,000 budget that has extremely important historical significance showing the viewer exactly what life was like for poor black families in 1970 Watts. One film discussion participant hated the film but others appreciated the historical-societal value, the cinematography, music, and other aspects. Another admitted that the film enabled her to viscerally experience poverty and a life of just getting by in south central Los Angeles. She understands that the film was groundbreaking for black cinema and considers it a gift to the black community.

We rated *Killer Of Sheep* a struggling but upwardly mobile score of 3.4. on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!

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