

17

A GUIDING LIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES BURNETT

bell hooks: Charles, you've been pretty consistently committed to creating serious drama, serious representations of black characters in your films; we've talked about that.

Charles Burnett: I began making films wanting to tell a story about all the people I knew and worked with, the problems that they're facing, and how they were getting on. I wanted to depict that on screen as well as what students were making films about. It's not that I set out purposely to create an alternative cinema. I was just trying to tell a decent story with real people. I think that if people are intelligent characters, that just makes the story more interesting.

- bh: You just spoke with the kind of modesty of representation that characterizes your personal energy. Clearly, your artistic temperament is towards the serious, yet you are fascinated by complexity in everyday life—not the silly or the stupid.
- CB: The serious interests me. And the silly too. The reason I care is because I depict the black community, and in any community there is a mix of these two things.
- bh: In *Killer of Sheep* I am fascinated by scenes like the one at the table when the guy is saying that the heat from the coffee is like a moment in sex, and then the other guy makes the joke about malaria. That's a mixture of seriousness and humor and that intensifies the deeper metaphysical drama. It's metaphysical because we watch the characters develop their sense of being in the world. That's why your work is unique. It has always enchanted me, because you are so into an ontological understanding of questions: how people come to see themselves in the world, how they construct a self, a worldview, an approach to life, and that is a fundamentally serious proposition that's always there in all your films—which is not to say that you don't use humor.
- CB: Yeah, the underlying thing; I'd say yes to that, but I think most script pieces do that, even if it's comedy; whatever it is, it makes some comment about life.
- bh: Commenting about life is different from an explanation of being. That's why *Killer of Sheep* remains an incredible piece. For years folks kept telling me to see the movie. I have become so depressed about black filmmakers and their work, and I thought, Yeah people are saying I

should see this film, but when I do I'm gonna be heart-broken if the magic isn't there. Then I saw the film and I thought it was awesome—that your capacity as a filmmaker to give us images that depict the complex emotional universe within a class of people, the black working class and poor. Those of us from that background or living that life are made to feel that we don't have that deeper layer of being. The reality is that black working-class people are conventionally represented in a manner that says, "What you see, what you get." The magic of your artistry is the creation of visual images that compel people who see your films to see those deeper layers. Will you share what was going on for you when you were in the process of creating *Killer of Sheep*?

CB: It was a very difficult time for me. I was reacting to the life around me. There's a bar that I used to go to in Watts all the time, like a storefront. Mostly old men go there. I was going to UCLA at the time, and there was this program happening. It was a week or something to celebrate Paul Robeson's coming up. I just happened to bring up this issue with these guys, 'cause you know how you go to these barbershops and there's all this political talk. You know these guys get there and they comment on everything in life. And every time I hear that there's some discussion going on, I sorta add my two cents. I tried to champion this Paul Robeson event, and all of a sudden things stopped. All the elements of radicalism appeared to be there in this person, and we all were agreed that some change had begun. But then somebody started talking about his conservative stuff, and lots of blacks there were not into just celebrating. And there was a contradiction between what was happening in that bar and at UCLA, and I just wanted to

show what it was like. And I wanted to do it without imposing the Charles Burnett way of life.

bh: Clearly, Charles, you have a distinct aesthetic vision. And I hear you saying that you're more interested in showing the diversity of the mix in black life than taking one standpoint, building a story around that standpoint, and drawing it to a conclusion. Your work shows all these different standpoints. That's the difficulty some viewers have had with *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger*, because they are not sure whom to identify with in the story. Your films don't dictate to the viewer, and that troubles them.

CB: People felt that because the film did not resolve everything happily that it was depressing. Whereas I thought, in the first film, why wasn't it significant, the fact that this person just struggled and survived? The only thing you can ask someone to do is to stay alive, to continue moving. It's hard, but as long as you keep your values in perspective, that's all you can ask of anybody. And that was what *Killer of Sheep* was showing, his values. He wasn't supposed to get anything—nothing. In most stories there's some object a person is after or a relationship or something that can be resolved in a conventional, expected way.

bh: A good example of that is the recent film *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, a story of a girl who wants to go to medical school, but she's poor and everyone in her school is saying, "You can't do this," but you can follow that story up to its conclusion: she doesn't go to medical school in the end. And no one expects her to, because in our society we do not expect a young single black

mother to fulfill her dreams. So people were happy with the ending; it was predictable. Even though they could see it as "sad," it was a familiar story. Most folks were unsettled by the ending of *To Sleep with Anger*. It didn't feel predictable in light of the things that had gone before.

CB: Why can't it be seen as a victory when folks survive potentially tragic events. It's like you weathered a storm.

bh: I watched *Killer of Sheep* with a young film student, a black woman who kept saying, "Is this the moment I should close my eyes?" She was certain that something dreadfully violent, really horrible was going to take place. She's young enough to be so influenced by a film culture in which most contemporary films, especially those made by black filmmakers, depict horrific violence. *Killer of Sheep* is so powerful because the most tragic moment in the film—that scene when the engine falls off the truck—is so ordinary; such a simple mistake. It's like when you go step out in everyday life to do something, a basic chore, but it matters so much to you; you put your energies into it, you put your heart and money on it, and it fails. This is so symbolic that this particular moment stands out. It evoked such a deep sense of failure—of not being able to beat the odds. It was fascinating that the young film student had the sense that horror registers itself in black life only through tragic, violent death, when it is actually so often registered in this mundane way. It's that sensitive cinematic exploration of this tragic quality in everyday life which makes your work problematic for Hollywood.

There is a big leap from *Killer of Sheep* to *To Sleep with*

Anger for you as a counterhegemonic filmmaker. You try to take this serious drama that you've had in the independent film *Killer of Sheep* and bring it to Hollywood in *To Sleep With Anger*. Does it work?

- CB: The moment you say "Hollywood," it's problematic; everyone panics. But when I was trying to get the funding for a film from alternative sources, it was much more difficult. Sometimes you can get a much better response in Hollywood as an independent. I didn't believe it, but it turned out to be true in a certain sense. Hollywood does so many films, and every now and then with some weird stuff, so in a way there are many more possibilities. When I did *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger*, I got a lot of criticism because they were both not like regular movies. I went on this tour once, and I was in Milwaukee, or someplace like that, at a Martin Luther King Center. *Killer of Sheep* was playing. There weren't too many people there, but there was a kid outside with his boom box and there was a "Freddie Kruger" movie playing, and that kid said, "Now that's a movie!" This is the way many people see films. And this documentary was showing and it was seen as really dry information. During the discussion, we began to have a battle about how our reality is reflected in films, about entertainment level and that kind of stuff. We debated the issue of making things accessible. But the moment we tried to talk about being relevant without any focus on being entertaining, we began to have a heated debate about the role of the filmmaker; whether one should be totally indulgent and say what you wanna do but still not be able to communicate, or whether to find ways to communicate in a language people can understand.

bh: Too much focus on accessibility limits creativity. I can watch *Killer of Sheep* with my family, with black people from all walks of life, poor and working-class black people, and they would identify with what they were seeing. And I think that is a different issue. It wouldn't be that it's not accessible to them; it's that it isn't entertainment. *Killer of Sheep* is not entertaining. The pathos of that film is deeply disturbing. It's very existential. It's really almost like a critically existential, reflective meditation on the pathos of working-class black life in a particular historical moment. Now the question comes whether black viewers of any class along with other viewers can bear that pathos. I think people find themselves, because it's not that the film is pessimistic but rather that it highlights and calls out a certain quality of anguish many of us live with day to day in our lives—and this anguish is unbearable. We don't usually see it at the movies. Your films foreground aspects of black pain that folks don't want to see. Audiences are not prepared to confront it—audiences of any race.

CB: It's a class thing too. When it screened at Howard University, folks weren't into it, because they want to see themselves on the screen. So they want you to do a film about the black middle class, like these films don't already exist. I wasn't as conscious of all this when I was doing *Killer of Sheep*. Over time it has become something that always troubles me as I work.

bh: How many films did you make between *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger*?

CB: I made *My Brother's Wedding* and I worked on another film.

- bh: Clearly, audiences cause problems for independent filmmakers making serious drama. There are still so few films made by black filmmakers that the expectations people bring to their films are always so much greater than anything any one film could possibly satisfy. And if you choose to highlight the existential anguish of black people as you do in your work, you run the risk of people not being able to relate. Even though audiences were deeply moved by Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, I was at one of the initial screenings where many black viewers did not respond favorably to the film because they didn't know what to do with this movie that didn't have the usual ingredients, a traditional resolution, a conventional Hollywood plot.
- CB: Audience expectation is important. If an audience is receptive to a film, I think it generates more interest.
- bh: It's much more difficult to make a film expressive of your own unique vision if you feel there is no audience ready to see that film. For example, there is a difference between the reception of a film like *Go Fish* and other contemporary independent films, because an audience of gay and straight consumers were eagerly anticipating this film. Here is a film made by very young white lesbian filmmakers that everyone compares to *She's Gotta Have It*, when it is much more similar to where Spike was with *Joe's Barbershop*. But there was an audience for *Go Fish*. In *Killer of Sheep* and in other films of yours, the camera often lingers at specific moments. There are long pauses—that wonderful scene, for example, when Stan and his wife are dancing in *Killer Sheep*; the scene in the car in *To Sleep with Anger*. Yet when your camera lingers, audiences think the film isn't moving fast enough. Now

Go Fish can have similar moments, but it has an audience that is predisposed to respond to the artistry of that film. Independent filmmakers who are black who want to make work that is innovative and experimental need an audience to come to see their work—an audience that is not just concerned with context.

CB: The struggle to find support is continuous for independent black filmmakers.

bh: When filmmakers like Spike Lee and John Singleton first began to get so much play, I kept waiting for them to say, "Actually, black filmmaking isn't just beginning here with us; there's Charles Burnett, there's Kathleen Collins," but they didn't do that. It was good for their product to act as if they were unprecedented. And if you gathered all the early magazine articles on these two filmmakers, many of them structured their pieces like, "Spike Lee paved the way for Julie Dash." It's frightening that this ahistorical understanding of the work of black filmmakers is so pervasive, because we lose so much awareness of the process which leads from one film to another. And we then don't have public acknowledgement of the variety and diversity in black filmmaking. It's the experimental work that is often forgotten about. When Spike Lee or John Singleton are the beginning points, then audiences can't look at their work as referencing and signifying on the work of other black filmmakers. There are scenes in *Boyz in the Hood*, scenes in *Crooklyn*, scenes in *Straight out of Brooklyn*, that totally referenced *Killer of Sheep* in terms of how they are shot, in terms even of location. But if people haven't seen *Killer of Sheep*, if they don't know the work of Charles Burnett, if they're not studying that in film school, they can't

recognize a continuance of black filmmaking. They should be learning about the tradition of American filmmaking, contemporary American filmmaking, and black filmmaking at schools, but that knowledge isn't going to be there. That's why we need to focus on audiences—on how you construct an audience through time. It's very clear to me that an audience was constructed for *Daughters of the Dust*. Once it was clear that people couldn't bring their conventional ways of seeing to this film, people began to shift their paradigms and started coming to see the film knowing beforehand that they weren't gonna see something that they were used to seeing. So in a sense they were more prepared than those first audiences who came and expected action in the same old Hollywood manner and didn't get it. Haile Gerima says that counterhegemonic images will never be supported in Hollywood I don't think that's always true, because *To Sleep with Anger* had those images.

CB: I think it's very difficult; I think you'd find it difficult anywhere you go unless you just make entertaining films. No matter what you do Hollywood or anything. Haile had to suffer greatly to get his film made. He applied for so much funding that he did not get. And one of the problems was the absence of a conventional category to place the film in that funders could relate to.

bh: And when we compare the struggles of black filmmakers who want to defy categories with someone like Clint Eastwood, who has access to money, who can say in his lifetime that he wants to make lots of different kinds of films, we know it is really difficult for any black filmmaker to make films that are diverse in style and content. Black artists, irrespective of their medium, are

made to feel that if we get one signature or one voice it has to be repeated. Audiences had trouble with Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* because they assumed it would be a comedy. It had funny moments, but it was not a comedy. Yet audiences just expect comedy from a Spike Lee film. In the United States, black artists must constantly resist the limits that culture wants to impose. It's just this continual battle to be able to assert an aesthetic vision that changes, that isn't the same. Your most recent film, *The Glass Shield*, certainly departs from the aesthetic vision in your early work. To me the change is disturbing, because you seem to have gone backwards rather than forwards.

CB: When I began *The Glass Shield* it was a different idea than what ended up on the screen. I felt that it was an important story about a man who had been on the "right side" of the law who wants to redeem himself. The film raises the issue of how you can be involved with something as innocently as possible, you think you're doing the right thing and then find out that you've made an awful mistake. But initially you had a dream about what life was supposed to be about. I like to do films about different aspects of people's experiences; films that explore what happens when you don't have a liberatory vision or plan, or a way of seeing the world. You just get swept away and bounce from one thing to another, and it's this tragicomic situation. Here's a story about a black male who works within the system as a cop, who has a decent job, who's just trying to make it in a world where night after night one dramatic thing after another is happening; and it's horrendous, folks are killing little kids, and the cop understands the circumstances but is really kind of caught in

the middle. His job is to protect and enforce the law, even though he knows the law was not made to help the folks on the street. Whose side is he on? It's complicated. I wanted to show some of that in *The Glass Shield*.

bh: Charles, I can hear the pathos in what you are saying as you describe the idea behind *The Glass Shield*, but the film doesn't convey that. One of the difficulties I had with *The Glass Shield* is that I could not identify with the character of J. J. The actor didn't draw you into him enough so that you were seduced by his longing to assimilate and to go along with the program. He keeps repeating in the film that he's always wanted to be a cop and this is his dream, but there was something that wasn't compelling enough, so that I didn't give a fuck whether he fulfilled his dream or not. As a film critic, I think that the particular actor chosen weakened the film, because so much of the pathos centers around his struggle and he doesn't draw you in deeply enough. I felt like, here this film is technically obviously really good, but I felt it lacked pathos; it lacked the seriousness of your preceding work. I was disappointed watching this film and felt it lacked Charles Burnett's unique style. Do you experience it that way, or do you feel that Charles Burnett flavor coming through?

CB: Working in a group to make this film was difficult. Not all the choices were mine—especially when it came to casting.

bh: But isn't this the problem, then, when a visionary, gifted filmmaker like yourself tries to make work in Hollywood and the film you wind up making is not necessarily going to be just the product of your vision

but also of the collaboration that takes place on all levels, artistically and administratively? Do you feel there is enough room for the realization of your vision?

CB: That's the thing you fight for every moment. And it's a victory. I'm sort of happy about the film. In many ways there are some things I would certainly put back in and do differently, but, given the circumstances, I'm pleased. Knowing the circumstances—the way Hollywood works—I am always reluctant to speak about the work of my peers, because I know the wars and battles they've gone through. And even though the filmmaker is ultimately responsible, you can't really assess what has taken place if you were not on the set to see what went on. There is so much on the set; it's not just Hollywood. I've had so many problems working in other settings.

bh: Any time a black artist in white supremacist culture who's decolonized his or her mind creates an artistic work, it's a struggle to market that work, whether it's a book or a film, when editors, public relations staffs, etcetera, are involved. It is harder to project what you may feel is your specific vision as a progressive, decolonized black person when you are also creating a commodity to be sold to mainstream white America, as well as everyone else.

CB: You have the same problem with black folks.

bh: That's why I used the term *decolonized*, because if you are trying to work with other black people who are just as mired in stereotypical racist thinking . . .

CB: It's really an issue of personal integrity. Each filmmaker

writes his own script. If you give him a script, he is going to rewrite that script with all his references. You're really alone. You know you're going to have all these people who support you in many ways and stuff like that, but it's you who's gonna determine the work. So you need character and inner strength to hold the conviction that something can work. The point is not to be irrational, because a film is one thing when it's a concept, when it's a script it's another thing, and when it's produced and shot it's another thing altogether. So you know you are at a different stage. Everyone looks at it and can't really see anything until it's done. As the filmmaker you have to weigh all that and then see what happens. Again, no matter where you go, no one can really understand your ideas but you. It's on you to communicate them. And when you have a unique experience, it's very difficult to get financing, because it's harder to share your idea with someone else. Most likely they will not understand it, 'cause you don't even really speak the same language.

- bh: Yet when we are called upon as black artists not just to create but to have marketable persons, often those of us who are more serious don't get much play. All black cultural producers right now are almost always called on to make our persons part of the commodity part of the mix. I mean Spike Lee isn't where he is just because of his films. He's where he is because he was very good at marketing his person along with his films. When I meet a filmmaker like yourself—a very quiet, serious person who thinks before he speaks, not a flashy, glib guy, I think that this is an artist who projects a private aesthetic realm and vision. To what extent does that make it hard for one to succeed in a culture that places a particular

demand on those of us from marginal groups to be like our product? If the product is glamorous, then we must be glamorous. I find that people are often disappointed when they meet me, because I am so soft-spoken, but my books have a very hard-hitting verbal edge. Then it's like folks want to drop me, like "she can't deliver," because my person doesn't deliver in the way my books do. Do you feel the same way as a filmmaker whose habits of being are not the kinds of habits that are easily commodified along with your product?

CB: You have to be able to act like a spy in order to survive in this business. It's not all about projecting that you know how to get a film done. It's about how well your film did at the box office the last time. To get backers you have to have the same interest in a certain sense, you have to be prepared to be on the team. Money and commercialism; that's what they identify with.

bh: What happens to someone like you then in that mix?

CB: Filmmakers like me fall by the wayside, into the cracks, and if we don't, it's an uphill battle.

bh: Charles, you have survived as a filmmaker. You have made compelling work. But is it satisfying?

CB: Well, not always. It's satisfying when you can make your own movies, and you can't in a certain sense unless you raise the money yourself and do it somehow or other. And when you make your own film, no matter how unlucky or successful with getting returns back, you're happy about that. But that's very rare. Julie Dash was able to do that and get a return. Making a film and

getting it distributed is the thing that is key. You have all these people telling you how to sell the film. And you know you're talking about double consciousness and all that sort of thing. I'd like to do films about that—about the sort of schizophrenic way black folks live.

bh: If you could make independent serious films about subjects you want to make, why would you want to make a Hollywood film where there's even more constraints than if you were trying to make a small film with a small budget?

CB: What's a small film with a small budget if it doesn't exist? I mean if you make a film that costs \$10,000, that's a hobby. When I was going to school that was fine, because I never thought we could make a living. But when you have a family, insurance, kids that go to school, that's a problem.

bh: We don't have a large enough African American audience that values independent films. And when that audience does promote an independent film, it will usually be one that is similar to Hollywood films—like Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa*. It's very Hollywood. Contentwise it may differ from Hollywood and in standpoint, but in the way it progresses as a story, in the way it highlights certain kinds of violence, particularly sexualized violence, it is very Hollywood. A distinction has to be made between a racist white public that might not want to support this film because of its standpoint—because they don't think it will sell—and the assumptions that radically parts in style and content from the norm.

CB: Well, no, it isn't so different in some ways. But within the

limitations of the film, it makes progress—particularly in the way that it was funded. The content made the search for funding difficult. Haile has said, “That in itself was the threshold.”

bh: Isn't it frustrating that within black culture, black folks who are wealthy have not created the foundations with funding where a young filmmaker who has great genius in making independent films of whatever kind could obtain the resources to make his or her work?

CB: I have a little bit of a problem with that suggestion, in a way, because one of the things about film is that there is always an audience problem and funding films is too expensive. I don't know if we could justify spending money on making films because of their limited effect on the public. There are so many other needs. There are always people who are having serious problems. You really have to justify doing a film anytime. That's the dilemma—I mean that's the dilemma we don't talk about enough. How much does it take to launch a book? For a film, you're talking real money.

bh: I know the crucial difference between the money it takes to produce films and books. It is because film is so expensive that we need new avenues and new sources of money. Let's face it, with the rise in black publishing in the United States, when a writer like Jill Nelson can't sell *Volunteer Slavery* to a white corporate press, she can go to a black press and have this major success. I'm just saying that it would be liberation for black filmmakers to have sources of money where there was the freedom to create whatever you wanted to create, whether it would draw a large audience or not. We are never going to be totally

free as artists to realize our visions if we can't have a wide playing field. Why can't we have a film made by Charles Burnett that everybody in town is maybe gonna want to see and also have a film by Charles Burnett that not everybody is going to be capable of seeing or approaching; in the same way that there are a whole lot of people who just couldn't hear that early Coltrane? Does that mean that it shouldn't exist?

CB: No, it doesn't, but I still think when I go back to sources and the audience, it seems to me the audience has to come first.

bh: It can't come first, Charles, not the audience, because audiences are made.

CB: They are, but I think that to generate the energy or money to do a film, there has to be a sense that someone out there is ready to receive it, to understand it, to respect it. Often you make the film and it just sits there, or when it is shown, the audience is not quite sure how to receive it because they have a whole different set of perceptions.

bh: Writing about film, I have to say that critics play a role in the creation of audience—in creating a visual aesthetic. I decided some time ago that I was not going to write another piece on a Spike Lee film. I'm over Spike. I'm over writing about this work. Yet when I saw *Crooklyn* and felt like I had read, you know, like ten fucking reviews by white people saying the film had no plot—that don't even mention the mother's death, and I think, What the fuck is going on here? As a critic you could say you didn't like the plot, but you can't say that that

movie doesn't have one. I thought, Well, I'm really fascinated by the plot of this film—how Lee deals with representing death, and I'm going to write about it. But when I wrote about this film in a sophisticated way, when I take this film really seriously, giving it the respect it deserves, writing sixteen pages on it, a lot of hours go into that writing, and there is not going to be any economic reimbursement equal to the amount of hours it takes me to produce the critique. I do that work because it has the power to make people look at this film differently, look at it and see things of value happening in it, even as they read my criticism—I didn't write a completely positive review. I felt the film was problematic. However, there are aspects of the film that are deeply compelling that people can easily miss because of the tendency not to "see" the complex shit that is really going on. Where, I ask you, were all of the incredible pieces of criticism on *Killer of Sheep*? If *Killer of Sheep* were a film that was being talked about in every film class in this country, if critics were writing about it, more people would see the film. The film would be referenced in certain kinds of ways. In the future, critics and black filmmakers need to be engaged more with one another. Look at the dearth of critical writing on works by African American filmmakers. If you teach a film class, you want to have this whole body of really sophisticated critical work to refer to because it doesn't exist yet. I think that these two facets must work together if we are to make new sites for black filmmakers to make whatever they want to. There has got to be a space where that work is given high-quality treatment. There have got to be more spaces where an audience can creatively approach the work. The public response to *Daughters of the Dust* showed us that you can create an

audience, you can prepare an audience that has been addicted to seeing movies in certain ways by just letting them know that as they enter the theater to see this film they are going to have to suspend their traditional ways of looking and see differently. And they will go, and they will struggle with it, and they will try to appreciate what is happening in the film. That audience has to be made in the sense that viewers have to learn to see differently—if they don't, there will always be only a small, elite understanding and appreciation.

CB: The filmmakers already exist. There's a whole lot of work that's still on the shelf, that hasn't been shown, or scripts that go nowhere, because the first thing anyone approached to back a film, especially in Hollywood, wants to know is, If they put money in, how are they going to get the money back?

bh: Well, that's exactly why I raised the question of alternative sources—more radical forms of funding. Why is it unreasonable to expect that a rich black person in this society, who can drop millions on an institution (as you know black donors have dropped a few million on Harvard), can't support foundations in this culture to allow black filmmakers to create films without having to earn the money back? That's the only way that a decolonized people can have a liberatory cinema. As long as people have to prove that this film will sell, you always have to have a limited vision that comes out of the limited marketplace.

CB: Well, let me see, there was once a black cinema. Spencer Williams performed there and made relevant films. And there was an audience for that. Then somewhere along

the line it sort of disappeared and black exploitation stuff emerged and set a whole new pattern. At that time folks like Kathleen Collins and Jackie Shearer and a whole bunch of them were making movies. It was a culture—film culture, black culture—where serious, relevant films were made. The issue of financing has become so complex—the question of whether black films or any film is worth financing is complicated. For example, if someone said they want to make this movie and it will take a million and a half dollars to do it and it's just for entertainment, would you finance that film?

bh: Yes, it's not an either-or question. We need a way to finance those films, but I'm more interested in unconventional work. If we cannot come up with untraditional ways of imagining stuff outside of the norm, we will always have a limited, narrow filmmaking process for African American people. As long as we try to work within the given structures, representations of black experience in film are never gonna change much beyond where we are now.

CB: Yeah, but my whole thing is that if there were more relevant films, they would attract audiences.

bh: If a black filmmaker wants to create a major entertaining film, they have a much better chance of working that film within the structures that already exist. It's precisely an incredibly filmmaker like yourself who wants to do more unconventional work that has difficulty. One of the tragic ironies of all spheres of critical production (not just filmmaking) in the United States is that as black people gain visibility, as we do more of everything, there's much more of a demand that everything

we do be entertaining. On the one hand we're getting big bucks, more big bucks than ever before, as black individuals producing culture in American society. But if you start looking for cultural products that are deeply, existentially reflective, that have a certain kind of seriousness, that have, God forbid, some kind of overt political radicalism, you will not fund much. We don't see a great deal of change in this society when we look for diverse, complex visions of black life. We don't see a place for any of those products that are not simplistic. For example, black heterosexuality has not been really given much serious play in filmmaking, period. Even black filmmakers like Spike Lee and John Singleton and other people who focus on love and romance create bullshit. There's a whole level of complexity in black love relationships that we simply don't see on the screen. One reason we don't see those images is that white crossover audiences are not interested in the depth of what black people do in their intimate life as we struggle to love and care for one another.

CB: Well, I think it's more than that. It's that for such a long time black films have offered images that suggest black people are first and foremost entertainers. I think we have to confess that black audiences feel that way too.

bh: Those perceptions of what black films should be like emerge in a consumer culture created by white supremacy. When I say that it is difficult to find concrete representations of black people in U.S. films by black or any filmmakers where the characters depicted are existentially self-reflective, I am saying we live in a culture where mass media and film particularly invest in the notion, rooted in racist assumptions, that there is no

emotional complexity in black life—which means that we can see films about white people for days where they can reflect, sit and reflect, and do nothing; we can have *My Dinner with Andre*, *Swimming to Cambodia*. There can be no “real action” at all, but we don’t yet live in a culture where black people can gain support for making such a film, or an audience where the work is supported.

CB: I know. That’s the problem, and a lot of filmmakers are striving to try to change that and I think the critique of what audiences want has to come in to cause audiences to support the production of these different images. You say that you support that any black filmmaker should have a right to make whatever film they want to make, which is right; but at the same time, we don’t support these guys that go out on a limb and try, even though we failed, it’s like—

bh: You and I do.

CB: The fact is, most people don’t.

bh: Then the question becomes, How can we widen the circle of people who support the recognition that black people will never be free until we can have a diversified expressive culture, which means to say that we need all kinds of films? I wanna live to see the day when a black person can make a film that doesn’t have any black people in it if they don’t want black people in it and it can be registered as something that’s coming out of black expressive culture, and I think we’re nowhere near that.

CB: Well, the fact is that we need space to discuss these

issues, like "What is black?" We need to talk more about these issues which we seem to avoid.

bh: I hope that *The Glass Shield* does not represent your giving up a more contemplative aesthetic vision.

CB: No. I think one of the things that this film does do is allow me to get to the next step, so I can buy my own equipment to start doing what I wanna do. I don't feel bad about it. The themes in *The Glass Shield* are important. It makes a comment about society and racism. I think it's something you do to get it out of your system while you look for the next level. There's something in it that I tried to do, and I learn a great deal as I work in and out of the system. Working within the system, you're not going to make any major changes, but one of these days you're gonna get into a situation where you can get yourself an average system, get yourself a camera, and then you can just go off and, with a normal amount of money, make the kind of film you want. Maybe it will just end up on video, but then you have the film, you can use that and make money. I hope to do this someday.