SUBVERTING HOLLYWOOD FROM THE INSIDE OUT: MELVIN VAN PEEBLES'S *WATERMELON MAN*

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African American filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles is probably best known for his popular and controversial 1971 film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The story of one man's evolution from apolitical sex performer to black power revolutionary, the film altered the trajectory of black representation in Hollywood. With its complex portrayal of black identity and experience and deliberately political message (it was even endorsed by the Black Panther Party), the film's success signaled the commercial viability of black films at the box office. It thus inadvertently kicked off an entirely new genre in Hollywood when studios rushed to replicate *Sweetback*'s formula. The works that resulted from Hollywood's capitalism—black action adventure films like *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971)*, Super Fly* (Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972), *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974)*, Dolemite* (D'Urville Martin, 1975)*,* and many others that constitute what some have retroactively labeled the "Blaxploitation" reflected superficial aspects of Sweetback such as explicit depictions of sex and violence but little of its uplift politics. Furthermore, with few exceptions, most of the Blaxploitation films had white directors at the helm. For these and other reasons, many scholars and critics draw a distinction between black cast films created in Hollywood and those produced by independent African American directors, differentiating films designed primarily to guarantee commercial success from those that aimed to explore deeper aspects of black experience.[1]

It is no surprise, then, that many scholars discuss Van Peebles's prior studio-produced film, *Watermelon Man* (1970)*,* as a prelude to *Sweetback*, but rarely single it out for individual analysis. Given the enduring importance of *Sweetback*, *Watermelon Man* is often relegated to a precursory tale that sets up the filmmaker's shift from Hollywood studio director to independent maverick. However, as one of the most important African American independent filmmakers in the history of film, Van Peebles's brief but significant experience as a Hollywood director under contract with Columbia Pictures merits more than a footnote. To relegate *Watermelon Man* to the margins of film history would be a gross oversight, for it stands as a testament to Van Peebles's difficult, but ultimately successful, ambition to criticize Hollywood's and society's racism "from the inside out."[2]

Watermelon Man: The Significance

Watermelon Man tells the story of Jeff Gerber, a white bigot who wakes up one morning to discover that he has turned black overnight. Based on Herman Raucher's 1969 screenplay, *The Night the Sun Came Out on Happy Hollow Lane*, the film follows Gerber as he learns what it means to live as a black man, lose his family, experience racial discrimination, and become the object of sexual fetishism by white women. Produced by Columbia Pictures, the studio no doubt assumed that hiring the young Van Peebles would add credibility to the film, a social satire that was supposed to trade on contemporary discussions about race relations, but without rattling white viewers. This is most evident in the studio's early suggestion to cast a white actor in the lead role and have him perform in blackface throughout the film, a proposal that Van Peebles obstinately refused. This was just the first of many battles between the studio and its director. Little did Columbia know that Van Peebles would ultimately transform the picture from a nonthreatening racial farce to a tale of one man's conversion from bigot to revolutionary.

Van Peebles executes his satire by interrogating two types of whiteness in the thematic and narrative elements of the film. First, the bizarre whiteface appearance of African American actor Godfrey Cambridge calls attention to the normative function of whiteness in both film and everyday life. In this analysis of the film, I focus on the relatively brief section in which African American actor Godfrey Cambridge appears in whiteface, for it establishes Cambridge's appearance as a form of black social critique in and of itself. In addition, Van Peebles satirizes Hollywood's usual methods of storytelling,

Columbia Studio publicity images demonstrate how *Watermelon Man* was marketed to audiences, including behind the scenes shots of director Melvin Van Peebles blocking scenes with lead actors Godfrey Cambridge and Estelle Parsons.

demonstrating how they mask social and political inequalities. Because the film represents whiteness from an independent, black-oriented perspective, it contradicts Hollywood's typical depiction of whiteness as normative. In the hands of another director, *Watermelon Man* might have been a liberal racist tale of a white man who "discovers" the reality of racial oppression via a "nightmarish" experience. Melvin Van Peebles transformed the film into a multilayered critique of white racism and white privilege, operating on both micro and macro aesthetic levels.

Instead of treating the film as a footnote to the director's body of work, this examination focuses on the film precisely because it *was* made within a mainstream context. Rather than concentrate solely on the ways that Hollywood placed limitations on Van Peebles's artistic expression, however, I want to explore how the director utilized and even exploited industrial and cinematic conventions in order to produce a film that scathingly critiqued American racism as well as Hollywood itself.

In fact, *Watermelon Man* is an important object of study precisely because it is Van Peebles's only major work for a Hollywood studio. The final product is a film produced in Hollywood, but one that should be viewed as a bridge between the worlds of studio and independent filmmaking, as evidence that it *is* possible (if admittedly difficult) to create a black-oriented film with progressive racial politics from within the Hollywood system. Itself wedged between the social-problem films of previous decades and the yet-to-come Blaxploitation films of the 1970s, the film also reflects the influences of both the French New Wave and American sitcom.

The importance of *Watermelon Man* as a blend of influences cannot be emphasized enough, because it suggests a means of complicating the independent/Hollywood divide, especially regarding discussion of African American filmmakers. When Tony Gittens rightly notes the racist politics of most Hollywood films in his classic *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, he cites them as "psychologically supportive of white Americans, their cultural standards, and their strivings."[3] Further, Gittens argues: "What must be underscored here is the fact that generally Hollywood film is a celebration of the contributions of the white American to the development of American culture; it equates American culture with white Americans and engenders a sense of national and ethnic pride for white Americans."[4]

Watermelon Man embodies the ongoing, fraught connection between Hollywood and black independent filmmaking. In *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, Gladstone L. Yearwood describes Van Peebles as an African American independent director who is "*multilingual* in cinematic languages and traditions." Yearwood continues: "Undeniably, *Sweetback* is

the cornerstone of contemporary black cinema, especially in its treatment of political content within the terms of popular narrative cinema. Yet, M. Van Peebles is able to work in the Hollywood style (*Watermelon Man,* 1967) [*sic*] and in the visual style of commercial television (*The Sophisticated Gents*, 1981) without the compromises characteristic of black exploitation films."[5]

How did Van Peebles manage to create such a provocative satire within the ideological and industrial constraints of the Hollywood studio system? Yearwood situates the two Van Peebles films in the context of African American filmmakers who occupy places both in independent cinema and in Hollywood: artists working toward the creation of an independent black cinema as well as seeking to change mainstream Hollywood methods of representing African Americans. On the one hand, independent cinema offered directors creative freedom, even though the miniscule production budgets often made those endeavors difficult to fully realize. On the other hand, working within Hollywood might guarantee material support, yet an underlying focus on the financial bottom line led studio executives to pressure filmmakers to generate products that would appeal to the widest possible audience, even through recourse to tried-and-true racial stereotypes and narratives. Many filmmakers did attempt to work within these limitations, knowing that studio backing ensured widespread visibility for their films.

Yearwood's reference to Van Peebles's television work suggests that filmmakers like him dealt with limitations, in part, by working across mediums. Therefore, it is important to consider Van Peebles's work in terms of Hollywood and independent cinema, but also within the context of television production, for *Watermelon Man* is a film that borrows heavily from the look of 1950s family sitcoms. It was, after all, produced in the midst of a boom of black-oriented television programming, a development that took place in conjunction with significant political, cultural, and social shifts that had their roots in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. As Christine Acham observes in *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power,* the 1970s saw an unprecedented number of black television shows across networks, including *Black Journal* (first aired in 1969), *Soul Train* (WCIU, WBBM, WGN, 1971–2006), and *The Flip Wilson Show* (NBC, 1970–74).[6] *Watermelon Man*'s aesthetics and politics form a point of intersection between the all-white family sitcoms of the 1950s and the emerging black programs of the 1970s. *Watermelon Man* is thus in conversation with the history of black images on television, a reminder that African American filmmakers have typically engaged in a wide variety of media production of all types, out of both creative desire and necessity.

Ideological concerns were always points of contention for directors like Van Peebles, just as matters of representation continue to be issues for filmmakers today. As they toggled between the creative freedom (but low production budgets) offered by independent cinema and the widespread visibility (with comfortable operating budgets) of the studio model, some African American filmmakers also faced political dilemmas as to the degree to which their films should support a broader, antiracist agenda. As Van Peebles noted:

> We place an exorbitant amount of weight on black film. Because there are so few of them, we always want them to mirror so many of our aspirations. This is understandable but it is also unfortunate, because all these stories cannot often be adequately told in the language of the cinema. The cinema cannot fully portray real life; but does this through its own cinematic languages.[7]

The conundrum that Van Peebles expresses here points to a broader concern in black filmmaking. Given the sheer lack of black images on the big screen, African American filmmakers were under tremendous pressure to "represent" all aspects of black life in ways that would satisfy studio executives, audiences, and themselves. Filmmakers who chose to focus on a specific issue or topic ran the risk of being criticized for showing a limited view of black culture.[8] Though independent filmmakers surely shared these burdens, too, studio directors also faced the additional obstacle of executives motivated mainly by profitability.

What makes *Watermelon Man* particularly notable is that its director found a way to convey his own vision of black and white identity in America through the cinematic languages of Hollywood and mainstream media. First and foremost, Van Peebles wisely decided to choose his battles with Columbia when it came to casting the film: he insisted that an African American actor play the lead and petitioned for Mantan Moreland to be added in a supporting role, but left the rest of the casting decisions to the studio. Van Peebles also interjected in ways that the studio likely deemed insignificant at the time, such as composing his own musical score for the film. The experimental jazz/blues/funk compositions, however, added a level of dissonance to many of the images in the film. And when he anticipated studio objections, Van Peebles simply lied or withheld important information, such as when he told executives that he had shot two endings for the film, but in reality, only filmed one. Perhaps most impressive is the way that Van Peebles used the very tools of Hollywood representation, such as conventions around whiteness and American identity, to reveal deeper truths about racism, white privilege, and Hollywood.

In the 1982 colloquy that resulted in *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, filmmakers Van Peebles, St. Clair Bourne, Haile Gerima, and critic Pearl Bowser discussed the impact of *Sweetback* and the state of black filmmaking more broadly. While Gerima and Bowser contended that filmmakers should commit themselves to uplifting people of color in their projects and questioned whether or not *Sweetback* did so, Van Peebles argued for individual creativity in one's art. Van Peebles was certainly no stranger to dissenting opinions about his famous and controversial film. Some critics have argued that he sought to invert the racial hierarchy in his work by creating black-oriented worlds where blacks are the heroes and whites are the losers: ridiculed, beaten, marginalized, or nonexistent. Others, like Black Panther leader Huey Newton, praised Van Peebles for making films that embodied the black revolutionary spirit of the 1970s Black Panther movement. Yet still others, such as *Ebony* magazine writer and cultural critic Lerone Bennett, Jr., believed that Van Peebles was simply putting a new spin on old stereotypes—an act that Bennett found particularly heinous coming from an African American filmmaker.[9]

Even Van Peebles himself has offered conflicting explanations for the motivations behind his films. His most frequently repeated narrative is that, unable to find film work in the United States due to industry racism, he traveled to Paris in the 1950s to work as a writer and eventual filmmaker. In some versions of this story, he very consciously imparts a politically progressive message into all subsequent works. In others, Van Peebles creates work that is personally meaningful to him and subsequently, audiences and critics interpret the message as radical and politically progressive. At times, he claims full knowledge of the revolutionary aspects of films like *Sweetback*, such as in his 1999 interview in *Transition,* when he stated that he intended *Sweetback* as a kind of instructional manual for budding revolutionaries, asserting that his goal "was to make it possible for the disenfranchised to learn the skills they needed in a capitalist society."[10]

Of course, these competing narratives and disagreements over Van Peebles's intentions presume that he actually has a defined set of politics guiding his filmmaking, and that these politics are reflected in a consistent manner in his work. In *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It),* Van Peebles responds to an inquiry about the politics of his work with the following opaque statement, "What are my politics? To win."[11]

Watermelon Man: Hollywood Production

Initially, production executives at Columbia pressured Van Peebles to cast white actor Jack Lemmon or Alan Arkin for

Black actor Godfrey Cambridge in character as Jeffrey Gerber in a rare instance of whiteface in the Hollywood studio production *Watermelon Man*.

the lead role in *Watermelon Man*, which would have involved the actor spending the majority of the film in blackface.[12] Because the lead character is only white for ten minutes or so before turning black, Van Peebles convinced them to cast an African American actor in the role instead. Comedian/actor Godfrey Cambridge eventually won the part. Van Peebles's substitution of whiteface for Columbia's desired blackface marks a radical and subversive shift: a direct black critique of whiteness as a response to a studio attempt to preserve the problematic trope of white actors "blacking up" to portray black characters.

Blackface traditions, of course, have existed within cinema since the birth of the medium, perhaps most infamously in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927). More relevant to *Watermelon Man*, though, is the film adaptation of John Howard Griffin's nonfiction novel *Black Like Me* (Carl Lerner, 1964), which featured white actor James Whitmore in blackface.[13] There are many instances of African American whiteface on stage: in minstrel shows, vaudeville, and Jean Genet's *The Blacks*.[14] *Watermelon Man* marked a rare utilization of whiteface on the cinematic screen, especially in a Hollywood production.

Columbia's desire to use a white actor in blackface is but one example of the radical difference between the studio's vision for *Watermelon Man* and that of Van Peebles. Initially, Columbia went out of its way to court the young director. Van Peebles recalls, "When they heard about me, Hollywood sent a plane for me to come down. This is while the [San Francisco Film] Festival was still going on. They weren't taking any chances because all companies had to show their good will that they were trying to [recruit black directors]."[15] However, things changed once Van Peebles signed his contract. Whereas the industry standard was sixty days of shooting, Columbia allowed Van Peebles a mere thirty-one.[16] Given this early restriction, Van Peebles quickly surmised that the studio wanted the positive press from hiring an African American director, but had little interest in giving him the tools he needed to create a successful picture. It seemed as if Columbia was more interested in the veneer of cultural "realness" that Van Peebles would lend to the film than in his skills as a director. One studio document analyzing the film's box office approach makes clear what the studio believed Van Peebles's value to be: "Melvin Van Peebles is one of the few black directors to make a major film at a major studio. It is he who gives the picture its authentically black viewpoint and the fresh, young, unhandcuffed-by-tradition approach that has 'today' stamped on it in black print."[17] The truth of Van Peebles's conviction that Columbia

did not care about his artistic or political vision would become even more obvious in battles over the casting, the title of the film, and especially the script.[18]

Columbia's approach to the film was to sacrifice real social commentary on race in favor of making a "feel good" comedy that would appeal to white audiences.[19] Internal documents confirm the studio's emphasis of enjoyment over social criticism, such as one box office analysis memo that stated: "The advertising approach should appeal to the amusement-seeking audience, and should strongly indicate that this is a picture they will enjoy. Any message and/or social commentary inherent in the film will make its point as it was intended to—by indirection."[20]

Furthermore, the studio did not seem to have any interest whatsoever in what African American audiences might think about the film. In a conversation about his experience shooting *Watermelon Man*, Van Peebles recounts that Columbia executives would call an African American administrative assistant into their office, show her the footage from the day's filming, and ask for her opinion on the racial content and tone of the film. No doubt intimidated by the situation, the young woman would simply endorse whatever statements the executives made.

Next, the studio executives approached the man who shined shoes at the studio to get confirmation that the film was indeed entertaining to African Americans. The man gave the film a ringing endorsement, praising the work that Van Peebles was doing. Little did the executives know that Van Peebles—now alert to the shoddy "research" that the studio was conducting about African American audiences—had decided to "use the enemy's power against them."[21] He had hired the man to tell the studio executives exactly what they wanted to hear, thus keeping them satisfied that they were in fact getting the type of film that they desired.[22]

The ending of *Watermelon Man* was one of the biggest issues of contention between Van Peebles and Columbia. Originally, the script called for the main character to wake up at the end of the film, only to realize that the whole experience had been a dream. Van Peebles resisted and shot the ending that eventually made it into the film: Gerber not only remains black, but also commits to radical black politics by joining a black revolutionary group at the end of the film. According to Van Peebles, he told Columbia that he was shooting both endings and would allow them final choice over which one to use. He delayed showing them either version until after the sets had been dismantled and the actors dismissed from shooting, at which point the director admitted that he had only shot one ending. Though a risky maneuver, Van Peebles correctly guessed that the studio

would not want to spend the money to reassemble the set and the cast just to shoot the ending that they wanted. As he explained, "everybody has an Achilles pocketbook."[23]

The tension between Van Peebles and Columbia concerned more than artistic differences. Though Columbia had invested in making a film about racism, the studio had little interest in making one that challenged racist ideology, whether in society or in cinema. By changing the ending, Van Peebles avoided a narrative that presented blackness as a nightmare and provided instead a story about the path to racial enlightenment and eventual revolution. In this way, the director challenged the pretense of Columbia Pictures: the studio wanted credit for creating a racially progressive film, but only if it could do so in a way that would not challenge racially problematic representations.

Watermelon Man: Whiteness and Whiteface

The casting, makeup, and set design of the opening scenes of *Watermelon Man* all combine to present an effective parody of whiteness based on the "unbelievability" of a an African American actor's performance of believable whiteness. A talented, multifaceted actor with a prestigious theater background, Godfrey Cambridge had already donned whiteface once before when he appeared in Jean Genet's play *The Blacks,* for which he won an Obie award in 1961. Cambridge was also a successful standup comedian whose routines thoughtfully skewered America's racism and ideological contradictions. Cambridge was not, however, overtly political in his humor, preferring instead to locate his critiques of both blacks and whites in personal anecdotes and observations.

Like *Watermelon Man*'s boundary crossing, Godfrey Cambridge was likewise a performer whose comedy blended two distinct styles. Gerald Nachman notes that Cambridge "presented a comic persona he squeezed in somewhere between Dick Gregory and Bill Cosby."[24] By finding the middle ground between Gregory's pointed criticisms of society and Cosby's casual observations on everyday life, Cambridge's "razor-sharp racial barbs felt painless wrapped inside so much personal warmth."[25]

Cambridge's personal narrative added a layer of depth to his portrayal of Jeff Gerber, who begins *Watermelon Man* ensconced in white privilege and slowly comes into consciousness from the outside in. Growing up in Canada and New York, Cambridge was often the sole African American at school and in his neighborhood. He claimed that, rather than feeling marginalized, these environments left him blind to the ways in which race functioned and, consequently, the significance of his own blackness. Like the character that he
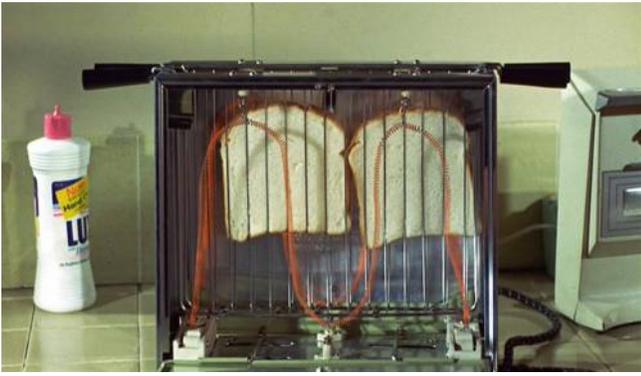
Plain white bread that will soon turn a toasty shade of brown foreshadows Jeff Gerber's transformation in *Watermelon Man.*

Cambridge crossing color lines and comedic styles as the black Jeff Gerber in a scene with his white wife Althea (Estelle Parsons) in *Watermelon Man.*

would eventually portray in *Watermelon Man,* Cambridge was similarly surrounded by a type of white privilege that insulated him from the realities of racism. Asserting that the discovery of what it meant to be black came to him later in life, Cambridge stated, "I never felt racial prejudice because I was the only Negro. It's terrible for someone to reach the age of twenty-one and realize he's a Negro, to spend all that time leading a sheltered life."[26] In a 1967 comedy routine, Cambridge implicated the media's role in promoting this kind of colorblindness and white normativity: "I believed everything I saw on television right up until I went out and tried to buy a flesh-colored Band-Aid. You know they didn't have me in mind."[27]

Cambridge, like his character Jeff Gerber, found a space for creative exploration with Van Peebles. Taking a closer look at Van Peebles's larger body of film work, it becomes clear that the concepts of twoness and identity are recurring themes. Van Peebles's use of twoness includes—but also stretches beyond—notions of individual identity first theorized by W.E.B. Dubois, along with his notion of double consciousness, which implies that African Americans are aware both of themselves and the way that whites view them.[28] Van Peebles's reflections on this notion of twoness are inherently messier, emphasizing not only separateness, but also the sites of intersection and overlap among racial subjectivities, genres, and narrative styles. Terri Francis notes that his films have often straddled the line between popular and art house cinema.[29] Such is the case with *Sweetback,* which walks a fine line between avant-garde art film and pornography. Van Peebles's French New Wave–inspired *Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1968) and *Watermelon Man* blur the lines of genre, and many of his films alternate between comedy and drama.

The opening of *Watermelon Man* demonstrates how artfully Van Peebles channeled these seeming contradictions into a powerful commentary on race. When the audience first sees Jeff Gerber, he is exercising at home on extravagant equipment. After exercising, he uses a tanning bed. The shots of Gerber's routine are choppily intercut with images of his white, middle-class life: framed photographs of his white children, a shot of his white wife putting on sensible nude-colored pumps and inserting pieces of white bread into the toaster; a subsequent shot of the result, brown toast, foreshadows Jeff's transformation. This initial depiction of Gerber's daily morning ritual demonstrates the process that he must go through to achieve the perfect whiteness, and reveals that white masculinity is a construction that must be carefully maintained by white men.[30] By the time that he sits down to breakfast in a tableau of the perfect All-American family—wife, two children, and glasses of wholesome orange juice—his hyper-visible whiteness casts an ironic tone to the scene.

According to Van Peebles, he instructed Cambridge to "act white" in these early scenes.[31] The result is an image of white masculinity that is overperformed from the first scene of the film. Cambridge's appearance, like many examples of whiteface (and blackface), never approaches believability. His skin is an unnatural hue with an odd shine (probably related to the makeup), giving him an incredibly inauthentic whiteness. In scenes with his family of white actors, his character's bizarre appearance stands out even more.

On this micro level of aesthetics, *Watermelon Man* uses whiteface to reverse the logic of whiteness as norm. By placing an African American actor in white makeup to portray the "normal" Jeff Gerber, the film throws into question the idea of what "normal" looks like in the first place. It has the effect of "making whiteness strange," in the words of Richard Dyer, unmasking the power structure by which whiteness masquerades as unraced norm and how whiteness becomes synonymous with "Americanness."[32]

Further, the theatricality of the opening sequence points to the artificiality—and inherent instability—of the very concept of Americanness. As Ralph Ellison astutely notes in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke": "For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, but gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind."[33] In contrast to those who view masking and identity performance as a practice specific to African American performance and synonymous with the black folk trope of the trickster, Ellison identifies masking as a foundational element of American identity, a practice developed as early colonialists attempted to create an identity that was distinct from their British origins. He continues, "Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be the most theatrical."[34]

Ellison links his observations about the theatricality of Americanness to the interdependency of blackness and whiteness, especially in the theatricality of racialized performance. Similarly, Eric Lott, Arthur Knight, Michael Rogin, and others have argued that blackface performance in particular reveals the many ways in which white and black identities are mutually constitutive. Susan Gubar argues that "racechange" in either direction (black-to-white or white-to-black) "provides artists in diverse media a way of thinking about racial parameters."[35] Just as Ellison noted that "the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals," Gubar argues that racechange encompasses a range of possibilities: "the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality."[36]

Jeff Gerber becomes noticeably more natural and subtle in his behavior and mannerisms the longer he resides in his "changed" black body, which is, of course, Godfrey Cambridge's regular self. This leads to a reading that positions blackness as normative for the audience, even though the plot of the film instructs otherwise. If *Watermelon Man* had been made according to the studio's initial specifications—with Jack Lemmon playing a normal white family man who turns black overnight and learns the error of his ways—the film would have essentially been a tale of white redemption through a temporary sojourn into blackness. Van Peebles's critical move to use an African American actor in whiteface transforms the film into a meta-critique on the nature of racial representation, as the makeup that Cambridge wears at the beginning of the film works in conjunction with the performance of his racial identity to launch a biting critique of whiteness in Civil Rights–era America. Godfrey Cambridge's over-the-top performance as the white Gerber, complete with wide smiles, boisterous laughter, and exaggerated movements, transforms whiteness into something bizarre and unnatural, a powerful accomplishment by itself.

In addition, the film attacks the concept of white privilege. Although most press discourses of *Watermelon Man* refer to Jeff Gerber as a bigot, it might be more accurate to say that he is a white man who does not understand his own white privilege and how he is implicated in the racist oppression of African Americans.[37] While he does not explicitly hate African Americans, he does not feel the need to understand the intricacies of the Civil Rights movement. He enjoys bantering with the elderly African American waiter (played by comic actor Mantan Moreland) who serves him his daily coffee, never realizing that the man may not enjoy Gerber's antiblack jokes. Gerber's life is so financially and socially comfortable that he has invented a daily challenge for himself to give his life a bit of drama: he runs to catch his bus each morning before getting on, thrilled with the rush of exhilaration that he experiences by *almost* missing it. He is a man so privileged by his whiteness, and so insulated from his awareness of it, that he literally has to invent hardships for himself.

Watermelon Man: Subverting the Stereotypes

In contrast to the battles over the casting and ending of the film, other Hollywood-mandated elements of *Watermelon Man* actually worked in service of the biting satire that Van Peebles wanted to produce. In the opening scene of the film, for example, the family eventually convenes at the breakfast table where they eat and watch the latest news story about the race riots occurring across the country. Van Peebles brilliantly juxtaposes actual black-and-white footage of African American protesters being arrested with shots of the Gerber family and the trappings of suburban middle-class life, highlighting the social distance between the two, but also their symbiotic relationship.[38] Once Jeff Gerber has completed his morning exercise routine, he joins his family at the head of the breakfast table, completing a cinematic tableau that immediately calls to mind television shows like *Make Room for Daddy* (ABC, 1953–65), *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954–60), and *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958–66). It is at this point, two and a half minutes into the film, that the opening credits roll over this vision of the "normal" American family.

Jeffrey Gerber becomes noticeably more natural and subtle in his behavior and mannerisms the longer he resides in his "changed" black body in *Watermelon Man*.

Jeffrey Gerber and his family in a mundane, sitcom styled scene of white middle class life in the opening scene of *Watermelon Man*.

The strong visual likeness between the opening segment of *Watermelon Man* and American television sitcoms was due in large part to the cast and crew working on the film. Art Director Malcolm C. Bert had an extensive background in television: his résumé included domestic sitcoms such as *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–72)*, I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965–70)*,* and *The Ghost & Mrs. Muir* (NBC, ABC, 1968–70). Set Director John Burton had worked nearly entirely in television throughout his career, creating sets for shows like *That Girl* (ABC, 1966–71) and *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–74).

The casting of *Watermelon Man* further solidified its connection to classic televisual Americana. Scott Garrett and Erin Moran, who play Jeff Gerber's son and daughter, were both child actors on television. In 1970, both appeared on the sitcom *Family Affair* (CBS, 1966–71) just prior to the release of *Watermelon Man*. Finally, Estelle Parsons rounds out the cast as Jeff's wife, Althea. Parsons was the most notable figure in the film, having won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and a nomination for *Rachel, Rachel* (Paul Newman, 1968).

While some casting and aesthetic choices supported Van Peebles's ironic take on the American sitcom family, the casting of Mantan Moreland as the counterman in a diner that Jeff Gerber frequents launches an attack on the history of Hollywood's treatment of African American actors. Moreland was best known for his comedic roles in the *Charlie Chan* movies and many other films, and had been appearing in motion pictures since the 1930s. However, Moreland was derided for most of his career for playing what many considered to be buffoonish black stereotypes. For instance, in Spike Lee's blackface satire, *Bamboozled* (2000), the lead character is named "Mantan" as a reference to Moreland.

Further, Godfrey Cambridge had cited Moreland as the embodiment of the antiquated, shuffling "coon" trope in his

comedy show *Ready or Not: It's Godfrey Cambridge*.[39] In the routine, Cambridge tells the story of Arthur Uncle (a play on the name "Uncle Tom"), an older Hollywood actor who rationalizes the degrading parts he plays in a conversation with his fellow actors. It seems likely that Cambridge based the character at least in part on actor Stepin Fetchit, who adamantly contended that his film roles, though criticized as stereotypical and self-hating, were actually early forms of activism that opened doors for African American actors down the road.[40] Cambridge walks the audience through the various justifications that Arthur Uncle offers for his continued debasement (historical accuracy, shuffling as revolutionary act) and chides other African American performers who criticize his choices. Cambridge, however, avoids lambasting the Arthur Uncle character. Instead, he offers his audience a glimpse into the fraught emotions of a man who has chosen to make his living in an industry that he secretly knows to be racist, but who desperately needs to deny it in order to survive. Toward the end of the nearly ten-minute-long routine, Cambridge-as–Arthur Uncle quietly says, "I don't have to picket. I just want to work."[41]

I reference Cambridge's comedy routine in order to emphasize the significance of Moreland's appearance in *Watermelon Man*. When Jeff Gerber first encounters Moreland's character, he is still white. Cheerful and exaggeratedly deferential, Moreland's counterman is a self-conscious parody of his own past roles. His character laughs boisterously when Gerber tells a racist joke about all African Americans looking alike, and Van Peebles underscores the moment by inserting banjo music during the exchange. Moreland's over-the-top performance clearly gestures toward the buffoonish trope that he was known for. When Gerber offers a toast to the counterman's health, however, the music suddenly goes silent. Just for a moment, Moreland's facial expression transforms into a grimace. The moment is cut short by a telephone ringing in the diner, at which point the counterman shakes his head as if waking from a daydream, apologizes to Gerber, opens his eyes wide (one of Moreland's trademarks), and hurries off to answer the phone.

This moment—a brilliant synthesis of Van Peebles's direction and Moreland's acting—functions as a meta-critique of Hollywood's history of racist representations. Van Peebles wanted the scene to be subtle enough to get past the white Columbia executives, but he made sure that knowing audiences would see it for what it was: a satire of the type of racial buffoonery that Hollywood had created through its limited use of actors such as Moreland, Stepin Fetchit (born Lincoln Perry), Willie Best, and others.[42] In his self-referential performance, Moreland's acting calls attention to the constructed nature of the characters he has played throughout his career, just as Cambridge's whiteface calls attention to the constructed nature of whiteness in the same scene. Furthermore, the fleeting glimpse of displeasure beneath the buffoonish façade suggests Moreland's own frustration with playing such characters (similar to Cambridge's Arthur Uncle) as well as many other African American artists' feelings about working in Hollywood more generally. Rather than direct Moreland to play the scene in a manner totally removed from his previous roles, Van Peebles utilized Moreland's reputation in service of this critique.

Van Peebles has admitted that his strategy in *Watermelon Man* and other films was to take stereotypes of African Americans and turn them against the systems that created them. Van Peebles elucidates this position with the following anecdote: "There was an article in the paper the other day about *Sweetback*. And the guy says, 'why would you take all of these stereotypes and so forth?' Take the stereotypes and kick ass with the motherfuckers. That's how you do it."[43]

Interestingly, Moreland was the one actor whom Van Peebles insisted on casting in the film. Feeling that Moreland had been unfairly vilified throughout his career, Van Peebles wanted to "give the brother a chance."[44] Van Peebles's passionate defense of Moreland is just one example of the ways that *Watermelon Man* references and comments on aspects of Hollywood's problematic depiction of African Americans. In response to Hollywood's marginalization of Moreland in stereotypical roles, Van Peebles imbues the trope of the "buffoon" with a glimmer of defiance. Though Van Peebles has often insisted that his films do not communicate concrete social meanings, the casting of Moreland demonstrates his preferred politics of film as social critique. His use of cinematic elements to create a film that can stand on its own and simultaneously criticize racist filmmaking practices recalls W.E.B. Dubois's musings on the goals of African American art. In "Criteria of Negro Art," Dubois states:

> Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.[45]

Though Cambridge wears a whiteface "mask" in the film, Moreland's performance recalls other notions of masking in African American philosophical traditions. Poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar explored the way that African Americans were forced to hide their true feelings about living in a

Van Peebles's direction and Mantan Moreland's acting function as a meta-critique of Hollywood's history of racist representations in *Watermelon Man.*

racist society beneath a constricting mask of public joviality in his poem "We Wear The Mask." The first stanza is an apt description of Moreland's momentary dropping of his own mask in *Watermelon Man*:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.[46]

Watermelon Man: The Politics of Winning

The elements that make *Watermelon Man* noteworthy are precisely the reasons why it is such a difficult film to categorize. It is often treated as little more than a precursor to *Sweetback* or an anecdote to explain why Van Peebles left Hollywood, but I want to reflect on what it can elucidate about Van Peebles's body of work and offer some suggestions for the ways that a critical study of other mainstream Hollywood films might enrich a discussion of African American independent filmmaking.

Though not often referenced as a film with a revolutionary theme, *Watermelon Man* is in fact the prototype for the work that Van Peebles would later produce, a fact that becomes clearer when one compares the lead character of each film. Addressing the evolution of *Sweetback*'s protagonist, Van Peebles states, "I saw the film [*Sweetback*] as an evolution in understanding . . . from an uncritical character—a guy willing to go along with the cops at first—to a progression in which he develops the consciousness."[47] In an interview with Van Peebles, James Surowiecki connects the two films explicitly when he argues, "Jeff Gerber, white insurance agent, and Sweetback, black prostitute [*sic*], begin about as far apart as they could, but in Van Peebles's world, they both end up black revolutionaries."[48] Indeed, the ending of *Watermelon Man* is a radical inversion of its television sitcom opening. Once again, we witness Jeff Gerber, now black instead of white, performing exercise maneuvers. There is even a call back to the camera angles and musical soundtrack of the opening sequences. The camera quickly pulls back, however, and we see that Jeff is not alone, but is participating in a kind of revolutionary battle training with a group of African American men. Wielding brooms and mops, the men strike a number of attack poses, transforming these symbols of domestic servitude into tools of combat. The final shot—a lightning-fast zoom in on Jeff thrusting his weapon toward the camera—confirms that Jeff's transformation, from white bigot to black revolutionary, is complete.

Although the closing shot is powerful on its own, its true brilliance is in the way that it serves as an inversion of the film's saccharine image of white Americana. It is this cunning subversion of Hollywood and television conventions that is the trademark of *Watermelon Man*. From the set designer to the child actors, the studio provided the components of the film, but Van Peebles assembled them in ways that were distinctly black and radical. If Jeff Gerber's transformation is the prototype for character development in *Sweetback*, and *Watermelon Man* a precursor to *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* then perhaps existing assumptions about the distinction between Hollywood and independent cinema merit reexamination. Such an understanding might allow for a more nuanced conversation about the ways that African American filmmakers traverse both worlds throughout their careers. For instance, an emphasis on the slippages between independent filmmaking and Hollywood production can provide nuance to an understanding of director Tyler Perry, who produces films and television shows in his Atlanta-based studio, but has formed distribution deals with Lionsgate and is currently partnered with Oprah Winfrey's OWN network.

This distinction grows messier with the constantly evolving nature of the film and media landscapes. For instance, the rise of cable networks and web-based media as a means of film distribution has resulted in directors such as Cheryl Dunye and Ava DuVernay—among others—working across media and moving beyond the simple Hollywood/independent binary. Acknowledging the fluidity of today's media production boundaries can illuminate how DuVernay's television work—including her well-publicized episode of the hit show *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–)—helps finance her independent films.

As I hope this essay has demonstrated, Hollywood films can and do offer thoughtful explorations of race and racism, even though their methods of doing so may be more fraught than those of independent films. Like *Watermelon Man,* films such as *Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde* (William Crain, 1976) and *True Identity* (Charles Lane, 1991) offer analyses of race and racism via whiteface. On television, Eddie Murphy famously used whiteface to humorously interrogate whiteness and white privilege in the short film *White Like Me* that appeared on *Saturday Night Live*.[49] Clearly, other media producers working within the Hollywood system are still employing the strategies that Van Peebles pioneered to navigate the industry's racist structures.

Melvin Van Peebles's *Watermelon Man*—the result of creative brilliance and sheer force of will—expresses a black-oriented perspective in spite of the many industrial factors working to actively suppress any manifestation of black radical politics. At a time when blackface was still seen as an acceptable representation of blackness and the very concept of an African American director in Hollywood was still a novelty (some might argue that it still is), Van Peebles found a way to shift the racial politics of Hollywood, if only for a moment.[50] Given the developments that have taken place in the filmmaking industry in the forty years since *Watermelon Man*'s release and the growing number of black filmmakers whose work straddles the already permeable boundary between independent cinema and Hollywood film, *Watermelon Man* deserves further discussion. Perhaps it can even prompt further analysis of today's similarly hybridized films.

Notes

1. In this essay, I use "African American" to refer to specific individuals or groups, and "black" in reference to cultural products and subject positions.
2. By "from the inside out," I am referencing Peebles's own words about criticizing Hollywood while working within the Hollywood studio system.
3. Tony Gittens, "Cultural Restitution and Independent Black Cinema," in *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking*, ed. Gladstone L. Yearwood (Athens: Center for Afro-American Studies, Ohio University), 117.
4. Gittens, "Cultural Restitution," 118.
5. Gladstone L. Yearwood, "Introduction: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking," in Yearwood, ed., *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, 12.
6. Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
7. "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the Development of Contemporary Black Cinema, with Melvin Van Peebles, St. Clair Bourne, Haile Gerima, and Pearl Bowser," in Yearwood, ed., *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, 65.
8. Later, in 1988, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer echoed this sentiment, stating: "Where access and opportunism are rationed, so that black films tend to get made only one-at-a-time, each film text is burdened in an inordinate pressure to be 'representative' and to act, as a delegate does, as a statement that 'speaks' for the black communities as a whole." Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, "De Margin and De Center," *Screen* 24, no. 4 (1988): 2–10.
9. Lerone Bennet, "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony*, September 1971, 107–18.
10. James Surowiecki and Melvin Van Peebles, "Making It," *Transition* 79 (1999): 180.
11. Joe Angio, *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)* (2005) is a documentary portrait of Van Peebles.
12. Melvin Van Peebles, introduction to *Watermelon Man* (Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.
13. The film, also titled *Black Like Me* (Carl Lerner, 1964), is a drama chronicling a white journalist who goes undercover as a black man to explore racism in the American South.

14. Written in 1958 and first performed in 1959, Genet's play is a racial satire that involves black actors reenacting the murder of a white women in front of a kangaroo court. Black actors appear in whiteface to portray the white characters; Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

    For more on the tradition of black actors in whiteface in the theater, see Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

15. Melvin Van Peebles, discussion with author, home of Melvin Van Peebles, New York, February 22, 2013.

16. Van Peebles cited the shortened filming time, which is also corroborated by production documents. Production schedule memo, August 26, 1969, William "Billy" Gordon papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.

17. "Box Office Analysis" memo, December 17, 1969, Jack Atlas/Joe Ansen, Jack Atlas papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.

18. The original title of the film was *The Night the Sun Came Out on Happy Hollow Lane,* which was the name of the book from which the film was adapted. Production documents also list the working title of the film as *Mirror, Mirror*. Rehearsal salaries report, August 15, 1969, William "Billy" Gordon papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA.

19. Van Peebles, discussion with author.

20. "Advertising Approach" memo, December 17, 1969, Jack Atlas/Joe Ansen, Jack Atlas papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA

21. Van Peebles, discussion with author.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 437.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 43.

27. Godfrey Cambridge, *Ready or Not: Here's Godfrey Cambridge*, Epic Records FLM 13101-LP, 1964.

28. W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008), 12.

29. Terri Francis, "Cinema on the Lower Frequencies: Black Independent Filmmaking," *Black Camera* 22 (2007): 21.

30. Again, Cambridge's real life plays a key intertextual role here, as his lifelong struggles with weight and dieting were well documented throughout his career; Louie Robinson, "Godfrey Cambridge Wins 'Battle of Bulges,' Loses 117 Pounds," *Ebony*, October 1967, 160–70.

31. Van Peebles, discussion with author.

32. Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002); Richard Dyer, *White* (London: New York: Routledge, 1997).

33. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison,* ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 26.

34. Ellison, "Change the Joke," 108.

35. Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

36. Ellison, "Change the Joke," 109; Gubar, *Racechanges*, 5.

37. This type of character—one who does not develop racial consciousness until it is forced upon him by circumstance—would later appear in the form of the main character in Van Peebles's 1971 film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.

38. Frantz Fanon argues that family structure parallels social structure for whites, allowing white Americans to shift from childhood to adulthood with a minimum of difficulty. He argues that this is not the case for African Americans, and that once the black man enters society, an entirely different set of structural rules apply. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 188.

39. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of African Americans in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001), 7.

40. Joseph McBride, "Stepin Fetchin Talks Back," *Film Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1971): 20–26. In an interview that McBride transcribes, Fetchit states, "I was the first Negro militant."

41. Cambridge, *Ready or Not*.

42. According to Van Peebles, he told Moreland "don't make it too clear that we're saying 'fuck you'"; Van Peebles, discussion with author.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. W.E.B. DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *WEBDuBois.org*, 29, www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html; originally published in *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926).

46. Paul Laurence Dunbar and William Dean Howells, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1896), 167.

47. "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," 61.

48. Surowiecki and Van Peebles, "Making It," 179.

49. Racquel Gates, "Bringing the Black: Eddie Murphy and African American Humor on *Saturday Night Live*," in *Saturday Night Live and American TV*, ed. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

50. In 1980, the Director's Guild of America (DGA) established an Ethnic Minority Committee, and later in 1994, the African American Steering Committee, both aimed at increasing the numbers of African Americans working as directors in Hollywood, as well as designed to provide a support and networking system for them. And in 2013, Paris Barclay became the first black president in the history of the Director's Guild of America. See Director's Guild of America, "About the African American Steering Committee," www.dga.org/The-Guild/Committees/Diversity/African-American.aspx.