



## Why Are There So Few Black Directors in the Criterion Collection?

by Kyle Buchanan and Reggie Ugwu

*The prestigious line is coveted by cinephiles and taught in film schools. The company's president blames his "blind spots" for largely shutting out Black Americans.*

Linda Koullisis sensed an opportunity. It was September 2016, and Koullisis, a talent agent and former film producer based in Los Angeles, was in New York for a special screening of Charles Burnett's "To Sleep With Anger," a critically admired but little-seen film she had worked on in 1990.

Burnett, who is African-American, was also in town for the screening. And Koullisis, who is white, joined him for an appointment with the Criterion Collection, the producer of a revered DVD and Blu-ray line of classic and contemporary films that has existed in various forms since 1984.

At the company's office in Gramercy Park, Koullisis found herself face to face with Peter Becker, Criterion's longtime president and creative lead, who is also white. Burnett hadn't come to discuss his own film (he had been asked to record an interview about a film by another director, the Italian Ermanno Olmi), but Koullisis steered the conversation toward "To Sleep With Anger." No one had ever produced a DVD or Blu-ray of the film, she told Becker. Would Criterion be interested in becoming the first?

The Criterion edition of "To Sleep With Anger" — released less than three years after the meeting with Becker, in 2019 — put Burnett in rarefied company. He is one of only two living Black Americans to have a feature-length film in the collection, which comprises more than 1,000 films by more than 450 directors. There are just four African-American directors with feature films in the collection overall, or less than 1 percent.

If there is a cinematic canon even more highbrow than the Oscars, it's the Criterion Collection, where directors are treated with a level of awe usually afforded to movie stars and a film's critical reputation outweighs its box office receipts. Criterion began in the 1980s as a producer of high-end laser discs, and pioneered several special features for that format — letterboxing, director's commentary tracks, deleted scenes — that would later become industry standards. Today, the company, which is privately held, oversees a sister streaming service with an independent catalog — the Criterion Channel — and employs a staff of around 50.

Its physical collection continues to grow by 50 to 60 new or reissued titles each year, all digitally reproduced to exacting specifications and packaged with eye-catching original artwork. It is well known for including works by many of the most highly regarded filmmakers of all time — Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, Akira Kurosawa and Jean-Luc Godard among them — alongside a select number of contemporary directors, like Wes Anderson, Guillermo del Toro and Richard Linklater.

That extensive range has created the impression among some cinephiles, including many who work in the industry, of an authoritative survey. In a recent newsletter circulated by Criterion, Anderson called the collection a “Louvre of movies.” And publications like Vanity Fair and Entertainment Weekly have compared it to a one-stop film school.

“I think in a community of filmmakers, actors and people who are knowledgeable about cinema, that Criterion stamp means a lot,” said Prof. Todd Boyd, the chair for the study of race and popular culture at the University of Southern California. “It’s like a Good Housekeeping seal of approval. It’s a stamp of cultural and filmmaking relevance.”

In such an expansive catalog, encompassing films from more than 40 countries, the relative absence of African-American filmmakers stands out. There are, for example, more directors in the Criterion Collection with the last name Anderson than there are African-Americans.

A New York Times analysis of the collection through June 30 found that of 1,034 feature-length films released by Criterion in the DVD/Blu-ray era, there were...

Four African-American directors:

Charles Burnett “To Sleep With Anger,” 1990

William Greaves “Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One,” 1968, and “Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take 2½,” 2005, released on the same disc

Spike Lee “Do the Right Thing,” 1989, and “Bamboozled,” 2000

Oscar Micheaux “Body and Soul,” 1925

Four Black directors from outside the U.S.:

Steve McQueen, Britain “Hunger,” 2008

Djibril Diop Mambéty, Senegal “Touki Bouki,” 1973

Ousmane Sembène, Senegal “Black Girl,” 1966

Euzhan Palcy, Martinique “A Dry White Season,” 1989

Women and other people of color appeared in slightly larger numbers. About 11 percent of directors were Asian; 2 percent were Latino; and about 7 percent were women.

“When you’re Criterion and you have the ability to stamp something and say, ‘This is valuable,’ but the list only includes certain films and certain filmmakers, that speaks for itself,” Boyd said. “If someone looking at it doesn’t see that many Black filmmakers, without even thinking about it, they’d probably assume that Black filmmakers aren’t that important, or at least they don’t make the kind of critically acclaimed movies you might see in the collection.”

It’s a thorny topic that Black directors have been discussing among themselves for decades.

“You always wanted as a filmmaker to be part of the Criterion Collection, you’re always hoping for that call,” said Gina Prince-Bythewood, the director of acclaimed Black-led dramas like “Love & Basketball” and “Beyond the Lights.” Though Criterion has never reached out to her, Prince-Bythewood still feels a rush of anticipation when the company announces new titles. “Every month, they put out an alert about their films coming out, and every month, I open it to see if they’re going to highlight any Black filmmakers,” she said. “And it never happens.”

In an interview this month with The New York Times, the Criterion president, Peter Becker, who owns a minority stake in the company, expressed regret about the lack of Black representation in the collection.

“There’s nothing I can say about it that will make it OK,” he said. “The fact that things are missing, and specifically that Black voices are missing, is harmful, and that’s clear. We have to fix that.”

## **Keepers of the Canon**

Though it has released contemporary titles since the laser disc era, the Criterion Collection has deep roots in the classic film canon. Its founders, including the multimedia publishing pioneers Bob Stein and Aleen Stein, the former Warner Bros. executive Roger Smith and the producer Joe Medjuck, started the company in 1984 on the back of two landmarks of American cinema, “Citizen Kane” and “King Kong.”

That same year, Criterion formed a strategic distribution partnership with another company, Janus Films, owned at the time by Becker’s father, William Becker, and Saul J. Turell, father of the current Criterion chief executive, Jonathan Turell. Janus, founded in Harvard Square in 1956, had distinguished itself as among the first American companies to promote foreign art-house films, including the work of Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini and François Truffaut.

Peter Becker, who became president of Criterion in 1997, is also a co-owner of Janus Films. And he inherited its value system, defined by what he described as a “quite canonical and traditional” catalog.

As he sought to expand it, Becker, 56, often looked to films and filmmakers that he felt were cut from a similar cloth. “I was working on what was in front of me based on my own experience and community,” he said.

Over time, that community came to include a contemporaneous generation of North American directors, largely white and male, who idolized Janus Films. Some, including Wes Anderson and Paul Dano (“Wildlife”), became personal friends of Becker’s. Others, like Alexander Payne (“Election”) and Greg Mottola (“The Daytrippers”), appear in promotional materials for Criterion, including popular web videos highlighting its vast DVD closet, and a series of Top 10 lists.

It was to this community that Charles Burnett and Linda Koullis gained entree after meeting with Becker in 2016, clearing the path for “To Sleep With Anger.” Before their visit, Becker hadn’t seen the film, according to Koullis.

Amy Heller, president of Milestone Films, another archival movie distributor that released an earlier Burnett title, “Killer of Sheep,” in 2007, said that many film ranking systems historically have been forged in echo chambers.

“The overwhelming majority of the filmmakers anointed, like the people who chose them, were white men,” she said. “The world they live in affirms their knowledge, acumen, taste and authority.” The result, Heller said, is a canon iterated so often that it can begin to feel “monumental and eternal.”

“The folks who are left out of the lists start to become literally personae non grata,” she continued. “Not worth talking about, or hiring, or watching.”

Though Burnett succeeded in joining the Criterion set, other Black filmmakers may choose not to make the effort, assuming that they are unwelcome. That was the case for Haile Gerima, a peer of Burnett’s and the director of the trailblazing “Sankofa” (1993). For Gerima, the Criterion Collection brings back memories of what he called the “independent white American film movement” of the 1990s.

“Our experience never allowed us to even think of the possibility of having a relationship with them, because I just feel their very standard is very white supremacist,” he said.

### **‘Blind Spots’**

Becker said that the lack of African-American films in the collection is in part a reflection of his personal “blind spots.” These were at play, for example, in his initial reaction to Julie Dash’s “Daughters of the Dust” (1991), the first theatrically released film directed by an African-American woman.

In 1992, Dash, who studied the Criterion Collection as a graduate film student at the AFI Conservatory and the University of California, Los Angeles, sent Becker a copy of “Daughters” via her distributor, Donald Krim of Kino International. The film, praised by critics for its dreamlike, multigenerational portrayal of a Gullah community on Georgia’s St. Simons Island, is often cited as an influence for Beyoncé’s “Lemonade.” But Becker turned it down.

“I didn’t understand what I was looking at,” he said, reflecting on the decision. “I didn’t understand it for what it was. And I wasn’t talking with people who were going to help me.”

At the time, Dash said, she had assumed that Criterion simply didn’t “get” her movie. But she later reconsidered. “It’s more than ‘They don’t get it,’” she said. “It has to do with worldview. They don’t care to get it. They’re not interested.”

Though “Daughters” never appeared in the Criterion Collection (in 2016, it was reissued in a digitally restored special edition by another company, the Cohen Film Collection), it was added to the Criterion Channel, the company’s streaming service, this spring. In June, following the global protests prompted by the police killing of George Floyd, the film was made available for free on the service, and featured prominently on its home page as part of a special “Black Lives” package.

For Dash, the about-face was a welcome surprise. “What a change, after 30 years,” she said.

Criterion’s blind spots have extended to the most recent generation of African-American filmmakers. Though the collection features the directorial debuts of multiple generations of white auteurs — including Gus Van Sant, Noah Baumbach, David Gordon Green and Lena Dunham — it has no African-American directors born after 1957.

One who potentially could have been included is Barry Jenkins, who directed the best-picture winner “Moonlight” (2016). Jenkins’s influential debut feature, “Medicine for Melancholy” (2009), is distributed by IFC, which has enjoyed a long-running relationship with the Criterion Collection. Other IFC films, including Dunham’s “Tiny Furniture” (2010) and Dano’s “Wildlife” (2018), received Criterion editions within two years of their release.

But Becker, who said he hoped to add “Medicine” to the collection in the near future, acknowledged that he had only recently seen the film: “I will admit that I didn’t know ‘Medicine for Melancholy’ when it came out.” He first reached out to Jenkins about acquiring distribution rights in 2018.

The director Ava DuVernay, who founded a distribution company, ARRAY, focused on the work of people of color and women, said that Criterion had contributed to “cinema segregation in the art-house circuit.”

“There are all these gates that are closed to Black filmmakers,” she said. “It’s a minimizing of the Black film canon. But also it’s a minimizing of the audience, to think that they wouldn’t be interested in Haile Gerima’s ‘Sankofa,’ or ‘Ashes and Embers,’ or would not want to see all the work of Julie Dash, or Kathleen Collins, or Charles Burnett, and on and on.”

DuVernay said that Criterion had passed on her own film, “Middle of Nowhere” (2012), for which she became the first Black filmmaker to win the directing prize at Sundance. “There wasn’t any rights issue,” said DuVernay, who owns the movie. “It was just a pass.” In an emailed statement, Becker said he had no record or memory of this, and offered to release “Middle of Nowhere” on Blu-ray.

“If Ava would want to work on a special edition with us, we would be honored and would just need her help to get Lionsgate to say yes,” he wrote, referring to the film’s current distributor.

The Criterion Collection wasn’t always quite as white as it is now. In the early 1990s, it put out several acclaimed films by Black directors on laser disc, including Melvin Van Peebles’s “Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song,” John Singleton’s “Boyz N the Hood,” Spike Lee’s “She’s Gotta Have It,” and the Hughes brothers films “Menace II Society” and “Dead Presidents.” But none of those titles survived the transition, in 1998, to DVD.

Becker said they had initially been lost because of rights issues. “In the beginnings of a marketplace, things are less available,” he said. But a significant majority of Criterion’s laser discs did migrate to the newer formats eventually, and Becker acknowledged that he could have done more over the years to reintroduce those by Black filmmakers.

“I know where those rights are, and I can go seek out those rights, and I will,” he said. “We’ve done second Blu-ray editions of other things; we should go do second Blu-ray editions of those, too.”

For the Hughes brothers, who said that they had been honored to be included in the collection in the 1990s, the damage has already been done. “How dare that be an oversight?” Albert Hughes said. “You should know better.”

### **‘We Looked Up and Looked Around’**

Becker said his company began trying to address the racial and gender disparities in its catalog around five years ago. That had been one of the objectives of FilmStruck, the now defunct streaming service that Criterion started in partnership with Turner Classic Movies in 2016.

“We looked up, looked around, and went, ‘Oh my God, we have to actually really deal with the fact that, one edition at a time, we’ve knit together something that is almost all male and predominantly white,’” Becker said.

The Criterion Channel, which was begun last year as a spiritual successor to FilmStruck, has been at the forefront of that diversity push, Becker said. Because streaming rights are available at a lower comparative cost to DVD and Blu-ray, and because the Criterion Channel doesn’t require the resource-intensive special features of the physical collection, the company has quickly generated a less homogeneous streaming catalog.

But the physical collection, which has greater cachet among cinephiles and in film schools, has not kept up. In the past five years, out of hundreds of new physical editions, only two — “To Sleep With Anger” and “Bamboozled” — have been works by Black Americans. Another — a reissue of “The Learning Tree,” the debut feature by the pioneering African-American director Gordon Parks — is planned for next year.

To diversify the collection, Becker said, he is assembling a “curatorial advisory group” that will work with him to identify acquisition targets, and prevent the exclusion of the next Julie Dash



or Barry Jenkins. He also plans to hire more Black employees; there are none currently at leadership levels.

“We’re just beginning senior leadership coaching for all of our management teams in terms of antiracist hiring practices,” Becker said.

Boyd, of the University of Southern California, said Criterion was an example of how the unexamined racial biases of cultural institutions can have pernicious and long-lasting effects, even without overtly racist intent. “It’s not the ‘segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever’ kind of racism,” Boyd said. “It’s the sort of racism rooted in assumptions about what’s relevant, what’s significant, what’s worth seeing, what’s important.”

Near the end of his interview with The Times, Becker said that he had come to recognize as much himself. “I think canons end up being defined as much by what they leave out,” he said, “as by what they let in.