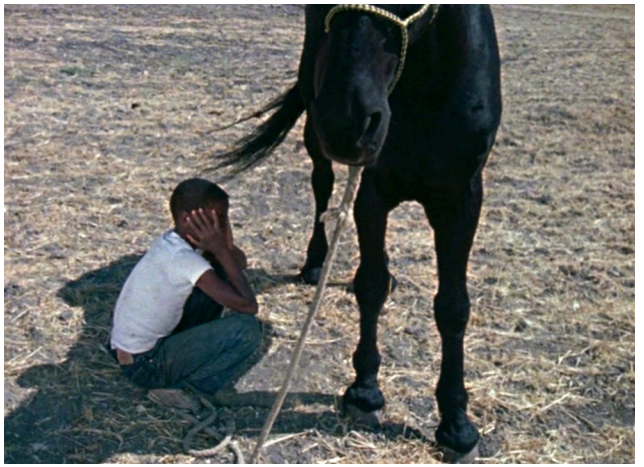
Andrew Christopher Green *On Charles Burnett's* The Horse

THE HORSE



The setting of Charles Burnett's *The Horse* is a farm in a valley in California in the early 1970s, but it might as well be one of the sharecropper plots in the Deep South that Walker Evans photographed in the 1930s. The film takes the shape of a valley in that its plot is inverted: the arc is established as a few men drive down from one side of the hill to a farm house in the middle of the valley, and for most of the film we wait around with them for reasons that are never made clear, until another man comes down from the other side to shoot a horse, at which point the film ends.

In the middle of the valley and at the center of the story is a black boy standing next to the horse. He's holding close to the empathetic creature and there is a solidarity between them. Their bond forms a defense against the group of men who arrive at the beginning and talk disgruntledly about a job, a job they were either offered or promised, but one that is ultimately given to someone else, namely the boy's father. Until this denouement—which hardly resolves anything—Burnett shows us what the characters do to pass the time.

Because we don't know what the men are waiting for, their gestures have a cryptic quality. They walk around triumphantly as though their sole purpose in the film is to dismantle whatever their arrival and discussion of a job might establish. One of the men walks straight into the house and up a rickety staircase. His walking is echoed by the next shot of the ranch hand walking away. The one who went inside comes out with a drawer that he props upright and sits on as a makeshift stool. How he knew where to go to retrieve it is beyond us, but it suggests a familiarity with the house and even a bit of propriety.

We never see the white men's faces as they talk about the job. Everything is as distant and vague (and threatening) to us as it must have been to the boy in the middle of the valley, standing next to the horse, petting it, placing mud chips on its back, and

bringing it to a trough so it can drink some water. At dusk, a truck pulls in. A black man steps out and the boy rushes into his arms. "You miss me?" "Yeah." "You'll have your dad back in a little while." Their embrace makes apparent a bit of the danger the boy had felt without his dad around. Then, there is a procession. The white men standing on the porch at the peripheries watch on. "Let's see what's so special," a threatening man says. "Let's get the firewood and kerosene," says another. The farmhand reaches into the father's truck and takes a pistol out of a bundle of newspaper, loads it with a bullet from his pocket, and then hands the firearm to the boy's father. As the final minutes of dusk turn into night, the boy covers his ears and closes his eyes, only to peek out in a moment of curiosity: we hear a gunshot, and the film ends with a freeze frame of the boy recoiling and trying to cover his ears again.

After the film ends, once we have learned the job the white men were talking about was the killing of the horse, there are even more questions left unanswered. Why weren't the white men hired to shoot it? They might not have been directly involved in killing the horse, but they still had to be around for some reason to get the kerosene and firewood to burn its corpse. Why did they have to wait for Ray? Was he hired because he's black and could be paid less, or because he had a pistol (but no bullets)? The critic James Naremore tries to make sense of the plot by reading it symbolically. He thinks that in *The Horse,* just like in Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, the slaughtering of animals functions "chiefly as a kind of metonymic illustration of a society in which the cruelest, most psychologically damaging work is assigned to the poorest and least powerful."[1] Though this interpretation seems reasonable enough, it leaves unanswered the question as to why the white men had to stay around to burn the horse's corpse. And while this might seem to be a minor discrepancy, it gets to the heart of the question of how we are to make sense of this abstract film.

The engine that drives the plot is opaque. The transactions taking place seem determined by relations that cannot be explained by the logic we have developed and rely on to go about in the world. What is it that holds these sequences of images together? Its economy is a mystery, reminiscent of the way money changes hands in a few scenes from Robert Bresson's *Mouchette*. First, Mouchette is handed her wages from the register by the cafe owner after washing dishes, which she then gives to her father before going to the town fair, where a woman inexplicably hands her a ticket to the bumper cars. This is not a cinema of cause and effect, shot and reverse shot. Bresson and Burnett's fidelity is to something much more abstract and essential: an atmosphere that is rarely explicit but never arbitrary to our experiences.[2] It forms the patina that sediments around our memories.

It is as if *The Horse* aspires to recreate the boy's perspective of the events that took place that day. Everything transpires with a foreign authority that we resign ourselves from trying to understand conceptually. Like the boy, we are witnesses to the events taking place, but we are not its agents, and not really even its interpreters. We have to orient ourselves sentimentally.[3] The white men arrive and belong because they are adults and the authority (and white and aggressive and perhaps vengeful) and the boy's father has to shoot the horse solely because he was hired to do so. The boy is at the cusp of adolescence; he will soon be forced to lose his innocence, enter the world of work, see the utility of things, and hopefully not let go of too much of his imagination. But in the film, he isn't taxing himself to figure out how any of these exchanges function. He mostly just wants to be reunited with his father, and to be next to the horse until then.

Despite having been in the middle of the field with the horse for the whole film from the first shot on, his presence is called into question by the aggressive white man, who suddenly notices him: "Where the hell did he come from?" Another one

of the white men responds, "That's Ray's boy." This is the only relation the film establishes between the characters' familiarity with one another. The man asking the question about who the boy is and what right he has to be there, centering everything on himself, inadvertently introduces the question of who's dictating the narrative.

There isn't any simplistic moralism at hand here. The politics of the film are not addressed on the level of content, which is a vague story about the killing of a horse. Rather, they are woven into its form: an aperture, a frame, a cut, and their relation to the totality of the world they comprise through exclusions and deferrals.

Burnett tells us there are two crucial precedents to *The Horse*: William Faulkner's *The Bear* and Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Burnett said in an interview that the creation of *The Horse*, which he acknowledges as "a strange story," that "I was influenced to a certain extent by Faulkner. He wrote a story called *The Bear*, and I wanted to make a movie of it. […] I wanted to do something on his personal South, where everything is said and explained in a symbolic way."[4]

Édouard Glissant describes Faulkner's notoriously difficult style as "deferred writing," which is what I take Burnett to have meant when he called it symbolic. Glissant asserts that this deferred writing "always delays disclosure—that is, [his characters] hold firmly to a presupposition which neither the author, the people of the county, nor the reader can grasp with certainty but which indeed dictates what everyone considers real."[5] The speech is haunted by what cannot be said: "All of Faulkner's works are built on this lack which they would never openly declare. This is where deferral plays out and builds up; speaking the lack without proclaiming it."[6] Burnett absorbed and reproduced Faulkner's

elliptical and indirect style of narration in *The Horse*. It is a film built on exchanges that show and hide simultaneously, structured by something that cannot be explicitly disclosed.

Without staying hung up on semantics, it is important to emphasize that there isn't anything being symbolized in Burnett's film: the figures, sounds, images, and gestures in *The Horse* only ever refer to themselves. They covertly make up an oneiric world that appears similar to ours, but is nonetheless an autonomous world with its own internal coherence. Burnett himself recounts laughing off an overly symbolic reading of the film after screening it on campus. He said that a student "asked me to tell him about the symbolism of it. 'The boy with blood on his shirt.' They counted the number of drops of blood on his shirt, and it was the same number as the Wise Men. […] He looked at that as a religious symbol, and found all this story behind it. […] I told the professor. He said, 'It's there, but you don't know. You made the film but it's not yours anymore.' That's scholars for you. I said, 'What the heck.'" At issue here is the student's attempt to project some flimsy, symbolic interpretation onto the film so as to secure a closure that Burnett actively worked to withhold.

With respect to Faulkner's "personal South," Burnett has his own connection to the South: he was born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi until he was about five years old, at which point his family moved to the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. On growing up in California, Burnett said, "We had a community. Anyone who was from the South had this community that was Southern, just displaced." The sense of migration and displacement are crucial to *The Horse.* Here it is important to reiterate that *The Horse* isn't set in the South: the valley and arid climate are distinctly Californian, and the structure on the farm is not a dogtrot but a two-story home. The South—and Faulkner and the collaboration of Agee and Evans's representation of it—functions as a kind of palimpsest for the film, a backdrop of

a particular social relation that has been displaced onto a new geography. The fictional world of *The Horse* is not a capricious abstraction but is built on a series of recognizable historical, social, and economic realities by which American society was racially segregated.

The displacements and repetitions that have shaped the history of black life are integral to *The Horse's* uncanny ambiguity of time and place. From slavery to segregation, the Great Migration from the farmlands of the South to cities in the North and the West, from agricultural to factory labor: each change was followed by a new series of threats, discrimination, recurrences of the Klan, and the shifting political agendas of the Democratic and Republican Parties that were obligated to vie for the black vote in new demographics. (We'll remember that Burnett's family themselves were participants in the great migration, leaving the South for economic reasons in the late 1940s.) Thus, the setting for *The Horse* is a spatial and temporal double. The characters are in California in the 1970s; yet it looks and feels like Alabama in the 1930s. And it is precisely this discontinuity, a discontinuity that registers the disorientation of said differences and repetitions, that marks Burnett's sophisticated and self-conscious adoption of Faulkner and Evans and Agee's works.

In the early 1970s, after the civil rights movement's successful overturning of Jim Crow, black politics found itself in a kind of quagmire. While civil equality had been achieved (on paper, at least), other forms of inequality—not least among them economic—were still in place, and the means of overcoming them were not at all clear. The existing political leadership couldn't adequately comprehend the task at hand, and there was no broader class-based political organization that could take it up. *The Horse* has a certain lethargy, a quality of waiting for what will come next, that feels reflective of this moment. I take this general political situation and its historical precedents to be what

is being "deferred" in *The Horse*. The boy himself wouldn't have registered these transformations, despite his situation being a product of them. There is a discrepancy between what can be readily articulated and what remains at the level of intuition and perception.

Faulkner's novels invariably deal with race relations in the doomed South of the Postbellum era, and it was the recognition of black life in his work that Burnett appreciated: "Faulkner put race on the table and he was aware of the black psychology. The right to exist, how to exist, and the power to endure were always part of his theme."[7] And yet, Glissant shows us that Faulkner's novels rarely ever attempt to provide an interior monologue for any of his black characters. Glissant surprisingly appreciates this: "I prefer to think that this choice of technique shows a clarity and honesty (in short, a natural and systematic generosity throughout) in one who knows, who admits in effect, that he will never understand either Blacks or Indians and that it would be hateful (and, in his view, ridiculous) to pose as an omniscient narrator or to try to penetrate these minds that are unfathomable to him."[8] That is to say, Faulkner acknowledges what Glissant would call their opacity, their irreducibility: the ways we are all unclear, even to ourselves. Glissant puts forth that Faulkner intuited that it would be future black and creole writers to fulfill this task, and we should note that Toni Morrison's *Sula*, another work deeply influenced by Faulkner, was released the same year as *The Horse* in 1973.[9]

The painter Kerry James Marshall once said in a lecture, and I am paraphrasing from memory, "Black people were banned from Modernism, because Modernism's ambition was always to mean nothing, or no one thing, and black people always meant something."[10] By saying that black people "always meant something," I understood Marshall to be saying that they were not thought to have an interiority that was subject to crisis.

And it was, above all, the crisis and apparent loss of meaning within modernity that Modernism was trying to aesthetically objectify. Thus the "meaning" Marshall is getting at is not a meaningful plenitude, but a static, fixed, and predetermined meaning that they were reduced to and in no position to change. In other words, Marshall was saying they were recipients and bearers of meaning, not agents capable of determining meaning or registering its absence. When black figures did appear in Modernist art works, they did so as caricatures or background figures, beginning with Laure, the maid in the painting that could be said to have inaugurated Modernist painting, Édouard Manet's 1863 *Olympia*.[11] (If black figures functioned as nothing more than static support within narrative veins, then we could venture to interpret *The Horse* as a film about a background figure having become the protagonist. The boy's timidity suggests as much.) There are, of course, notable exceptions, including Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and Jean Toomer's *Cane*, perhaps the most explicit precedent for Burnett's *The Horse*, with its disjunctive plot that lays as much emphasis on smells, atmosphere, and evocative visions like pyramids of smoking pine as it does on racialized violence and sexuality. Given the financial constraints of the medium, Burnett and his generation of black filmmakers (the first to have access to MFA programs and the opportunity to make films outside of the Hollywood model) saw the Harlem Renaissance as both a model and an indication of their belatedness: "We're sixty years behind the Harlem Renaissance. We're not even dealing with those issues of the language and psychology of a black person, man or woman." Burnett said that Hurston, Ellison, and Toomer wrote in protest of the obligation to "write from a white perspective about black people for a white audience."[12] This doesn't mean they were writing for a black audience, but that they were motivated to go beyond standard cliches that were

produced by and justified the social order. The one-dimensionality of the culture industry's kitsch shares a fundamental kinship with reductive stereotypes: both are motivated by the substitution of identification, the foreclosure of experience, and a predigested form of consumption. Hurston, Ellison, Toomer, and Burnett's dedication to their craft was in opposition to these forms of reduction. And the work serves as evidence of what could not be tolerated; the complexity of a particular form of life that the world conspired to repress.

The other influence on *The Horse* Burnett has mentioned, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is an experimental documentary concerned with the lives of a group of tenant farmers in Hale County, Alabama, and the ethics of representing them. Unsurprisingly, all of the tenants are white. Fortune magazine, which originally commissioned Evans and Agee for an article that was rejected and later expanded into the book, gave Evans explicit orders not to photograph black subjects, as it was assumed the white readership wouldn't identify with their plight. Ironically, the first tenants Evans and Agee encountered in Hale County were black. They met a landowner at a diner on their first day on the job, and Evans asked if it would be "all right to make pictures" of his land and tenants, not knowing the majority of them were black. The landowner replied, "Sure, of course, take all the snaps you're a mind to; that is, if you can keep the [epithets] from running off when they see a camera."[13] A book about the economic plight of three white families begins with the active avoidance of and an inevitable encounter with black people. Agee's manuscript for the article Fortune rejected, which was thought to have been lost, was discovered and published in 2013. It contains an appendix titled "On Negroes," in which Agee tried to give an account of the situation of the black tenant farmers he was told not to write about. Avoiding any simplistic essentializing, Agee acknowledged the material and economic

conditions of their lives and the complexity of their social organization, which had its own hierarchies and power imbalances. Above all, he recognized the difficult and dangerous task they faced in organizing themselves politically. The text is not without the author's overwrought guilt, however, and has its moments of patronizing flattery.

Agee agonized over his privilege, constantly turning back on his own subject position as a writer in his prose. Burnett said, "What made [*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*] remarkable was that it provided this sense of history told from a certain perspective. Yet Agee was also concerned about exploiting the subject; he wanted to be as objective as possible."[14] Agee's commitment to an impossible impartiality is perhaps most acutely expressed in the following passage from the book: "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement."[15]

Walker Evans understood his relationship to his medium quite differently. When asked about the documentary quality of his work, Evans replied, "Documentary? That's a very sophisticated and misleading word. […] The term should be documentary style. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. […] A man who was operating in that definition could take a certain sly pleasure in the disguise. And very often I'm doing one thing and I'm thought to be doing another."[16] There is a fissure between information and aesthetics in the experience of his work, and thus it is an experience that begins with a misrecognition. He made a virtue of the technical way photography reproduces people and things in the world. Unlike the generation of artists working with photography before him like Edward Steichen

and Alfred Stieglitz, Evans didn't try to restore a subjectivity to his mechanical medium, but to make it even more detached, even more anonymous. And the result is that his photographs refuse us an immediate identification with their subjects; we don't feel closer to but further away from them. That is, his work produces an inverse of the distance that photographs invariably try to overcome. It was Agee's ethical commitment, coupled with Evans's ambivalence, that Burnett admired and turned the work into something more than mere reportage. He said that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, "was a document that gives a feeling of the period that would have been lost otherwise. That's one of the things I was trying to achieve—to go beyond information and convey a feeling for how these people lived and how they felt."[17]

It is the apparently unscripted reality represented in Italian neorealism that influenced his short *Several Friends*, his feature *Killer of Sheep*, and his script for Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*. The critic who championed Italian neorealism, André Bazin, claimed that these films broke with the traditional conventions of mise-en-scène and, instead, showed a reality that appeared to unfold before the camera without a script, driven by pure contingency. And it should be clear why Burnett was interested in this quality of spontaneity. It was a means of incorporating that which cinema could not account for: a feeling for how the people who had been excluded from it lived, and how they felt.

It is not coincidental that Burnett's white men sit around on the porch like the families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. And it's not coincidental that Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* plays during the credits, an opera whose lyrics are based on the epilogue to Agee's *A Death in the Family*, a text about a boy lying in a field on a blanket, surrounded by adults, listening to the world go by and wondering what kind of person he will become.

Faulkner and Evans and Agee provided a set of tools for Burnett so that he could take up where they left off. He created a mysterious little film that renders polyvalent a boy standing in the middle of a valley holding close to a horse, existing in his own world and the one on the screen, in a not-so-distant time deeply entangled in the past.

1 James Naremore, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 23.

2 "Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of." Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography* (New York: Urizen Books; distributed by E. P. Dutton, 1977), 20.

3 The critics Jean-Louis Schefer and Serge Daney both emphasize the relationship between childhood and cinema: their childhoods made up (replaced) by cinema and the childhoods discovered within it. See Jean-Louis Schefer, *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), and Serge Daney, L'Exercice a été profitable, Monsieur (Paris: P.O.L, 1993). Excerpts translated by Andy Rector and Laurent Kretzschmar published online at https://kinoslang.blogspot.com/2024/12/the-exercise-was-beneficial-sir-serge.html.

4 Michel Cieutat and Michel Ciment, "Interview with Charles Burnett," *Positif*, no. 357 (November 1990): 40–47, reprinted in *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 48.

5 Édouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara B. Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 62.

6 Ibid., 20.

7 Michael Sragow, "An Explorer of the Black Mind Looks Back, but Not in Anger," *New York Times*, January 1, 1995, © 1995 The New York Times, reprinted in *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 95.

8 Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 68.

9 On a global scale, it is worth briefly acknowledging the emergence of so-called Third World Cinema, with Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* having been released in 1972 and Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* in 1973. Alongside the anti-war protests from the mid sixties to the early seventies, the disenchantment with national politics gave way to a new hope for a global struggle amongst recently decolonized African nations.

10 Kerry James Marshall, lecture at the Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL, December 13, 2018.

11 It was only after Modernist concerns had been eclipsed by what has come to be called Postmodernism that, in part due to the economic and social changes of the postwar landscape, black subjectivity could be pursued in the domains of high art. Burnett's commitment to a Modernist ambition lends his pre-Hollywood films a unique and untimely character.

12 Sragow, "An Explorer of the Black Mind Looks Back, but Not in Anger," *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, 96.

13 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), 25.

14 "Warming by the Devil's Fire: Director Interview," PBS, *The Blues*, www.pbs.org/theblues/aboutfilms/burnettinterview.html, © 2003 Vulcan Productions, Inc., reproduced in *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 132.

15 Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 13.

16 "Walker Evans Interview with Leslie Katz," Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1994.250.152 (5), p. 62.

17 "Warming by the Devil's Fire: Director Interview," reproduced in *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, 132.

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