



Directed by Charles Burnett

Producer: C. Burnett, Gaye Shannon-Burnett

Screenwriter: C. Burnett

Cinematographer: C. Burnett

Editor: Tom Pennick

With: Everette Silas, Jessie Holmes, Gaye Shannon Burnett, Dennis Kemper, Ronald E. Bell

Digital video, color, 82 min.

Playfighting in South Central: On the Everyday in *My Brother's Wedding* by Cameron Kunzelman

The films of the L.A. Rebellion, even at their most abstract, are eruptions of the real into the filmic imagination of American cinema. These films focus on the lives, the social relations, the materials, the architecture, and the possibility space of black experience over a thirty year period. The movement was successful in presenting the United States as the radically pluralist place that it is, where the world of one person can, and does, appear wholly alien to anyone else looking in. In this way, the success of this literal rebellion of aesthetic sensibility is also its downfall; the films that make up the armaments of that rebellion have been denied their rightful canonicity in both the public and academic ecologies of consumption and appreciation due to how much they shake up what can be taken for granted or imagined in American experience.

Charles Burnett's *My Brother's Wedding* (US, 1983) is one part of this broader movement in visual and auditory reconfiguration that we have chosen to call the L.A. Rebellion. The basic plotline of the film follows Pierce Mundy, a thirty year old man who is the victim of late 1970s labor policies that robbed him of his job driving a cement truck. Pierce's dedication and attention is split between two figures: his brother, a newly-minted lawyer who is marrying a nouvelle riche woman who Pierce strongly dislikes due to her class and class biases; and his best friend Soldier, who has spent his entire adult life bouncing in and out of the carceral system.

The central struggle of *My Brother's Wedding* is the push and pull between Pierce's obligation to his family—represented by the titular wedding—and his dedication to Soldier, whom he loves despite his extraordinary shortcomings and purposeful acts of violence against those around him. On the first night of Soldier's release from prison, he beats a man for no reason; later in the film, he sexually assaults a young woman. Finally, in an unrelated and seemingly random situation, he is killed in a car accident. The funeral is scheduled during Pierce's brother's wedding, and the final scenes of the film show Pierce attempting to cover both events, trying to respect and mourn his friend while also supporting the life choices that his brother has made. The second-to-last shot of the film literalizes what the audience already knows. Pierce, too late to attend the funeral and missing the wedding, stands isolated in the parking lot of the mortuary. A cut to his hands reveals the absolute incommensurability of these two commitments in Pierce's life; he holds a wedding ring in his hand.

Yet, the strength of the film does not lie in this grand narrative. Like Kierkegaard, Pierce manages to always be in the wrong in relation to the world, making him a stand in for all of us. That is the clear move being made, and while it is compelling, taking the larger narrative of the film as what delivers something to us is a mistake. Rather, it is the small moments, the incongruous ones, which force us into a direct confrontation with a lived realities of these characters. Some are obviously symbolic:

Soldier's father, lying in bed, never able to get comfortable and merely sleep on his own terms, always foiled by the materiality of the bed, or a statue of a lawn jockey, in focus and in the foreground, but facing away from the camera and never brought to light as something worth mentioning. Others speak to social relations: Pierce helping his grandfather use the restroom and take a bath, or chasing down a would-be assassin with Soldier. Others are merely reflective of reality: Pierce's grandparents taking a gun out of a drawer before answering a door, a man coming out of his front door with a gun to ward off the play-fighting Soldier and Pierce, or Pierce's mother in a hidden standoff with would-be robbers of her laundry shop. Finally, there are those moments that reveal the playfulness or surrealism of the everyday: a man who forgets his ticket every time he comes to pick up his laundry and cannot remember the alias he used to place the order, or the teenage girl who fixates on Pierce and wants to take him to prom in a few years, or the wrestling matches where Pierce's aging father repeatedly dominates the younger man by pinning his arms behind his head.

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These are all scenes that make very little sense in the context of a dark comedy about one man's indecision about who his life should be committed to. They force the viewer to ask questions of the world that the film presents. Why does everyone have a gun, and more importantly, why does everyone feel like they need one? What does the world around the content of the film look like? The film proliferates windows, and it structures itself like the laundry that so many of the film's scenes take place in. The laundry opens into itself over and over again—a cage of bars opens into a doorway, opens into a lobby, opens into a receiving desk; a receiving desk, which opens into rooms upon rooms, which the camera takes us through over and over again without exhausting the structure.

Each moment of life that *My Brother's Wedding* presents is nested within, or opens out to, another—rarely connected explicitly with another event or moment, but instead stitched together by the arrow of linear phenomenal time. The characters are products of a contingent social world, but we're begged by the film to reconstruct what that world might be. Could these disparate pieces of life have come together in another way? *My Brother's Wedding* does not give us answers or present political strategies. Instead, it wraps us up in doubt, denies us a ground, and forces us to address why things are the way they are.