

Formal Film Analysis

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ASRC 3305 Film Formal Analysis

Keeping Blaxploitation Real – Van Peebles Style

In Van Peebles' words, he made *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song* "for a sensibility that doesn't get to see twelve Visconti films a year."¹ Taken out of context, this statement comes off as pompous and somewhat pretentious for a director talking about only his second American film and his third altogether, but it obviates the fact that *Sweet Sweetback* was the conscious product of Van Peebles' attempts to create a film to reach specific demographics which he felt were not being spoken to by mainstream films. In attempt to get a better perspective on what Van Peebles was saying in *Sweet Sweetback*, it helps to review the opening scenes of *Sweet Sweetback* leading up to Sweetback's Christening. It is also interesting to notice how much his opening to *Sweet Sweetback* differs from that of *Story of a Three Day Pass*, both superficially and in the more subtle formal elements.

Sweet Sweetback starts off with no sound at all with the camera panning across the faces of a group of women all staring at some unseen subject in a kitchen. As the camera pans we see a variety of different facial expressions on the women: faint smiles with wandering eyes and heads shaking as if unwilling to accept what they see. As we get to the last face in the row, we see the brightest smile yet and then the camera cuts to the subject—a little boy with sores all over his body and chunks of his hair missing sitting at a table hungrily devouring whatever is put in front of him. At the same time that we see the last face, a note of grey industrial sound creeps into the aural landscape, almost like a large piece of machinery firing up in the distance.

We are then hit with a sharp whistling sound as the camera cuts again to a scene of a grown man running away from something with the sound of loud rumbling and eventually a siren in the background. During this time, two pieces of text appear on the screen: one a prologue to the dark ages and another a dedication of the film to "all the Brothers and

¹The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland / Lerone Bennett, Jr. Source: *Ebony* 26 (September 1971):118.

Sisters who had enough of the Man.” After a moment of the droning sirens, we are suddenly thrown back into the kitchen. The sirens are gone, but a reverberating metallic hum remains giving the scene a more sinister feeling.

Finally, we see the most genuine smiles on the women yet as they watch the boy eating with even more gusto now. We savor their happiness which seems out of place after the cut of a man running away and in the midst of sirens and industrial sounds in the background.

In many analysis of the beginning of *Sweet Sweetback*, this opening is often obscured by the Christening scene which comes next, but the scenes leading up to Sweetback’s Christening offer much in the way of analysis especially in contrasting them with what we saw from the opening Van Peebles constructed in *Story of a Three Day Pass*.

Newton helps point out that this scene is not some one-off story of a stray, unlucky child, but a snapshot of a situation striking many Black communities: the difficulty of providing the children in the community with healthy meals.² While this begins to explain what is going on in this scene, there are other subtle details to the cinematography and sound of these opening scenes which become more apparent when viewed in contrast to *Story of a Three Day Pass*.

Story of a Three Day Pass gives the viewer a much smoother, slower introduction to the film with a jazzy soundtrack and a few minutes of credits before introducing the protagonist. This deliberate departure from a smoother style makes it apparent the rawness Van Peebles was trying to bring out in the opening scenes of *Sweet Sweetback*. Bennett alludes to a ‘symbolic schizophrenia’ afflicting Black communities trying to stake out their interpretations of films and television, and perhaps the way Van Peebles opens *Sweet Sweetback*, is his acknowledgement and response to this schizophrenia. The rawness Van Peebles presents with his lack of polished sound and the choice of a scenario very real to many Blacks who

²He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of ‘Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song’ / Huey P. Newton. Source: The Black Panther Party, Vol. VI, No. 21 (Saturday, June 19, 1971) p.4.

would be viewing the film was his attempt not to get bogged down in symbolic schizophrenia, and to start with something concrete that his audience could latch on to.

With respect to its affect in the movie itself, this opening scene also establishes that there is no question as to Sweetback's roots. Although it is not obvious at first, the initial pass across the prostitute's faces in the first scene places the camera below the women's faces in the general direction of Sweetback, thus putting the women in a position of power in relationship to the viewer, whose perspective can be inferred to be close to that of Sweetback's. Regardless of however one may interpret Sweetback's relationship to the prostitutes through the Christening scene, here we see them fulfilling a maternal and nurturing role, doing their best to shape Sweetback into a man based on what they know and the means they have available to him. With this interpretation, the whole idea of 'Emancipation Orgasms' and f***ing one's way to freedom does not seem so far fetched for the scion of a house of prostitutes, but more like the type of suspension from reality that we see in a superhero film in the explanation of how our hero got their powers. This scene explains how Sweetback, a boy who might have died hungry on the street otherwise, was able to grow up into a man and fight for his community.

It is easy to get carried away in the unrealistic parts of *Sweet Sweetback* or to try to condemn his use of violence and sex to make it through various situations in the film, but I feel like that is a little like saying it is unrealistic to give a superhero super powers in a movie—in fact it is even worse because while Sweetback's 'Sweet Sweet Back' is a bit over the top, the sex and the violence can be considered more an outcry against the means left to the Black community to express themselves to the rest of society than a lapse into fantasy. Avoiding trying to win this debate, the formal analysis offered of the first scene of *Sweet Sweetback* is intended to emphasize that Van Peebles was not just trying to speak through gaudy sex and action, but also through more subtle elements of sound and his usage of the camera. In this way *Sweet Sweetback* is not just a gaudy display, unscrupulously designed

to be a commercial success, but also a film with layers of meaning and appreciable formal elements available to any who is willing to see them.