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Shuji Terayama vs Melvin Van Peebles : Comparison of Experimental and Avant-Garde Cinema of 1971

Across the world, the 1960s and 1970s were a tumultuous time of new culture, new ideas, and, most importantly, political and social issues. These points of contempt vary from country to country and from continent to continent, but the overarching theme for many citizens of the world was that people were fed up with something. Every issue that had been simmering for the past thirty years, in many places, reached a boiling point in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These boiling points came in the form of civil protests, changing worldviews, and most importantly, artistic expression. These pieces of art were often avant-garde or experimental. For the film industry, this is often reflected in strange editing and off-kilter storytelling and characters. These films often had subject matter that was as political as the state of the world outside of the films. Two films that exemplify these ideals and capture the essence of the 1960s and 1970s were released just one day apart: Sweet Sweetback's BaadAsssss Song and Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets. I seek to interrogate how films made in the late 1960s and early 1970s utilize subject matters of societal change, sexual violence/oppression, and defiance in an experimental and avant-garde way via story/character structure and music through the "Third Cinema" movement within Melvin Van Peebles' Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971) and Shūji Terayama's Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets (1971).

"Third Cinema" refers to the third removed layer to the first and second cinemas of the world. This concept refers to the idea of the "third world" as in third world countries and third world ideologies often refer to countries that are developing or are underdeveloped. The essay "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World" written in 1969 by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino described the ideas of needing a way to produce films that are made to be revolutionary and subversive to combat the societies surrounding them. The "First Cinema" is that of the classic "studio system" in Hollywood and in the United States. "Second Cinema" refers to the sort of art-house or "aesthetic" filmmaking of Europe. Then "Third Cinema" is that of the outskirts often in non-European countries or the United States that take up and discuss anti-imperialist ideologies and subvert the idea of what a film can be. These filmmakers are often ingrained with a desire to create art that shows and changes the dialogue of the industry or the system that they may be confined to by working outside of it or despite it. Melvin Van Peebles and Shūji Terayama fit into this description of what a "Third Cinema" filmmaker should be through their films Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song and Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets.

Melvin Van Peebles wrote, directed, and starred in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in 1971. Before that, he had graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University and had traveled the world doing and performing odd jobs until he struck his first big film deal with Columbia Pictures in 1970. The film that came out of this deal was *Watermelon Man*. This film was studio-produced, but that didn't mean a sacrifice for the socio-political commentary for Van Peebles. The film's concept was that a racist white man wakes up as a Black man. The film was a box office success, despite the concept and maybe because of it. Van Peebles then decided to switch gears and independently finance and produce the film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The film cost \$150,000 to create and went on to make \$15 Million (about \$111 Million in 2023) despite the nature of the story, characters, and style. Shūji Terayama wrote, directed, and produced *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* in 1971. Before creating this film, Terayama was an avid poetry fan from his school days until after graduation. He was also an experimental and guerilla theater creator before becoming a filmmaker and an author even before that. His poetry and theater were often centered around anti-establishment ideals and the sexual revolution. He carried these themes and ideas to the screen as he began creating independent films. He created three shorter films before creating *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* for \$20,000 in 1971. This film was financed by the ATG (Art Theater Guild) in Japan which often financed Japanese New Wave and Art House features.