

Incarceration and the African American Family in the Films of Charles Burnett

Max Rehmet

"Peril is generational for black people in America – and incarceration is our current mechanism for ensuring that the peril continues."¹

Introduction

The exceedingly high incarceration rate in the United States may be one of the biggest strains on the African American community and poses a large threat to the African American family. Popular representations in film and television suggest that a large part of the responsibility lies with the non-nuclear family structure of African Americans which is prone to produce 'violent young men'. Such representations, again, contribute to legitimising

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates: The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration. In: *The Atlantic*. Vol. 316, No. 3 (2015), pp. 60-84, here p. 80.

violence against African Americans, which in recent years has unfortunately occurred so often, sparking the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013.²

Charles Burnett belonged to a Black independent filmmaking movement that emerged at UCLA in the early 1970s and came to be known as the "Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers"; or L.A. Rebellion respectively. This generation's challenge was "to find a film unique to their historical situation and cultural experience"³. While the films of Burnett and other members of the L.A. Rebellion are praised by critics, they remain widely unknown to "mainstream audiences, both black and nonblack"⁴. However, academic interest has risen in recent years.⁵ This may possibly be traced back to the restoration of *Killer of Sheep* (KoS, USA 1978) by UCLA Film & Television Archive that brought the 16mm version to a 35mm print. The DVD was released by Milestone in 2007 and premiered at the Berlinale Film Festival.⁶ In 2015, the Arsenal Cinema in Berlin showed a series of films of the L.A. Rebellion⁷ and a DVD-Box containing 510 minutes of L.A. Rebellion film is finally available.⁸

Burnett's strategy of representation offers a complex portrayal of the African American family structure pointing out that it is exactly such external factors as the high incarceration rate that pose a threat to the African American

² 'Representation' according to Stuart Hall has the connotation of being able to create meaning in a society (Stuart Hall: New ethnicities. In: Kobena Mercer (ed.): *ICA Documents No. 7. Black Film British Cinema*. Michigan 1988, pp. 27-31, here p. 27). As a result "events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive" (*ibid.*). While 'representation' in this sense recognises that the meaning of "things" is not fixed, attempts are frequently made to fix meaning through stereotypes (Stuart Hall: *The Work of Representation*. London 1997, p. 258). Bogle reveals how black people have been portrayed stereotypically in the history of Hollywood (Donald Bogle: *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American films*. New York 2010).

³ Ntongela Masilela: The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers. In: Manthia Diawara (ed.): *Black American Cinema. Aesthetics and spectatorship*. New York 1993, pp. 107-117, here p. 108.

⁴ Melvin Donalson: *Black Directors in Hollywood*. Austin 2003, p. 124.

⁵ For a detailed study see: Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart: *L.A. Rebellion Creating a New Black Cinema*. Oakland 2015.

⁶ Cf. <http://www.killerofsheep.com/> (last viewed 29.12.2016).

⁷ Cf. <http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/arsenal-cinema/current-program/single/article/5690/3006.html> (last viewed 29.12.2016).

⁸ <https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/support/la-rebellion-dvd> (last viewed 29.12.2016).

family and not vice versa. This essay will briefly outline how the African American family is typically represented in film and television, pointing to the Moynihan Report as a source for the popular image of the African American family as 'pathological'⁹. Subsequently, Burnett's strategy of representation contradicting popular representations will be analysed. Finally, this essay will examine how Burnett points to the issue of incarceration as the major threat to African American communities.

The analysis is based on Burnett's first four major films. In *Killer of Sheep* Stan has to maintain his job at the slaughterhouse to support his family, although it is making him suffer from depression. Pierce has to ultimately choose between his brother's wedding and the funeral of his best friend Soldier, who is in constant conflict with the law in *My Brother's Wedding* (MBW, USA 1983). In *To Sleep with Anger* (SwA, USA 1990) Harry, a drifter from the South, brings conflict to Gideon and his family. Finally, the young and ambitious African American police officer John Johnson (J.J.) is caught between the loyalty towards the force and his fellow officers on the one side, and righteousness and the African American community on the other side in *The Glass Shield* (GS, USA 1994). The analysis of Burnett's films will reveal that he opposes the "pathology paradigm" in two different ways. First, instead of upholding the nuclear family as an ideal and denouncing matriarchies as 'pathological', Burnett shows complex representations of African American family structures without denying issues concerning single parenting. Secondly, he portrays external factors such as incarceration as a constant threat to the African American family.

Popular Representations of the African American family

Promoting his film *To Sleep with Anger* in Europe in the early 1990s, Charles Burnett was reminded how rare positive representations of African American families in television and film are, and how firmly established the ghetto-centric image of African American families with absent fathers and single-mothers had become:

⁹ The term 'pathological' occurs in quotation marks throughout the essay lest it reinforce the idea that it is in any way adequate to describe the African American family.

When I went to Europe and audiences saw my film (*To Sleep with Anger*), they asked me where were the drugs and violence scenes. I wondered if they thought most blacks were involved in drugs and violence. They were equally surprised that black families had fathers who resided within the family structure.¹⁰

According to Watkins “most television programs featuring African Americans typically employ the matriarchal model as the basic formula for narration”.¹¹ By frequently employing African American families as run by a single female, with the father being absent, media representations are widely responsible for “solidifying the belief that black culture is predominantly matriarchal and consequently inferior according to the presumptions of patriarchy”¹². Households consisting of single female parents are, thus, represented as typically ‘black’, while in reality the increasing trend of single households does not merely apply to African Americans.¹³

The problem, however, is not limited to the fact that black families are depicted as matriarchies led by single-mothers. The more dramatic fact is that the depicted matriarchies frequently fail. Representations of failing single-mothers are particularly present in ghetto-centric Hood films, a genre, created in the early 1990s, which revolved around African American inner-city life. While the violent images of African American males in films such as *Menace II Society* (USA 1993, R: Allen Hughes, Albert Hughes) or *Boyz n' The Hood* (USA 1991, R: John Singleton) can be justified for revealing the disastrous circle of poverty and violence determining inner-city life, there is little to be said in defence of the negative portrayals of women. For instance, single mothers are depicted as incapable of raising their children to become decent citizens. Wallace criticizes *Boyz* for having a formula that is too

¹⁰ Burnett qtd. in Bishetta D. Merritt: Charles Burnett. Creator of African American Culture on Film. In: *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 39, No. 1 (2008), pp. 109-128, here p. 126.

¹¹ Samuel Craig Watkins: *Representing. Hip hop culture and the production of Black cinema*. Chicago 1998, p. 219.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*

“simple and straightforward”: “The boys who don’t have fathers fail. The boys who do have fathers succeed.”¹⁴

A key document determining the perception of the African American family as ‘pathological’ due to its matriarchal structure is the Moynihan Report. In 1965, Patrick Moynihan’s Report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* addressed the high rates of poverty among the black population of the United States. As the title already implies, the centre of the Moynihan Report is the instability of the African American family: “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time.”¹⁵ For instance, Moynihan considered juvenile crime to be the result of the increase of single-parent households.¹⁶ Again, Moynihan held the matriarchal system and its undermining of African American men to be responsible for driving out male parents from the family, thus, pointing to African American women as the reason for the community’s issues such as poverty and high crime rates.¹⁷

However, more recent crime statistics indicate that juvenile crime cannot be traced back simply to single-parenting. While marriage declined and single-parent households increased in the 1990s and 2000s, the crime rate of juveniles has rapidly declined.¹⁸ Reversely, a stable family cannot automatically prevent crime because “no family can ever be made impregnable, [as] families are social structures existing within larger social structures”¹⁹.

¹⁴ Michele Wallace: *Boyz N the Hood and Jungle Fever*. In: Gina Dent (ed.): *Black Popular Culture. A Project by Michele Wallace*. Seattle 1992, pp. 123-131, here p. 125.

¹⁵ Daniel P. Moynihan: *The Negro Family. The Case for National Action*. Washington 1965, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015001649550> (last viewed 20.02.2016).

¹⁶ Cf. Daniel Geary: *The Moynihan Report. An Annotated Edition*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/> (last viewed 15.05.2016)

¹⁷ Cf. Herbert J. Gans: *The Moynihan Report and its Aftermaths – A critical Analysis*. In: *Du Bois Review. Social Science Research on Race*. Vol 8, No. 2 (2011), pp. 315-327, here p. 322.

¹⁸ Geary, *The Moynihan Report*.

¹⁹ Coates, *The Black Family*, p. 78.

While the stability of the African American family does not necessarily have an effect on crime, the War on Crime definitely has an effect on the stability of the African American family. The increase of crime in urban areas in the 1960s and 70s was met with tough police action, which increased over the decades and especially affected the poor African American community. With the introduction of crack cocaine in the 1980s the punitive crime policies were reinforced. Even in the 1990s, when crime and violence was on the decline, criminal policies remained tough. Under Bush, sentences for violent crimes and drug possession increased. As a result, the prison population of the United States was five times higher by 2000 than it was in the 1970s. The majority of the people imprisoned are poor, while the number of black prisoners is disproportionate: While 13 per cent of the US population is black, the black prison population is at 37 per cent. The figures are exceedingly alarming for black men without college education: 30 percent of them have been to jail by the time they are in their mid-thirties.²⁰

Being incarcerated, again, decimates the chances of finding employment because “employers are reluctant to hire ex-criminals and many professions are forbidden by law from hiring people with criminal records”²¹. As a result, it is next to impossible for ex-convicts to “provide reliable child support, further hindering their families’ opportunities for self-sufficiency”²². Issues such as crime and poverty cannot simply be blamed on the African American family structure. Unfortunately, it is exactly this image – the image of the ‘pathological’ and matriarchal family – that frequently appears in film and television in order to explain many of the conflicts of the African American community.

Instead of opposing such representations, black film is frequently “reactionary and susceptible to penetration by the ideas of social

²⁰ Cf. Alice Goffman: *On the Run. Fugitive Life in an American City*. Chicago 2014, p.xi ff.

²¹ Thomas J.Sugrue: Poverty in the Era of Welfare Reform. The ‘Underclass’ Family in Myth and Reality. In: Stephanie Coontz (ed.): *American families. A multicultural reader*. New York 2008, pp. 325-337, here p. 328.

²² *Ibid.*

conservatism”²³. Ghetto-centric films could “develop a representational politic that reverses the pathology paradigm”, yet instead, they “tend to construct filmic worlds that reinforce this popular interpretation of black familial life”²⁴. Hood films point to social issues such as incarceration and unemployment, but ultimately reinforce stereotypes because they focus too closely on ‘pathology’, while representing the African American family as something that needs ‘fixing’, thus, passing a lot of the blame on to the non-nuclear family structure. As will be demonstrated, Burnett devises a representational strategy that contradicts the ‘pathology paradigm’.

Resisting the White Nuclear Family Norm in the films of Charles Burnett

Charles Burnett personally stresses the importance of family to his projects in an interview with Bérénice Reynaud published in 1991 in the *Black American Literature Forum*: “I think that most problems exist within the family. It is the base of civilization, and its erosion and breakdown, the destruction of the extended family, are a constant theme for me”²⁵. As a result, strong family values are common to all of Burnett’s films and indicated, for instance, by photographs on the walls as well as characters who “believe in the importance of family meals, outings, and special events”²⁶. Popular representations of African American families have implied that deviating from the white nuclear norm is to blame for many of the social issues such as poverty and crime. Burnett’s representational policy works strongly against this notion. The families in his films successfully negotiate a structure, which may differ from Moynihan’s family norm, but does not fail as a result of this difference.

Burnett’s representational strategy opposes many of the stereotypical and negative representations of the African American family discussed earlier. For instance, instead of focusing on the African American family as headed

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 219f.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

²⁵ Robert E. Kapsis: *Charles Burnett. Interviews*. Jackson 2011, p. 56.

²⁶ Bishetta D. Merritt: Charles Burnett. Creator of African American Culture on Film. In: *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 39, No. 1 (2008), pp. 109-128, here p. 126.

by a single mother, the families in Burnett's films mainly consist of two parents. In *The Glass Shield* the Marshall family and the family of Theodor Woods are depicted as "two-parent units, [...] interested in their children and supportive of them"²⁷. J.J.'s parents "listen to his concerns and encourage him to follow in his younger brother's footsteps and marry his beautiful fiancée"²⁸. In *To Sleep with Anger* Suzie, who works as a midwife, prepares partners for giving birth.²⁹ A medium shot depicts several couples – predominantly African American– forming a semicircle around Suzie. The men are embracing their partners and listening attentively. In a later scene one of the couples is accompanied while giving birth. A medium shot depicts an African American woman receiving her baby; her supporting African American partner comforts her with an embrace.³⁰ In opposition to the cold sexual relation depicted in blaxploitation films, the couples in Burnett's films love each other and pull at the same strings in order to overcome their issues. Burnett's character Stan, for example, has difficulty sharing intimacy with his wife, thus, clearly contradicting the hyper sexualised image of black men, which was reinforced through the blaxploitation genre.³¹

In this environment of loving families, Burnett manages to address sensitive topics such as single-parenting as well. The most salient depiction of a single-parent can be found in *My Brother's Wedding*, when a woman attempts to lure Pierce into the house to "come see my sister's baby"³². Finally, succumbing to the woman's demands, Pierce lifts the baby out of her

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ SwA 0:03:25.

³⁰ SwA 0:46:03. Incidentally, being present at a birth is a luxury not all young African American men can afford. Alice Goffman describes how difficult – often impossible – it is for young African Americans to attend their children's birth when they are involved in criminal activity (Goffman, *On the run*, p. 34ff.).

³¹ Cf. Jan-Christopher Horak: Tough Enough. Blaxploitation and the L.A. Rebellion. In: Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart (eds.): *L.A. Rebellion. Creating a New Black Cinema*. Oakland 2015, pp. 119-155, here p. 151.

³² MBW 0:02:26. According to Roy and Burton recruiting fathers or father-figures is common practice in low-income families (Kevin Roy, Linda Burton: Mothering through Recruitment. Kinscription of Nonresidential Fathers and Father Figures in Low-Income Families. In: Coontz, American families, p. 351ff.

pram. An over-the-shoulder shot shows Pierce holding the baby: "So, this is what human beings look like when they're babies."³³ Having never held a baby before, Pierce is not quite sure how best to handle the young baby. Showing some interest, Pierce asks "Who's the daddy?" The baby's mother does not respond but continues to look lost and depressed. As a result the father's whereabouts are never clarified. The sister's frustration about men's lack of responsibility in general, may indicate that the baby's father left simply because he was irresponsible. However, a further possibility can be found in the subsequent scene in which Pierce visits Soldier's parents. After the conversation between Pierce and Mrs. Richards, Pierce pensively notes: "Mrs. Richards ... you know ... out of all the kids Soldier and I grew up with ... only he and I and a couple of others are still with us"³⁴. It is, therefore, conceivable that the reason for the father's absence is slightly more dramatic.

A further scene drawing attention to the issue of absent fathers can be found in *Killer of Sheep*, when a man is kicked out of the house by a woman holding a gun. The man is wearing a military uniform and leather shoes. He peaks around the corner and sneaks back up the stairs towards the woman's flat. The subsequent shot shows a woman opening the door and looking round the corner with a gun in her hand.³⁵ A close up shows her taking aim at the man; her facial expression is stern. The man takes cover and demands her to throw down his sun glasses. The next scene shows a little boy sitting on the sofa rubbing his eyes, with his smaller sister lying asleep in his arms. The woman turns away from the door and looks at her two children. An extreme close up of the woman focuses on her facial expression. She has an exceedingly worried look on her face, when she glances at her children. The son, on the other hand, appears to be full of anger, when he exchanges eye-contact with his mother.

³³ MBW 0:03:32.

³⁴ MBW 0:07:47.

³⁵ KoS 0:47:44.

It is impossible to objectively judge the scene because Burnett only depicts a fraction of the quarrel. However, the fact that the woman resorts to using a gun in order to chase away the man and the fact that she is concerned about her children imply that the man was posing a threat to the family. In accordance with this theory the angry look on the boy's face may have been caused by the man's behaviour. Thus, the scene may be interpreted as the portrayal of a strong female character protecting her children. However, judging by the worried look, the woman is well aware of the fact that single-parenting can be a strain on the family. Burnett, thereby, makes clear that choices concerning such issues are exceedingly complex; and complex issues require complex representations. What is the mother to do in this case? How can she act in the best interest of her children? Burnett poses the question without offering a solution because there is no simple one. Another interesting aspect of this scene is the man's uniform. By portraying him as a veteran the American government is – to an extent at least – made responsible for the family's problematic relationship. The way the man moves about and takes shelter behind the wall implies that he was not fully able to leave behind the traumatic experiences of the Vietnam War, a war that cost many African American lives, while overshadowing all ambitions to push forward African American civil rights.³⁶

While the families in Burnett's films consist mainly of two parents, it is striking that a lot of the fathers seem to be only physically present, leaving the nuclear family, de facto, headed by a female parent. For instance, in *My Brother's Wedding* Soldier's father is constantly engaged in some kind of occupation around the house, while his wife looks for condolence in the words of Pierce. "I'm counting the days", Soldier's mother – Mrs. Richards – confesses with a subtle smile on her face.³⁷ "I promise you, that when Soldier gets out of jail this time, he ain't going back"³⁸, Pierce comforts her. "I

³⁶ Lucks offers a detailed analysis of the relationship between the war and the movement for Civil Rights: Daniel S. Lucks: *Selma to Saigon*. Kentucky 2014.

³⁷ MBW 0:33:48.

³⁸ MBW 0:33:53. This turns out to be true for a different reason than hoped. Soldier dies in a car accident.

pray that he's learnt some sense", Mrs. Richards replies sceptically. The picture of Mrs. Richards conveyed in this scene is that of a loving mother, who is eagerly awaiting the return of her son and – while having her doubts – wants to believe in his goodness and ability to change. In *Killer of Sheep* Stan is the breadwinner of the family. However, his depressing work at the slaughterhouse renders him mentally absent in his home environment. Stan's wife, on the other hand is "rather diffident, yet without being submissive, and whenever necessary she is more than ready to protect her family from the dangers of Watts"³⁹. A significant aspect of passivity concerning Stan's masculinity is his lack of sexual drive. Moynihan has criticised the patriarchal structure for its emasculation of the man in the family. However, Grant notes that Stan's "lack of sexual drive [...] cannot be seen as something his wife, who wants him desperately, or any other woman has given him"⁴⁰.

In *To Sleep with Anger* Gideon is removed as the family patriarch after Harry, an old and mysterious friend of Gideon's from the South, comes to visit.⁴¹ Harry uses this situation of vulnerability to manipulate Babe Brother, whose "demeanor darkens as he spends time with Harry, eventually leading him to slap Linda over a minor accident"⁴². The increased vulnerability of the family could be interpreted as the importance of a solid patriarchal family structure. However, the situation allows Suzie to step forward and resolve the family issues. Babe Brother and Junior get into a fight, which escalates when Babe Brother attacks his brother with a knife. It is Suzie, the newly installed matriarch, who prevents worse from happening by "gripping the blade"⁴³.

³⁹ Jürgen Martschukat: 'You be a man if you can, Stan'. In: Isabel Heinemann (ed.): *Inventing the Modern American Family*. Frankfurt 2012, pp. 223-244, here p. 240.

⁴⁰ Nathan Grant: Innocence and Ambiguity in the Films of Charles Burnett. In: Valerie Smith (ed.): *Representing Blackness. Issues in Film and Video*. London 1997, pp. 135-156, here p. 141.

⁴¹ For a more detailed analysis with reference to the Black South, see: Jones, The Black South; O'Brien, Charles Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger*; Phillip Lamarr Cunningham: The Haunting of a Black Southern Past. In: Andrew B. Leitner (ed.): *Southerners on Film. Essays on Hollywood Portrayals since the 1970s*. Jefferson 2011, pp. 123-133.

⁴² Cunningham, The Haunting of a Black Southern Past, p. 125.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

The incident is a crucial moment of the film because it “reunites the family and returns the focus back to Gideon’s health”⁴⁴. The example of Suzie demonstrates, again, Burnett’s representational policy of not depicting families as ‘pathological’ due to their patriarchal structure. While a stable family may be important in order to be less vulnerable, the vulnerability does not stem from the family structure. In addition, the actual threat is not to be found within the family but comes from without, in this case in the form of ‘Harry’, who seduces Babe Brother to resolve his issues violently, thereby risking committing a terrible crime.

Incarceration: The greatest threat to the African American Family?

In Burnett’s films incarceration is depicted as the major threat to the African American community in various ways. Burnett addresses the issue of crime and incarceration indirectly in *Killer of Sheep*.⁴⁵ The liquor store, in which Stan is unwilling to work out of fear that it might be robbed, draws attention to the criminal activity in his neighbourhood. It has been mentioned that Stan’s wife successfully defends her family from the two delinquents at their house because she recognises them as a threat to Stan, who could face incarceration. Another aspect of *Killer of Sheep*, which reveals the constant threat of crime, is the depiction of children, engaging in rough games in the streets, thus, urging the audience to question what will become of them when they grow up. Corbin notes that *Killer of Sheep* “ends in a domestic space [and therefore] indicates Burnett’s importance of family and generational continuity”⁴⁶. However, the fact that Stan Jr. is on the roof and therefore “is missing from this moment shows that all is not right with young

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Incidentally, incarceration even endangered the production of *Killer of Sheep*. The film took years to shoot because “one member of Burnett’s nonprofessional cast was in prison for much of that time” (Clifford Thompson: Good Moments in a Tough World. The films of Charles Burnett. In: *Cineaste*. Vol. 33, No. 2 (2008), pp. 32-34, here p. 32.

⁴⁶ Amy Corbin: Charles Burnett’s Dialogic Aesthetics. In: *Black Camera*. Vol. 6, No. 1 (2014), pp. 34-56, here p. 48.

black men"⁴⁷. According to Corbin, Pierce can be considered an "older version of Stan Jr." in a neighbourhood that "is changing for the worse"⁴⁸.

The most salient example of the issue of crime and incarceration can be found in the character of Soldier in *My Brother's Wedding*. The audience does not learn about the exact reason for Soldier's incarceration but conversations between Pierce and Mrs. Richards reveal that it was a minor conflict with the law. Pierce reminds Mrs. Richards about Soldier's true nature: "You know, Soldier may get into trouble, but he's never done anything that was evil or vicious"⁴⁹. He elaborates on what he considers "evil or vicious" by claiming that Soldier "never sold dope, he never prostituted women, he's nothing like these kids walking the streets these days"⁵⁰. The conversation, furthermore, reveals that it is not the first time Soldier has been in jail. Pierce tells Mrs. Richards about a letter he received from Soldier: "He said when he get out of jail this time, he ain't going back, he even asked me to look for him a job"⁵¹. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Mrs. Richards blames his delinquency on his age, asking Pierce whether he thinks "Soldier will ever act his age and stay out of trouble"⁵². The image conveyed in this scene is that of a caring mother who is aware of the fact that children get into trouble when they are young.⁵³

The consequences of his incarceration, however, are grave as they make it impossible for him to obtain a job, thus, ridding him of the opportunity to socialise. Pierce unsuccessfully attempts to find a job for Soldier. When he enters the local liquor store the owner is sincerely happy to see Pierce offering to grant him any favour he wishes, until he hears that his concern is

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47f.

⁴⁹ MBW 0:06:03.

⁵⁰ MBW 0:06:10.

⁵¹ MBW 0:05:35.

⁵² MBW 0:05:29.

⁵³ The type of – rather violent – children's play, in which the generation of Pierce and Soldier participated, is depicted in *Killer of Sheep*.

finding a job for Soldier.⁵⁴ An over-the-shoulder shot captures the owner's reaction to Pierce's request, suddenly expressing seriousness: "If you wanted a job, yeah, but Soldier? Nooo Lord ... I'm sorry. Soldier, no!"⁵⁵ In the following scene Pierce receives an even more vehement reaction by the scrap merchant for simply mentioning Soldier's release from jail: "That's too bad, that's one fellow you should keep in jail till he rot."⁵⁶ After this devastating remark, Pierce does not even bother to ask whether he is willing to hire him. Due to the fact that Soldier has not committed any serious offense the reactions seem exceedingly harsh. It is made clear in the film that chances of being employed after being incarcerated are very slim.⁵⁷

In fact, in the scene immediately following Soldier's homecoming, the audience learns that Soldier is not managing to stay out of trouble. Pierce and his parents are sitting down for dinner, when a young man knocks at their door claiming to be a friend of Pierce. In the car parked outside there is somebody who has allegedly been beaten up by Soldier. His associates warn Pierce to keep Soldier in a tight rein "before somebody shoots his ass."⁵⁸

However, a remarkable aspect of Burnett's representational policy is that he never explicitly shows criminal activity, as Hood films typically do, thus reinforcing stereotypes about violent black men.⁵⁹ Instead, the subsequent scene depicts Soldier changing a toddler's nappy, thereby, asserting his potential as a responsible parent. He clearly surpasses Pierce's skills of handling a baby, who did not even know how to hold it. While the baby is still heard in the background the camera focuses on a conversation between Pierce and Mrs. Richards who inquires: "Is Soldier managing to stay out of trouble these days?" Pierce answers hesitantly, while she studies his

⁵⁴ MBW 0:34:24.

⁵⁵ MBW 0:34:43.

⁵⁶ MBW 0:35:28.

⁵⁷ A reality that has been described by Sugrue (Sugrue, *Poverty*, p. 328).

⁵⁸ MBW 0:42:07.

⁵⁹ Cf. Corbin, Charles Burnett, p. 37.

expression sceptically and is obviously aware of his words being a white lie. He puts Mrs. Richards' mind at rest by saying: "I ... ah ... haven't seen him do anything."⁶⁰ Just as Pierce, the audience does not see Soldier do "anything" either.

As a result, Soldier is not reduced to a violent young black man engaged in criminal activity. The representation of Soldier rather focuses on him as a human being who potentially is of value to the community and a good father, as his successful handling of the toddler reveals. In other scenes Soldier is represented as playful, racing Pierce through the streets while laughing loudly.⁶¹ Another scene shows Pierce and Soldier singing in an alleyway.⁶² By representing Soldier in such a way Burnett avoids stereotypical depictions of a young black man who has been imprisoned more than once, much rather focusing on a humanised representation of Soldier. Soldier cares for his family and leaves the impression of having the potential to be an important father figure, if only he were given the chance to escape his criminal surroundings and incarceration. Interestingly, the only character that demonstrates a spontaneous outbreak of violence can be found in *The Glass Shield*. However, the circumstances under which J.J.'s outburst occurs are made fully comprehensible to the audience. From the beginning of the film J.J. is portrayed as a friendly and righteous man. Towards the end of the film, however, he is involved in a fist fight.⁶³ Burnett does not depict the whole fight as the camera does not capture the beginning. While J.J. is shown to hit one of the other officers in the face repeatedly, he is not portrayed as the aggressor. However, to the prejudiced Watch Commander, who has ostensibly internalised the image of violent black men, J.J. is the obvious culprit.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Soldier's and Pierce's friendship reveals how alike they are; as Pierce says to Mrs. Richards "Soldier and I are pretty much

⁶⁰ MBW 0:43:13.

⁶¹ MBW 0:44:00.

⁶² MBW 0:45:27.

⁶³ GS 1:25:00.

alike”⁶⁴. The representation of Soldier and Pierce, thus, suggests that they could have chosen similar paths. For instance, Pierce does not hesitate to run after the man who attempts to shoot at them.⁶⁵ Had they managed to catch the man, Pierce would most likely have been involved in a crime as well. The scene clearly demonstrates the vulnerability of young African Americans whose life can be threatened suddenly at any given moment. Similarly, in *To Sleep with Anger* Suzie indicates the influence of the environment on her children’s development. Babe Brother and Junior grew up to be rather different, although “everybody got the same. I breast-fed him, just like I breast-fed you.”⁶⁶

Sampson argues that social problems such as crime and poverty “cluster together spatially”⁶⁷. By demonstrating the constant exposure of his characters to criminal activity, Burnett shows how easy it is to be threatened by crime and incarceration, and how little influence upbringing and the family structure ultimately have in an environment which is so hostile to African Americans. Eventually, Soldier dies suddenly in a car accident. According to Grant dying in a car accident symbolizes the lack of mobility from which young African Americans suffer.⁶⁸ It is a recurring theme in Burnett’s films to show that even if characters are not literally incarcerated, they are exceedingly restricted in their mobility. Another prominent example of the inability of escaping social problems can be found at the end of *Killer of Sheep*, when Stan and his friends are unable to bet money on a promising horse because their car breaks down. Escaping social problems and advancing economically are unattainable for many of the depicted characters. A stable family is quite powerless to make a change.

⁶⁴ MBW 0:06:22.

⁶⁵ MBW 0:56:00.

⁶⁶ SwA 0:12:15.

⁶⁷ Robert J. Sampson: Racial Stratification and the Durable Tangle of Neighborhood Inequality. In: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 621 (2009), pp. 260-280, here p. 263.

⁶⁸ Cf. Grant, *Innocence*, p. 148.

The impact on the African American family by the threat of incarceration is best exemplified in *The Glass Shield* by the arrest of Teddy Woods. An establishing shot shows the petrol station in which the arrest is to take place.⁶⁹ Set at night, the neon-lights of the deserted petrol station form a high contrast to the pitch black sky. While the camera focuses on the station, Hip-Hop music can be perceived at an increasing volume. The music becomes diegetic as a red VW Beetle convertible pulls up unto the petrol station. The subsequent shot depicts J.J. sitting alone in his patrol car. He is observing the young couple in the car attentively, but obviously sees no need to intervene, as they are in no way acting suspiciously. The following shot establishes them as a loving and joyful couple, out to have a nice evening. As Teddy Woods leaves the car his girlfriend laughs and jokingly throws a ball of paper at him, while he leans over to give her a friendly slap on the back. The couple's ostensibly peaceful and happy evening is interrupted when Deputy Jack Bono turns up. It soon becomes clear that the reason for stopping Teddy Woods is the fact that he is driving a fancy car: "How do you afford that car?", Bono asks, suggesting that the only way he would be able to afford such a car is by selling drugs.⁷⁰ It turns out there is an arrest warrant against Teddy Woods due to a traffic violation.⁷¹ In addition, they find a gun licensed to Teddy Woods' father-in-law. In his interrogation Teddy Woods claims to have the gun "for protection only"⁷². While the serious threat to Teddy Woods liberty stems from the corrupt detectives who attempt to frame Teddy Woods for murder,⁷³ the fact remains that the young couple's romantic evening was ended by an unexpected and unjustified police search. The only suspicious behaviour of Teddy Woods was driving a car

⁶⁹ GS 0:23:04.

⁷⁰ GS 0:24:40.

⁷¹ Goffman explains how forgetting minor violations and later not turning up to court can create a vicious circle (Goffman, *On the Run*, p. 30).

⁷² GS 0:28:28.

⁷³ Teddy suddenly being in an exceedingly precarious position can be read as a hyperbole of how a minor involvement with the law – in this case a traffic violation – can have disastrous consequences: A murder trial.

that – in the eyes of a white police officer - someone of his status can only be able to drive if he is somehow involved in criminal activity.⁷⁴

The petrol station scene creates further tension through the interaction between J.J. and Teddy Woods' girlfriend. She remains calm while her boyfriend is being interrogated, but does not hesitate to show her contempt towards the police officers. When J.J. approaches the car and asks her whether she minds turning down the radio, while cooperating she replies: "Yes, I do mind"⁷⁵. The escalating interrogation of Teddy Woods by Bono is accompanied by shots depicting J.J. and Teddy Woods' girlfriend exchanging glances. When Bono derogatorily addresses Teddy Woods with "Brother"⁷⁶, her eyes are focused on J.J. who does his best to evade her stare. Burnett, thereby, subtly demonstrates the pressure working on J.J. He is aware that Bono's tone is not adequate and cannot escape her accusing eyes, which seem to be condemning him for his being part of the system. Still, J.J. remains loyal to the force and his fellow officer. He confiscates the gun in the car exclaiming: "Partner, I have a gun"⁷⁷. J.J. shows further condemnation when he agrees to back Bono's false claim that Teddy Woods made an illegal turn because he had no legal right to stop him.⁷⁸ Although J.J. hesitates for a moment – possibly because he is aware of crossing a legal boundary – he sides with Bono claiming he has "no sympathy for low-life scum"⁷⁹.

The conflict between law enforcement and African Americans does not merely affect the people immediately threatened by incarceration. J.J.'s working for the police force affects the chances of his founding a family

⁷⁴ Coates describes how this system makes the 'black body' breakable. In a fictitious letter of a father to his son, he writes: "The law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault on your body [...]" (Ta-Nehisi Coates: *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne 2015, p.17f.).

⁷⁵ GS 0:24:05.

⁷⁶ GS 0:25:22.

⁷⁷ GS 0:26:25.

⁷⁸ GS 0:37:10.

⁷⁹ GS 0:37:46.

because of his loyalty to an institution that excessively incarcerates African Americans. It is not until after the case has been solved and J.J. no longer works at the police force that he manages to reconcile with Barbara. At a family dinner J.J. breaks the news to his parents "Barbara and I decided that ... em ... well, since I'm out of a job now, that we should go ahead and get married"⁸⁰. The irony of their timing makes some important implications. On the one hand, it emphasises once again how J.J.'s being a police officer was in the way of their founding a family. Being part of a racist system that threatens lives of young black men through incarceration – and even death – is in stark opposition to being a member of the African American community. Hence, J.J.'s advancement in the force coincided with the alienation from the African American community and especially his girlfriend Barbara, who he was not able to marry before leaving the force. On the other hand, J.J.'s and Barbara's newly formed family starts in a more precarious position. The African American family is not compatible with J.J.'s job at the police force and must therefore suffer economically.

In summary, it can be said that Burnett elaborately shows how African American families are threatened by the War on Crime politics. While the possibility for Teddy Woods to form a family is directly threatened by his arrest and Soldier – as an ex-convict – is unable to find work, J.J. is unable to form a family because he is part of the system arresting people such as Teddy Woods and Soldier; a system that is incompatible with his African American background.

Conclusion

In popular representations the disproportionately high incarceration rate of African Americans has often been reduced to the non-nuclear family structure. In line with the Moynihan Report, Hood films point to the absence of fathers as one of the main reasons for crimes committed by young black men. The reality, however, has been revealed as far more complex. Burnett's strategy of representation strongly opposes the 'pathology paradigm'. The most obvious way in which Burnett opposes popular depictions of the African

⁸⁰ GS 1:38:03.

American family is by showing them as two-parent units, who love each other and worry about their children's upbringing. Moreover, the family relationships in Burnett's films are complex and differ from the typical patriarchal norm, but do not fail as a result. This essay has pointed out several examples in which fathers are depicted as apathetic and passive. However, the issues are far more complex and lie outside of the family.

Accordingly, Soldier's repeated imprisonment has been shown to stand in the way of family foundation. While Burnett frequently suggests that Soldier is having a hard time staying out of trouble, it has been pointed out that he is never shown engaging in any violent actions. He is much rather depicted as Pierce's friend and a potentially good father who helps change the baby. While deviating from the white nuclear family norm cannot be blamed for high crime rates, Burnett reveals that the War on Crime can be blamed for complicating the foundation of a family. The example of Teddy Woods has shown that – for an African American – a simple evening out with one's fiancée can spontaneously lead to being accused of a traffic violation, which, again, can lead to a murder trial.

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Autor

Max Rehmet (M.A.) hat an der Ruhr-Universität Bochum Anglistik und Romanische Philologie Spanisch studiert. Der vorliegende Text basiert auf seiner 2016 eingereichten Masterarbeit mit dem Titel *The African American Family in the Films of Charles Burnett*.

Kontakt: max.rehmet@rub.de