

Pathological symbolism i

By Leon Forrest

CHICAGO — First three questions: Why is it that during a period when the most politically articulate and culturally defining aspects of US culture spring from the Afro-American community, that so often Black hustler - hippie types, who are trying to make it, or have made it — are so obsessed with serving up a mangled, crippled, white supermachist, non - thinking, savage, inhuman vision of Black people and Blackness, as the cultural definitive about their people, in order to peddle themselves, and their wares before the tarnished money-bank altar steps of the white man, whose house and children are so fitful and rampant with gothic decay before the eyes of the world? Why is it that talented, but misdirected artistic types like Melvin Van Peebles of Sweetback and Gordon Parks of Shaft have this need to rub out the Black community in a distinctly counter - revolutionary move, while the real enemies of Black survival, the powerful whites who own the banks; those who make millions off Black music and those who make billions off of the war in South East Asia, and South Africa, even as they put millions into counter - revolutionary regimes around the Third World, are allowed maximum security by the artists in question? Why is it that those who spread a gospel of Black pathology in books and movies, even as they place the soul of the race in an inferno of filth for profit, (which is only matched by their own gutter vision of Black women and unprincipled, inarticulate men, and their decision not to address themselves to our major problems) are being relegated to places of honor by whites, and misdirected Blacks? These and several other questions come up jarring for answers when one considers the reasons underneath the current rage over Van Peebles' movie madness — Sweet, Sweetback and its implications for the kinds of future cinema that big rich white movie magnets and the bank which controls their selections will finance and spend millions to promote, particularly in the cities with

growing Black majorities, hungry for cinemafare which spotlights their conditions, not the white world's image of itself.

MUHAMMAD SPEAKS is surely not the place to reel off repetitious, imitative white filth Van Peebles has saddled and plagued his people within this film: our paper's standards of excellence would not give the film that added bit of notoriety and box-office notices. But when licentious poison is being poured into the minds of young Blacks who are so confused over who they are, what it means to be Black and freedom - seeking and where they are going, then it is important that we speak to the symbolic levels of derangement in this cancerous piece of parasitic ego - tripping on the part of Van Peebles, lest our silence be confused with an affirmation.

Firstly, as Van Peebles merchandizes injustice — like a slave auctioneer bidding and peddling flesh — he embraces that old diseased sociologist view which says that because Black males are often surrounded by women, our women have been historical vixens, who poison potential manhood: he then transforms this rage into symbolic action, via the seduction into manhood of his non-hero Sweetback, who is raised and adopted into the rituals of an orphanage - brothel. This, in Van Peebles mind, is a symbolic statement about the involvement of our ethos as a race: that is, like Sweetback, the Black male grows upon in a women ridden ridden societal brothel, and that Black women are the participants or keepers of this repugnant red light in this kind house of initiation - licentiousness ... Here we are, as people in 1971, with a race of women who have the most noble, burdensome history any of female group in the history of the world, and all Van Peebles can see as the symbolic - definition of our Black mother's nobility is this

definition: Harlot.

FROM SWEETBACK'S EARLY INITIATION in the Brothel where he grows up and comes to view this situation as the world, Van Peebles manipulates the sexuality of this Black man, by actually doing the same thing that certain kinds of white slavers tried to work on the Black male slave: turn him into a stud, and that's exactly Van Peebles, symbolic vision of Black manhood. So that as Sweetback grows up he is a simple - minded, non - dimensional non - man with only one ability, one trade. Van Peebles who wrote, directed, produced, and acted out this ego - trip, true to the image of the white southern enslavers' mentality spins out the yarns of his own libido by exploiting Sweetback and Black manhood, through a non - hero who seems barely able to talk.

Sweetback grows up in this circus type brothel, as one of the principal teachers, for white and Black audiences: he is sold out because of collusion between the proprietor of the house and two white detectives



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in 'Sweetback'

who need a Black scapegoat: he is arrested on a trumped up charge, in order to keep the circus brothel going.

Van Peebles' awareness about the real forces and people who are manipulating the large Black community are really and symbolically limited to this myopic vision of sport and play in a diseased world and the audience finds itself caring little or nothing about the participants in this inferno, nor for that matter Sweetback, who is a cardboard character — no, do they care about his evolving fortunes from this point on in the cinema. The fact that he never takes on the real enemies of our survival tells us much about how Van Peebles is really afraid of big white power and does not want to bite the hand of those who will eventually feed him by giving him millions for movies in the future.

SWEETBACK BEATS UP white policemen after they assault a group of young Blacks, but the fact that the young militants burn up a cop's car seems limited and personal in scope, lacking revolutionary range, and even

though Sweetback escapes from the car, the myopic fascist mentality of Van Peebles seems to be more important to the film than it is to Blacks who must after all deal with police brutality on a day to day basis. Fascist - one dimensional car burning obviously is not the answer. For in working over these white policemen Van Peebles plays upon many young Blacks **need** for release of anger and hostility, and in many theatres a tremendous amount of energy gets lost in the name of revolution by whipping down these dreadful policemen, yet it is only a mask for Van Peebles who as artist escapes once again from dealing with the forces behind the fascist - state that America is becoming, not simply the one - dimensional police - brutality aspect, as hideous as it is. (The so - called released Black youth watching the film after the beating of the policemen, has actually learned nothing new about his condition and how to deal with the day to day realities of the ghetto . . . Indeed he goes home

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with a swelled - head, perhaps, but really short - changed out of \$3. cost of cinema fare.

After beating the two policemen, Sweetback goes on a long period of escape from reality. In these long scenes which occupy most of the latter period of film the non - hero is chased by the police, who are portrayed as being very stupid, thusly Van Peebles confuses the stupidity of the cop on the beat with the high level precision of the machinery of the police department, state - wide and ultimately across the board, which can catch anybody they want badly enough, most of the time, and a Black who has downed two white policemen, ALL OF THE TIME.

There are other elements as well. There is a long sex dual scene with Sweetback and the female president of a wild motorcycle gang: Sweetback wins: so what's revolutionary about the oldest of laws the white woman and the Black man? Shortly after this — in the middle of the movie — when it comes down to choice between himself and a young Black brother, Sweetback, who

really cares about no one tells a Black motorcyclist: Take him, he's our future. But these noble words do not actually issue Sweetback, the man; this is yet another instance of Van Peebles using symbolic language which in fact has nothing to do with film nor the character in processes, rather it's Melvin putting words into people's mouths.

VAN PEEBLES as motion - picture man has been deeply influenced in terms of his own aesthetics by people like the Italian film maker Federico Fellini, but Fellini is making films about Western society at the point of decay and decomposition, like certain Italian cities. Van Peebles has taken Fellini's aesthetics and placed them like a yoke upon the Black community. Meantime Blacks are not about to collapse, instead we are a rising people, defining ourselves, celebrating life and fighting for life, and survival. He loves the counter - culture - anti revolution of white hippies and white advertising techniques so well that he employs "simplistic sensationalism of the

treatment and the eye - disorienting visual style which substitutes film school technical complexities (such as the superimposition of double triple and quadruple images) for dramatic content."

THE SYMBOLIC MEANING underneath the escape presents yet another personal agony of Van Peebles. He is attempting to answer the literature of major Black writers of fiction, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, whose heroes often times are either killed, commit one form of suicide or another or are about to die. So Van Peebles wants Sweetback to symbolize the man who survived, who beat the rap. But in the end, Sweetback doesn't survive whites' lynching - like hounds, but rather he escapes from Black people, like a white fleeing to the suburbs to escape the problem — so too, with Sweetback, at the end he is a cop - out, leaving real Black people with the problems, while he idles away in Mexico.

Finally, young Black people

ought to ask themselves why it is that the major issues facing the survival of our people are never addressed in this movie and why is it that we Blacks will rationalize any kind of slimey public behavior by a Black, as long as he is rapping loud and

long and drawing a crowd, when in the final examination it is the loud mouth who is putting the bad - mouth on Black people and making a mint off the abomination which he has created in the name of Blackness?
