Part one of a conversation with film historian, scholar James Naremore: The films of American director Charles Burnett

David Walsh
9 May 2021

James Naremore has been one of the most insightful commentators on film and film history over the past four decades. He remains one of the relatively few figures in the field interested in (or capable of) "interweaving"—as he notes in our conversation below—a genuine aesthetic sensibility with a political and social interest.

Now retired from teaching, Professor Naremore is Chancellors' Professor Emeritus of Communication and Culture, English and Comparative Literature at Indiana University. He is the editor of the Contemporary Film Directors series of books at University of Illinois Press and a writer at large for *Film Quarterly*.

We first spoke in 2015 at the time of the 100th anniversary of American filmmaker Orson Welles' birth. His books include *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (1973), *Filmguide to Psycho* (1973), *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (1978), *Acting in the Cinema* (1988), *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (1993), *On Kubrick* (2007), *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (2008), [Alexander Mackendrick's 1957 film] *Sweet Smell of Success* (2010) and *An Invention without a Future: Essays on Cinema* (2014).

We spoke again recently about two of Naremore's latest works, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* (University of California Press, 2017) and the recently published *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (BFI Film Classics, 2021), about the classic 1948 film directed by Max Ophuls. We will post the discussion about Ophuls' film tomorrow.

The subject of the 2017 book, African American director Charles Burnett, born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1944, is an independent filmmaker widely recognized as one of the most important of his generation. His valuable works include *Killer of Sheep* (1978), *My Brother's Wedding* (1983), *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), *The Glass Shield* (1994), *Nightjohn* (1996), *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2003) and *Warming by the Devil's Fire* (an episode in the mini-series, *The Blues*, 2003). He has also directed documentaries about homelessness, Medicare and the Civil Rights movement and the COVID-19 lockdown in Los Angeles.

Burnett makes films that remain in the memory because of their intelligence and humanity, their clear-eyed passion. We come to care a great deal about his characters, all of them with human weaknesses and failings, in part because he cares a great deal about them. He came of age artistically at a time of social upheaval and widespread questioning of American society's official view of itself. Enrolling at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1967, in the wake of the 1965 Watts rebellion, he was clearly receptive to diverse radical social and aesthetic influences.

As Naremore explains in our conversation, Burnett was influenced by prominent Latin American and African filmmakers of the time, including Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Fernando Solanas and Ousmane Sembene. One of his teachers at UCLA was the British documentary filmmaker and critic Basil Wright, among those responsible for the legendary documentary *Night Mail* (1936), narrated by John Grierson, with a verse commentary by W.H. Auden and a score by Benjamin Britten.

Naremore cites Burnett's comment that Wright gave the students in his classes a conviction that "one had to approach filmmaking from a humanistic point of view."

Burnett also came to admire the work of French filmmaker Jean Renoir, including *The Southerner* (1945), "a harsh but lyrical film about the lives of dirt-poor southern tenant farmers," as Naremore explains. He goes on in the recent book, "What Burnett especially admired about *The Southerner* was its tendency to treat all the poor with equal dignity: 'They were all sharecroppers, white and black, and sharecropping was hard for everyone. The rich landowners were the ones who benefited. Not the poor whites who were fighting for the same scraps from the master's table. Renoir showed it.'"

In our conversation below, Professor Naremore provides a general overview of Burnett's career. It is not necessary to repeat that here. We would just point out that his first work, *Killer of Sheep*, deserves mention both as a remarkable film in its own right and for the course on which it set Burnett.

Its central figure, a slaughterhouse worker (Henry G. Sanders), is married with two children. His life, including the brutality of his occupation, weighs him down. Naremore calls the film "pathetic, tender, passionate, and melancholy," a "catalog of frustrations and disappointments." Yet *Killer of Sheep* bestows on the protagonist, his family and their reality a gravity and a significance far greater than the sum of the small episodes on the screen.

In this early work Burnett established themes, methods and social concerns to which he has attempted to remain true, under sometimes difficult circumstances. One can no doubt detect the impact of a generally stagnant cultural atmosphere and strong intellectual "headwinds," including the turn by middle class layers to identity politics, on his work, but on the whole he has, as we suggest below, negotiated the period with seriousness and principle.

* * *

David Walsh: For the benefit of our readers, who may not know as much about Charles Burnett as they should, could you explain something about his origins and evolution as an artist and why you consider his body of work to be significant? He seems, without putting words in your mouth, one of the most serious and principled directors of his generation, whether one agrees with every political or artistic choice.

James Naremore: He was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1944, and

his family was part of the black diaspora that headed to Los Angeles in the postwar period because there were jobs to be had. They settled in Watts. It wasn't too long before the factories in Watts rusted out and it became an impoverished community. Burnett was raised by his mother and his grandmother. His mother was a nurse's aide. He went to high school with Marquette Frye, the young man whose arrest prompted the Watts riots in August 1965.

High school wasn't encouraging to him. He tells a painful story about a teacher walking past his classroom seat and saying, you won't amount to anything. Somehow he persisted. The schools were bad and they tried to push the black males especially into shop programs. Burnett was able to go to L.A. Community College as a major in electronics, but soon realized he wasn't interested in that. He was lucky enough to have a teacher named Isabelle Ziegler who taught creative writing. That got him interested in writing. Her motto was: write about the ax you have to grind.

Burnett was also becoming interested in photography. He got into UCLA at a time when it was trying to increase minority representation in the film production program and when, if you were a state resident, tuition was quite cheap, $15 per quarter. He became a leading figure in what was named, not by him, but by others, the L.A. Rebellion, which had a lot of young black filmmakers in it, including Ben Caldwell, Julie Dash, Billy Woodberry and others. He had a good teacher, a fellow named Elyseo Taylor, who wanted filmmakers to tell stories about their own communities.

Burnett's student films were quite striking. His MFA [Master of Fine Arts] thesis film, *Killer of Sheep*, is extraordinary, and is listed by the Library of Congress as an essential American film. It's as powerful today as it was when it was made in the 1970s. It was supported by a fellowship and cost about $10,000.

The L.A. group of filmmakers were in rebellion against several things. First of all, they were reacting against the "Blaxploitation" cycle of the '60s— *Blacula* and that sort of film. More generally, they were in rebellion against Hollywood. Burnett never expected to be a Hollywood director. He was also in rebellion against what is known as the "social problem" film. That genre establishes a social problem, shows the characters' struggle and how they somehow overcome the difficulties. It has an A, B, C, D plot, leading to resolution.

Killer of Sheep simply shows vignettes from the life of a man in Watts with a wife and two children, who works in a sheep slaughterhouse and is depressed. It's a film in which, as Burnett said, you don't solve problems, you survive. This man is struggling not only economically, but psychologically. None of the problems are solved at the end, how could they be? The characters just keep enduring their situation. It's a great film.

Since then, Burnett has made a variety of films. A few are Hollywood productions, though these are unusual ones. *The Annihilation of Fish* [1999] is an off-beat love story with James Earl Jones and Lynn Redgrave. He made an expensive film for television, *The Wedding* [1998], that was executive-produced by Oprah Winfrey. Probably his most intriguing conventional film was *The Glass Shield* [1994], about police violence in Los Angeles, but it was not commercially successful, largely because of his distributor.

Burnett has made a number of truly remarkable films. *My Brother's Wedding* [1983] is in some ways an advance over *Killer of Sheep*, but was mangled by production difficulties. *Nightjohn* [1996], the television movie about slavery, is a wonderful film. I like very much his semi-documentary about the 1831 Nat Turner slave rebellion [*Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property, 2003*]. *To Sleep with Anger* [1990] might be considered his masterpiece. It's a really interesting, semi-comic film, full of folkloric elements.

DW: It strikes me that Burnett is one of the most serious and principled American directors navigating a difficult cultural period, in many ways, the weakest period in the history of filmmaking, the 1980s, '90s, 2000s. We're talking about the rise of the "blockbuster" film and the Reagan-Thatcher-Bush-Clinton years.

JN: Burnett was assisted by receiving a MacArthur grant when he was young, which provided him some financial support. He also got a Guggenheim. But otherwise he's had to work with very small budgets and find producers who understood and appreciated his work, which is a difficult thing to do in Los Angeles.

Burnett has an uncompromising integrity. He only wants to make the films that he wants to make. So the odds have been against him, especially, as you say, during the period in which he was primarily working. He has found opportunities, but I would say the biggest obstacle has been Hollywood and the overall culture of the entertainment industry.

DW: We're speaking today about two very different filmmakers, Charles Burnett and the German-born Max Ophuls [1902–1957]. Without straining too much, are there any features or traits common to directors that interest you and/or that you choose to write about? Do you recognize certain recurring qualities in the artists you admire?

JN: Burnett and Ophuls! That's quite a combination, isn't it?

DW: Of course, there is an "outsider" element in each case, a black American and a European Jewish émigré in Hollywood, at the time Ophuls directed *Letter From an Unknown Woman*.

JN: If you're asking about who I choose to write about and why, it's a question I've often asked myself. Obviously, I pick a subject that interests me. But I've written about Orson Welles, Vincente Minnelli, Alexander Mackendrick [*Sweet Smell of Success*], Stanley Kubrick …

I come to these figures with two principal interests. One is an aesthetic interest in film. And the other is a political, social interest that weaves itself in and out of that other interest. I can't say that the directors I've chosen to write about have a great deal in common. I just love Ophuls' films and I love Burnett's films.

DW: In terms of the influences on Burnett, I suppose, first of all, there's the radical politics of the time, the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Individuals like Basil Wright, the British documentarian who taught at UCLA, seems to have had an interesting impact.

You suggest in your book that the Italian neorealists were not among the greatest influences, but you do mention Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* [1964], which is *not* a neorealist work. Watching *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger*, I was reminded of scenes in or themes from Pasolini's *Accattone* [1961]—the kids playing in the dirt, the poor kids more generally—and his *Teorema* [1968]—the other-worldly figure from the countryside—respectively. Does this seem far-fetched?

JN: No, it's not far-fetched. Lots of people have made the connection between Burnett and the Italian cinema. I would say there is no direct influence. Burnett himself says that he admired the Italian neorealists, but wasn't influenced by them. His teacher at UCLA introduced him to a couple of what were called "Third World" manifestos: Brazilian director Glauber Rocha's "The Aesthetics of Hunger" and Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa's "For an Imperfect Cinema."

Also, while he was a student he met Ousmane Sembene, the Senegalese filmmaker [Black Girl, 1966]. He met the great Brazilian director Nelson Pereira dos Santos and the Argentine filmmaker Fernando Solanas. They were making the kind of films he wanted to make, that is to say, as far away from Hollywood as you could get, socially committed films. He respected Basil Wright as a teacher. He also encountered Joris Ivens, the left-wing Dutch director.

DW: One of the things that's interesting about Burnett, which comes across in his films and also his public appearances, is that there's obviously deep-seated anger, but also a definite calmness and objectivity, which is an unusual combination.

JN: He's an unpretentious, gentle guy, with clearly a great deal of

legitimate anger *at* things. He has made a film about the fascistic actions of the police, about a slave rebellion, about the economics of slavery. He has been concerned about racism, poverty and social action, these are unifying themes.

DW: I thought *Nightjohn* is a remarkable film, unusual in its treatment of slavery as an economic and social system, the relationships that develop within it, in a generally objective, non-moralizing fashion.

JN: It's also a remarkable film given that it was produced by the Disney company. It's an adaptation of a novel by Gary Paulsen. Burnett didn't write the screenplay, although he contributed heavily to it. It is a "young adults" movie, shown on television. It walks a fine line while moderating the amount of incredible violence. Among other things, it teaches a powerful message about literacy.

DW: Yes, the slave-owners were in the position, or attempted to be in the position, to physically prevent people from learning to read. But I think there's a connection today, frankly, to the destruction of the public education system, to the attempt to censor the internet. Knowledge and culture are always dangerous to those in power.

JN: Absolutely. The Southern slave system taught dictators everything they needed to know. Knowledge would be the most dangerous thing you could give a slave.

DW: The connection is interesting. Because the central protagonist in *Nightjohn*, a young slave girl, is able to read, she is also able to see the economic realities spelled out in the owner's ledger-book. It's an important scene, whether it's entirely plausible or not, in which she identifies how much the various slaves are worth to the plantation owner—and that, in fact, they largely constitute his wealth.

I thought the Nat Turner film was intriguing and powerful as well, and I sent you Leon Trotsky's quote about the miserable attempt to equate the violence of those who enslave and those who are enslaved.

[From *Their Morals and Ours* (1938): "History has different yardsticks for the cruelty of the Northerners and the cruelty of the Southerners in the Civil War. A slave-owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks the chains— *let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equals before a court of morality!*"]

JN: It's an unusual film. Burnett set about going to the area in which Nat Turner lived to make a truth and reconciliation documentary with the citizens there. He ran into all kinds of local problems, and a different film evolved. It became a film in which five different actors offer different versions of Nat Turner, from the literature that survives. The truth of Nat Turner is elusive for us, but we can see the truth of slavery. The film is unambiguous about that.

DW: The film investigates, probes, obviously always with a definite partisanship, but also with objectivity and genuine curiosity.

Presumably you feel that Burnett's films are going to endure.

JN: I can't predict, but I think that against all the odds Burnett has made at least half a dozen films that are going to look as good in fifty to a hundred years from now, if we're still around, as they do today.

To be continued