

Morton Marcus: Reading the subtext of 'Killer of Sheep'

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Charles Burnett's "Killer of Sheep" is getting a lot of press these days. Just released to the general public for the first time, it was finished in 1977 and is an intimate, unvarnished look at life in the black ghetto of Watts, Los Angeles, U.S.A. The film is not a documentary, however; it is a low-budget, black-and-white, highly stylized fiction film that Burnett wrote, shot, edited and made with amateur actors.

Many of the reviews I've read are strong and insightful, but none of them examine the historical perspective the film provides. I'm talking about the film's structure and the fact that it was shot in Watts between 1973 and 1977, eight to 12 years after the Watts riot. By the time Burnett started his project, the causes of the riot were well-documented: poverty, lack of job opportunity and white harassment. But as is clear from the film, nothing had been done to alleviate the situation. It is important to look at the film from that standpoint since the people in the film are still living desperate, hopeless existences a decade after the riots. When seen from that perspective, nothing has changed — or more accurately, everything has gotten worse. The children in the film have grown up to be the parents of today's gang-bangers, drive-by shooters and drug users and dealers who drop out of school at a 50 percent rate and crowd our prisons. The film can be seen as a midpoint between the riots of the previous decade and the life that now exists in what is no longer known as the ghetto, but the 'hood.

Burnett's stylized vision of Watts cuts out TVs, church-going, serious crimes, schools and harassing white L.A. police officers, and concentrates on the attitude of hopeless resignation that permeates all aspects of the characters' lives.

At first glance, the film seems to be a series of random scenes, but close viewing reveals a tight structure that moves to an inevitable conclusion.

Instead of the usual long shot to identify location before character, the opening scene, which occurs before the titles, begins with an extreme close up of a young boy's face as his father scolds him. The effect is to place the viewer in the middle of the surroundings, intimately close to the characters, with the father's words serving as the film's prologue and main theme of hopelessness that, in one way or another, all the film's characters share. After Burnett has established that intimacy, each sequence begins by showing location and then the people who inhabit it.

Stan, the film's main character, a thirtysomething family man whose despondency is the essence of the film, is not introduced for the first 15 minutes. Before then, the viewer is shown a group of boys playing in various areas of the neighborhood. For the rest of the film, the camera follows an emotionally dead Stan as he travels around Watts, interacting with friends and his wife, and working in a slaughterhouse. All the while, children run in and out of the scenes, observing the adults and thereby learning how to live in the ghetto. In many ways, the film is about educating the young to live their parents' miserable lives.

Look at the film's progression. Symbolically, the boy being scolded and the boys at play could be Stan observing the adult world and learning from it. The remainder of the film follows Stan's meaningless adult life — until the penultimate scene when a woman announces she is pregnant. The following — and last — shot shows Stan shooing sheep into the slaughterhouse killing area.

The sheep imagery has been intercut several times before and suggests that the entire community are sheep being led to slaughter. That the sheep appear again to end the film, just after the pregnancy announcement, shows the film has symbolically come full circle to childhood again — as the endless round of hopelessness in the ghetto continues.

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