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The Baadasssss and The Avant-Garde: The Radical Aesthetics and Politics of Melvin Van Peebles

Samuel Jay Smucker

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, samuel.smucker@gmail.com

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THE BAADASSSSS AND THE AVANT-GARDE:
THE RADICAL AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

By

Samuel Smucker

B.A., Knox College, 1990
M.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 1994

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree

College of Mass Communication of Media Arts
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Samuel Smucker

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
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Approved by:
Jyotsna Kapur, Chair
Novotny Lawrence
Joe Shapiro

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TITLE: THE BAADASSSSS AND THE AVANT-GARDE: THE RADICAL AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Jyotsna Kapur

Melvin Van Peebles is best known for *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and that film's role in inspiring the Blaxploitation cycle of films of the early 1970s. However, biographical research on Van Peebles's creative activities in France in the 1960s connect Van Peebles to the institutions and aesthetics of the French New Wave. Van Peebles radicalizes New Wave techniques by employing them to illuminate issues of racism. I generate a new reading of *Sweetback* which connects the experimental aesthetics and the political stance of the film to cinematic innovations of the French New Wave and the militant politics of the black power movement. By categorizing *Sweetback* as Blaxploitation film, critics often misread the Sweetback character's class position. By using the framework of the lumpenproletarian folk hero, I reframe Sweetback's differences with Blaxploitation protagonists. Finally, I read the film within the traditions of Brechtian theatrical theory by introducing the concept of popular realism and the language of black power, imperfection, absurdity, and militancy. Enormously popular with a younger black audience, *Sweetback's* release coincided with a new black power movement and a shift in a self-consciousness political and aesthetic awareness for African-Americans. *Sweetback* played a role in dispersing and invigorating representations of black independence and new aesthetic norms through a connection with a mass political organization, the Black Panther Party - a singular achievement in the history of U.S. film.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Judy Smucker, for her enduring support of my non-traditional life decisions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In Robert Stam's (2004) article on Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces* (*La Hora de los hornos*) (1968), he marks their film as a point of intersection of the "aesthetic and the theoretico-political" avant-garde noting how "its experimental language is wedded to its political project" (254). Solanas and Getino mobilize all the techniques of avant-garde cinema to enliven their film. The minimalist aesthetics, he explains, is the "result of practical necessity as well as artistic strategy. Time and again one is struck by the contrast between the poverty of the original materials and the power of the final result" (261). But their film is representative of the avant-garde in political practice as well. The film, "rather than being hermetically sealed off from life, the text is a preamble to history and praxis, calling for accomplices rather than consumers" (257). This political avant-gardism is not dogmatic or didactic but relies on an "openness" to the production processes which "inflected their own ideological trajectory in ways that they themselves could not have fully predicted" (256). The film transcends the "self-expression of auteurism" and "voices the concerns of the mass movement" (266).

If *The Hours of the Furnaces* is an intersection of two avant-gardes, to what extent do these two avant-gardes need each other? An artistic avant-garde without politics concludes Stam, supplies cultural novelty to the oligarchy and "risks becoming an institutionalized loyal opposition, the progressive wing of the establishment" (263). A political avant-garde without the aesthetic avant-garde is "equally retrograde" and reduces art "to a crude instrumentality in the service of a performed message... a 'correct' but formally nostalgic militancy" (266-267). The intersection of the two avant-gardes leads to the paradoxical idea of a "majoritarian avant-garde."

To extend his argument, a majoritarian avant-garde would resonate and represent the aspirations and experiences of a great mass of people in their conscious movement toward freedom. Critically, in the tradition of Third Cinema, it would also align with popular organizations like unions, community organizations, and political formations that while imperfect carry the broad aspirations of the poor and working classes. In this vein, Patricio Guzman (2015), director of the *Battle for Chile* (1975) described his film as “pluralist and not dedicated to any particular militant group; only to the Chilean dream (the struggle of an unarmed people), the utopia of a people in its broadest perspective, which I could see with my eyes and feel with my body in that vibrant Chile with which I identified, and still identify today.”

At the same time, as a work of the majoritarian *avant-garde*, the film would not just represent but challenge the people towards a more explicit conceptualization of their experiences. It would move forward their consciousness and call them to action. The political avant-garde does not just represent the audience at a particular moment in time but asks them to move beyond their current level of consciousness or social self-conception. Solanas and Getino intended their film to be viewed by members of mass political organizations - a gesture in Argentina at that time which itself was a form of political commitment and as Stam (2004) describes, “a life-endangering form of praxis” (257). Further, the end of the film “refuses closure by inviting the audience to prolong the text: ‘Now it is up to you to draw conclusions to continue the film,’” a challenge to which audiences responded (256).

Argentina and or Chile in the 1960s and early 1970s were countries in which there were mass movements for national independence, socialism, and popular democracy; and concomitantly against dictatorial forces. Filmmakers intervened consciously aware of their political alignment and hopeful in their political impact. How does an artist engage politics and

aesthetics on this level in a way that resonates for audiences in their place and time? How does an artist create politically relevant, politically popular art that embodies avant-garde aesthetics yet intersects with the popular appetite for dignity and transformation? And finally, what is the role of film in particular?

In Walter Benjamin's (1936/1986) classic essay on film, he praises the potential of cinema for bringing together the masses as no other art form has before. Much like Karl Marx's belief that the factory socializes the processes of production laying the groundwork for democratic control, Benjamin recognizes the potential for cinema to bring together the working classes with the possibility of self-representation and interpretation of their reality. Cinema fundamentally re-arranges one's relationship with culture by making it a relationship mediated by mass participation consequently changing the modes of apperception through which people come to understand their lives.

Furthermore, cinema, says Benjamin, has a unique ability to penetrate reality. Cinema reveals, much like psycho-analysis, hidden movements by isolating and enhancing phenomena while at the same time aestheticizing these natural elements. Consequently, cinema has the "tendency to promote the mutual penetration of art and science" (236). This interpenetration of art and science finds its analogy in an aesthetics and the politics associated with the avant-garde. Film is an optically and aurally immersive experience, but this immersion means that humans are developing through cinema a new mode of perception in which an unconscious penetration of space replaces a space consciously explored. We imbibe culture more fully although we may be hardly aware that we do so. *Sweetback* was a collective cinematic experience at the moment of immense transformation of cultural and aesthetic sensibilities in the black community toward

images of powerful and positive collective self-identity: a transformation which *Sweetback* both represented and promulgated.

The technology of cinema is not inherently progressive. For instance, D. W. Griffith's *A Birth of a Nation* (1912) is considered still today a groundbreaking film for its development of the filmic language of continuity editing. The film combines the most reactionary of political imagery with a new aesthetics to promote a narrative of anti-humanist degradation. Its aesthetics were complementarily enthralling and helped to mobilize a resurgence in white-supremacist terror throughout the United States. While it's not uncommon for a film to capture the cultural zeitgeist representing back to an audience a deeply rooted racial narrative, it's rare that this effect happens in conjunction with organized and popular political movements. While Third Cinema theorists imagined alignment with mass organizations that valued a unity of all people and challenged dictatorial forms of state and capital, Griffith's film explicitly aligned itself with the Ku Klux Klan re-energizing this moribund terrorist organization. The resultant mass political mobilization against the African-American population suggests that political intention and narrative is the defining element, but also the reactionary politics and reactionary aesthetics are drawn together like magnets.

It's Griffith's reactionary politics that signal his reactionary aesthetics. As the inventor of continuity editing, he is the godfather of what Jose Garcia Espinosa (1969) called "perfect cinema" which positions the audience as a passive consumer. While reality presents itself as smooth and continuous most of the time, continuity editing mimics this perception suggesting that the filmic experience is real instead of constructed. The avant-garde aesthetic, on the other hand, does the opposite. Instead of mimicking the perception of reality it enters and opens reality to viewers in ways they might not be able to perceive otherwise.

Perhaps, the best example in U.S. history of a film that both invigorated a mass political organization at the height of its popularity and is aesthetically avant-gardist is Melvin Van Peebles's film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). According to Gerald Butters (2016) the film was a giant hit among young black audiences causing long lines and consecutive sold out shows. Some theaters even played the film around the clock. The \$500,000 film grossed more than \$10 million outselling *Love Story* for many weeks and establishing itself as the highest grossing independent film in the U.S. until *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999. Gerald Butters (2016) claims that the film brought so many young African-Americans to downtown Chicago's Oriental Theater that it forever changed its reputation as black-oriented (60).

Rooted in Van Peebles's development as a filmmaker in France during the height of the prestige of the New Wave, *Sweetback* is a film that parallels Stam's description of *The Hours of Furnaces*. *Sweetback* is a film about running and escape, fundamentally about movement, even though the raw footage probably offered little inherent energy. Van Peebles's creativity in the editing room and the purposefulness of his narrative carry the avant-gardist aesthetics. Gladstone Yearwood (2000) sees in *Sweetback* a unique form of signification that activated black audiences while Amy Ongiri explains that the "spectator is asked to fill in the blanks of his [Sweetback's] visual imagery with his or her own interpretation" (179). Van Peebles's says "I could have created a character already armed with a political conscience; but most of the people I talk to in the movie, like the black community who saw the movie, are more of Sweetback's political level! So I started the story on this level!" (Beauchez, 2008). Consequently, the film "meets people where they are." It's political but not didactic or dogmatic.

Van Peebles aligned his successful film publicly with the Black Panther Party, a mass political organization at the height of its influence; a singular achievement in U.S. film history.

Party press and leadership analyzed and promoted the film; leaders like Huey Newton encouraged party members to attend multiple times as a sort of ideological development training. This certainly had some impact on ticket sales as well.

As a source of ideological development, Van Peebles's film displays significant weaknesses as it lacks a strong sense of solidarity between black men and black women. Centered around the flight of a man whose sexual prowess is his secret weapon, women (and black women especially) serve as obstacles to Sweetback's escape instead as comrades. For the most part, the film indulges in the sexist trope that women, through their petty concerns or unenlightened sexuality, hold men back. Consequently, while the film claims to embody the liberatory aspirations of the black community, women in *Sweetback* do not rise to the level of equal partners in the struggle for liberation.

Both Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and Van Peebles's *Sweetback*, center around race. In the first, it is a reification of the category in the white supremacist imaginary and, in the second, as a rebellion against the first. This is a testament to how central the concept of race is for shaping the cinematic narrative in U.S. culture. It suggests the capacity of race in the U.S. to find in the cinematic form a connection to mass imaginary and its political movements. The mass labor movement of the 1930s with all its millions of supporters and its vastly superior resources never had an equivalent.

In this sense, Melvin Van Peebles's film is extraordinary in its popularity with masses of young African Americans and in its explicit alliance with the Black Panther Party. While Griffith had the backing of studios and financiers, Van Peebles largely self-financed his independent movie. This thesis asks how Van Peebles's came to make perhaps the only aesthetically and politically avant-garde films to ever play broadly in the United States. By what route did Van

Peebles's develop his aesthetic and political approach to filmmaking? Why did *Sweetback* resonate so strongly with African-American audiences? What literary and cinematic traditions did Van Peebles tap into to create his phenomena? And finally, in what ways did Van Peebles's imagery resonate with the moment of mass cultural transformation in the black community?

Literature Review

This project brings together biographical information on the legacy of Melvin Van Peebles and his films and the literature on the cinematic techniques of the French New Wave to inspire a broader discussion of *Sweetback*. While Van Peebles has written little about his time in France, he has given several fairly in-depth interviews most notably with James Surowiecki (1999) and Jerome Beauchez (2013) and video interviews with Olimide Productions (2014), the Visionary Project Interviews (2009) and interviews for Joe Angio's (2005) documentary on Van Peebles. Van Peebles was a prolific writer during the 1960s. His journalistic efforts in France paint a picture of radical and iconoclastic thinker forthrightly struggling against the forces of racial prejudice and discrimination through his writings. Further, his work with *Hara-kiri*, an anti-authoritarian humor magazine, demonstrates an ironic approach to social humor marked by a fascination with the absurdist qualities of racial hatred and its effects. His monthly column at *Hara-kiri* reveals his fascination with the lumpen world of artists, criminals and homeless characters haunting the 14th Arrondissement in the 1960s. By combining information from these sources with historical accounts of Paris in the 1960s and the film industry of France, it's possible to paint a picture of Van Peebles's time in France which draws out his motivations, personal connections, and ambitions during those years.

Van Peebles's ambitions as a filmmaker in France in the 1960s inevitably led him to an encounter with the French New Wave which would have been at the height of its prestige.

Interviews by email with Liliane Korb paint a picture of Van Peebles's relationship with French film directors, writers, and craftspeople. Supported by Richard Neupert (2002) comprehensive history of the New Wave as well as David Bordwell (1984) on jump cuts and Tom Brown (2002) on direct address, a close reading of Van Peebles's one short film and first three feature films made between 1961 and 1971 illustrates his auteurist signature: the use of techniques of jump cuts, freeze frames, and direct address as well as other experimental forms in rhythmic and visual overlap to produce narrative energy.

I review the academic and popular discussions around *Sweetback* as a representative of and problematic for black representation in cinema. There is a robust conversation about *Sweetback* and Blaxploitation films in general concerning their effects on the black community both as a representation to the rest of society as well as the corrosive effects of heightened levels of sex and violence on black youth. For this discussion, I review press on NAACP's attempts to regulate Blaxploitation cinema and the discourse around Blaxploitation in general.

I engage in a discussion around the Sweetback character involving the literature of African-American stereotypes in cinema and the history of the lumpenproletarian folk hero in African-American literature. Donald Bogle's (2001) book on the history of stereotypes of African-Americans in film is a starting point for understanding how Sweetback activated concerns around the buck and brute stereotypes typical in the history of black representations. Novotny Lawrence's (2007) book on Blaxploitation and his and Gerald Butter's collection of essays on Blaxploitation cinema (2016) defines the Blaxploitation cycle of films and their place in film history. Nathaniel Mill's (2017) book on the lumpenproletariat in African-American literature provides a historical tradition of lumpen characters into which Sweetback also fits. Drawing on Marxist literature around the definition of the lumpenproletariat, I attempt to situate

these class categories as experienced by the black working class versus their representational forms in literature.

Drawing on the literature of Bertolt Brecht for a definition of the language of popular realism, I then look to W.E.B. DuBois (1903), Franz Fanon (1967), and Chester Himes (1976) for unique elements of that language in *Sweetback*. Finally, by employing the literature around the African-American cultural transformation in the 1960s and 1970s associated with the black power movement and connected to the mass movement of the Black Panther Party, I look for the important ways the cinematic language of *Sweetback* dovetails with the political and cultural zeitgeist. Gladstone Yearwood (2000) sees in *Sweetback* a unique form of signification that activated black audiences while Amy Abungo Ongiri's (2009) links *Sweetback* with the cultural changes associated with the black power movement. I expand on Ongiri's insights through a discussion of the images of militancy and the attendant vulnerability implied in these images. This encounter between a director and his techniques locates Van Peebles's film within the political history of the black power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Relevancy

This project brings together biographical information on the legacy of Melvin Van Peebles and his films, literature on the cinematic techniques of the French New Wave, and critical theories of cinema as a social and political event. *Sweetback* is assessed both in relation to well-known black stereotypes and in the African-American tradition of the lumpen folk hero. This encounter between a director and his techniques and narratives, intersects with the political history of the black power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Van Peebles develops a cinematic language rooted in these cultural transformations. This approach implores a re-reading of *Sweetback* as an aesthetically and politically avant-garde film.

The first chapter of this thesis on Melvin Van Peebles's biography, based on all public texts and video, is the most comprehensive history of the early years of this essential American filmmaker. Personal correspondences with Liliane Korb, Van Peebles's editor for both *500 Francs (Cinq Cent Balles)* (1961) and *Story of a Three-Day Pass (La Permission)* (1968) add original biographical information.

I engage in an elemental analysis of Van Peebles's four novels written between 1963 and 1967 as well as his journalistic writings for *France Observateur* during 1963-1964, *Hara-kiri* from 1964-1967, the French edition of *Mad Magazine* during its five-issue short run in 1965, and *Le Figaro Littéraire* in 1964 and 1965. This analysis provides a context for Van Peebles's artistic and creative choices. Van Peebles's biography is essential for placing him in the tradition of African-American creatives who went to France to practice their craft. This narrative de-centers him as an American filmmaker demonstrating his internationalist impulses rooted in an American perspective. By doing this, Van Peebles is positioned as the only African-American filmmaker to use this Parisian route to fame, a route used by people like Josephine Baker and James Baldwin before him.

This research places Van Peebles's filmmaking and writing career in France in the context of the ever-changing regulations of the French film industry. His ability to find success in France was not only a result of escaping the race-based restrictions in the U.S., but also a result of using the French social supports for cultural industries. By reading Van Peebles's trajectory within the political-economy of French filmmaking, he emerges as the beneficiary of his tireless work ethic, artistic quality, and a network of friends, but also funding opportunities evolving out of post-World War Two French social legislation and the system of French cultural exceptionalism.

This research offers a comprehensive review of and close reading of Van Peebles's first short film and first three feature films vis a vis their engagement with the techniques and narrative themes of the French New Wave. His experimentation with styles associated with Godard and Truffaut is not surprising given the prestige of the New Wave techniques at that time. However, his particular re-appropriation of these techniques and themes for illuminating issues of racial prejudice is an original reading which this research contributes to scholarship.

The first and second chapters of this research reposition Melvin Van Peebles as a filmmaker with a rich biography in France requiring a re-reading of Van Peebles's contribution to film history beyond *Sweetback* and its link to Blaxploitation. The third chapter attempts to re-read *Sweetback* itself by leveraging his biographical information, his writing from the 1960s, and his signature approach to filmmaking. This unique re-reading of *Sweetback* recognizes the genuine concerns of black critics of the film in the context of general criticism of Blaxploitation as reproducing a modern version of racist stereotypes and the corrosive effects of viewing extreme sex and violence on black youth.

This research offers a re-reading of the character of Sweetback through a discussion of his class location and the misreading him as a pimp rather than a sex worker. In distinction, this research proposes that Sweetback is best understood as an example of the African-American literary tradition of the lumpen folk hero. This begs an analysis of lumpenproletariat and the general confusion around the concept of the lumpenproletariat popularly used as a synecdoche for the industrial reserve army. By re-reading the Sweetback character in this way, I re-position Sweetback as a film significantly differentiated from Blaxploitation heroes and heroines.

Sweetback's popularity is related to its explicit connection with the Black Panther Party at the height of that movement's influence. While others have written on the link of Sweetback

to black power movement, this research elevates Van Peebles's alliance with the Black Panther Party by way of *Sweetback* was a singular relationship in the history of U.S. filmmaking distinguishing the film from the Blaxploitation cycle of films it inspired.

The Research Question

Artistic and political avant-gardes don't just make history as they please but are created by and create of history simultaneously. *Sweetback*'s release coincided with the black power cultural transformation and the height of the influence of the Black Panther Party. This obscure independent "European art film set in Watts" as Nelson George once called it, grossed over \$10 million and caused lines around the block in large cities. The leader of the most successful and militant black urban political organization adopted it as the first truly black revolutionary film. *Sweetback* is perhaps the only film in U.S. history to meet Robert Stam's (2004) definition of "majoritarian avant-garde," a film that successfully combines the elements of the political and aesthetic avant-gardes. This research asks how do the traces of biography, aesthetic styles, and political economy combined in a work of filmmaking that interpolates political movements and the moving-target of volatile cultural transitions in such a way that elevates it into the position of cultural influence, embodying the "majoritarian avant-garde?"

CHAPTER 2

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

Melvin Van Peebles spent his early years between the south side of Chicago where his father owned a tailor shop on 58th St. between Calumet and Prairie just west of Washington Park and the small suburb of Phoenix, Illinois where his parents moved when he was young¹. Van Peebles says of 58th St. that he saw people shot in the street and the neighborhood was one of the worst in American at the time. His father ran the tailor shop out of the basement of their building and from the age of ten young Melvin would stand on a Coca-Cola box, run the register and try to tell the employees what to do. Eventually, his father put him to work selling clothes left at the shop by going door to door. That's where he learned to negotiate says Van Peebles. "Instead of paying me, my dad started giving me old clothes that people didn't pick up from the shop and I'd sell them on 58th Street."

The other side of this divide was Phoenix, Illinois, a small community of 3,000 by 1930. When the Van Peebles family moved there in the late 1930s there were about 450 black

¹ Van Peebles has spoken about his life in France in various publications and video interviews including the Introduction to the DVD of *Story of the Three-Day Pass* (1968); Interviews in *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)* (2005); as well as Beauchez, Jérôme. "Black Pride in Images: An Infra-Political View." *Dans*, vol. 24, Jan. 2008; Brooks, Dudley M., "Melvin Van Peebles." *Ebony*. October 2010.; Coleman, Horace W. "Melvin Van Peebles." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 5.2 (1971): 368-385; Dannic, Claude. "De Hara-Kiri à La Blaxploitation." *Soul Bag*, vol. 171, no. March, 2003.; Gabert, Shelley. "Melvin Van Peebles." *Variety*. Vol. 394 Issue 6; Lewis, John. *UNSTOPPABLE: A Conversation with: Melvin VAN PEEBLES, Gordon PARKS & Ossie Davis*. Starz.; Malkin, Raphaël. "Interview with a Hands-on Adventurer Melvin Van Peebles." *Snatch*, Oct. 2014; Nicklaus, Olivier. "L'éclaireur Melvin Van Peebles." www.lesinrocks.com. October 29, 1997. <https://www.lesinrocks.com/1997/10/29/cinema/actualite-cinema/leclaireur-melvin-van-peebles-11231876/>; Norman, Lee Ann. "Melvin Van Peebles." *BOMB*. Issue # 146, Winter 2009: Water.; Rose, Charlie. "Interview with Melvin Van Peebles." *The Charlie Rose Show*, 7989; Roussel, Frédérique. "At the Bar, Melvin Van Peebles Tells His Tales." *Libération*, 18 Feb. 2015.; Sélavy, Virginie. "Interview with Melvin and Mario Van Peebles." *Electric Sheep*. November 28, 2005. <http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/features/2007/05/29/interview-with-melvin-and-mario-van-peebles/>; Smith, Jonathan. "Melvin Van Peebles." *Vice.Com*, 1 June 2010; Van Peebles, M., and J. Surowiecki. "Making it. A conversation with Melvin Van Peebles." *Transition* 79 (1999): 190; Visionary Project Interview. 2009.; *Melvin Van Peebles* (2014); *Olumide Productions Interview*. 2014; Waintrop, Edouard. "Melvin Van Peebles, en permission, ce réalisateur Américain, qui a vécu en France lor des anées 60, repassait á Paris. Son point de vue radical sur le cinema outre-atlantique." *Liberation*. April 19, 1997.

residents, however, the town was strictly segregated. On the jacket of his first book, he describes his early years as a “happy bourgeois childhood” although he tends to cast it as rougher in recent interviews. Van Peebles straddled these two worlds.

Van Peebles was always small in stature, and he didn't like to engage in physical activities like sports. Instead, he spent a lot of time reading and his interest in the arts started early. He tells Lee Ann Norman (2015) that on a class trip to the Art Institute one year he so impressed one of the docents that he received a scholarship for an Art Institute summer program.

Van Peebles's family enrolled him at Thorton Township High School in 1949; a school Van Peebles considered one of the best high schools in the country where out of 2,800 students, he was one of about 50 black students. Van Peebles says he walked about a mile and a half to school every day. There, he learned to speak two languages: “the hygroscopic nuclei stuff on the one hand, and, ‘Yo motha’ fucka’ you didn’t pay me’ on the other hand.” Van Peebles worked all day Saturday and Sunday at his father’s shop saying he never went to prom or sporting events and finished high school when he was sixteen. However, a picture in Joe Angio’s documentary suggests that the young Van Peebles played on the high school tennis team – he was the only African-American player.

As a kid, Van Peebles says he loved movies, but he'd leave the theater with a sense of unease which later he recognized as shame. “When you see a movie with Tarzan, you are for Tarzan! But there are these other characters who resemble me; not Tarzan, you understand? Or the Indians: the ‘Red Skins’... Well, I got tired of that!”

Van Peebles finished high school at sixteen, and his parent enrolled him in the all-black West Virginia State College, but he found the academic standards and resources poor. Plus, he was so young that other kids just picked on him. According to Van Peebles, he joined a fraternity

but quit after a week after getting paddled in a hazing ceremony he said, “Fuck this shit.” He refused to go back after the first year.

The next year he was admitted to Ohio Wesleyan and soon obtained an ROTC scholarship. Van Peebles wanted to be a painter in those days and developed his craft at Wesleyan. His first novel, *A Bear for the FBI*, which Van Peebles once called the story of “a good Jewish boy in blackface” was written in the early sixties and is an autobiographical story of a young black man who leaves his Chicago home for college in small-town Ohio (Gussow). The novel speaks of the loneliness and isolation of college life in de facto segregated campus and town where personal relationships were limited to just a few other African-American students on campus. But, the novel ends on an upbeat note as his parents arrive for his graduation and celebrate their son’s successes.

Van Peebles graduated Ohio Wesleyan in 1953 at the age of twenty. Although his real ambition was to go to Europe, he had to fulfill his ROTC commitments first. He attended basic training in Texas where he recalls being chased by a “lynch mob” while wearing his Air Force officer’s uniform after refusing to sit in the back of the bus. Van Peebles says that in the Air Force he attempted pilot school but that black soldiers were systematically flunked out. He enrolled as a navigator instead and ended up flying B47 bombers at times carrying atomic bombs.

Active in the Air Force until 1957, Van Peebles flew out of Sacramento, California where he lived in a house about two miles out in the desert. A life-changing story he recounts in a couple of interviews is the day he got bumped from a mission and then woke up to a huge explosion in the desert. One of the planes had crashed near his house. He drove out to the crash and discovered it was the plane from which he had been bumped. The navigator who replaced

him died. He says that because of that experience even when he's getting his ass kicked, he is happy to be alive.

He moved to San Francisco where he met Maria Marx who he knew while they attended Ohio Wesleyan together. The two married in 1955 or 1956. Marx was from a liberal family on the east coast, and her mother had been active in the NAACP, while her father taught economics at the university level. After his discharge in 1957, he was unable to find a job with a commercial airline because of racial discrimination. The Van Peebles family went to Mexico City where they could live inexpensively, and Melvin could paint. He made a living by selling paintings and portraits on the street. Maria gave birth to their son, the future director, and actor, Mario Van Peebles while the family resided there.

With an infant and daughter Megan on the way, they returned to San Francisco where after being denied jobs with the commercial airlines, Van Peebles found a job as a cable car operator. He writes the poetic text for a book of photography about the day in the life cable car driver called *The Big Heart* with photos by Ruth Bernhard, an accomplished photographer at the beginning of her career. Later Ansel Adams would call her one of the best nude photographers in the U.S. The book sold well, and Van Peebles claims that the book had two significant effects. First, he got fired saying his boss thought black people shouldn't be allowed to read let alone write a book. He says the cable car bosses told him he fit the psychological profile of someone who might have an accident one day. Secondly, someone in the film industry saw the book and told him he should make a movie.



Figure 1 *The Big Heart*. Text by Melvin Van Peebles.

Van Peebles taught himself filmmaking with the help of a friend in San Francisco who lent him Eisenstein's *Form and Film*. He made three short films over the next year *A King* (1957), *Three Pickup Men for Herrick* (1957), and *Sunrise* (1957). Van Peebles says he started writing music for his films while making these early shorts. One day the musicians didn't show up to record the music, so he just played it on a kazoo instead.



Figure 2 *Three Pick-up Men for Herrick* (1957). One of Van Peebles San Francisco short films.

Excited by his accomplishments with the short films, he made a trip to Hollywood where he hoped to work as a director. But, there was little interest, and he says he was offered menial jobs instead. At that time, a Hollywood had never hired an African-American director for a feature-length film. Van Peebles took the rejection hard and decided to pursue what he calls his second love instead – astronomy. He used his G.I. Bill to apply for an Astronomy program in Holland - the best place to study the kind of astronomical mathematics that interested him.

In 1959, Van Peebles family took the train from San Francisco to New York on their way to Amsterdam. In New York, he met Amos Vogel, the founder of the Greenwich Village-based avant-garde cinema club, Cinema 16. Vogel ran a distribution library for cinema clubs and agreed to put two of Van Peebles's film in his catalog for lease.

From New York, the Van Peebles took a ship to Holland where he enrolled in classes. In his application, he suggested that he would need to “brush up” on his Dutch, but in reality, he didn't know a word which made classes difficult. Meanwhile, his love of the arts persisted, and one day he saw an ad for a black actor and landed a role as Rio Rita, a gay boxer, in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*. During this time he and Maria separated, and she returned to the U.S. with their two young children.

France in 1960

One day in Holland, in the summer of 1960, Van Peebles received a letter with a postcard inside from Henri Langlois and Mary Meerson at the Cinematheque Française inviting him to present his short films. Langlois and Meerson had heard about Van Peebles from Amos Vogel who according to McDonald (2002) had screened Van Peebles's short film *Three Pickup Men for Herrick* at Cinema 16 on a program with a feature-length film called *City of Jazz* in the spring of 1960 with James Baldwin leading a post-film discussion. When Vogel went to Paris shortly after,

he brought Van Peebles's films to show Langlois and Meerson. According to Van Peebles, he received a postcard invitation and hitchhiked to France. The screening in Paris happened in a small swanky theater on the Champs-Élysées owned by Gaumont. It lasted about forty minutes with just a few people attended including the critic Lotte Eisner. Van Peebles says that afterward everyone praised the films, thanked him for coming, kissed him on the cheeks, and drove away. "So, there I am on the Champs-Élysées with three cans of film, two wet cheeks, and not a franc in my pocket." But, he adds: "They had done the most dangerous thing. They'd given me hope." Van Peebles moved to Paris.

In an interview with French academic Jérôme Beauchez (2013), Van Peebles sees the French acceptance and interest in his work as a critical step forward for his film career. "If *Sweetback* launched blaxploitation if it really started independent films in America – all that started with this letter [from Henri Langlois]. So, part of the responsibility goes to France... These people form the Cinematheque – Mary Meerson, Henri Langlois, Lotte Eisner – they invited me, they welcomed me, and they were the first to tell me that I was made for the cinema." While Van Peebles claim to start independent film may be an over-statement (Oscar Michaux was making independent films in the 1920s and 1930s), France's role in his development as a filmmaker is undeniable.

In August 1960, a 28-year old Melvin Van Peebles arrived in Paris. He didn't speak a word of French, but he would learn and stay for about eight years. For decades, Paris had been a refuge for African-American artists, musicians, and writers. Like those who came before him, Van Peebles was seeking a place where his creative energies could find an audience. He arrived in Paris during a time of transition for the African-American expatriate community. The musicians and artists who had first visited the French capital as soldiers or had heard stories

about its relative open-ness from returning GIs were giving away to an economically diverse community increasingly influenced by the Civil Rights movement.

Furthermore, the post-war generation was getting older or not as artistically active. Syndey Bechet, the jazz musician, had just died – and Richard Wright, the best-known American writer in Paris, would pass away a couple of months after Van Peebles’s arrival. African-Americans were as likely to be students on study abroad or work for a French company. Still, the artists liked Van Peebles lived a hardscrabble life eking out a marginal living. Van Peebles tells interviewers that he scraped by playing the kazoo for money in front of the renowned literary cafes like La Flore and Deux Magots where he specialized in songs like Leadbelly’s “Take this Hammer” and “La Bamba.” He was occasionally jailed or harassed by French police especially if they thought he was Algerian. However, quickly, Van Peebles became a fixture of the café scene in the left bank’s 14th Arrondissement, the traditional neighborhood of the post-War diaspora.

Within a year of his arrival, Van Peebles wrote, directed, and composed the music for his 12-minute silent short *Les Cinq Cent Balles (500 Francs)* (1961) inspired by Francois Truffault’s *400 Blows* (1959) which had come out two years before². The Office de Production d’Edition et de Realisation (OPERA), a private production company organized by the financiers Michel Zemer, Guy Pefond, and Christian Shiva produced the film. Les Films de la Pléiade distributed the film. OPERA produced about a dozen feature-lengthen films in the late 1960s including Van Peebles’ *La Permission*.

² The title *Les Cinq Cent Balles* contains a grammatical error committed during the title card creation process. The correct title of the film should be *Les Cinq Cents Balles* (Personal communication, Korb, Liliane, May 7, 2018). Websites like Wikipedia and IMDB list the distribution date of this film as 1963. However, the film’s editor Liliane Korb confirmed that the film was finished in 1961, edited intermittently during her editing of François Reichenbach’s film *The Winner (Un cœur gros comme ça)* released in 1961 in France and 1962 in the U.S. The websites of the distribution company which owns the film and of the French Ministry of Culture’s Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée (CNC) both list 1961 as the distribution date (Personal communication, Korb, Liliane, April 30, 2018).

Pierre Braunberger ran Les Films de la Pléiade. By the 1960s, he was a well-known producer who began his career producing the films of Jean Renoir in the 1930s. He financed the first short-films of Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut such as *All The Boys are Named Patrick* (Godard, 1959) and *The Story of Water* (Godard and Truffaut, 1961) and Truffaut's second feature film *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960). Braunberger became involved in Van Peebles's film when he discovered that two of his employees, cinematographer Jean-Marc Rippert and editor Liliane Korb were helping Van Peebles on the side secretly using Braunberger's equipment.



Figure 3 *Les Cinq Cent Balles (500 Francs)*

Rippert and Korb were working together on the Braunberger-funded *The Winner (Un cœur gros comme ça)* (1962) directed by François Reichenbach. Korb was 20 years old and interning on a series of Braunberger-produced films which she hoped would eventually earn her an editor's professional position. She worked on Jean Rouch's *La Pyramide Humaine* (1961), a Maurice Pialat short film called *Love Exists* (1960), and met Van Peebles in 1961 while working on Reichert's *The Winner*. Korb says Van Peebles had no money for his film and asked her to help him edit on off-peak hours. She agreed. But, she was in trouble when Bruanberger found out. Korb explains that *Les Cinq Cent Balles* "was finalized in secret, without the agreement of

Pierre Braunberger, which earned me annoyances. But as the film was well received, it all came together” (Personal communication, April 30, 2018).

There was a robust industry for short films in France at the time. The post-War French film industry resisted the domination of big-budget American films through both restrictions on the amount of screen time for American films and taxes that support French film production. Initially focused on investing in successful French producers, the *Fonds de Soutien*, a 10.9% tax on all tickets sales, were then available to producers based on the tickets sales from their most recent film. This system bolstered established director/producer teams over newcomers but put actors and craft people to work, the primary concern in the post-war era. The result were big-cast expensive literary or historical spectacles. After criticism of this system, a small number of funds were made available for “quality” films often by first-time directors, the awards determined by a board of industry experts and critics. This system was established for short films in 1953 and extended to feature films in 1955 (Gimello-Mesplomb 147). Cinemas were required to play short films before the feature film. Consequently, producers and directors had a mechanism for receiving funding for short films in France which is likely how Van Peebles and OPERA funded *500 Francs*. Liliane Korb says *500 Francs* played in theaters and was well-received. Braunberger’s successor company, Les Films des Jeudi, owns the rights to the short although it is unclear if Braunberger purchased the film for distribution³.

After *Les Cinq Cent Balles*, it seems that Van Peebles focuses on his writing. This could be because obtaining a director’s card, permitting one to apply for funding for a feature-length film, is much more difficult than making a short film. It could also be that Van Peebles never had any permission to make a short film in the first place. Regardless, Van Peebles hunkers down to write during 1962 and probably completes the majority of his autobiographical work eventually

³ Requests for information regarding this episode in film history to Les Films des Jeudi have gone unanswered.

released as the novel *A Bear for the FBI* – a book about neither bears nor the FBI. However, its publication would not happen until Van Peebles established himself as a journalist.

Mel Gussow (1971), the long-time *New York Times* movie critic, claims that Van Peebles lived on about \$600 per year while in France. Van Peebles says he survived because of relationships with French women who occasionally supported him while he wrote and even assisted him with investigative reporting or translations. Gussow quotes Van Peebles as opining, “The trouble with countesses and baronesses is that they don’t have anything to do all day so they got you walking their poodles and going to cocktail parties and [I] can’t get any work done. I always preferred working girls. They put in 10 hours a day and were tired when they got home. I had all day to write” (15).

Van Peebles had several longer-term relationships with women including with Jeanine Euvard, a future film critic, who claims in Joe Angio’s film, that she lived with Van Peebles for several years. It’s a relationship she describes as “a fabulous, exhausting, and heartbreaking experience.” In Neil Serge’s book *Rive Noir* on African American artists in Paris, he mentions that Van Peebles received critical support in the film industry because of his relationship with “Nicole” – perhaps a reference to the television actress Nicole Berger who had a lead role in François Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player* who he may have met in 1966 or later. She would eventually star in his first feature-film *La Permission* and then tragically die in a car accident soon afterward.

Van Peebles, The French Writer

Van Peebles gets his first big break writing a story for the socialist newsweekly *France Observateur*. He says that one day he is walking down the street and he picks up a newspaper and sees an article about a murder in Evreux, France. In the interview with Beauchez he

explains: “There was a murder in Evreux. I told a newspaper about it, and they allowed me to investigate it; it was a "scoop" as they say in the United States: I discovered things, etc. From there, I worked for this newspaper - *France Observateur*.”

On September 9, 1963, the U.S. Airforce accused six servicemen, five black and one white, at the Evreux U.S. Air Force of murdering Airman 1C Robert Padgett of Woodlawn, Va. Two black servicemen, Raymond Bost of Pittsburgh and Robert Burrell of Philadelphia were charged with unpremeditated murder. *France Observateur* ran Van Peebles’s article “Set Me Free” about the murder at Evreux and the arrest of the African-American soldiers on Sept 12, 1963. Van Peebles interviewed airmen at the bars near the base putting together a story of racism that existed on the base and discovering that there were segregated barracks which would have been a scandal in France because it demonstrated that the U.S. military was importing southern-style segregation. Van Peebles, of course, would have had first-hand knowledge of the circumstances of the black enlisted soldiers and their treatment by Airmen. In his article, he reviews the history of segregation and racism in Virginia, the home of the murdered soldier who other soldiers accused of taunting black soldiers with racial slurs and organizing incidents of intimidation.

France Observateur ran his article and asked him to keep writing. Van Peebles writes at least eight articles during 1963 and 1964 for the publication.⁴ His style is loose, not rigid like most professional journalists, with lots of quotes and an ironic folksy mocking of American and

⁴ A list of articles by Van Peebles in the *France Observateur*:

1. “Set me free” Sept 12, 1963 (On the murder and racism among US soldiers at Evreux airforce base.)
2. “Looking for an apartment” Nov 7 1963
3. “Blues for JFK” Nov 28, 1963
4. “Legal lynching” December 12, 1963 (Follow up article on Evreux)
5. “Daniel Gurien’s *Décolonisation du noir américain*” Jan 23 1964. (Book review)
6. “The Unconquered, Chester Himes” Feb 20, 1964
7. “The victory of a black muslim” March 5, 1964 (about Muhammad Ali)
8. “Harlem on fire” July 23, 1964

French racism. His following article, “Looking for an Apartment” appeared on November 7, 1963. The article recounts a day in the city of lights apartment hunting while black. Multiple times he arranged to see apartments over the phone only to find them unavailable upon his arrival. A couple of weeks later he follows up with “Blues for JFK” a lyrical ode to the recently assassinated President in which he mixes his thoughts on the conspiracy of the assassination with his rejection of the hypocrisy of politicians. The article consists of man-on-the-street interviews with American G. I.’s. In general, his approach is tongue-in-cheek which seems a bit out of place in the straight-laced political newsweekly. After two African-American enlisted men at Evreux are found guilty, he follows up with a report calling the verdict “a legal lynching.”

In early 1964, *France Observateur* sent him to interview Chester Himes, the American novelist living Paris, who had just won a prize for a series of detective novels. Van Peebles didn’t know who Himes was or even that he was black and *The France Observateur* hadn’t bothered to tell Himes the same about Van Peebles. Before they started the interview, they both broke down into laughter at the absurdity of the situation.

The resulting article is a somewhat typical writer profile although Van Peebles’s begins the interview by facetiously asking Himes his opinion of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The accompanying photo shows Chester Himes in close-up with a young Van Peebles in the background.

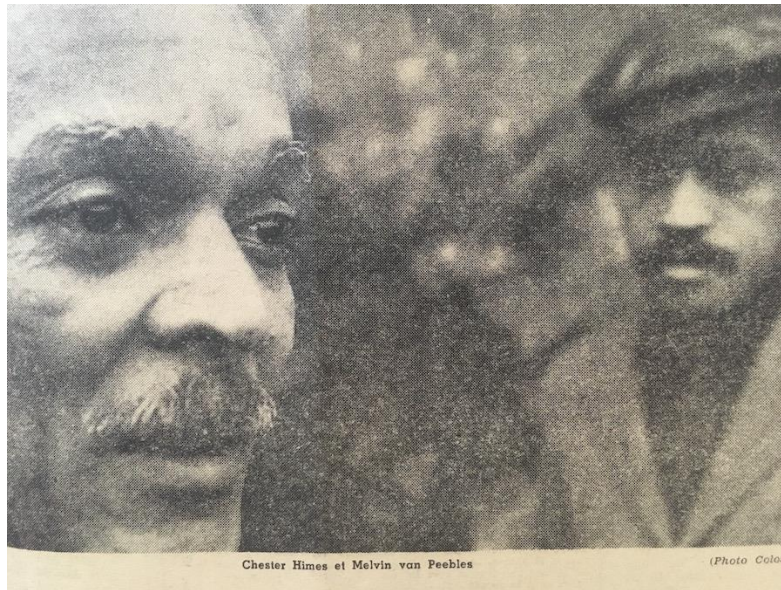


Figure 4 Chester Himes and Melvin Van Peebles. *France Observateur*. “The Unconquered, Chester Himes” Feb 20, 1964

Himes and Van Peebles became friends, and Van Peebles says Himes would feed him when money was low. Himes was about 25 years older than Van Peebles but seemed to have taken him in, and Van Peebles says that the two of them, occasionally accompanied by the painter Herb Gentry, would spend long hours together laughing. They had similar personalities claims Van Peebles: “a little lonely” and that “He and I fell in love! That’s the only way to say it!” Himes introduced Van Peebles to others in the publishing and entertainment industry such as William Targ from G. P. Putnam publishing. In Himes’s (1976) autobiography, he says that when he and his wife moved out of their Rue d’Assas apartment in Paris, Van Peebles and Gentry, helped them load up his beloved Jaguar. Van Peebles and Rosemary Wallbank then moved into the apartment.

In his autobiography, Himes explained that he was entertained by Van Peebles clowning around with a bunch of people at a party one night. The next day a couple of writers from the anti-authoritarian humor magazine *Hara-kiri* came by to ask him to write a column. He said didn’t have time, but recommended Van Peebles. At *Hara-kiri*, Van Peebles helped translate and

illustrate Himes's novel *Le Reine des Pommes* (known in English as *For the Love of Imabelle* and later made into the American film *A Rage in Harlem*) into a comic strip⁵ (Brooks). This project was initially conceived of but never pursued by Pablo Picasso, an acquaintance of Himes. Van Peebles works with the well-known French cartoonist George Wolinski, a regular contributor to *Hara-Kiri* and the editor of the magazine throughout the 1960s.⁶ In a historical coincidence, *La Reine des Pommes* was Himes's first book in a series featuring hard-boiled Harlem detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. The sixth book in the series, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, was later directed by Ossie Davis is considered to be a seminal Blaxploitation work along with Van Peebles's *Sweetback*.

The project with Wolinski led to a monthly column in *Hara-kiri* which lasted from 1964 to 1966 of tall tales about life among the lumpen: the homeless, outcasts, artists, and criminals of the 14th Arrondissement where Van Peebles lived. Each article started with a group of men huddled around a café table during a power outage exchanging stories. The column is called "La Chronique de gars qui said de quo il parle" ("The chronicle of a guy who knows what he's talking about"). Van Peebles's gritty, street-smart style appealed to the French. The series built Van Peebles's reputation, and the collection of these articles was published in 1967 in book form as *Le Chinois du XIVe* illustrated by the surrealist artist Roland Topor and dedicated to the photographer Paul Truffert. In early 1965, *Mad Magazine* launched a French edition of its humor magazine, and Van Peebles was named Editor and Chief for the five issues that came out during its short-lived run.

⁶ During Wolinski's editorship, *Hara-Kiri* was shut down after writing disparaging articles about French President Charles DeGaulle upon his death. The staff renamed the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, a reference to Charles De Gaulle. In 2015, a terrorist entered the office of *Charlie Hebdo* and killed twelve people including George Wolinski.

Van Peebles interviewed Malcolm X in France likely for the *France Observateur* as he passed through France on his way back from Africa probably in November of 1964. Mario Van Peebles writes that in the interview “Malcolm had said some disturbing things and the article was never published, some believe, at the insistence of the U.S. State Department.” (Van Peebles 2004). When Malcolm X was assassinated the next month in Harlem, French television news interviewed Van Peebles about Malcolm’s death and legacy.

Van Peebles published at least two articles in *Le Figaro Littéraire*, the weekly literary magazine associated with the *Le Figaro* daily newspaper. In September 1964, he wrote an article entitled “The Black Bourgeoisie Faces Jericho” in which he describes this tragic class trapped in a collective hallucination that they might one day find acceptance in mainstream American life. He qualifies the use of the term “bourgeoisie” explaining that for black Americans this amounts to anyone with a stable job. What will happen to the black bourgeoisie, he asks, when the American habit of denying that they exist refuses to fall?

In his second article published in February 1965 entitled “Where Is Black Theatre Going?” Van Peebles discusses the difficulty for black actors in Paris to find anything more than bit parts in the stereotypes of the buffoon, the assistant, or the exotic bird. In the article, he says black performers should have integral parts and cites Aime Cesaire’s *Le Roi Christophe* and Van Peebles’s own *Fête a Harlem* as a couple of plays that provide real parts for black actors. At the time of his writing, he is in rehearsals for *Fête a Harlem* and which is performed at the festival de Liege in Belgium that year.

The African-American diaspora in Paris was always a loose-knit group. Tyler Stovall (1996) explains that how much the diaspora stuck with each other varied considerably and that sexual partnership was almost always interracial in part because there were far more African-

American men than women in Paris. Van Peebles reports a similar experience telling Beauchez, “When I was in France, among the Americans there was a sort of expatriate community, white and black, which had been formed. But that did not interest me; I am rather a loner.”

Van Peebles first feature-film credit was a writing credit for Pierre Grimblat’s film *Slogan* (1969) starring Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birken. In his autobiography, Grimblat says that he fell in love with a younger woman who had ended tragically. Heartbroken and depressed, Françoise Truffaut told him he should make it into a screenplay to recover. Grimblat drafted Van Peebles to help with the scenario, and the two installed themselves in the back of the Montparnasse café Le Coupole. Grimblat says Van Peebles destroyed for him any idealism about his once tender love for his muse after a day of interrogating him on the most intimate details of their sexual encounters.

Van Peebles’s career as a novelist took off between 1964 and 1967. He published five books: four novels and the collection of essays from *Hara-Kiri*. Van Peebles wrote his first two novels in English and his second two novels in French showing his growing strength in the language. *A Bear for the FBI* which comes out in 1964 is a straight-forward autobiographical novel.

In his second novel, *A True American*, Abe, a puny black man from the south is railroaded and wrongly imprisoned dying in a prison work quarry accident. At the pearly gates, Jesus holds a hearing on whether he can enter or not asking an angel formerly from Mississippi about black Americans. Abe is once again railroaded, this time right into hell— except that hell is white-people hell which means equality and opportunity for black people. After some time in hell, now educated and aware of the system of racial oppression that existed in America, Abe and his new friend Dave (a sort of Davey Crockett frontiersman) reincarnate to fix America. Abe

wants to teach people about fairness and equality. Dave wants to grow rich and powerful. In the end, Dave and Abe only meet each other after several decades back on Earth only to discover that Dave has been successful at becoming wealthy. Abe is an elevator operator. But, their chance encounter forces Dave to repress his memories of equality while it inspires Abe to join the Freedom Riders – where he sacrifices himself to protect his fellow Riders. A white mob then murders him.

Van Peebles's third novel, *A Party in Harlem (La Fête à Harlem)*, was inspired by a party he attended to in New York in the summer of 1965. Van Peebles says he was state-side working on a documentary in the New York - very likely a Harlem-focused made-for-French-TV documentary inspired by the Harlem of Charles Himes's detective novels. An invitation to a party in Harlem inspired a story about the humble resilience of his hard-drinking hosts. That experience gave rise to another semi-religious fable about two imps, David and Trinity, frustrated by the impervious resistance of a group of open-hearted African-Americans at a party thrown by Miss Maybell in Harlem. Despite their best efforts, the imps can't ruin the party and instead, Trinity falls in love with one of the guests. Frustrated by the entire evening, David turns himself into a cockroach to escape the party, and Miss Maybell stamps him out before he can get away.

Van Peebles writes his second and third novels in the tradition of folk tales or tall tales, an American folk tale tradition in which characters or events are supernatural or exaggerated to provide a moral lesson. In the tradition of African American folk tales, these lessons were often coded messages about racism or poked fun at white slaveowners through allegory.

Van Peebles's final French-written novel is *La Permission (Story of Three-Day Pass)* about the brief romance between an African-American soldier and French woman. White

soldiers discover and report his affair and his commander revokes the promotion. Van Peebles won a national French screenwriting competition for the script of *La Permission*, a significant achievement. The author Jacques Panijel had failed to win the same prize the previous year for Himes's *Une Affaire de viol*. Working with OPERA, the company that produced his short, he was able to receive a production grant of between \$60,000 and \$70,000 through the French Ministry of Culture's Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) (Peavy 2).⁷ This grant was likely a fonds de soutien Award of Quality grant considered an advance on receipts although repayment was only necessary if the film made a profit. The OPERA financing group then matched these funds, and *La Permission* was filmed for somewhere between \$100,000 and \$200,000 (Ebony, p. 54). He completed filming in 1967.

Lilian Korb⁸ says that "In 1966, Melvin contacted me about editing his first feature *La Permission*. This film was made by 'participation' which means that technicians were financially involved in the production and were to receive a percentage of sales and the inputs of the film which never took place because producers were not very reliable. Anyway, the film was made, and it was released in theaters."

While editing *La Permission*, Van Peebles met an African-American man, who was in Europe looking for films for the San Francisco International Film Festival. He asked Van Peebles if he could finish the movie by the time of the festival and Van Peebles said that of course, he could do. Van Peebles attended the festival as a representative of France along with Agnès Varda and Jacques Demy. His film received a jury prize.

⁷ Mendik et al and the Ebony (1968) refer to the "French Film Center" for which I can find no record, but the CNC is the primary source of funding for new French directors. Van Peebles probably shortened the obtuse "Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée" into the "French Film Center" for his American interviewers.

⁸ Lilian Korb would soon after leave the film industry and with her sister write a successful detective novel series under the *nom de plum* Claude Izner about the amateur detective Victor Legrise who solves crimes in 19th century Paris.

The release date for *La Permission* in France was May 1968 and consequently, it did not do well at the box office. Chester Himes says that the film played in smaller theaters around Paris mostly to negative reviews although some Paris intellectual who were free of racist inclinations liked it. Lilian Korb agrees that the movie didn't do well nor was it seen as a critical success in France.

Melvin Van Peebles was the first African-American to direct a feature film in Europe. Van Peebles went to the San Francisco festival as the French entry. Consequently, it's a circuitous route that Van Peebles traveled: to get a film funded and entered in the San Francisco International Film Festival, the city in which he made his first short films, he had to go to France. After Van Peebles's film won a jury award, he was hired by Columbia Pictures to direct *Watermelon Man* in 1970, and he would go on to make the independent *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song*.

Much like Josephine Baker or James Baldwin, Van Peebles established himself as an artist in France before becoming famous in the U.S. Van Peebles embodies an extraordinary intellectual force and would continue to make films, books, and music for decades after. So, like other African-Americans who were shut out of creative professions in the US, he goes to Paris and is the first (if not the only) African-American filmmaker to use this pathway to establish himself as a filmmaker. He returns to the U.S. at the moment that the civil rights movement is finally having an impact on Hollywood. In 1968, Warner Bros. hired Gordon Parks to direct *The Learning Tree* (1969) making it the first studio-produced film by an African-American director. Van Peebles's *Watermelon Man* would be the second.

Van Peebles tells Jerome Beauchez that many people go into film because they are inspired by something. He, on the other hand, went to into film for precisely the opposite reason:

“I was discouraged by the things I had seen [at the movies].” Originally, he had wanted to be a painter saying “I was not that bad [as a painter], but I realized that people I wanted to talk to – and about whom I wanted to talk – didn’t know anything about Kooning, Van Gogh or anyone else... So, I started making movies.” Always in the forefront was making films for black filmgoers who were disgusted by the images they saw of themselves on the screen. At his most political moments, he says his interest in making films that challenge racism and power is his only concern. “If I had thought that selling hot dogs could improve the lot of African Americans, I would never have touched a camera again. I would have sold hot dogs!” But, Van Peebles refuses to tie himself to a particular political agenda or political party in 1968 at the release of *La Permission*. When asked by an interviewer about his politics, he responds: “My politics are to win.” He explains to Mel Gussow (1972) that he isn't timid but rather coy: “You don't call a general timid if he doesn't give you the battle plans for a march.”

Melvin Van Peebles succeeds in France as a journalist, novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and filmmaker. The encouragement he receives from French media institutions is critical for his burgeoning career. Crucial also is his ability to refine his unique vision and sense of humor which confronts racism with both irony and anger. Van Peebles develops his skills and makes his mark in the long tradition of African Americans in Paris. His writing in France confronts racism sometimes straight on with hard-hitting reporting but usually through humor used not to disarm bigotry but as a way to illuminate the cruel and absurd nature of racist institutions and prejudice.

CHAPTER 3

HOW MELVIN VAN PEEBLES RADICALIZED THE FRENCH NEW WAVE

Van Peebles made his early films in dialogue with French film industry then dominated by the New Wave; with U.S. literary history; and with his experience of racism in the United States and France. The films he produced bridged the cultures of France and the U.S. both in aesthetics but also in the unique forms of financing and production found in the two countries. As a result, Van Peebles's work is associated with both the French New Wave and the Blaxploitation cycle of films. In the following chapter, I explore how Van Peebles's appropriates techniques of the French New Wave to explore themes of racism and discrimination in the films he made between 1961 and 1971. I begin with a discussion of differences between Blaxploitation the French New Wave and suggest that these two film movements have some surprising commonalities. These commonalities make it easy for Van Peebles's films to be categorized aesthetically and narratively in both film movements. On the other hand, variations in the systems of financing and profit-making are one way of explaining the aesthetic differences between the two movements. These differences are critical for understanding what channels of self-expression on open to Van Peebles in France and not the U.S. The differences also explain how Van Peebles uniquely combined American-rooted narrative traditions and French-generated aesthetic traditions.

Van Peebles lived for much of the 1960s in France working as a filmmaker, journalist, and novelist. He received funding from the French Ministry of Culture to adapt his novel *La Permission* into a script and then received subsidies to direct it. The film won the Critics Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1967 bringing Van Peebles back to the U.S.

where he would make the studio-funded *Watermelon Man* and then the self-funded *Sweetback*. Throughout his career, Van Peebles has been the consummate do-it-yourselfer always using the resources available to him to overcome the roadblocks to his success. When asked by a reporter once how he got to the top of the film industry, he replied, “No one would let me in at the bottom.” His skills were cultivated and enriched in a culture of do-it-yourself filmmaking in the enthusiasm of the New Wave movement which was also financially supported by the French system of cultural production.

Film Movements: Blaxploitation and the New Wave

There are surprising similarities and essential differences between the economic and social conditions from which the French New Wave and Blaxploitation arise. Both film movements lasted about five years, 1959-1964 for the New Wave and 1970-1975 for Blaxploitation, but both went on to transform filmmaking in their respective countries. In both cases, pent up demand for an underserved audience created an incentive for the new film movements which lead to new financing. Lawrence (2016) argues that the origins of Blaxploitation cinema can be traced to the “historical misrepresentation of blacks in cinema, the civil rights movement, and Hollywood’s financial difficulties” (1). The historical misrepresentation of blacks in Hollywood meant that there was a sizeable movie-going audience starved for multifaceted black characters who succeeded in a world that reflected their own experiences. This underserved audience was created, on the one hand, through by the studio’s race-based restrictions on storytelling, and on the other hand, through the growing black consciousness movement evolving out of the southern civil rights movement and signified by the northern and urban black power movement.

Meanwhile, declining film audiences and the inability of studios to create relevant modern stories which appealed to young movie-goers had created a financial crisis in the industry. Once *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Sweetback* proved (to studio executives) the existence of a viable black audience, studios invested in films like *Shaft* (1971), the success of which saved MGM from bankruptcy. According to Lawrence (2007) in response to ongoing agitation in the civil rights movement and the resulting culture and political pressure to recognize African-Americans as full citizens, studios were regularly pressed to fund black directors, use black actors and hire black film crew employees (17). Until 1969, the studios had still never financed a film directed by a black director.

The advent of the French New Wave was also, in part, a result of the unmet demands of a younger generation of film-goers as well as the idiosyncrasies of the French film production system. As part of the employment promotion policies of the French government in the 1940s and 1950s, film subsidies based on an eleven percent ticket tax called the *Fond de Soutien* skewed resources toward established producers. In turn, producers gravitated to large-scale epic literary and historical productions which were both popular with French audiences and also guaranteed to employ the maximum number of technicians and extras.

According to Neupert (2002) while successful as an employment program, a side-effect of this system was that it became difficult for young directors to make a movie without having completed years of apprenticeships and on-set work (37-39). This created a structural barrier to younger directors entering filmmaking albeit less nefarious barrier but functionally similar to the racist prohibitions against black filmmaking on the part of U.S. studios. Similar to industry stagnation in the U.S. in the late 1960s, the French film industry stagnated in the late 1950s. Attributed in part to the growth of television and car ownership, the number of tickets sold in

France flatlined between 1950 and 1958 (Gimello-Mesplomb 143). However, demographic changes in France and accessible higher education created an explosion in the student population creating an educated professional class who were interested in films outside of the mainstream epics and romances. Cinema publications, the Cinémathèque Française, and a network of ciné-clubs cultivated new audiences with an appreciation for innovative aesthetics among thousands of participants. This led to a pent-up demand for innovative films and more realistic and frank presentations of sexuality and social problems. The French Cultural Ministry responded in the late 1950s by making more funds available for first-time filmmakers. Much like the investments directed towards Blaxploitation cinema after the success of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Sweetback*, the availability of funds for new directors quickly led to the success of *400 Blows* and *Breathless* leading to several dozen New Wave films over the next five years. Further, the government sponsored a chain of art-house cinemas where less commercially viable films by new directors could get screen time.

Films in the Blaxploitation and French New Wave movements are so categorized because they encompass bodies of work which have similar characters, themes, and visual aesthetics. Lawrence (2007) describes the aesthetics of Blaxploitation as both visually and thematically coherent while standing against previous stereotypes and themes. “Blaxploitation films feature a black hero or heroine who is both socially and politically conscious. They also illustrate that blacks are not monolithic by depicting the films’ protagonists in roles of police, detectives, vigilantes, and pimps, among others. The characters are strong because they possess the ability to survive in and navigate the establishment while maintaining their blackness” (18). Further, the black male heroes are sexually liberated breaking a taboo against the expression of black male sexuality on screen. Whites are almost universally the villains in these films and are

defeated by the black hero or heroine through action sequences often involving what was considered excessive violence at that time. Set in urban centers instead of the rural south, Blaxploitation films draw on the grittiness of daily life created by employment and educational discrimination and segregated housing markets of the urban black community. However, the films use imagery, fashion, and music, to promote heroes and heroines who are confident, successful, politically-sophisticated, and socially-aware. The “exploitative” aesthetic of blaxploitation derives from the use of these themes in ways that “affirm the audiences' beliefs” are both “timely and sensational” (21). Elaborate costumes embrace the latest fashion trends including African-themed accessories or dress cuts in case of Cleopatra Jones or implying success or toughness in the case of Shaft’s leather coat or Superfly’s mink. The films also cultivate images signifying the black power movement such as afros, black leather coats, berets, and turtlenecks as well as the presence of household African-artifacts, and posters referring to political prisoners like Angela Davis and George Jackson. Critical to the aesthetic of Blaxploitation is the distinctive rhythm and blues soundtracks which differentiate the style as black and urban. Blaxploitation fundamentally transformed the portrayal of black characters and black communities in U.S. cinema. Soon after, a new genre of action films appropriated its action-based themes.

The French New Wave was influential in the transformations of the style and practice of French cinema in the late 1950s and 1960s. Marie (2008) defines the aesthetic program of the French New Wave as including the director as auteur, the flexibility of the shooting script, natural locations, small crews, direct sound, natural lighting, and non-professional actors. Themes of young people coming-of-age in an oppressively traditional or uncaring commercial and bureaucratic society are the primary themes. For instance, in *400 Blows* (1959), Truffaut

recounts the story of a devious and neglected troubled boy living in a society that is unsupportive of his maturing process. Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* (1958) involves a working-class youth who missed his opportunity to go to university straining against small-town traditions and alcoholism. Godard's *Breathless* (1960) is about a small-time criminal at odds with a society who dooms himself by delaying his flight from the police while trying to convince his girlfriend to run away with him.

As these plot summaries illustrate, New Wave characters could not be more different from Blaxploitation leads. Characters at the center of New Wave narratives are not heroes, but rather complicated outcasts who often hurt people as much as they are injured. Their disconnection and personal ennui drive them to recklessly thrash their way through life unsuccessfully seeking to overcome these absences. According to Bordwell (1979), this leads to narratives in which the "heroes" are more victims of circumstances, reacting to the world rather than acting on the world. Finally, New Wave filmmakers are associated with new cinematic editing and narrative techniques such as the jump cut, freeze frames, direct address, and rapid changes in perspective. A disregard for continuity editing leads to distortions of diegetic space and time. Uncertainty in character attributes and motivation is developed through formal elements such as improvised acting and direct address.

The French New Wave was branded as high-art cinema and re-invigorated France's international cinematic reputation. Bordwell (1979) uses it as a primary example of international art house cinema. Meanwhile, the term Blaxploitation suggests that producers and marketers have depleted these films of artistic merit for commercial purposes. Blaxploitation cinema is sometimes dismissed for weak plots and poor acting. New Wave films are often embraced for the

same. The similarities in their conditions of production and social forces is obscured by these branded market position.

A distinct group of personalities defines both Blaxploitation and the French New Wave. An ideology of directorial authorship called *auteurism* drives the French New Wave approach. According to Bordwell (1979) directors as much as actors define the film's look and their directorial mark is a critical sense-making device for audiences. The personalities of the five critic-directors associated with *Cahiers du Cinema* (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette) imbue their often personalized narratives from their own experiences and publicly-known personal relationships.

Nevertheless, there were stars like Antoine Doinel, Anna Karina, Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Moreau associated with the New Wave. These personalities, Marie (2008) argues, are an aspect of the aesthetic element of the New Wave elevating the prestige of the technical practices. The *auteurist* fingerprint defined the New Wave just as the actors such as Pam Grier and Richard Roundtree and characters such as Coffy, Cleopatra Jones, Shaft, Youngblood Priest, and The Mack defined Blaxploitation. Concomitantly, the physical features and personalities of its characters and actors also marked the Blaxploitation aesthetic. The most successful of these characters like Shaft and Coffy earned sequels - a rare practice at the time.

A significant difference between the French New Wave and Blaxploitation was in the system of film financing that developed and produced these films. In 1959, film financing reforms at the Ministry of Culture's Le Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) re-directed film funds to new directors by way of a committee of directors, producers, and critics. These awards included the *avance sur recettes* (advanced on receipts) which were provided to filmmakers prospectively but not owed if revenues failed to materialize (Gimello-Mesplomb

147). These incentives provided a financial cushion for new directors to experiment with their artistic vision with less concern for profitability. In fact, after *Breathless* in 1959, Godard would make three commercially unsuccessful films until his success with *Contempt* (1963) starring Brigitte Bardot. Those poorly performing films are now considered by many as classics and continue to receive worldwide distribution. No such system to encourage artistic expression existed in the United States and black-themed films were circumscribed in a white-controlled studio system responding to financial incentives which emphasized returns on investment and pushed filmmakers towards repeating previously lucrative character types and storylines. Guerrero (1993) explains that Blaxploitation “arises from the film industry’s targeting the black audience with a specific product line of cheaply made, black-cast films shaped with the ‘exploitation’ strategies Hollywood routinely uses to make the majority of films” (67). This was during a time of change in the Hollywood studio system which shifted investments from production to distribution; ousting the old studio heads; reducing budgets; ending the reliance on blockbusters and epics; and opening up to a variety of independent and new production themes and styles (83). It’s interesting to speculate if *Sweetback* could have served as the *Breathless* of a popular auteur movement in African-American cinema if only a state agency tasked to overturn Hollywood’s racist history had funded independent black filmmaking without the concern of short term returns on investment.

Further, the segmentation of the film market meant that black consumers were one of many market segments which studios targeted with a new lower-cost production model. While the studios’ focus on their return on investment was standard, the extreme caution in limiting investment risk for black-audiences was unique. There are two reasons that this likely occurred. First, white producers and financiers were inexperienced and unknowledgeable about marketing

to black consumers. Small investments were a secure approach in the perceived high-risk market segment. Secondly, a built-up demand for black characters and black-themed movies meant that initial offerings met a high demand regardless of quality, making cheaply-made products just as popular as well-made films.

The dominant model for Blaxploitation cinema was driven by companies like American International Pictures (AIP) (creators of *Blacula* (1972), *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) among dozens of other Blaxploitation films) which claimed they never lost money on a movie because they insisted on low-budgets and low production values accompanied by high-octane, and often misleading marketing. It was AIP's model that emphasized the exploitative nature of the approach to African-American themes.

Similarly, budgets for French New Wave films were significantly lower than those of mainstream French cinema. In both countries, success in the new market niches led to larger budgets. Warner Brothers, the financier for *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), probably spent more money on the film's opening scene than AIP spent for the entire budget of *Blacula* (1972). However, as cheaply made black films flooded the market, black consumers rejected the poor quality and repetitive themes (Guerrero 71). The Blaxploitation audience declined in part because of oversaturation. Furthermore, studios discovered that they could capture both black and white audiences with cross-over films such as martial arts film starring Bruce Lee. In France, the original group of New Wave filmmakers explored a variety of styles and techniques, and the adoption of the themes and aesthetics by mainstream French directors deteriorated the coherence of the French New Wave as a school. Eventually, Godard would direct Brigitte Bardot in color with Bardot's salary consuming half of the budget.

The case of Melvin Van Peebles is unique because his experience spans the two film movements. In France, like most French auteurs, his filmmaking was nurtured through state support for artistic expression where he was able to survive as a journalist, novelist, and filmmaker. He returns to the U.S. at the moment in which the success of the civil rights movement and the increasingly vocal black demands for representation made conditions ripe for an African-American New Wave. It's in this moment that he creates *Sweetback*, a defiant black independent film with avant-garde politics confronting American racism, yet greatly informed by the avant-garde aesthetics of the French New Wave.

New Wave Roots in *Les Cinq Cent Balles*

Between 1961 and 1971, Van Peebles made four films, a short and three features. In 1961, less than a year after arriving in France, he wrote, directed, and composed the music for the 12-minute silent short *Les Cinq Cent Balles (500 Francs)*.⁹ The title *500 Francs* is a clever play on Truffaut's *400 Blows*. As in Truffaut's famous film, Van Peebles features a neglected French boy on the streets of Paris trying to rescue a 500 Franc bill from the bottom of a drain gutter which lays two feet below the grill. He's unable to snag the bill on his belt despite repeated tries. After a trip home to beg his mother for money, he returns to the water drain to make a second effort when an Algerian street person approaches. An experienced survivor of the streets, the Algerian pulls out a rod with a nail to grab the money. The boy, however, throws rocks at the Algerian who fights back almost knocking the boy unconscious. When he comes to, the boy severely cuts the man with his belt and finally the Algerian retreats. Just then, a deluge of

⁹ The title *Les Cinq Cent Balles* contains a grammatical error committed during the title card creation. The correct title of the film should be *Les Cinq Cents Balles* (Personal communication, Korb, Liliane, May 7, 2018). Liliane Korb confirmed that the film was finished in 1961 and released in 1961 in France and 1962 in the U.S (Personal communication, Korb, Liliane, April 30, 2018). The websites of the distribution company which owns the film and of the French Ministry of Culture's Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) both list 1961 as the distribution date.

water comes down the street, and despite the boy's efforts to delay and redirect the water, the bill washes away.

Like Truffaut's young Antoine Dionel from *400 Blows*, Van Peebles's boy is a multi-layered character: a neglected victim who is at times vicious. According to Neupert (2002), Truffaut draws out the viewers sympathy for his condition and then undermines that sympathy by Antoine's deceptive or cruel actions (184). Similarly, Van Peebles's boy spends his time in the streets. But, when approached by the Algerian, he turns brutal and greedy and ends up a victim of the Algerian's adult strength before fighting back and injuring him. Anne Gillian (2000) argues that in *400 Blows*, Truffaut associates Antoine with themes of "trash, dirt, and mess" as Antoine is often dirty or covered in ink, in charge of the garbage at their apartment, and unbathed. Similarly, Van Peebles's covers his characters with dirt and grime and the short revolves around the water drainage system and the garbage that collects there.

The racial dimension of the boy's competition with the Algerian is the most significant departure from the themes of *400 Blows*. Driven by his childish desires but also his sense of entitlement, the impoverished boy violently attacks the Algerian adult, forcing him away. While fighting each other, they miss the opportunity to recover the bill suggesting the benefits of solidarity among poor people and how racism undermines this solidarity.

In an email interview with one of the editor,s Liliane Korb, she says that Van Peebles probably wanted to "stand out... in substance and form, to tell a story of the present, in a given period, to be heard by a younger audience mired in colonial wars..." At the time of its filming, France was in a brutal colonial war in Algeria. In 1960, the government banned Godard's film *Le Petite Soldat* (1963) on that topic. Van Peebles attempt to criticize the mistreatment of Algerians in France at a heightened moment of conflict was a bold statement and would not have been

popular with censors or government funding agencies, but demonstrates his intent to attack the most controversial issues head-on.



Figure 5 *Les Cinq Cent Balles*. The boy and the Algerian.

500 Francs shows that Van Peebles had access to the film industry in France quickly after his arrival. Despite praise for the film, Van Peebles was unable to use it to gain funding for a follow-up film. He says that you couldn't make a feature film in France without a director's card, but he figured out that he could apply for a director's card by becoming a writer.

Eventually, he received a grant to turn his novel *La Permission* into a screenplay and won a production grant of \$60,000 through the French Ministry of Culture's Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) (Van Peebles 16; Peavy 2). According to *Ebony* magazine, a production company matched these funds, and Van Peebles filmed *La Permission* in 1967 for \$100,000 to \$200,000.

Direct Address and Jump Cuts in *La Permission*

If *500 Francs* invokes *400 Blows*, then Van Peebles's first three feature films build on the editing techniques and aesthetic sensibilities of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless (À bout de souffle)* (1960). Of Van Peebles's feature-length films, *La Permission* is most often referred to as Van Peebles's New Wave Film; although all three have been called New Wave-influenced by various

commentators (Chaffin-Quiray, Woodard). In *La Permission*, Van Peebles shifts the axis of racial prejudice back to the U.S., which was more palatable to French funders and audiences. In an interview with Jonathan Smith (2010), Van Peebles explains “Well, the French loved it [the focus on U.S. racism] because they thought it showed how liberal and open-minded they are, but that’s bull-shit.”

La Permission is the story of Turner (Harry Baird), a black U.S. soldier stationed in France who receives a promotion and a three-day pass. After a racially-coded lecture from his commanding officer on “trust and duty... and you know what I mean by trust,” he heads to Paris. He meets Miriam, played by Nicole Berger, a well-known French actress who had central roles in Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player* and Godard’s short film *All the Boys Are Called Patrick*. In an innovative scene at a bar, Van Peebles places both Turner and the camera on a moving dolly to give the appearance of Turner floating through the crowd. He asks Miriam to dance and eventually to accompany him to the seaside. While enjoying an afternoon at the beach, three fellow soldiers discover their liaison. Turner knows that punishment is imminent for his inter-racial relationship. The couple declares their love and parts ways the next day, promising to continue their relationship. Upon his return, the commanding officer strips Turner of his promotion and confines him to the base. When Turner finally gets a chance to call Miriam, she refuses to take the call.

Van Peebles embraces a staple theme of the French New Wave in *La Permission*: the impossibility of satisfaction in a romantic relationship. However, he projects it on the commanding officer’s prohibition against inter-racial romance. In Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player* and *Jules and Jim* (1961), as well as in Godard’s *Breathless* and *The Little Soldier* every

couple is separated by the death of one of the lovers at the end of the movie. Van Peebles uses this narrative device to force the viewer to confront race-prohibitions to romantic relationships.

Van Peebles combines effects such as jump cuts and direct address to re-create the experience of being the object of racial prejudice. David Bordwell (1984) explains that critics typically interpret jump cuts as a representation of subjective “character psychology, verisimilitude, authorial presence, and personal style [of the director].” The first of these categories imply that the jump cuts affect the meaning of subjective characteristics of the character and the second, verisimilitude, means the jump cut represents the objective encounters of the characters. In *Breathless*, the jump cuts, when referencing character psychology, indicate Michel’s impatience and compulsive personality. When read as an objective encounter, they suggest the randomness and dangers of chance events (10).

A second technique important for understanding how Van Peebles adapts New Wave devices is in the use of direct address. Tom Brown’s (2012) work on direct address deals with forms of address that create a connection between the viewer and the actor or film. He argues that direct address can serve a variety of functions such as to create intimacy, agency, honesty, and instantiation (13-17). Particular instances of direct address may augment one or more of these characteristics or activate a constellation of effects. For example, instantiation implies a heightened presence of the speaking character which might increase the sense of intimacy or suggest honesty.

Van Peebles pushes these editing choices in new directions, layering and combining them throughout the film. For instance, Van Peebles uses direct address at critical moments in *La Permission* both to create a sense of the presence of his characters, but also to reposition the viewer to more fully experience that presence. He breaks the fourth wall in the same way Godard

does with Anna Karina in *Le Petite Soldat*. As Bruno snaps photos of Anna Karina, shots alternate between the two until she suddenly turns and poses in direct address and we hear the camera click several times. The effect is one of surprise and intimacy as the audience subsumes the place of the photographer (and the camera). Similarly, in *La Permission*, the audience subsumes the diegetic location of the protagonist during direct address.¹⁰ The viewer subsumes Turner's point of view, a technique Van Peebles uses, perhaps, to create empathetic identification with Turner. A strategy that seems to be an attempt to pre-empt the judgement of the inter-racial relationship by a white French film audience.

Van Peebles's layering of image and sound and attention to the modulation of the rhythm and pacing is a signature of his filmmaking. In the first minutes of the film, Turner sits through a three-minute long lecture on "duty and trust." Van Peebles films the entire scene in direct address and Turner is absent, never speaking or appearing, and consequently, the viewer replaces him in the film. The scene lasts 3 minutes and 26 seconds and has seven cuts, all of which are jump cuts with shot lengths decreasing as the intensity increases. Shot lengths are 36, 20, 11, 04, 08, 08 and 23 seconds. The jump cuts move the commander from his desk to the door to the window chopping up his speech and echoing the distortions of the commander, who switches between authoritative scolding and insipid pleading and cajoling. The result offers up the commander for our inspection and replaces the details of the diatribe with the general sense of being lectured.

The most significant use of discontinuous editing in *La Permission* occurs during a seven-minute sequence in the car while Turner and Miriam drive to the shore. The first five minutes, Miriam directly addresses the camera speaking to Turner who is only cut into the scene

¹⁰ The way in which Van Peebles uses direct address may not meet Tom Brown's definition, but the effect is to create what Brown recognizes as a subjective connection between the viewer and the character: enhanced agency and enhanced intimacy.

occasionally through his reflection in the rearview mirror. While Miriam talks about the weather and her job, Van Peebles accentuates the sense of intimacy through a series of axial jump cuts alternating between close-ups and extreme close-ups. The section has a relaxed editing pace with an average shot length of 7.7 seconds. After a one-minute stop at a cafe, a second sequence in the car suggests Turner's growing arousal and excitement. As Miriam talks, cuts leap from her direct address to her legs and skirt, and the road ahead. The editing accelerates to an average shot length of 2.25 seconds combined with 13 freeze frames. Miriam's dialogue is barely comprehensible as Van Peebles injects discordant audio - especially over shots of Miriam's legs and skirt. No longer able to concentrate on Miriam's words, Turner, and the viewer are disoriented, lost in Miriam's disassembled physicality.



Figure 6 Miriam in direct address in *La Permission*.

The viewer assumes Turner's place one more time in the film: a two-second shot on the beach in which white soldiers discover Turner with his new French girlfriend. He realizes that his rendezvous will end in the loss of his promotion. At three critical moments of the film which illuminate the tension of the plot: the illegitimate authority over his actions, his desire, and his

discovery, Van Peebles employs direct address in ways that use agency, intimacy, and instantiation to heighten the viewer's empathetic experience of Turner's dilemma.

The aesthetic effect has much to do with how these techniques encounter and interact with other elements of the film. Referring to Bordwell's discussion of jump cuts, Van Peebles uses jump cuts to portray subjective experience in the case of Turner's excitement and attraction through a wild succession of cuts. He uses it as an objective encounter when confronted with the commander's disjointed lecture.

In an e-mail interview with the film's editor Liliane Korb, reflecting on the editing process fifty years later, she says, "you start with the film footage you have, and sometimes this leads to a new aesthetic approach." Regarding the New Wave style of *La Permission*, she explains that she can make some tentative inferences about the aesthetics. She says that in France at the time filmmakers were influenced by the darkness of the noir thrillers. Secondly, Korb says that the lack of financial resources which caused them to "work light and turn the film around quickly... always generates creativity and imagination." Finally, new techniques and equipment influenced their editing of the film without the need for "an army of technicians." She cites the use of new UHER Reel to Reel audio equipment and blimp microphones as important for filming *La Permission*.

Psychological Distress and Freeze Frames in *Watermelon Man*

The critical success of *La Permission*, especially the jury prize at the San Francisco International Film Festival, generated write-ups in industry magazines and articles in *Ebony*, leading to an opportunity for Van Peebles to direct *Watermelon Man* for Columbia Pictures. In this studio-produced film, Jeff Gerber (Godfrey Cambridge) plays a white bigot who turns black one night and then must face a society based on racial prejudice and discrimination. He is forced

by the neighborhood association to sell his house and Althea (Estelle Parsons), his liberal wife, abandons him. The satiric arc of the film finds Jeff moving through the five stages of grief after discovering that he is black. In the end, he achieves acceptance and joins a proto-black power organization.



Figure 7 In *Watermelon Man*, Van Peebles combines television sitcom and New Wave styles

Scholars have connected the *Watermelon Man* aesthetic with the French New Wave. In a recent issue of *Screen*, George Derk (2018) compares the freeze frame of the film's final scene with the final freeze frame at the end of *400 Blows*. Raquel Gates (2014) describes the peculiar aesthetics of *Watermelon Man* as a result of "the influences of both the French New Wave and American sitcom" (11). She attributes the sitcom aesthetic to the prior experience of the crew with which Van Peebles worked: the Art Director, the Set Director, and the child actors were all regulars working on television productions (17). In this unique blend, it's easy to overlook how Van Peebles integrates his interest in the New Wave aesthetic into a well-funded, slapstick comedy shot on a sound stage. Charles Wilson, Jr. (2016) points out that the film only meets some of Lawrence's criteria for Blaxploitation and that the film is usually not categorized as

such. He adds: “instead of black culture and black identity being exploited, it is the assumed American culture and values system that are exploited/exposed” (41). Gates calls it “a multi-layered critique of white racism and white privilege, operating on both micro and macro aesthetic levels” (11).

The first half of the film involves Jeff ricocheting between denial, bargaining, and depression then exploding in panic and anger. At these explosions, Van Peebles employs radical shifts in perspective, camera-tilts, and rapid changes in colorization to indicate states of psychological distress caused by the shock of realization of his true black self. When Jeff discovers that he is black in his bathroom mirror, Van Peebles films in an extreme close up while colored gels rotate across the screen. Then as he stares at his new black skin in the mirror in panic (a shot the audience sees in close-up from the front), Van Peebles intercuts several half second shots of extreme close-ups of his panic-stricken face from the moment of realization. As he investigates his skin, he moves closer to the mirror and bumps into the glass through which the scene is being shot; revealing the technical apparatus of the shot.

Later, during the scene in which Jeff reveals his black skin to Althea, an establishing shot has Jeff on the left and Althea on the right. As their argument grows, the shots alternate from over Jeff’s right shoulder with Jeff in the foreground and Althea in the middle-distance; to a shot from the extreme opposite angle, a long shot from outside the bathroom door with Althea in the middle-ground and Jeff in the background; and then back to two similar angles on the establishing shot. As the argument changes tone, the camera flips sides of the room with Jeff on the right and Althea on the left. It’s a dizzying scene that pushes the boundaries of continuity editing.



Figure 8 Jeff Gerber in existential panic in *Watermelon Man*.

Van Peebles repeats this approach of wide swings in perspective in several other scenes. When the facemask Jeff purchases fails to make him white, he runs from room to room screaming while filmed in long shots through doors with alternating shots through gels. When Jeff becomes angry with the whitening creams, Van Peebles adds overhead shots. While he maintains temporal continuity except for the panic inserts in the original discovery bathroom scene, the psychological distress warps the spatial coherence of the Gerber home into a funhouse of mirrors egging on Gerber's slapstick distress.

Later in the film, as Jeff discovers the reality of racism all around him, he goes through what Wilson (2016) called the "transitional moment as he can no longer deny his new existence" (52). Van Peebles uses a series of freeze frames with title inserts to indicate these important evolutionary moments, marked by encounters with his boss and the agent at the employment office. These freeze frames mark the transformation of his psychological distress into higher levels of awareness of the racist obstacles in front of him. For Nueport (2002), describing the French New Wave, the freeze frame is employed "to stop action, much like a photographer's camera would, helping to foreground the emotion of his characters while isolating specific

moments in time” (203). However, Van Peebles uses extreme shifts in perspective and color for psychological distress and freeze frames for psychological stability. The comedy of the film belies the repurposed New Wave techniques. Further, these devices function to expose the psychological dynamics of the growing self-awareness and the protagonist of the intractability of racist institutions.

Donald Bogle (2001) categorizes *Watermelon Man* as “the classical tragic mulatto movie of the early separatist 1970s” (235). However, Bogle’s historical analysis of the evolution of black stereotypes in film tends to impose old stereotypes on these newer more nuanced characters. Raquel Gates (2014) furthers this discussion by explaining that the “whiteface appearance of Godfrey Cambridge [as Jeff Gerber] calls attention to the normative functions of whiteness in both film and everyday life” representing “whiteness from an independent black-oriented perspective” (9-10). She points out how the film establishes the constructed nature of Gerber’s whiteness with his elaborate work routines and “masculinity that is overperformed” creating “an incredibly inauthentic whiteness” and a “bizarre appearance” in whiteface (15).

James Surowiecki (1999) sees the parallel arcs of the Gerber and Sweetback characters. “Jeff Gerber, white insurance agent, and Sweetback, black prostitute, begin about as far apart as they could, but in Van Peebles’s world they both end up black revolutionaries.” He adds, “Slowly, inexorably, Jeff Gerber becomes a black man, from the outside in” (179). However, I argue that Jeff Gerber is not a white man who becomes black but rather black man playing (or pretending to be) a white man on a journey to revolutionary black consciousness. This reading makes sense in part because Van Peebles’s other films have this same story: a black man’s movement toward a higher level of political consciousness about racism. Despite the

melodramatic and clownishness of the television aesthetic, Van Peebles employs techniques like the freeze frame to elevate the transformation to black consciousness.

Narrative Structure and Experimentation in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*

Van Peebles is best known for *Sweetback*, his third feature-length film. Released at the peak of the Black Power political and cultural revolution, it was an extraordinary hit among young African-Americans. Huey Newton promoted *Sweetback* by writing a detailed scene by scene analysis and devoting an issue of *The Black Panther* to the film. The film was required viewing for party members. At the same time, negative reviews from black newspapers and more established black leaders made the film a source of debate in the black community (Butters).

More than any other Van Peebles film, *Sweetback* replicates the mode of production of the early New Wave films. He relies on friends and family to make the film, uses public settings, natural light, hand-held and light-weight equipment to create a realistic and gritty personal film. Van Peebles embarks on *Sweetback* using his own financial resources, an understanding of how the Los Angeles studio system functions, and the skills of an experienced director (Chaffin-Quiray; Massood 154). This combination allows him to circumvent the constrictions of institutional power and effectively utilize his small budget. *Sweetback* was produced, written, directed, and edited by Van Peebles who also starred in the film and assisted in composing the music. For *Sweetback*, critics occasionally mention the connection to the aesthetics of the French New Wave (Wiggins; Massood 132). Nelson George once called it “a European art film set in Watts” (Surowiecki 179).

Sweetback is the story of a male sex worker named Sweetback who develops an awareness of racial oppression after he instinctively beats two police officers who are torturing a

young black political activist. This incident forces him to run. During his flight, the unity of the black and brown communities of the southwest mislead authorities and cover up his escape.

I have argued thus far that Van Peebles repurposes New Wave techniques (direct address, jump cuts, and freeze frames) allowing them to carry new meanings beyond what has typically been assigned to these techniques by critics of New Wave films. Finally, I want to add “narrative structure” to the list of methods that associates Van Peebles’s films stylistically with the New Wave. David Bordwell (2008) explains that the French New Wave is a primary example of International Art Cinema (153) which is characterized by a narrative structure distinct from the classical Hollywood narrative in that the protagonist reacts to a set of circumstances rather than pursues a goal. These narratives then are ones of psychological reaction to conditions resulting in ambiguous outcomes rather than stories in which characters take the initiative to overcome an obstacle (156). Van Peebles’s characters similarly are reactive rather than heroes of action. *Sweetback* and the protagonists in Van Peebles’s other feature-films maintain a fundamental characteristic of the Art Cinema protagonists. *Sweetback*’s goal is to get away or to stay alive. He is reactive to the system of racial oppression.

Sweetback violates the classical Hollywood narrative definition in other ways beyond Bordwell’s description. Yearwood (2000) points out that “the script’s minimalist approach to dialogue... is a severe violation of the classic narrative tradition” (204). Masood (2009) adds that “the film’s famous coda leaves the narrative unresolved, a rarity at this point in Hollywood filmmaking” although this unresolved ending is not ambiguous in the New Wave sense (155). It’s just not yet finished. All of these diversions from classic narrative structure set *Sweetback* apart from Blaxploitation films which adhere to the formula of a heroic character with an achievable goal taking control of a situation to solve a crime or fight injustice.

In *La Permission*, Turner's dilemma of desire versus prohibition precludes a definite objective. His goal is to go to the beach with Miriam, who puts up almost no resistance to his advances. The obstacle to his happiness is the inability to continue the relationship when the Amry applies U.S. racial prohibitions in France. Jeff, in *Watermelon Man*, has no goal other than to survive his transition from white consciousness to black consciousness; reconstituting his life as a black man.

However, Van Peebles's films also diverge from the Art Cinema structure. New Wave protagonists drift through modern life bereft of goals while Van Peebles's heroes, faced with racial oppression, don't have this luxury and must fight against oppressors to retain their humanity. This creates a sense of urgency missing from, for instance, Godard's Michel.

Van Peebles uses freeze frames and jump cuts to elicit meaning in several critical scenes: the opening sex scene, the beating of the police officers, the sex duel, and his discovery behind the brothel and during the second half of the film while Sweetback makes progress in his flight. For Neupert (2002), the freeze frame is employed "to stop action, much like a photographer's camera would, helping to foreground the emotion of his characters while isolating specific moments in time." In the controversial opening scene in which a pre-adolescent Sweetback is sexually initiated by with one of the prostitutes, repeated freeze frames both undermine and emphasize the woman's ecstasy. Yearwood (2000) argues Van Peebles's approach to sexuality in *Sweetback* "denies the sexual pleasure associated with a sex scene in the classical narrative" (198). The woman's ecstasy is not activated but interrupted by freeze frames and further disrupted by the accompanying religious hymns of "Wade in the Water" and "This Little Light of Mine." However, these freeze frames emphasize the importance of this scene as the formative source of Sweetback's name and consequent identity as a sex worker (Wiggins 38-39).

In the sex duel with the motorcycle gang leader, “the images come and go in a rapid editing sequence. The viewer is unable to grasp them satisfactorily to savor their pleasure” (Yearwood 195). However, Ongiri (2010) argues “the repetitive use of freeze frames and stills reinforces and reinstates a masculinity that is ultimately static and all-powerful” (181). For Ongiri, the freeze frame reifies “Black male sexuality as active and omnipotent, possessing even the power to stop narrative.” While Ongiri differs in her critique of how the technique distorts sexuality, my point is that both Yearwood and Ongiri recognize a deployment through a radical repurposing of the technique. In *La Permission*, Van Peebles deploys the freeze frame as one of a constellation of techniques to represent the protagonist’s subjective sexual excitement. Here, it is used oppositely, to interrupt sexual action and voyeurism.

Sweetback, more than any other Van Peebles’s films makes use of jump cuts. Neupert’s appraisal of the jump cut in the French New Wave that the “visual style complicates rather than clarifies cause-effect events and the worlds of the characters... it emphasizes the arbitrariness of the story construction, creates permanent complexity and ambiguity, and calls the viewer’s attention abruptly to the labor of signification” suggests that this is the only way in which these techniques can provide (or undermine) meaning (Neupert 218). However, Van Peebles’ jump cuts perform an entirely different function. Instead of primarily undermining the apparatus of cinema, they provide disjointed and uncertain terrain through which *Sweetback* must traverse.

It’s difficult to decipher whether *Sweetback* is making progress or not during much of the film and the incoherence of space and time serve to heighten the uncertainty of flight. Regarding Bordwell’s distinction between subject and objective references, the jump cuts tend to highlight the objective struggle to escape the obstacles in front of him: the physical terrain and repressive authorities between him and the Mexican border. Instead of removing the viewer from the story,

the jump cut encourages the viewer to experience the panic and uncertainty of his escape withholding information to create a dramatic effect and then permitting the viewer to fill in the blanks. Further, I agree with Ongiri's assessment that "Sweetback's journey is very much meant to mirror the spectator's own journey to consciousness" (179). In this sense, the disorientation of space in *Sweetback* serves to socialize or generalize the physical terrain of the narrative into a psychological state that would activate the interpretation of audiences especially young black audiences who might have experiences of dangerous or uncertain encounters with the police (Wiggins 34). Yearwood (2000) recognizes the narrative destabilizing effect is not towards "permanent complexity and ambiguity" but rather towards "disturbing the traditional position of the viewer as consumer" and as a "refusal to produce Hollywood's cinematic grammar and syntax. Van Peebles uses his camera, not as a simple servant of the film's narrative development, but to reformulate the question of cinema as a mode of writing" a maneuver which "forcefully moves attention to the uses of cinematic language and other political and ideological questions" (187-188). In this sense, Van Peebles uses techniques associated with the vagueness of early New Wave films in such a way that they elicit the audience's own experience of racial oppression as a critical sense-making device (Reid 28). Van Peebles's re-appropriation of the jump cut in this way radicalized the techniques for a U.S. black audience. While it's fruitful to track how Van Peebles employs these techniques in his films, it's impossible to reduce *Sweetback* to isolated editing decisions. Van Peebles, by this time, is a masterful filmmaker who activates an enormous amount of directing and editing techniques to achieve an overall aesthetic effect.

In the scene in which Sweetback wins a sex duel with a motorcycle gang leader, Sweetback and Moo Moo are captured by a white biker gang and everything about the set up of

this scene suggests the dynamics of a lynching. The bikers decide to have fun with the two of them and challenge them to a duel allowing Sweetback to pick his weapon. He, of course, chooses “fucking” once he discovers that the gang leader is a woman. Consequently, Van Peebles reverses the narrative of the lynching which was often justified by a supposed transgression of the cultural norm which prohibited a black man’s (stereotypically insatiable) sexual desire for a white woman. In the sex duel, Van Peebles violates the taboo through a ridiculous affirmation of the stereotype.

The sex duel scene suggests Van Peebles’s commitment to experimental techniques. For instance, lighting in this scene involves halo lighting, backlighting, and lighting from motorcycles. The editing is a cacophony of jump cuts, double exposures, repetitive shots, looping video, and looping audio. After double and triple exposed motorcycles revving their engines set the stage for the sex duel, Sweetback’s challenger lays down on a pile of coats ready for him. She then abruptly sits up, which is repeated visually several times, while her voice is looped: “Well?... Well?... “Well?” She lays down as he approaches but then a jump cut re-establishes her entering the space this time clasping her hands above her head like a prize fighter and then that shot repeats. Naked except for his hat and a large white bow tie Sweetback approaches her now laying on the ground. As he moves down towards her, there is a triple exposure and the image is incomprehensible outside of its context. Sweetback lays on top of her, but the double exposure shows him approaching her as well. As he removes his hat, an image we see from two angles in double exposure, the front facing view freezes for twelve seconds (!) while the couple writhes together. Sweetback is both frozen and active. However, as the sex duel reaches an intensity, the double exposure and jump cuts end and the editing becomes continuous in space and time: alternating between close-ups and medium shots until the crowd’s chanting

and cheering culminate with her defeat. Sweetback wins because of his ability to deny himself sexual pleasure. Van Peebles cuts to the gang leader's smiling face and freezes which fades to a medium-shot freeze of Sweetback with his hat and tie captured from moments ago. As he pulls away again, Sweetback is in multiple exposures from several angles, and the scene disintegrates as the bikers disperse in defeat.

The sheer complexity of this scene is startling once broken down, but also surprising is that for the most part the editing successfully draws in the viewer without losing track or distracting from the narrative. There is an ambiance of an unknown white underworld obscured by low lighting and overlays, obscure, mysterious, and dangerous. Van Peebles uses the barrage of cutting to build toward a dramatic climax mobilizing the energy of a scene with minimal physical action. Further, as Ongiri points out, the cutting undermines the sexual stimulation of the audience in a scene ripe for that sort of exploitative exhibition. Instead, Sweetback's power is asserted, not as a violent, braggish, or malicious victor, but in placidity, as a man who survives. The final freeze frame asserts his supremacy in the duel with a matter-of-factness that humanizes him without denigrating the vanquished.



Figure 9 A rapid series of split screens disguise the culprits who set the police care on fire.



Figure 10 Vertical split screen



Figure 11 Horizontal split screen

Van Peebles in no way constricts himself to the techniques of the New Wave. A ten-second scene in which Sweetback is discovered behind the brothel and then placed in a police car demonstrates Van Peebles's attention to detail and his ability to employ experimental editing techniques. The scene includes nine split screen shots in rapid succession including six different types of split screens: 1) vertical with images of the young men pouring gasoline onto the police car on both the left and the right; 2) vertical with a black right side; 3) vertical with a black left side; 4) vertical in which a vertical fold elides the central canal of the shot separating the left and

right images which an actor then crosses; 5) vertical with a one-sided mirrored image; and 6) horizontal with the police car both above and below. These nine cuts occur in only ten seconds, as the police force Sweetback into the police car and as the adolescents set fire to the vehicle. The split screens metaphorically recapitulate the black and whites of the police car and the division between the police and community. Additionally, it's the visual energy of the sequence which activates the movement forward toward Sweetback's escape. The confusion created by the rapid succession de-identifies the perpetrators as they dissolve into the commotion of the cheering crowd and socialize the resistance of the black community.

While commentators have suggested that the space and time that Van Peebles creates in *Sweetback* is "disjointed," a word often associated with the jump cut, Van Peebles aesthetic is more akin to a mellifluous and wonderful interweaving of imagery and sound. Space and time are not Cubist like in *Breathless* with its linear ruptures. Rather, space/time in *Sweetback* is quantum: repeating, infinite, and simultaneous. It is happening everywhere at once which breaks open the space of repressive authority and socializes it, inviting the audience to enter. As Wiggins (2012) describes it, this is *Sweetback's* open space of signification in which "the anchors that typically ground blackness have few places to entrench themselves" freeing them to re-order the symbolic hierarchies of racial identity (Wiggins 38). Using and withholding these devices rhythmically to pace, activate, and obscure dramatic action is one of the signature elements of Van Peebles's editing style and embodies at a metaphorical and aesthetic level Van Peebles's radical political vision.

Sweetback, more than any other of Van Peebles's films, makes use of jump cuts throughout the film. The only spaces in *Sweetback* filmed in linear continuity are the scenes of the police station and the morgue, spaces of closed meaning and standardized authoritarian time.

As opposed to creating an indecipherable ambiguity born of the arbitrariness of the story, Van Peebles's jump cuts ask the viewer to draw on their own experiences to complete Sweetback's story. As Ongiri (2009) argues, the "spectator is asked to fill in the blanks of his [Sweetback's] visual imagery with his or her own interpretation" (179).

Instead of distancing the viewer from the story, Van Peebles's jump cuts encourage the viewer to experience the panic and uncertainty of his escape by resisting orienting markers and forcing the viewer to be actively engaged in meaning-making. Further, Ongiri points out that "Sweetback's journey is very much meant to mirror the spectator's own journey to consciousness" (179). The disorientation of space in *Sweetback* serves to socialize or generalize the physical terrain of the narrative into a psychological state that might activate the interpretation by black audiences who have had the experience of dangerous or uncertain encounters with the police (Wiggins 34). In this sense, techniques associated with the vagueness of early New Wave films are re-purposed in such a way that they elicit the audience's own experience of racial oppression as a critical sense-making device (Reid 28).



Figure 12 *Sweetback's* quantum aesthetic.

Van Peebles's appropriation of New Wave techniques leverages their radical potential to disrupt classical Hollywood's narrative illusions of white supremacy. The effect of a quantum space/time serves to heighten the identification with Sweetback's flight but also disrupts the ideological premise of black subordination embedded in classical cinematic language. For Yearwood (2000), it is this "refusal to reproduce Hollywood's cinematic grammar and syntax" which resonated strongly with African-Americans. "Van Peebles uses his camera, not as a simple servant to the film's narrative development, but to reformulate the question of cinema as a mode of writing" a maneuver which "forcefully moves attention to the uses of cinematic language and other political and ideological questions." The effect creates of "an alternative 'popular' cinema outside the conservative ideological parameters of the traditional Hollywood cinema" which refuses "the ideological paradigm based on the subordination of blacks" (187-188).

Melvin Van Peebles went to Paris as an unknown aspiring artist and, like Josephine Baker or James Baldwin before him, found the creative freedom necessary to develop his craft at a time when those prospects seemed impossible in the U.S. He was the first (and perhaps the last) successful African-American filmmaker to use the French support systems and the French appreciation of African-American artists in the way that previous generations of African-American painters, musicians, and writers had. The unique artistic and political vision of *Sweetback* is indisputable and was inspired by Van Peebles's understanding of racism and the violent oppression of black aspirations for freedom in the U.S. A vibrant network of professional and personal connections influenced his filmmaking in France embedding him in the French cinematic and literary communities at the height of the prestige of the New Wave. The result is a unique style of filmmaking that re-appropriates techniques associated with French directors to dramatize the dialectic of racial oppression and a growing black power consciousness.

CHAPTER 4

SWEETBACK

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song opened in two theaters, one in Atlanta and one in Detroit, in the Spring of 1971 (Butters 62). *Sweetback* earned an X-rating after Van Peebles shot it as a pornographic film to avoid union restrictions on staffing people of color and to keep his costs low. He refused to submit the film to the MPAA rating system. Van Peebles famously turned the X rating against the MPAA with the one-sheet tagline: "Rated X by an all-white jury" simultaneously attacking the history of Hollywood racism and the U.S. judicial system while suggesting the X rating had little to do with the content of the film.

In this chapter, I attempt to place *Sweetback* in the context of the debate around Blaxploitation films within the black civil rights and artistic communities. Then I analyze *Sweetback* by stepping away from the legacy Blaxploitation, distinguishing it in its political commitments and aesthetic approaches. I show that unlike Blaxploitation in general, *Sweetback* is a film with a sincere political commitment to interpretations of black political reality informed by theories of the lumpenproletariat popularized by Huey Newton and others around the Black Panther Party. I draw on Van Peebles's biography in France, his writings, and his previous filmmaking to place the Sweetback character in the context of Van Peebles's aesthetic and political commitments as well as his method to exposing racism through humor. In proposing this approach, I draw on Van Peebles's close relationship with Chester Himes and their shared perspective that racism makes absurd all involved. Finally, I engage with a discussion on why the politics of *Sweetback* resonated so strongly with audiences. To do this, I look at Sweetback's presence on screen in dress and action analogizing it with the militant displays of the Black

Panther Party as both performances of solidarity and vulnerability. By reframing *Sweetback* in this way, I position the film as a popular art form in the tradition of Third Cinema with an explicit political commitment aligned with a political mass movement led by the Black Panther Party, perhaps a singular achievement in the history of American filmmaking.

Sweetback is categorized as an early Blaxploitation film, in part, because its enthusiastic reception by black audiences confirmed for studio executives the existence of a market for black-themed heroes and narratives (Bogle, Lawrence, 2008b)). Representations of the black the community in *Sweetback* and Blaxploitation films, according to Lawrence (2016) "were the catalysts of fierce debates among actors, directors, critics, scholars, and activists, who argued about the impact that the films were having on the black cinematic image..." (5). The leadership of mainline civil rights organizations were deeply troubled by *Sweetback* and the ensuing Blaxploitation films like *Shaft* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972) and *The Mack* (1973). In 1972, Junius Griffin of the Hollywood Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB) which included mainline civil rights groups like the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Griffin argued that the new "black movies" had the effect of "warping of the black children's minds with the filth, violence and cultural lies" (Newsweek 1972). CAB had as its goal to institute a rating system for black films (not censorship as some critics of CAB contended). An aspect of Griffin's criticism was that wealthy white "film moguls" were exploiting the least powerful and historically underserved audiences with a kind of poison that was not being dished out to white audiences.

According to Gerald Butters (2016) the core of the debate in Chicago around the release of *Sweetback* concerned whether by associating the black community with violence and sex, the

film was presenting black people negatively and morally corrupting black youth. Butters points out that while the audience for *Sweetback* may have primarily been black working-class youths, the criticism of the film came from the black middle-class press as well as the Nation of Islam with strong roots in the working-class black civil rights movement (65). He highlights the critical analysis of the Kuumba Workshop, a black arts organization. Their criticism faults the film for a negative portrayal of women, exploiting sex for the “sake of titillating and lust,” failing to show the social context of the black experience, and oversimplifying what it takes to win black liberation. Further, they criticize the Sweetback character which promotes the “hustler/stud as a hero” (67).

Bogle (2001) places the *Sweetback* character in the tradition of both the black stud and brutal black buck stereotypes which served as templates for Blaxploitation hits like *Shaft* (1971), and *Superfly* (1972) (238-240). He explains that these films inspired “buckmania” among studio executives and were followed by a slew of films with “male action fantasies, with tenacious buck protagonists performing deeds of derring-do...” (241). According to Bogle, the cinematic stereotype of the “brutal black buck” finds its origin with D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The stereotype has two subcategories: the black brute and the black buck. While “differences between the two are minimal. The black brute is a barbaric black out to raise havoc... [and] his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed.” The black buck, on the other hand, is “over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (13-14). What unites these two characters is the relationship between sex and racism invoking “the myth of high powered sexuality” of black men which stood as a permanent threat to white women while elevating white women as the ultimate symbol of purity and desirability. The black buck characters in *Birth of a Nation* were used to mobilize white hatred

and fear by portraying the black male libido as inherently dangerous: when repressed it generates uncontrollable violence and when released its insatiable desire for white flesh runs rampant (14).

By the 1920s black stereotypes in U.S. cinema had been de-sexualized into roles of jesters and servants as well as eager singers and dancers. By the 1950s and 1960s, Sidney Poitier played a series of over-achieving, morally perfected black male characters whose sexuality and anger is managed and vacated in films like *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) or *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961). Eventually he is allowed to marry a white women in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Countering the lurking buck stereotype, these films delivered politically strategic desegregationist messages to white audiences, and Bogle describes Poitier as a “hero for an integrationist age.” However, the films do not age well as Poitier’s characters are by today’s sensibilities so “immersed in white standards that there is little ethnic juice in his blood” (181).

After decades of films of largely de-sexualized black leads, *Sweetback*, a film characterized by black male nudity, interracial sexual encounters, prostitution, and queerness was indeed a cinematic shock. I will argue below that *Sweetback*’s sexuality is also circumscribed and instrumental and that Van Peebles presents the film’s sex scenes as vacated of voyeuristic pleasure. But for many *Sweetback* was obviously associated with the vicious buck stereotypes.

Stereotypes like the black buck according to Michael Pickering (2001) always invoke normative systems which identify deviant behaviors for moral censure (201). In other words, the black buck demarcates forms of morally permissible sexual desire for both black and white viewers. By associating a black character with sexual deviancy as defined by mostly middle-class and religious standards, Van Peebles risked activating a series of moral invocations that had previously used black bodies and characters for normative delineations as well as for mobilizing white hatred. For integrationists whose cultural program sought to demonstrate the

commensurability of black-white cooperation and compatibility through appeal to mainstream American normative standards, *Sweetback*'s popularity was a significant step backward. Given issues of deviancy as the framework for understanding these films, there was little interest on the part of CAB or other critics for a nuanced differentiation between *Sweetback* and the follow-on Blaxploitation cycle of films. What united these films were images of nudity, sexuality, and violence which transgressed normative standards and associated this transgression with black characters: a series of cultural linkages which at best undermined the integrationist program and at worst called forth the forces of racial violence.

Criticism of Blaxploitation did emanate mostly from organizations identified with southern, more religious, and more professional-class of civil rights organizations. Black filmmakers, actors, and technicians like Gordon Parks and Jim Brown defended the films as finally opening up a space for African-Americans in the film industry (Encyclopedia of Film 1972). While critics of the films like Roy Innis come off as self-righteous in their urge to protect black minds, supporters like director Martin Ritt blandly appealed to the old trope of "the audience knows best" – hardly a compelling argument given white commercial control of production decisions. But, CAB's concerns seem realistic. The Hollywood Studios' record on the treatment, employment, and portrayal of African-Americans was abysmal. Further, the breakdown and end of the Hays Code in years before *Sweetback* meant that a new spate of films challenging public sensibilities for violence and sex on the screen was just starting. It's not hard to imagine that studios might use black audiences to experiment proferring displays of extreme behaviors before using these tropes in white-oriented films. Culturally-aware black audience resentment does not seem misplaced.

It's easy to watch Blaxploitation films today and dismiss these concerns given the change in sensibilities that have occurred during the last forty years. But, at the time, Blaxploitation films were on the cutting edge of raw sexuality and violent encounters. Nevertheless, a glance at the top-grossing American films from 1970 – 1975 demonstrates that violence in films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) or the *Godfather* (1972) and sex in movies like *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), or the James Bond films hardly make Blaxploitation films unique in this regard. On the other hand, black audiences were getting nothing equivalent to high-minded romances like *Love Story* (1970), musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof* (1970) or children's fare such as *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1970). Except for Warner Brother's financing of *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), investment levels in and the production value of black-themed films remained exceptionally low.

Blaxploitation's hyper-sexual male characters, as critics pointed out, look suspiciously like the buck stereotype promoted by Hollywood in the past. *Newsweek* (1972) quotes Griffin saying the "transformation from stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to Super Nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide." In Blaxploitation this buck stereotype, now the hero, remains marked by his unleashed sexual prowess. Not unlike James Bond, these heroes slip in and out of bed with women (always women, of course) of all creeds and colors. However, James Bond is not burdened by a history of white stereotypes based on uncontrollable sexuality which threatened the purity and delicacy of womanhood. Given the centrality of *Sweetback's* sexual powers to his character and the repetition of this trope in nearly every male-centered Blaxploitation film to follow, it's understandable why critics of Blaxploitation in the early 1970s didn't bother discriminating between *Sweetback* and Blaxploitation protagonists.

Sweetback and the Blaxploitation Debate

The success of *Sweetback* along with *Cotton Comes to Harlem* paved the way for the arrival of the Blaxploitation genre (Bogle, Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s*). But, if *Sweetback* is Blaxploitation, it is so *avant la lettre*. Lawrence (2007) defines Blaxploitation as films made between 1970 and 1975 featuring a socially and politically conscious black hero/heroine who uses any means necessary to defeat a white villain. These films feature a rhythm and blues soundtrack, present a range of black characters, and occur in black urban neighborhoods with plots that address the black experience (18-20).

While meeting this definition, *Sweetback* is aesthetically and narratively distinct. Instead of a bold quick-witted hero who works as a detective or C.I.A. agents like Shaft or Foxy Brown, *Sweetback* is a sex worker on the run from the police. Instead of a tough-talking protagonist whose black consciousness is on display through fashionable dress, African-themed props, or background posters of Angela Davis, *Sweetback* is radicalized through acts of solidarity with the black community while fleeing authority. Instead of action-packed sequences sewn together with continuity editing, *Sweetback* features long takes and a meandering narrative punctuated by New Wave-style editing consisting of jump cuts, freeze frames, natural lighting, and limited dialogue. As argued in the previous chapter, Van Peebles employs New Wave-style editing throughout his first three films by mixing and matching multiple techniques, modulating the rapidity and rhythm of their display, to impressionistically represent character psychology or the dramatic tension of racial prejudice and acts of racial discrimination marking his unique form of auteurism. Viewed in this way, *Sweetback* then represents the culmination of a self-conscious coherent thematic and aesthetic approach. Van Peebles's commitment as an artist and writer to an iconoclastic race-conscious radical politics referencing national liberation movements, independent socialism, and

the Black Panther Party informs *Sweetback's* thematics. Given Van Peebles's aesthetic roots in the French New Wave, his independent mode of production, and his distinctly radical political project, it no longer seems appropriate to categorize *Sweetback* as a Blaxploitation film.

Some scholars differentiate between *Sweetback* and follow-on Blaxploitation films tracing the differences to the sources of financing and the commodification on the *Sweetback* character. In comparing *Sweetback* to Blaxploitation, Mark A Reid (1988) reviews the difference between *Sweetback* and *Shaft* describing the latter as akin to “black-skinned replicas of the white heroes of action films” (32). He locates the reasons for this difference with the more independent production and financing of *Sweetback* versus MGM's funding of *Shaft* (1971). Similarly, Chris Lott (2013) reviews arguments by both the proponents and the critics of *Sweetback* and Blaxploitation films, and faults the debate for “a noticeable downplay of the industrial factors that would have had a significant influence on Blaxploitation's thematic deficiencies which duly garner overemphasis” (31). He argues that Blaxploitation producers degraded their films into “unfeasible, outlandish plots” by way of “commodifying of a formula.”

This thesis that Blaxploitation is a result of the commodification of *Sweetback* is only convincing if you ignore the popularity of *Sweetback's* unique experimental aesthetics, narrative structure, and representational strategies. Further, one of *Sweetback's* most compelling characteristics for audiences is his independence from institutional ties to law enforcement or organized crime. That Blaxploitation producers largely refused to replicate this key element of the “*Sweetback* formula” contravenes their own commercial interests and suggests an effect of white supremacist assumptions in the production apparatus or an explicit political agenda.

I agree that *Sweetback* served as a financial model for Blaxploitation films, inspiring white executives to aim for the black film-going audience as a market niche. However, critical

differences between *Sweetback* and Blaxploitation films can serve to illuminate unique elements in both and how those characteristics relate to questions of representation and realism.

Sweetback, the character, is distinct from the lead roles in Blaxploitation films. Instead of a bold quick-witted hero who protects the community like Shaft or Foxy Brown, Sweetback barely speaks. Instead of a politically conscious protagonist, Sweetback's awareness develops in the course of his flight. The narrative of escape and survival means that Sweetback re-acts to racial discrimination instead of fighting against white-instigated inner-city corruption to outwit a racist antagonist. Instead of action-packed sequences and staged fights, *Sweetback* features long takes and disoriented uses of filmic time and space as Sweetback runs alone in the desert urged on by an angelic chorus.

Sweetback: Class Location and Sexuality

Representational debates about *Sweetback* inevitably run through Sweetback's career in the sex trade, his sexual prowess, and the character of his masculinity. For Bogle (2001), Sweetback was a representative of the new buck hero aligned with "a certain social/political philosophy prevalent in some sectors of the black community" rooted in a black separatist politics that equated poverty and ghetto life with black identity which elevated the "pimp/outlaw/rebel as folk hero." As such, Van Peebles elevates the pimp without explaining the "social conditions that made the pimp such an important figure" (236-237). Similarly, Manthia Diawara (1993) explains that "Van Peebles thematized black nationalism by casting the Black community as an internal colony, and Sweetback, a pimp, as the hero of decolonization" (9).

The problem with these representational readings of Sweetback's character should be obvious: Sweetback is not a pimp or a hustler but rather a sex worker. Inscribing this distortion within their critique limits their ability to understand one of the most compelling aspects of

Sweetback's character: his class location, his inability to act independently at the onset of his story, to control his own body, and to affect his destiny. Critics of the film often conflate Sweetback with other Blaxploitation protagonists. For instance, Toni Cade Bambara (1993) cites the films "retrograde ideology" and then conflates *Sweetback* with *Super Fly* citing the Blaxploitation formula: "revolution equals criminality, militants sell dope and women, the only triumph possible is in a throwdown with Mafia second-stringers and bad-apple cops on the take, the system is eternal" (118). But, nothing in this description has anything to do with the *Sweetback* narrative.

Sweetback does have a sexist "retrograde ideology" but it's not the one described above. Instead, the film's gender relations derive from an inversion of actual male/female social power which conflates the female characters with institutional authority. Like Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason) in the *Honeymooners* or Doug Heffernan (Kevin James) in *The King of Queens*, put-upon male characters are ruled by a boss at work and a woman at home both of whom conspire to frustrate their manly desire for freedom. For Sweetback, both gifted and cursed by his sexual skills and debased of social power, he is an easy target for women who take advantage of him. Consequently, women appear in *Sweetback* as obstacles to his flight who must be paid off in sex in the case of black women and as threats to be defeated through sex in the case of white women. In the montage of black characters who assist in Sweetback's escape there is only one woman who helps him cover his tracks (although her scene is impressively played). Nevertheless, it's disappointing that in a film about black freedom, black women are not full partners in that liberation.

Sweetback however is not a super pimp, but rather lacks social power. He is desperate and on the run. He has no resources but his own body which is under constant threat. Reading Sweetback as an early version of the Shaft, the tough acting cop, or implying that he is like the Mack, the sexy pimp in the film of the same name confuses Sweetback's class location and effective power. Van Peebles's projection of power relations places Sweetback at the bottom of society's ladder. In fact, Sweetback's own pimp, aptly named Beadle, the only pimp in the movie, is not portrayed as a hypersexualized and powerful super pimp, but rather as a sniveling coward unable to operate independently of the white establishment and who is violently discarded by the police in their ruthless search for Sweetback. The relationships of power imagined in *Sweetback* is radically different from those envisioned in *Shaft* (1971) or *The Mack* (1972) which takes the point of view of the pimp instead of the sex worker. To conflate *Sweetback* with these other films confuses *Sweetback's* imagined geographies of power.



Figure 13 Beadle, Sweetback's very unglamorous pimp, refuses to help him escape.

Furthermore, to compare Sweetback to Shaft misses the point that Shaft participates in sex at his own initiative, a difference in their ability to exercise social power. Sexuality in *Shaft* is represented as pleasurable for Shaft as well as displayed voyeuristically for the audience. Sex

in *Sweetback*, and consequently, the place of sexuality and masculinity, couldn't be more different. To the extent that reviewers read sexuality in *Sweetback* as salubrious, is the extent to which they reject the film as exploitative conflating it with Blaxploitation's sexual displays.

To be clear, *Sweetback* is phallogentric. It's about an oppressed sex worker with low political self-awareness who spontaneously saves a political prisoner and runs. In doing so, he uses his one job skill, his sexual prowess as a way to pay-off accomplices, defeat enemies, and disguise himself. In this process, he develops a revolutionary consciousness. The film indeed centers on Sweetback, and there are no female characters of significance. It would not pass a Bechtel test. On the other hand, female characters are never denigrated or abused for sadistic or voyeuristic pleasure. For instance, in the sex duel, Sweetback accomplishes his victory calmly without boisterousness or cruelty despite the charged racial implications of this scene as the inversion of a lynching.

One aspect of *Sweetback* that requires criticism is Van Peebles's filming of the opening scene in which the young Sweetback has sex with a sex worker. Melvin Van Peebles forced his thirteen-year-old son, basically under duress, to participate in the scene - something that Van Peebles was able to get away with because he was working outside of union rules. The scene itself can be read in a variety of ways, for instance, as literal or as metaphorical. However, it also could have been filmed differently to achieve the same effect. The actual filming is problematic, to say the least. Unfortunately, Van Peebles remains unapologetic about the process as recently as the audio commentary track in the film *Baadasssss!* (2003).

Amy Abugo Ongiri (2010) faults the film for relying on the eroticism of the African-American "phallic superman" which, she claims, through freeze frames and stills is "inscribed as static and all-powerful... possessing even the power to stop narrative" (181). Van Peebles

affirms the stereotypes of black male sexual prowess while at the same time “he wants to claim some of their power.” However, she reads *Sweetback* as transcending John Wayne’s masculine immobility. Ongiri has a more complicated reading of *Sweetback* which like Blaxploitation in general attempts to represent, but also transcends the ‘Negro is penis’ formula” (181). I agree with Ongiri that *Sweetback* is a phallic-superman; it is his superpower. However, I disagree that the sex duel scene presents *Sweetback* as omnipotent. In that scene, and throughout the film, his sexuality is purely instrumental. It is his livelihood and then his means of escape.

Those who read the film as an example of radical or revolutionary culture challenge the over-sexualized readings of *Sweetback*’s character. Huey Newton (1971), who wrote an extensive analysis of the film and made it required viewing for Black Panther Party members, describes the opening scene between the older woman and the young *Sweetback* as a baptism rather than a sexual encounter (116). Yearwood (2000) also disagrees with the overly-sexual reading of the film exclaiming that “the viewer is not afforded the normal expectation of filmic pleasure” (199) describing the sexual acts as “simple, cold and mechanical” denying voyeuristic or erotic pleasure (195). He explains that the sexual acts have distinct narrative functions which run “against traditional sexual enjoyment” and “develop an antivoyueristic experience” (213).

Laura Mulvey (1989) makes a similar argument vis a vis Jean-Luc Godard in her essay on Godard’s portrayal of women. She writes of his use of images of the female body: “The length of the shot and the fact that the image of the body is not presented as spectacle makes us uneasy in our position of the voyeur.” The image lacks “that titillation of vision on which exploitation depends.” Nevertheless, it’s not without danger that Godard uses these images: “the potency of that image is such that any true demystification [of the source of our images of women] is possible” (52). Van Peebles could be said to be deconstructing black male sexuality in

a similar way. Mulvey, for instance, compares the image of Charlotte of *Une Femme Mariée* (1964) as an image of perfection which symbolizes a “social formation” that equates women with sexuality. Is it not possible to imagine this same argument applied to Sweetback as a symbol of a stereotype which deconstructs black male sexuality? My purpose in raising this issue is not to confirm Mulvey’s reading of Godard, but instead to ask why all but a few scholars have been willing to grant to Van Peebles the level of nuanced interpretation that is permitted Jean-Luc Godard? It’s hard not to read this a racial double standard related to the perception of Godard’s work as high art and Van Peebles’s work as carrying the low art mark of Blaxploitation.

By looking at the representational debates around Sweetback’s sexuality, it’s possible to see the limitations of some of the readings of the film. Typically, when the analysis of the film over-emphasizes sexuality or macho masculinity of pimp culture wrongly attributed to Sweetback, it becomes difficult to develop a more nuanced interpretation of the film’s resonance with youth. For instance, Bogle’s (2001) point is undoubtedly valid that after decades of asexual black male characters, *Sweetback* fulfilled black audience’s demand for a “sexual black movie hero.” Further, *Sweetback* resonated with the young people because of its shocking narrative of a black man who meets “violence with violence and triumphed over the corrupt white establishment,” and “a bold declaration of war that refuses to make concessions to please white audiences” (235-236). Through “music and movement” Sweetback revealed a “communal spirit” as the black community aids in his escape.

Bogle, of course, recognizes that the release of the film is during a moment of “social flux and the evolution of a black cultural aesthetic” (236). But, interpreting Sweetback as a buck stereotype limits rather than opens up an understanding of his unique resonance with audiences.

By developing a reading of the film that evades this trap, I intend to seek out an understanding of how the film uses the cinematic language of visual and aural pleasure to create a social experience relevant at the time of its release to activate an erotics of power and defiance. But first, I want to develop a reading of the Sweetback character that more clearly illustrates his class location and its relationship to the reality of African-American life.

Sweetback and the Lumpenproletariat

The character of Sweetback is different from the lead roles in other films categorized as Blaxploitation. It's possible to read Sweetback as a response to the history of black cinematic stereotypes, yet it's also possible to read him in the literary tradition of black folk heroes associated with the lumpenproletariat. The term "lumpenproletariat" belongs to Marxist class cosmology and its explicit connection to black literature, as described by Nathaniel Mills in his study *Ragged Revolutionaries* (2017), runs through authors such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Margaret Walker and their encounter with the U.S. Communist Party literary and political circles in the 1930s. In the 1960s, Black Panthers Party leaders like Huey Newton and Eldredge Cleaver would rethink and incorporate the lumpenproletariat into a theory of black revolutionary politics which provided new relevance to the term.

Eldredge Cleaver (1970) reverses the standard Marxist interpretation of the proletariat as the revolutionary class and the lumpenproletariat as reactionary dead-weight. Cleaver describes the lumpenproletariat as "those who have no secure relationship or vested interest in the means of production and the institutions of capitalist society." Unlike the proletariat in the United States, especially the white working class, the lumpenproletariat have "no choice but to manifest its rebellion in the University of the Streets" (10).

In Capital Volume 1, Marx (1867/1990) describes the lumpenproletariat as a useless appendage of the industrial reserve army. Marx categorizes the four component parts of the industrial reserve army by their relationship to the labor process. The four layers are: floating (displaced by technology); latent (rural and migratory), stagnant (irregularly- and under-employed); and pauperized (unemployable because of age or disability). He dismisses the lumpen element as “vagabonds, criminals, and prostitutes” in part because he attributes participation in the lumpen economic process to be a morally disreputable choice but in part because of its treacherous tendency to do the dirty work of the most reactionary forces of capital. For Marx, the lumpenproletariat is a minor and the least progressive category of the industrial reserve army of labor.

The industrial reserve army in Marx’s analysis tends to grow because the ever-increasing mechanization of industry produces “the misery of constantly expanding strata of the active army of labour, and the dead weight of pauperism” (798). His analysis describes capitalism’s tendency toward “reserve” forms of temporary, part-time, and itinerant employment. The Black Panther Party’s analysis of the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat is rooted in this idea of the ever-expanding de-skilling of the working class. In his speech at Boston College, Huey Newton (1972) says that the trends of mechanization suggest that the lumpenproletariat will one day be the majority of the proletariat (26).

The differences between the Black Panthers’ analysis and Marx’s analysis is, in part, a result of a particular use the term “lumpenproletariat.” For the Panthers (as well as with many other theorists) the lumpenproletariat has a synecdoche relationship with the “industrial reserve army.” However, Newton and Cleaver’s analysis of capitalism impact on African-Americans is unique because it links the white working class with racially-bound integrative structures of

unions and privileged employment opportunities. Black and white workers according to Cleaver are “caught up in a totally different economic, political, and social reality” (7). That African-American writers and political theorists consistently elevate the lumpenproletariat as a vital class category seems to have generally gone unheard by white Marxist political economists. For instance, some of the most influential Marxists’ analysis of U.S. class structure such as Harry Braverman (1992) and Erik Olin Wright (1979) have surprisingly underdeveloped theories of how race impacts class in the United States.

The organization of race-segmented capitalist expropriation in the United States defies Marx’s description of the relationship between the working class and the industrial reserve army (as well as the lumpenproletariat) which he observed in 19th century Europe. According to Manning Marable (1979) “Capitalist development [in the U.S.] has occurred not in spite of the exclusion of the Blacks, but because of the brutal exploitation of Blacks as workers and consumers” (2). This exploitation alternates between forms of accumulation such as deflated remunerations on wage labor and forms of dispossession such as schemes of foreclosures, loan sharking, and redlining which directly extract value from African American communities (xiii). Consequently, unlike in Europe, the American class structure has evolved through a series of racially differentiated capitalist exploitation practices from slavery through the modern system which relies on state, quasi-state, and normative enforcement of race-based discrimination incentivized by increased profit margins. State-sponsored systems of segregation in education interact with permissive discriminatory practices in housing and employment (both in terms of access and compensation) to economically and geographically segregate black working people. According to Marable, African-Americans receive substandard education, face discrimination in the employment market place, are more likely to be laid off from work because of technological

changes or plant closings and are more likely to be unemployed than their white working-class counterparts (52-53).

Consequently, the black working class is “concentrated in the lower paid, blue-collar, unskilled and service sectors... compromise[ing] a substantial portion of the total U.S. reserve army of labor...” (95). Further, a large section of the black working class exists as a “subproletarian” class which “includes both marginal elements of the working class as well as those of whom Marxists have traditionally termed the ‘lumpenproletariat:’ pimps and prostitutes, small-time criminals, drug dealers and ‘numbers’ runners” (56). This class structure coincides with intense policing and incarceration of black youth with high rates of imprisonment. According to Marable, there are some 1.8 million prisoners in the U.S. half of whom are African-American, and of all prisoners, a third were unemployed when arrested (xiv). These conditions create a fundamentally differentiated class experience for African-Americans.

This system of prohibitions ensures that the black working class has always been disproportionately and massively concentrated in the industrial reserve army, experiencing work as systematically insufficient for the socially necessary reproduction of labor as well as temporary, itinerate, and precarious. Further, this permanent precariousness of the “subproletarian” classes combined with geographical restrictions that ensure a porous and non-elective relationship between the lumpenproletariat and the industrial reserve army are at odds with the elective and distanced relationship suggested by Marx. The geographical proximity means that segregation-trapped African Americans are familiar with forms of survival and predatory economic activity common for the lumpenproletariat. They also live their lives in fear, in a lumpenproletarian public sphere ruled by violence as Marable suggests: “Black elderly and handicapped [sic] persons are afraid to walk or visit friends in their own neighborhood... Young

Black women are often uncomfortable going to parties or social gatherings by themselves because they will invariably be harassed...” (58).

From Richard Wright to Huey Newton, the identification with the black lumpenproletariat is a consequence of the observed class structure in the United States. While the term “lumpenproletariat” stands in for the itinerate and precarious existence of the African-American working class confined to the industrial reserve army, African-American writers draw on lumpen characters akin to Marx’s heterogenous list-definition. Nathaniel Mills (2017) quotes the writer Stanley Edgar Hyman who says that the black lumpenproletariat functions to symbolize the “social and economic miseries” of the black community. The effect of this is twofold: First, it elevates Marx’s criminal lumpenproletariat to folk hero status as in Margaret Walker’s poem *For My People* in which Walker presents the “non-working black lumpenproletariat... as legendary outlaws” (163). Or, they are the inspiration for tragic but representative characters such as Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas. Secondly, it means that itinerant or temporary workers who are technically members of the industrial reserve army are categorized in shorthand as “lumpenproletariat” in the way that the Black Panther Party theorists describe workers without permanent employment enshrining morally or socially transgressive behavior as a badge of honor.



Figure 14 “Free Huey” on the back of Melvin Van Peebles first album *Brer Soul* (1968)

Melvin Van Peebles political alignment with the Black Panther Party was evident by 1970 with the release of his first musical album *B’rer Soul*. On the back cover is scrawled the words “Free Huey.” The Sweetback character, at the very least, implicitly draws inspiration from Black Panther Party theories of the lumpenproletariat as well as the same conditions that gave rise to the African-American lumpenproletariat literary traditions. Van Peebles, in interviews, resists drawing literary comparisons to Sweetback. When Jerome Beauchez (2008) makes a comparison between Sweetback and the black folk character Staggolee, Van Peebles denies this antecedent for his creation. On the other hand, when interviewer Horace Coleman (1971) praises *Sweetback* for its cast of real lumpenproletarians, Van Peebles agrees saying “There you go. They’re real, man, real. That’s simply one aspect of the revolutionary aspect of the film.”



Figure 15 For *Sweetback*, escape is a symbol for liberation

Drawing on Nathaniel Mills's (2017) study of Wright, Ellison, and Walker centering on their portrayal of the lumpenproletariat as a historically progressive force, it's worth enumerating some of how *Sweetback* parallels literary themes developed by these authors as well as reflects similar ideas developed by the Panthers. For Wright, mobility and escape symbolize revolutionary potential which is also a tension in *Sweetback* in which his flight is both for survival and for liberation. Similarly, the Panthers develop this theme when Newton describes the Panther Party's ten-point plan "a survival program" adding "until we can achieve that total transformation, we must exist. In order to exist, we must survive; therefore, we need a survival kit: the Ten-Point Program" (20-21) According to Mills, Wright anticipates the Black Panther critique of the working class, explaining that the "lumpenproletariat perspectives and actions provide components of political awareness and revolutionary action not yielded by proletarian experience." Ellison and Wright, according to Mills, tend to "focus on, and perhaps, glamorize,

the lumpenproletariat's potential for agency." Walker, on the other hand, expresses a more diverse set of characters "prostitute, juvenile delinquents, [and] underworld criminal" who are both resistant and victims of social exclusion (139).

By using the lumpenproletariat as a stand-in for the black working class and then employing the lumpen criminal element as the folk heroes of this black working class, theorists and writers have collapsed the space for women's narratives. The truly lumpen public sphere (as opposed to the broader industrial reserve army) is fundamentally predatory realm run by organized gangs, drug dealers, hired guns, scam artists, and pimps and this means that women are systematically excluded or exploited. Women show up in descriptions of the lumpen sphere as prostitutes or victims, and they make scant appearances the lumpen-oriented work of Wright and Ellison. Mills (2017) reviews how Margaret Walker attempts to at once elevate the lumpen sphere as a realm where female revolutionary agency might find purchase but also a sphere free from the drudgery and submissiveness necessary to hold a job in industry. Mills writes that Walker's attempts to frame prostitution as both "freedom and labor" is a "careful attempt to reconfigure lumpenproletarian life as freedom without losing sight of its real limitations" (146). Walker positions the prostitutes of her poetry and prose as dehumanized workers, but workers nonetheless, echoing Marx's examination of prostitution as a representative form of alienation of all workers who sell their labor power under capitalism (149). Nevertheless, while Walker seeks out manners of agency and heroism for the prostitutes and others of the lumpenproletariat, ultimately her ability to do so is circumscribed by the limited range of female characters associated with the lumpen public sphere.

By allowing the lumpenproletariat to stand in for a large section of the black working class, these stories frame the black working-class experience as the experience of the black male

outlaw eliding representation of the black female working class whose agency, in reality, need not be negotiated in the ways Walker attempts. Although it hardly requires explanation, African-American women have been at the forefront of many working class and community struggles in U.S. history. For example, African-American women nut pickers affiliated with Communist Party led an interracial strike against the Funsten nut company in St. Louis in 1933 shutting down a dozen nut picking operations in Missouri and Illinois and winning a significant pay raise including equal pay for black workers. This story of heroism and organization is untellable when the lumpen public sphere comes to stand in for the industrial reserve army experiences of the black working class. That Van Peebles centers his narrative on a lumpen folk hero necessarily makes it difficult to include women in the story in a meaningful way.

Sweetback achieves folk hero status in the course of his flight by using his resourcefulness to escape. In his analysis of *Sweetback*, Newton (1972) claims that “the ability for people to survive even under the harshest conditions” is one of the three key messages of the film (136). This is a theme Mills (2017) attributes to Ralph Ellison in his development of the “lumpen-folk” archetype, a combination of “irrepressible strength of human agency... [and] the socially displaced mobility of the lumpenproletariat” (110). In the *Sweetback* narrative, Sweetback obtains a mythical status as the black community rallies to his defense covering his escape through misdirection and denial.

Similarly, according to Mills (2018), Margaret Walker’s poetry and prose develop legendary lumpen characters like Stagolee into folk heroes of criminal resistance. She articulates through literature the lumpen class position as “both an outside agent of resistance as well as a symptom of the damages of being socially excluded” transforming “criminal activity into a

source of resistance just as she elevates the lumpenproletariat as the source of revolutionary change” (140)

Given the white-dominated and commercially-focused nature of film production in the United States, it’s not surprising that the first black-financed and black-produced film of the modern era would naturally parallel themes from African-American literature where authentic expression of the African-American experience could find purchase. In that sense, *Sweetback* can be read as an extension of an African-American literary tradition. The black cinematic tradition was one trapped in cruelly negative and naively positive stereotypes of African-American characters. Van Peebles’s film mostly breaks with this tradition by drawing on (or paralleling) well-established African-American literary characters of the lumpen folk hero and concomitant narratives of escape and liberation.

***Sweetback* as Popular and Imperfect**

Sweetback resonated strongly with young African-Americans despite its avant-garde aesthetics and unconventional narrative trajectory. Van Peebles’s self-conscious attempt to represent a “black perspective,” as he describes it in his interview with Horace Coleman (1972), uses lumpen vernacular, mostly notably the film’s title, and lumpen characters in an attempt to construct a black cinematic popular realism.

Bertolt Brecht (1957) develops the idea of popular realism in which “‘popular’ means intelligible to the broad masses, taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them” (108). Consequently, realism cannot be “ascribe[d] to a particular historical form... Our conception of realism needs to be broad and political, free from aesthetic restrictions and independent of convention.” Brecht continues that “indignation at inhuman conditions can be stimulated in many ways, by direct description of a pathetic or matter-of-fact kind, by narrating

stories and parables, by jokes, by over- and understatement... reality can be represented in factual or fantastic form” (108). In other words, there is a wide variety of cinematic languages which are intelligible as realism. For black youth, perhaps, an apt metaphor is seeing the movie after having read (or lived) the book. As I will argue below, this intelligibility links necessarily with the freshness of Van Peebles’s experimental techniques.

In discussing the young black film audiences’ enjoyment of *Sweetback*, I want to invoke W.E.B. Dubois’s (1903/2014) description of “double consciousness” which has the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” This “veil” and “second-sight” creates a sense of twoness: “two souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings” (5). For Dubois, “double consciousness” is a process that emerges in self-definition and self-understanding. It is living with an imposed external representation of the self which is defined by white hegemonic discourses and consequently at odds with internal conceptual representations of self.

To demonstrate how Dubois’s double consciousness might be relevant to *Sweetback*, I want to develop Manthia Diawara’s (1993) use of A.J. Griemas’s reading of mythology as a confrontation between desire and law. He explains that the “resisting spectator” refuses to identify with the pleasure of or is unable derive pleasure from a character’s desire when it runs counter to their identificatory desire or is frustrated by the censure of the “law.” For instance, he reads the films of Eddie Murphy as invoking a punished desire which provides little pleasure for black viewers (216). It’s useful to employ his framework for understanding that one of the primary pleasures of *Sweetback* is his success at obtaining his goal. *Sweetback* provides its audiences with the pure joy of desire unrestricted by compromise. In this sense, the tension of DuBois’s double consciousness might be momentarily lessened as the spectator’s representational image comes more into alignment with the internal self-image.

Using the framework of desire and law, Blaxploitation often restricts black desire with U.S. law. This restriction can act as a progressive anti-realist fantasy. In other words, Blaxploitation projects an imaginary geography of power in which in which black characters through cleverness or an internal strength carve out an area of independence. The aesthetics of Blaxploitation with its hyper-signaling of place, identity, and power activates this fantastic notion of irreality solidified by a faux sense of the film's mise-en-scene. While *Sweetback* presents its efforts as independently imperfect, Blaxploitation suggests styles and techniques that often mimic big budget films. It's this irreality that makes Blaxploitation lend itself of cynical readings of black power as impossibly kitsch and specularized through cultic fascination.

Employing a technique similar to that used above with W.E.B. Dubois, it is possible to invoke Franz Fanon (1952) concept of "being-for-others" as the black experience, that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (1). This creates "two dimensions" in which "a black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another black man" (1). For Fanon, the "being-for-others" is a form of alienation in which the lie of inferiority, rooted in the economic conditions of colonial domination, is internalized (xiv-xv). The phenomena of a black person wanting to prove themselves to whites represent a split consciousness in which the black person attempts to adopt behaviors and attitudes attributed to whiteness. This strategy tries to relieve the stress of DuBois's double consciousness by collapsing the two antagonistic images of self by embodying an acceptable idealized whiteness. However, the promised resolution creates a second split in consciousness: Fanon's two-ness of being-for-self and being-for-other. In this sense, one can read in Jeff Gerber's character in *Watermelon Man* as a clear metaphor for Fanon's being-for-others: a complex which he resolves once other people see through his performative construction of whiteness. This being-for-others is the dilemma that all of Van

Peebles's lead characters face in his first three feature films, the undoing of which is the primary arc of the characters' development.

Gladstone Yearwood (2000) advances this discussion by explaining the cinematic language of how popular realism functions in *Sweetback*. His analysis is that *Sweetback* refuses to "reproduce Hollywood's grammar and syntax" attacking the "illusion of cinema" refusing to allow the audience to "experience the film as pastime" (187-188). Yearwood traces *Sweetback*'s growing political consciousness and stresses the importance of the soundtrack and the music to developing the theme. He notes that at some point in *Sweetback*'s flight the images assume a documentary quality while the soundtrack does the work of moving the narrative forward employing the "black oral tradition" of storytelling. By defying Hollywood's cinematic conventions, Van Peebles creates a constructed world open for political contest. The result is not just entertainment but a film "as an instrument for transforming social existence through its own expressive modes" (216).

Amy Abungo Ongiri (2009) develops an even more sophisticated analysis by integrating the details of the aesthetic and cultural change in the black community: a matrix of representation and realism that leads to resonance. The post-civil rights era move towards black power ideology correlates with a general change in black consciousness which focused on positive self-identification and self-determination. Initiated in part by the Black Arts Movement, cultural workers attempted to define a new black aesthetic aligned with this new consciousness which often appealed to an authentic essentialized blackness exemplified by the experiences of the "brothers on the block" and reliance on urban vernacular to demonstrate this authenticity (23). The new self-awareness in the African-American community generally created an opportunity for a "spectacular performativity" which, for instance, developed in the dress and

demeanor of the Black Panther Party. However, she cautions that this performativity in the imagery of the Black Panther Party and Blaxploitation films to come is often hyper-masculinist.

In reading *Sweetback*, Ongiri (2009) employs bell hook's "oppositional gaze" and Manthia Diawara's "resistant spectatorship" with the African-American tradition of "witnessing" social injustice to black cinematic spectatorship (163). She reads in Blaxploitation filmmaking (in which she includes *Sweetback*) a counternarrative to the myths of Hollywood's cinematic portrayal of black people but also to the myth of white supremacy generally (165). Reaching a conclusion similar to Yearwood's (2000), Ongiri (2009) believes *Sweetback* creates a unique relationship to spectatorship through his quiet "witnessing" (*Sweetback* speaks only seven lines in the entire film), and he comes to stand in for the witnessing spectatorship of the audience which encourages the participatory "talk back" of the audience (178-179).

Ongiri's reading of *Sweetback* is incredibly sophisticated as it brings together social transformations in the post-Civil Rights era with cultural changes of self-perception within the black community to read how *Sweetback* activates a particular type of oppositional spectatorship. However, by suggesting a parallel in the male characters of *Sweetback* and John Wayne, she misses a critical way in Van Peebles's experimental techniques, and *Sweetback*'s class position activates his character. To understand the difference in the aesthetics of masculinity, it's worth looking at two other sources of Van Peebles's aesthetics: Third Cinema and Chester Himes.

Ongiri (2009) connects the black arts appeal to the "brothers on the block" vernacular as a conscious attempt to identify with the lumpen parts of the black working class as a result of a political alignment with Gueverist Foco-ism held in high esteem at the time. In the same tradition also aligned with national liberation struggles of the 1960s, Julio Garcia Espinosa's (1969) definitional article on Imperfect Cinema describes the reactionary nature of the "perfect cinema"

of Hollywood. In contrast, he advocates a democratic artistic culture in which there are no tastemakers who define good art but aesthetic norms as a “heritage of all” (76). He advocates for a Third Cinema, a consciously political cinema that aligns itself with the masses. That cinema he argues is “no longer interested in [the] quality of technique” and “must above all show the process which generates the problems” of society (81).

The political implications of imperfection are one way to differentiate the masculinity of Sweetback from that of John Wayne. Whereas John Wayne “sutures” the audience to the perfection of his representational form, Sweetback’s imperfection as a character in the process of coming to consciousness leads the audiences through transformational stages. Fundamental to this reading is Van Peebles’s portrayal of Sweetback as both a “badass” and also trapped in the bizarreness of a social world in which sexuality is polymorphous and instrumental. That is, while Sweetback’s character is a moving target, on the run, imperfect in its development and embodying the “raggedness” of the lumpenproletariat, John Wayne is stolid and impenetrable representing an imagined masculine perfection.

In his interview with Melvin Van Peebles the year after the release of *Sweetback*, interviewer Horace Coleman (1972) tells van Peebles that watching the sex duel scene in which Van Peebles picks “fucking” as his weapon of choice “was one of the funniest things in the entire movie” (379). This scene where Sweetback employs his skill as a lover to save himself and Moo Moo is supposed to be funny as is his general predicament: that his redemptive skill is his ability to “fuck” his way out of danger. Van Peebles imbues his literary endeavors before *Sweetback* with this absurd and ironic folk humor like Abe’s journey to white-people hell in *The True American*. His journalistic writing for *France Observateur* approaches serious topics with irony as the case of “Blues for JFK” or with street savvy articles like “Finding an Apartment.”

Van Peebles found his intellectual home in France at the anti-authoritarian humor magazine *Hara-kiri* with his tragic and absurd tales of the lumpen characters of the 14th Arrondissement. His brief editorship at *Mad Magazine* was not an aberration. His second and third novels are written in a fantastic tall tale style to undermine and poke fun at racists and their institutions. *Watermelon Man* is wildly absurdist in its attack on racial prejudice and discrimination.

The use of comedy to unmask racism parallel Van Peebles's close friend Chester Himes's description of racism as an encounter with absurdity. Himes with whom Van Peebles maintained an ongoing friendship while in France, begins his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity* (1976) with the following observation:

Albert Camus once said that racism is absurd. Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life.

Later Himes adds, "Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference" (109).

Picking up on this theme, John Bennet (2016) analyzes Van Peebles's film *Watermelon Man* using the framework of absurdity suggesting the film aligns with the values of the Martin Luther King's Poor Peoples' Campaign but embraces "absurdity as a launching point for political commentary" (14-15). This strategy of expressing "outrage through being outrageous" is the cornerstone of the film's politics which connects it to the reality of racism in America (16). This connection between realism and absurdity runs throughout the work of Van Peebles's films albeit in more subtle ways in *Sweetback*.

In this sense, the idea of absurdity acts as one of the intelligible forms of expression of Brecht's popular realism. It's this language of absurdity which at times in Van Peebles's works

serves as the common popular language with African-American audiences, a language in which non-black audiences are likely less fluent. It provides room for the film's progressive queerness in the portrayal of gay characters as well.

Reading *Sweetback* through Brecht offers additional insights into the film's "imperfect" construction. Brecht, similar to Ongiri (2009), analyzes the way audiences are activated socially in their spectatorship. Formalistically it is the separation of the performative elements of music, text, setting, etc. which defies the "witchcraft" of "hypnosis" of Espinosa's perfect cinema (Brecht 38). By separating these elements, in the way that Van Peebles separates, for instance, the angelic voices of the soundtrack from *Sweetback*'s movement creates the spaces for spectator interpretation.

Van Peebles employs experimental techniques to develop the film's approach to realism. As Lawrence (2016) describes *Sweetback* put "the sights, sounds, and socio-economic problems of the black community on grand display for all to see, Van Peebles made visible what had historically gone unseen..." (5). That is, *Sweetback*, with its experimental editing and winding narrative, was read by audiences as a realistic representation of African-American life. For instance, Huey Newton (1971) felt the film was deeply relevant to the black struggle for independence calling *Sweetback* the "first truly revolutionary Black film" (113). In his extended analysis of *Sweetback*, he describes three crucial themes for the black community: the need for black unity; the difference in points of view of the victim and the victimizer; and the resourcefulness of the black community when faced with its own survival. For Newton, the film's value was in offering a sort of political self-help manual for the black community – a message he felt that people should take in by viewing the film multiple times.

The reading of *Sweetback* as a popular film, in the Third Cinema sense, has material political implications. Similar to Third Cinema's expectation of a connection to a mass organization, Van Peebles's political commitments evolved into a tacit alliance with the Black Panther Party as the films' exhibition progressed. This unique and explicit organizational alliance with a currently released popular film was a singular achievement speaking to how the film was read by audiences as politically realistic and relevant.

Cinema, however, is not a substitute for industrial and political power, but rather is a prismatic mirror through which a movement sees and learns from itself. That the cultural industry would sap the energy from the cultural transformations occurring on the tail end of the political victories of the civil rights movement in the form of Blaxploitation is not surprising. This is the cultural domination which capital matter-of-factly carries out against any popular movement. Nevertheless, *Sweetback* provides a model for the unification of popular cinematic art with popular mass politics within the U.S.: a significant and singular accomplishment.

Images of Militancy and Vulnerability

Sweetback's success entwines an erotics of power and defiance with the black consciousness aspect of the black power movement and the transformation of black aesthetics on both a representational and political level. According to William Van Deburg (1992), the black power movement's psychological emphasis ("black consciousness") contained core assumptions including: "To become conscious of one's blackness was a healthy psychosocial development... [and] that black self-actualization was accompanied by a corresponding questioning and rejection of many normative values forwarded by the majoritarian society..." (51-52). Black psychologists theorized various conversion stages on the way to fully elaborated black consciousness. Van Deburg summarizes these as first, a thinly disguised self-hatred where blacks

accepted their self-definition from the white world, not unlike Fanon's "being-for-the-other." The second stage involves a jolt or trauma after which some alternative to the current system of white domination is considered. The third stage imagines an "immersion stage" in which there is a recognition of personal struggle, causing a re-interpretation of the world from a perspective of black pride and white blame. This stage involved a deep rage at injustice, but a final stage of internalization was possible in which black militants "discovered ways to leaven rage with reason. They become more secure in their identity and more receptive to concrete plans to improve the black community" (53-54). Militants hoped that a transformative psychological process would lay the groundwork for united African-American action.



Figure 16 Sweetback in black hat



Figure 17 Panthers in black leather. An erotics of power and defiance characterize both Sweetback and the Panthers

The Black Panthers defined this highest stage of black militancy. Further, they aestheticized the black power consciousness by combining rhetorical defiance with displays of dress and weapons to create compelling images symbolizing psychological liberation from the chains of self-hatred and doubt. Sweetback’s interior journey from the “subzero” consciousness of self-denial to militancy recapitulates the stages of psychological freedom described above. After Sweetback frees Moo Moo at the beginning of the movie Moo Moo asks: “Where are we going?” Sweetback replies: “What’s this we shit.” By the mid-point, Sweetback describes Moo Moo as “the future.”

He receives the jolt toward self-consciousness as he witnesses the police beat Moo Moo and then is forced to progress to the highest levels of consciousness because of the difficulties of his flight. In the following section, I link the Black Panther Party’s aesthetics of defiance and power to the aesthetic appeal of *Sweetback*. However, behind this aesthetics of powerfulness there lays the real vulnerability that black militants faced when uniting against powerful and

violent institutions. Consequently, while these gestures of defiance could create collective reassurance, they also placed party members in the line of fire.

Jan Rhodes (2007) describes how the black panther as a symbol of black aspirations to control their government and community emerged out of an independent political movement in Lowndes County, Alabama and was later picked up by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in establishing the Black Panther Party. Jeffery Ogbar (2005) explains how the Black Panther Party adopted the panther as its symbol after rejecting the dove as too passive. The Panther image shifted the discourse of resistance of the heroic stage of the civil rights era to the insistence of power associated with the black power movement – a shift which accompanied a cultural transformation of black self-representation (76). The Black Panther Party advocated armed patrolling of police, a powerful symbol of their assertion of authority over their community.

For Ogbar, one way the Panthers gained recruits was by exploiting their “lumpen image” of the “brothers on the block” by evoking a “...toughness and machismo. These very disempowered men in a patriarchal society found ways to affirm their manhood. Coolness was intrinsic to the hyper-male image...” which for some meant “an extra cool swagger when they walked. For others, it came in sexual virility” (96). According to Rhodes (2007), they cultivated “a visual representation of defiance” which they hoped “would attract new members and generally impress the black masses” (76). She believes the Panthers “exploited their visual appeal... through their determined display of guns, their garb, and expressions of black pride (i.e., the Afro), paramilitary spectacles, and the deployment of inflammatory rhetoric...” (91). Further, this visual presence included sex appeal. She quotes Elaine Brown: “The media liked the Black Panthers; we were sexy, we did dramatic shit, and we had handsome men” (110) augmented by the uniform of leather coats and black berets.

Further, Black Panther Party leadership consciously translated their Gueverist and Marxist-Leninist analysis into “lumpen vernacular” (106). Rhythm and Blues music was also an essential part of the Party’s identity (114-115). While the Panther’s criticized the black nationalist fashion statements at placing fashion over politics, they benefitted greatly when in 1966, black Olympic U.S. athletes wore black berets on the medal stand instantly invigorating the berets as an international symbol of allegiance. The beret, black leather jacket, and the afro (and occasionally the gun) became the standard forms of dress for Party members. Youth unaffiliated with the Panthers adopted Panther dress styles (119)¹¹.

These displays of power both emboldened and armored black youth against the violence of the police as well as required that they risk further police violence and persecution in the future. In his book *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates describes the dynamics of violence and collective protection he experienced coming of age in Baltimore in the 1980s. Writing to his son, Coates describes the vulnerability of young bodies in his neighborhood: “To be black in Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the gun, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of political policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear. The law did not protect us” (17).

The fear and vulnerability of black exploitation and control generated a dialectic with cultural and organizational forms of collective security through dress and ritual.

When I was your age the only people I knew were black and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid... The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world... I see them girding themselves

¹¹ Citing Russel Shoat’s study on the Black Panthers, Ongiri (2009) suggests that the symbolic power of the Party outpaced its organizational and military power leading to a catastrophic mismatch of political image and political capability – a familiar sad tale of many Foco-ist inspired military groups.

against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered ‘round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away. The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big T-shirts, the calculated angle of their baseball caps, a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in the firm possession of everything they desired.

I saw it in their customs of war. I was no older than five sitting out on the front steps of my home on Woodbrook Avenue, watching two shirtless boys circle each other close and buck shoulders. From then on, I knew that there was a ritual to a street fight, bylaws and codes that, in their very need, attested to all the vulnerability of the black teenage bodies.

I heard the fear in the first music I ever knew, the music that pumped from boom boxes full of grand boasts and bluster. The boys who out on Garrison and Liberty up on Park Heights loved this music because it told them, against all evidence and odds, that they were masters of their own lives, their own streets, and their own bodies. (14-15)

In Oakland in the 1960s, the Panthers infused these conditions of fear and vulnerability with a transformational politics. In doing so, they armored themselves with a collective dress, a uniform projecting an imaginary of control and self-mastery. While Coates describes the destructiveness of the crews: “...the young men who’d transmuted their fear into rage, were the greatest danger.” The Panther’s focused this rage into a confrontational and oppositional politics articulating a radical transformation of capitalism and black colonization.

To engage in these demonstrations of power and self-control were incredibly dangerous acts of cultural defiance in the face of police violence. While some discuss these “hyper-male” displays of black power as misogynistic in themselves, I argue that they are distinct from actual misogynistic practices which are well-documented as the experiences of many female militants in the Party. However, these acts of defiance created enormous vulnerability for those who engaged in them. Local police agencies and the Federal Bureau of Investigation violently repressed these displays. Many Panthers including most famously Fred Hampton paid with their lives while others were held as political prisoners for extensive periods.

The emotional vulnerability of defiance of wearing the berets (or Sweetback’s hat) is another intelligible form of popular realist expression that would have been shared by politicized

youth, *Sweetback*, and the Panthers. In this way, *Sweetback* resonated with the danger involved in a liberated black consciousness and simultaneous display by black youth of these symbols of power and defiance that accompanied these changes in consciousness. Van Peebles's character who journeys through the stages of self-denial to psychological liberation paralleled the experience of many in the audience. Film-goers saw more than the color of their skin in *Sweetback*. They saw the most intimate psychological processes and personal cultural representation that they were experiencing or had experienced.

Van Peebles's film spoke a psychological language in the manner of "majoritarian avant-garde." That language of popular realism makes Van Peebles's experimental aesthetics necessary for confirming its cultural relevancy for the present moment. Brecht says he speaks from experience when he says, "one need never be frightened of putting bold and unaccustomed things before the proletariat, so long as they have to do with reality" (111). At the moment, in a time in which their aspiration seems to lay accessible in front of them, working people are not afraid of aesthetic statements which are bold and imaginative. Van Peebles created perhaps the only film in U.S. history to resonate with and invigorate a popular mass movement organization at the height of its influence. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, Melvin Van Peebles successfully responded to conditions in the U.S. by politicizing the aesthetics of the artistic avant-garde.

CONCLUSION

Melvin Van Peebles's third film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* resonated with a young African-American audience who crowded theaters for multiple showings. The film engaged the cultural zeitgeist which celebrated the victories of the civil rights movement but also revealed the intractability of an inimical system of race-based discrimination and segregation. Released at the height of the black power cultural transformation, the film presented a no-holds-barred representation of black male empowerment and ingenuity. Van Peebles's relationship with the Black Panther Party ideologically and in promoting the film is unique in American film history.

The intersection of Van Peebles's film and the cultural moment of its arrival is a story that, on Van Peebles's part, extends backward in time through his development as a filmmaker in France during the 1960s. An uncompromising artist, a do-it-yourselfer who often found breaking the rules was necessary for accomplishing his goals, and an original promoter of himself and his work, Van Peebles established himself as a cultural force in France and then used that position to leverage his admission into the U.S. entertainment industry. His journalism and novels almost always involved a critique of race relations and racial discrimination often using traditional storytelling techniques of the tall tale.

Van Peebles's filmmaking was aesthetically and thematically always in dialogue with the present. The short film he shot in France is a critique of French racism. In his follow-up film, he re-purposes New Wave techniques such as freeze frames and jump cuts to illuminate the experience and effects of racial prejudice and discrimination. Van Peebles does not just adopt techniques popular at the time but instead employs them at specific moments to create empathy

for his characters or disrupt the viewer's assumptions. His auteurist signature is the layering and multiplying of these techniques in climactic scenes.

Van Peebles's legacy ties him firmly to the Blaxploitation cycle of films released after the success of *Sweetback*. However, reading *Sweetback* as a continuation of the stereotypes and tropes of the films that come before and after *Sweetback* only provides part of the picture. Van Peebles trajectory through France, his unique political commitments, and *Sweetback* production as an independent film require a reading of *Sweetback* that imagines its intersection with film history with multiple tangents.

Critics of the *Sweetback* character asserted that he recapitulated some aspects of well-established stereotypes of black men. However, *Sweetback* draws its inspiration from an African-American literary tradition which centers lumpenproletariat characters as representative of the black suffering in the U.S. This tradition, rooted in the Marxist politics of writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Margaret Walker, uniquely intersected with a resurgence in a unique re-thinking of African-American Marxism associated with the Black Panther Party. The Panthers theorized that the black working class, and the working class in general, were increasingly characterized by their lumpenproletarian status and would serve eventually as a progressive revolutionary force. This is a commitment that Van Peebles seems to have shared.

Sweetback was a political film that once engaged in an avant-garde aesthetic rooted in New Wave filmmaking innovations and at the same time used a popular cinematic language which resonated strongly with young African-American audiences. The development of his character into a revolutionary black consciousness and his resourcefulness at avoiding capture made *Sweetback* an unapologetic catharsis for a black community often brutalized by the police. Further, the film employs an aesthetic of movement and fashion which resonated with the black

power cultural transformation then underway. Similar to how the Panthers used style to create a sense of security and militancy that attracted many members and admirers, *Sweetback* resonated with film-goers. As a result, *Sweetback* demonstrates that, like the best of Third Cinema, popular and radical political themes are not at odds with avant-garde aesthetics but energize each other. For radical filmmaking to truly represent the experience of the people, an avant-garde aesthetic is necessary to capture the reality of the present moment.

This suggests that cultural forms which embrace a “majoritarian avant-garde” are fleeting in that they rely on the resonance with cultural meanings at the moment that those formalistic elements are in rapid transformation. Consequently, radical forms of the popular avant-garde may not have a life beyond their era. That is, the majoritarian avant-garde may be so dependent on the referential knowledge of the transformational moments that, at the very least, they do not age well. When we look back at films like the *Hours of the Furnaces*, the second section on Peronism is generally dismissed. In retrospect, Solanas and Getino link their utopian aspirations to Peronism as the best representative of a majoritarian political movement. This seems like a miscalculation now because Peronism was defeated due to its internal contradiction but likely also because of the forces arrayed against it. An alliance with the Black Panther Party is questionable in light of extensive research on party activities. It’s certainly easier to criticize the Black Panthers after the party was destroyed by U.S. government operatives and state violence. While the representations of the fashion of the Black Panther Party remain compelling for many, few have successfully rebuilt anything similar to the party itself. Its political resonance was of a specific era of cultural and political transformation.

Sweetback’s cultural moment was similarly transitory. While *Sweetback* symbolized an essential stage of black film history, its resonance will never be the same; it will never be as

dangerous to the powers that be as it was at the time of its release. We will never feel the thrill of its defiance, the audacity of its presuppositions, or the intensity of its consequences. This is the role of the film analyst and the critic to draw together the elements of meaning and reimagine the moment. The purpose is not just to complete the historical record but to confirm that we cannot relive history from the past but must find our historical moment. The avant-garde whether political or aesthetic is wedded to the present moment and the search for the next majoritarian avant-garde work comes from a dialogue with the past and a clear-eyed assessment of the moment, its relations of power, the capacities of technologies, the aspirations of its people, and their aesthetic sensibilities.

This project could inspire several future lines of research to both fill out what has been accomplished here and move in new directions. While Melvin Van Peebles biography in chapter one is the most comprehensive biographical information on Van Peebles, there is room for a much deeper and richer telling of his life in France and the process by which he came to establish his career there. This would require access to people and archives but would enrich what is already an exciting story sketched out in this current document.

The comparison above between the French New Wave and Blaxploitation begs for a more rigorous analysis which could be applied more broadly to similar film movements. How do we define a film movement such as these and why do they come into existence? What are the necessary antecedents in terms of resources, audiences, and ideology that bring them together? How do they happen to be defined as low and high art or by other stylistic judgments and how does that feedback into their production?

The section on class location and sexuality could be expanded to incorporate films across genres to understand better how signifiers of class location interact with signifiers of sexual

identity? To what extent and under what conditions are they the same? Class identity is an under-theorized characteristic in film studies. It would be interesting to study how films represent class and class conflict in the U.S. and cross-nationally. Do national political cultures affect the characteristics of class identity? How does class identity overlay with gender, sexuality, ethnic and national identities?

One of the main contentions of this paper is that African-American literature has a tradition of employing lumpen characters as representative of the black working class in general. How does this compare with representations of the white working class in the U.S.? How does the framing device of class change when working-class women are the primary frame or when black, white, Latino or other ethnic identities are involved?

The advents of avant-garde movements and their intersection with political movements is a rare occurrence. Robert Stam's examples of *The Hour of the Furnaces* and several other Third Cinema works are notable examples. Perhaps an argument could be made for films like Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* (1932) or Jean Renoir's *La Vie est à Nous* (1936) or Chris Marker's *Be Seeing You* (1968) although only Renoir's film connects this intersection of politics and aesthetics with a mass organization.

Today there are amateur films created by smartphones and accessible distribution channels such as YouTube. How do we assess these new technologies which must always be considered an aspect of what makes the avant-garde *avant*? Consequently, where do we look for the avant-garde today in politics or in filmmaking? It's worth asking how videos of police violence against African-Americans, for instance, play a role in the debate of the majoritarian avant-garde. Should we consider homemade social media videos in this manner? Is there a way

to identify the majoritarian art form in the moment of its effectiveness as opposed to in retrospect?

Melvin Van Peebles's life and work give rise to these sort of questions because of his ingenuity and creativity. His willingness to face and overcome obstacles for his art and his politics force us to question our assumptions about film movements and their origins. This thesis attempts to broaden the discussion around Van Peebles: to put his work in dialogue with social forces such as the black power movement and the civil rights movement. I hope to place his narratives in the context of cultural and aesthetic traditions in which he engaged: the French New Wave; African-American literary traditions; and Third Cinema; with the purpose of enriching the conversation about his relationship to Blaxploitation. *Sweetback* is an exceptional film because it serves as a link between avant-garde style, political movements, and cultural transformation. By recognizing the depth and breadth of Melvin Van Peebles work, we enrich our understanding of film history.

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VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Samuel Smucker

Samuel.smucker@gmail.com

Aug. 2012 M.B.A., Business Administration
College of Business
University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois

May 1994 M.A., Sociology
College of Liberal Arts
University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

June 1990 B.A., Sociology-Anthropology
Knox College
Galesburg, Illinois

Thesis Paper Title:

The Baadasssss and The Avant-Garde: The Radical Aesthetics and Politics of Melvin Van Peebles

Major Professor: Jyotsna Kapur

Publications:

Refereed Journal Articles

“Moral Choices and Social Mobility in *Lady Bird* and *The Graduation*.” *Film Criticism Journal*, Volume 42, Issue 3, 2018

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