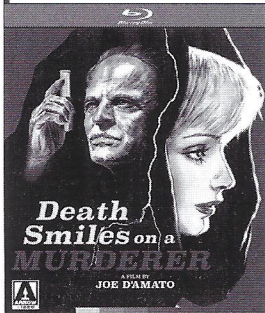


## DEATH SMILES ON A MURDERER

Directed by Joe D'Amato  
(1973) Arrow Video Blu-ray



Joe D'Amato would certainly go on to direct rougher fare than *Death Smiles on a Murderer* (1973), but with this late entry in the Italian Gothic cycle that began more than a decade earlier, the future director of *Anthropophagous* (1980) and *Porno Holocaust* (1981) proved he could also handle atmosphere and subtlety, although the film has its share of gore and sexuality as well. Originally released in a few cut versions with slightly varying titles (*Death Smiles at Murder*, *Death Smiles on Murder*, etc.) the film has finally made its way onto

Blu-ray in what appears to be its definitive, most complete version.

Viewers are plunged right into the deep end at the beginning of *Death Smiles* with a disorienting series of flashbacks which depict the plight of Greta (Ewa Aulin) an apparently deceased young woman who has endured a . . . Complicated . . . relationship with her brother Franz (Luciano Rossi), a jealous, stalking, and abusive hunchback. We are still trying to piece Greta's story together when the movie abruptly shifts gears and we find ourselves at the site of carriage accident near the home of Walter and Eva Ravensbruck (Sergio Doria and Angela Bo) in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Austria. Inside the wrecked carriage, mysteriously, is a nearly catatonic Greta, who is carried inside the Ravensbruck home, where she becomes a long-term guest. Klaus Kinski appears in a somewhat limited role as the baffled doctor trying to determine what's wrong with her.

As Kinski works feverishly in his lab, the spectral shenanigans commence at Castle Ravensbruck. Bed-hopping, bloody murders, hauntings, and hallucinations rule the day. Eventually, of course, the Inspector arrives. Just as the audience thinks it has finally sorted out what the hell is going on, D'Amato pulls the rug out from under us with the film's final enigmatic sequence. Along the way, there has been plenty of R-rated sex, some surprisingly strong gore (well, it's D'Amato), and ghoul make-up which some commentators have called disappointing, but which I found viscerally effective.

Some viewers may find *Death Smiles* nearly impossible to follow. Those who enjoy the atmosphere of an Italian Gothic or Giallo and are content to immerse themselves in this world without trying to force it to make TOO much sense are likely to have a good time with the film. It's not quite a classic of either genre, not the first Italian genre flick, or Ewe Aulin flick, or, God knows, Joe D'Amato flick you should probably show someone, but it has its quite affecting moments and its own peculiar charms.

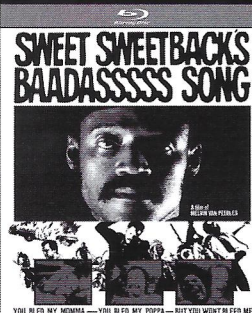
Arrow Video has given *Death Smiles on a Murderer* all of the attention it deserves (and then some) with its new region-free Blu-ray release. The package offers a 2K restoration of the full cut of the film using the original camera negative. The results are mostly quite beautiful, with some scenes rendered in life-like clarity and everything else in the visual presentation looking as sharp and colorful as the original photography and film elements would likely allow. The English and Italian soundtracks were also cleaned up and are available in LPCM Mono.

Arrow's respect for the material also comes through in the various A-listers it has recruited for the disc's extras, beginning with genre historian and Italian Horror expert Tim Lucas who delivers his usual thorough examination, comparing and contrasting elements of *Death Smiles* to other entries in the era's Italian Gothic cycle, while also providing plenty of screen-specific analysis, where appropriate. Viewers still confused when the credits begin rolling (and there will be plenty), should switch right over to his track. Complementing the commentary quite nicely is a 21-minute video essay by film critic Kat Ellinger who offers a scholarly assessment of D'Amato's controversial but preternaturally productive career. Thoughtful and serious, but never boring, Ellinger's piece finds new significance and avenues of inquiry in a body of work that many prefer to simply laugh off without further reflection. Finally, Ewe Aulin appears in an invaluable 45-minute career spanning video interview. The disc also contains trailers and a booklet of essays from Stephen Thrower and Roberto Curti, included with the first pressing only. The care, attention, and respect demonstrated by Arrow's treatment of *Death Smiles on a Murderer* should be a model for other genre labels.

Chris Herzog

## SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSSS SONG

Directed by Melvin Van Peebles  
Vinegar Syndrome Blu-ray/DVD combo



Melvin Van Peebles had already defined himself a renaissance man long before he took on the mantle of black cinema's leading freedom fighter. Having spent much of his career in Europe, as a musician, writer, filmmaker and *enfant terrible*, he returned to America in 1969 with an invitation (and a three-picture deal) from Columbia Pictures. His second film, *Watermelon Man* (1970), was a source of great frustration for one who prized independence and self-worth. But the Hollywood system was a strong arm of the Man, whose foot was clearly up the ass of every member of the Black community. Van Peebles chose to do what was unthinkable, namely to remove the foot, break it in half and shove it down Whitey's throat. In essence, *Sweet*

*Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was a dangerous mission statement for a new cinematic revolution, and it resonates just as defiantly in 2018 as it did at the height of the Civil Rights struggle.

Van Peebles claims to have come to the story by way of "semen shock," where the force of his own sexual energy allowed the idea to burst forth like Athena out of the head of Zeus. Yes, that's the story, which the filmmaker visually and unashamedly recreates in his own fascinating 2003 documentary *The Real Deal*. His vision was to tell a story that would defy the reality of both cinematic and societal norms—a black man on the run who beats the odds to live and fight another day. Financing the film on his own, he shot in a nineteen-day frenzy, with cast and crew working long stretches to ensure entire sequences could be filmed before any person or location became unavailable.

Few films start off so abrasively, to say the least. *Sweetback* doesn't shy away from the truth of its world, in which a young Sweetback (played by the director's then 13-year old son, Mario) loses his "cherry" to one of his adopted prostitute mother-figures. This is full-on child sex, with nothing left to the imagination, no body doubles to disguise the truth Van Peebles is aiming for. As commentator Sergio Mims points out in his commentary, brothels, pimps, hustles, and sex were real struggles that plagued much of post-war black America, as anyone who knows Richard Pryor's life and stand-up routines can attest to. Add to that the non-stop police abuse, torture and murder of the innocent, the film is as relentless in its pace, attitude and transgressive agenda.

As played by Van Peebles, Sweetback begins as what could be the silent, deadly stereotype—the best fuck you'll ever get in your life. When a young white woman volunteers to try him out, his boss, Beetle, gives the signal that stops what could have been perceived by some on-looking cops as "deviant sex," halting a potentially early death for our titular lead. Sweetback, as hinted in the film's magical opening sequence, is a kind of unearthly hero, who has been given the gift of the gods in more ways than one. And like the heroes of old, he is forced into a choice that leads to dire consequences, to save his skin and that of a renegade Black Panther who he believes is the future of his people. Sacrifice is at the core of this film, as is cost, but not in the ways one would expect.

*Sweetback* is a chase movie, but a dreamlike, disjointed, dislocated experience. Van Peebles' use of inserts, split screens, dissolves, jump cuts, repetition, handheld camerawork all work to scramble our sense of clarity, to place us in the same desperate perspective as the man we are following. We know we're somewhere in Los Angeles, but where exactly and at what time remains a mystery. All we know is that we need to get to the Mexican border.

Van Peebles' brilliant use of cinematic tricks (especially his creative use of off-screen space and sound design) allow for the movie to feel bigger than it is, and to reveal more than it shows. For a man who didn't readily admit to being a student of film, he delivered a masterpiece fueled by vision, focus and technique.

In Sweetback's world, nothing is simply black or white, when friends and enemies betray each other out of fear of the white man. However, there are those who sacrifice for friendship, such as Sweetback's smooth-talking boss Beetle (a rather nuanced and memorable performance by Simon Chuckster) and the Dragon, the biker who risks his neck for a stranger, wonderfully played by John Amos in one of his first screen performances. But the real reward is Van Peebles himself, who was forced to play the part his way when other better-known actors demanded more lines. The writer/director/producer/editor/composer didn't budge for Columbia, and he sure wasn't changing his script for any actor. His minimalist approach, coupled with his physicality and distinct wardrobe, proved an inedible icon of its day.

The film's sequences of events build to defy expectation—specifically the tradition that a defiant black man would die before the end. Each time Sweetback appears to be cornered or betrayed, he finds another way out, each with a new price. In a role reversal that borders on comedy, our man encounters a group of Hell's Angels, whose boss challenges him to a duel to the death. Without spoiling this memorable scene, let's just say Sweetback has the upper hand in more ways than one.

Working with a then up-and-coming group called Earth, Wind and Fire, Van Peebles created a musical soundscape full of furious grooves, themes, hymns, and beats that layer over one another—and sometimes edit in and out of one another, revealing his admiration for avant-garde and jazz. The music is the voice, and the