

# Panther

## An Interview with Mario Van Peebles

*Editorial Note: Last spring, Mario and Melvin Van Peebles's movie, Panther, was released and then quickly removed from mass distribution in American movie theaters. The movie sympathetically portrays the situation of urban Blacks that led to the creation and spread of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense under the leadership of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in the years 1966-1969.*

*The release of the movie was accompanied by a series of vitriolic attacks on the film and on the social-change movements of the 1960s. Some of the campaign against the movie was orchestrated by David Horowitz. Horowitz, an editor at Ramparts magazine in the late 1960s, became involved with a group of Oakland Panthers in the 1970s and believes that some of them were involved in a murder that shocked the entire community. He was justifiably angered when others on the Left, too quick to defend any and every activity that came from an oppressed community, refused to publicly confront and condemn these actions. But for reasons that have been viewed by some as opportunistic rather than principled, Horowitz took his quite legitimate anger at some Panthers and at moral double standards among*

*some people on the Left as a justification for attacking any commitment to liberal or progressive vision.*

*In the 1980s, Horowitz reconstructed himself as a born-again Reaganite, vigorously attacking the Left, and became a central figure in a crusade to expose what he saw as left-wing tyranny exercised through "political correctness."*

*In a letter he sent to Todd Gitlin (a copy of which he sent to us at TIKKUN), Horowitz refers to Gitlin's remarks about Panther in USA Today, and says, "I see you haven't relinquished your role as a shill for the criminal left." He goes on to say, "For twenty years I have had to undertake the personal risk involved in telling this story because cowards like yourself, who know better, refuse to take a clear moral and intellectual stand on this issue. I can't wait to read the review of Panther in TIKKUN."*

*Well, we tried to oblige Horowitz, but our reviewer couldn't see the film before it got yanked from the theaters, in part because of the way the movie had been decried by the media. So instead we decided to talk to the film's director, Mario Van Peebles.*

**TIKKUN:** What led you to make *Panther*?

**Mario Van Peebles:** My father, Melvin van Peebles, and my mother were both very active politically when I was a kid. The first time I was allowed to stay up late was to attend a demonstration. My father made a movie called *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* that portrayed a street hustler who began to move beyond the typical individualism of ghetto life and to think politically. Because the film showed the development of a consciousness that could combat the tendency toward drugs and violence in ghetto life, it was embraced by Huey Newton and the Panthers, who hoped that people would see it and be influenced. They helped make the film a success by pushing it in their newspaper. This gave me special access to the Panthers, so that when I made the film I was able to talk to people like David Hilliard and Elaine Brown in depth. My father started writing a book about the period some nine years ago, and when he read it to me I thought "this is really a film."

After we turned the material into a movie script, we went around to Hollywood studios and we kept on get-

ting the same message: "You really need to make this more mainstream." But when pressed to explain what they meant, it turned out that they meant that there had to be a white person as one of the main heroes of the movie. "People knew about the destruction of the Indians for years," we were told, "but no one really cared about it until they got Kevin Costner to star in *Dances With Wolves*. The civil-rights movement might have been led by Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King, Jr. but Americans didn't care to see a movie on that till *Mississippi Burning* tells the story from the standpoint of white FBI agents. So you've got to write this story in a way that gives focus to some big white stars, and then you can do your thing." One of the studio heads suggested that we make one of the leading Panthers a white man. Others suggested focusing on a Berkeley white person who would meet five young Black guys, teaches them to read and stand up for themselves, and then they become the Panthers!

**TIKKUN:** But that's not what happened!

**Van Peebles:** Exactly. But you know that when Hollywood tries to make a film portraying heavyweight



boxers like Tyson or Ali they end up making them look more like Stallone. What the Hollywood people told us was that a big white audience would find the picture easier to appreciate if they found a big white star in it. But we didn't go that route.

But to get back to why I made the movie. All I ever heard from the media about the Panthers was a story about scary Black guys with scary ideas and scary guns. You never heard about alliances with whites, like that forged between the Panthers and the Peace and Freedom Party. You never heard about the role the Panthers played in preventing a riot from happening in Oakland after the shooting of Martin Luther King, Jr., though most other American cities exploded in violence after that assassination. The Panthers actually opposed a riot as an ineffective method of protest. Yet the media portrayed them exclusively as a paramilitary anti-white group, though the Panthers continually insisted that they were not anti-white but anti-oppression, and made alliances with progressive whites.

**TIKKUN:** In that way, they were quite different from other Black nationalist groups at the time.

**Van Peebles:** Absolutely. And they were willing to lose Black support to stand against that kind of antiwhite Black nationalism. So they chose Charles Garry as their key lawyer to defend Newton. The Panthers over and over again insisted that "it's not a color issue." In fact,

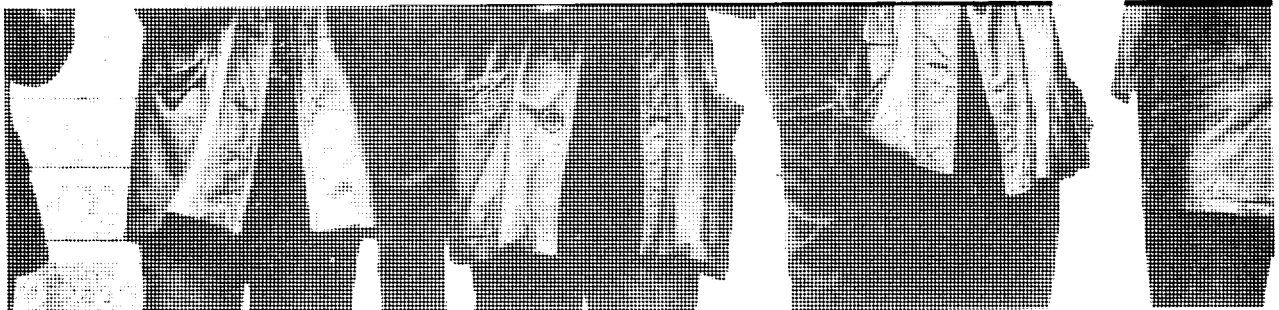
it was precisely that kind of sensitivity that made them so dangerous.

But the 1960s had a spirit that we rarely see today—much greater unity. Youth were thinking politically. I remember going to the Panhandle, the strip of green leading into Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, and there would be concerts at which one could hear Hendrix, Ronstadt, and Janis Joplin with Country Joe and the Fish and Santana—that's Black, white, and Latino—and today you'd have to listen to three different radio stations to hear that kind of diversity.

So one of the reasons I made the movie was to show kids today that social change could be made by young people. When young people see movies like *Gandhi* or *JFK* there is an element of romanticization of these powerful people, and young people often feel a huge distance between their own lives and the lives of these social-change heroes. But the Panthers were flawed-up people from the streets, so it's easier to identify with them. Huey was twenty-one when he started the Panthers. This was a time when youth were politically active.

**TIKKUN:** Let's focus on some of the criticism of this movie.

**Van Peebles:** Every pseudo-historian got their opportunity to knock the movie. The *New York Times* critic said that the film ignored the role of important Panther



JASON LAURE, IMPACT VISUALS

women like Elaine Brown. But the time line of the movie was 1966 to 1969, and at that period the powerful women had not yet emerged into powerful roles. It's as if we did a movie on a specific battle in World War II and the movie critic then says that the movie is inaccurate because it didn't deal with another battle that took place later. This wasn't a twelve-hour documentary, it was a feature film.

The level of misinformation and historical ignorance on the part of the critics was incredible. We had a woman in *The Los Angeles Times* who criticized the movie because it didn't show Angela Davis as a Panther—but Angela Davis was *not* a Panther.

**TIKKUN:** The Panthers adopted Mao's phrase that power grows out of the barrel of a gun. They became media stars after they walked into the State Legislature carrying unloaded rifles. They often emphasized the gun as an instrument of self-defense. They gave the message that one could defend the Black community by fighting back militarily. So this made it rather easy for the media to portray them as threatening.

**Van Peebles:** I have to agree. It was good news and bad news. On the one hand, we have a Black community whose problems and whose daily oppression are never captured by the media, and now through the Panthers that attention and the plight of Blacks in the inner cities gets highlighted. The bad news is that the attention also goes to focussing on the gun.

**TIKKUN:** Getting attention in that way created a legitimation framework for the state to portray the Panthers as deeply threatening.

**Van Peebles:** You can't take their actions outside of the historical context. Blacks are already subjected to violent attacks by the police. The police didn't feel the need to wait for the Panthers to legitimate violent attacks on Blacks; it was and remains a fact of daily life for young people in the ghetto. Nor does white society attack only those Black leaders associated with violence. Martin Luther King, Jr., the leading advocate of nonviolence, was slain in this period. Blacks could see that it didn't matter whether they took the nonviolent route—when their challenge to the larger society looked like it might succeed in challenging the existing system of power, it was struck down with force and violence. King seemed to be saying, "Be more humane than your opponent and they'll have to recognize our humanity." But that didn't work. The Panthers recognized the reality and said, "Power will concede nothing without demand. Don't expect that if you try to be a good Negro, with light skin and straightened hair, that anything fundamental will change for you."

The Panthers called themselves the Black Panthers for Self-Defense. The reason they picked the panther as

their symbol is that the panther is an animal that only fights in self-defense when it has been backed into a corner. It's not an offensive animal. But Newton recognized the problem with the image of the gun, and wanted to emphasize breakfast-for-children and other serve-the-people kind of programs.

My dad recognized the problematic nature of the use of guns when he put the following line into the movie: "If Black people have guns they'll probably shoot each other." And that is one of the key lines in the movie. The movie isn't just an indictment of the FBI—it's *also* of *us*, as Black people, for allowing some of the things that have happened to us to have happened. Nobody is forcing us to take drugs—it may be the FBI that gets them into the community, but it is *we* who actually decide to take them. So the movie is also an anti-drug message and an anti-gun message to Black young people, and this is where the FBI role is key to making the point, and the point is this: "If we don't grow the drugs and make the guns, how come there is so much of that stuff in our ghettos. How do you suppose they get here?" My point is to try to convince people that they are playing into the hands of the power structure when they use guns and drugs.

**TIKKUN:** Part of the criticism of the movie is that it only sees Blacks as victims without acknowledging enough the internal pathologies in the Black community.

**Van Peebles:** I wonder what movie they saw. The drug dealer who is portrayed as the worst villain in the movie is Black. Good and bad does not fall along Black and white lines. There were 175 Black people on the FBI payroll. The guy who gave the FBI the floor plan in Fred Hampton's apartment so that they could enter and kill him was Black.

**TIKKUN:** Why didn't you have more critical distance about the use of guns? Why not have your movie reflect the danger inherent in the romance of violence, a danger that became clearer in later years when some Panthers actually engaged in violence, and a few in outright murder? These later destructive developments could be seen as an outgrowth of tendencies that were already present in the years you explore.

**Van Peebles:** The Black audience comes away from this movie with a much greater appreciation of the destructive impact of drugs and violence. African Americans see the irony of how the guns go from the hands of revolutionaries to drug-related gangsters, or that drugs that were once the mind expanders of the nineteen sixties would now become the vehicle for pacifying and medicating an entire generation. It's like the Boxer Rebellion when Britain flooded China with drugs to undermine rebellion.

And right on screen I showed the destructive nature

of violent acts when I depicted the way that Eldridge Cleaver creates a shootout and ends up having little Bobby Hutton killed, so that the price right there is shown on screen, so that everyone will get how destructive a path it is that Eldridge has chosen (and one that Bobby Seale explicitly opposes, and tells Eldridge that this is not what the Panthers should be about).

**TIKKUN:** Do you have any basis for your claim that the FBI explicitly and consciously was engaged in a conspiracy to flood the Black community with drugs?

**Van Peebles:** Earl Anthony, who was an FBI informant who had become a Black Panther, writes about it explicitly in his book, *Spitting in the Wind*, how he was given drugs by the FBI to distribute.

**TIKKUN:** On what level? To his friends? That's not what you claim when you talk about flooding an entire community.

**Van Peebles:** True, he just writes about it on a specific level.

**TIKKUN:** That the FBI might give to ten Panthers would be very different than talking about flooding all of Oakland, or even just a sector of Oakland like West Oakland, where they'd have to be bringing in enough for tens of thousands of people.

**Van Peebles:** In Elaine Brown's book, *A Taste of Power*, she describes visiting Newton in exile and talks about the drugs coming into the ghetto and how the police are staying out of it. She describes white guys in a Rolls Royce coming into the housing projects and dealing with kids from the project. The people she talked about in her book became the composite character of the drug dealer in another movie I did called *New Jack City*. But I didn't find some new evidence or a letter from the FBI saying that we flooded these communities across the board. My father talked of this in terms of a garden theory. Anyone who has ever gardened knows that you don't have to plant weeds. The potential for weeds is always there, so if you want weeds to grow all you have to do is not weed the garden. And that's what the police have done in the ghettos of our major cities, starting with the Panthers in Oakland: They have not weeded the garden of the drug dealers.

I pointed this out to David Horowitz, one of the big critics of *Panther*, that if you go to a Black section of Los Angeles or to Harlem or to other major urban ghettos, you can get a hit of crack or a gun easier than you can get a Cuban cigar. But, I pointed out, there are no poppy fields in these inner cities, and there are no gun-manufacturing plants. So whether or not you believe that there was ever an explicit meeting between the FBI and the drug kingpins or mafia, there was a willingness to let this activity go on, because the government has turned its back on some communities and not on oth-

ers. You need only look at the aftermath of the bombing in Oklahoma to see how the government can go after people very quickly to stop and expose behavior they wish to stop. But there is no will to stop drug and guns importation to the American ghettos. So when they want they can find the bombers, but they don't stop drug traders who stand out in the open streets dealing drugs because they don't have any desire to stop it. As a result, you can go into any major urban area and see the dealing being done in broad daylight.

**TIKKUN:** There is still a difference between the racist and disgusting proposition, "We don't care about Blacks so we will let them get screwed by not stopping them as they pursue *their* own pathologies by engaging in drugs and violence," and the position of your movie which suggests that the government was consciously creating the addiction to drugs and violence.

**Van Peebles:** I don't think that they are that different. I was a drug counselor in Harlem and I can tell you that when you put those kinds of drugs into the hands of eight-, nine-, or ten-year-olds, and get them addicted, you are not talking about "consenting adults." True, they don't have to take it ... it's just there. But why is it there?

The *New York Times* reports that Manuel Noriega, a known drug trafficker, was on the federal payroll of the Drug Enforcement Agency and received \$300,000 from them to stop the flow of drugs. That's like the wolf taking care of the sheep. Bush was head of the CIA. In 1992 they decided to bust Noriega for his drug dealing. But Noriega did not have a policy of shredding his documents like the CIA did. Noriega was willing to testify and shed light on how drugs get into America. But on the grounds of national security the U.S. government refused to allow him to testify. The *New York Times* reported that the government was concerned that his testimony would show that narcotics trafficking was done in conjunction with U.S. authorities.

This information is publicly available. But people don't ask the obvious question when these drugs then end up on the streets of the ghetto: "How the hell does this stuff get here?" We don't grow it in the ghettos. You can't have it both ways, saying "Gee, this is just a Black problem, because Black people like taking drugs" but on the other hand, it couldn't get into the country without the active involvement of the government. And the Noriega affair is one of the few times where there is a possibility of exposing this direction. So what, exactly, was the "national security" interest that would be undermined by exploring what Noriega had to say?

You cannot logistically have this quantity of narcotics and firearms come into specific very geographically small areas of the country without the cooperation of the authorities.

**TIKKUN:** Why didn't they get more support within their own community?

**Van Peebles:** That presupposes that Blacks would be able to recognize their own best people. Does that happen necessarily in other communities? The Black community is not a monolithic community, just as the Jewish community is not. Just as there are people in your community who are scared of what TIKKUN represents, so there are people in the Black community whose interests were threatened by the Panthers and their program of social justice. There were even people in the Black community who opposed Dr. King.

But the responses to the Panthers and other progressives was not left to our community to decide for itself. In the 1970s, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Congress held hearings on the FBI and revealed the COINTELPRO program of the FBI which aimed at the systematic disruption of various progressive organizations. One FBI document explicitly says that the FBI must "prevent the rise of a Black messiah, anyone who might unify or electrify Black people." This is the government saying that it wants to prevent the rise of *any* Black leader, not just the Panthers.

You seem to be saying, "They had guns so they created the climate in which they allowed themselves to be isolated and killed." But Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed also. It didn't really matter whether you held the peaceful means strategy or the "by any means necessary" strategy—whichever strategy didn't really matter. And we have not had an effective Black leader since then. Since then our whole community has been medicated, drugged.

It's ironic to hear people like David Horowitz complaining about the alleged glorification of violence in this movie. When Schwarzenegger does a movie full of violence, you don't hear complaints from Horowitz or other right-wingers. When there are movies about Blacks shooting each other up in the 'hood, nobody complains. They complain when there is a progressive political message attached.

**TIKKUN:** I was in a meeting with Bobby Seale and David Hilliard and other Panther leaders in preparation for the United Front Against Fascism conference in Oakland in 1969. There were a group of us from the Peace and Freedom Party and a group of Panther leaders, and we were discussing the problems that might arise and how to deal with them. Our attention focused on the possible participation of a socialist sect group that had frequently participated in other movement activities, often in a somewhat disruptive way. We wondered how to prevent them from disrupting our meeting. Suddenly, Bobby made the following comment: "Ah, just off them if they get out of hand." Now the word "off" had been used in Panther rhetoric to mean "kill," as in "off the pig." So I

objected to Bobby, and told him that was ludicrous. He said back, "Well, I didn't mean kill them, I meant get rid of them, throw them out." I said back, "Bobby, if that's what you mean you should say so. Because you are the chairman of the party, and when you use language that loosely it can be misunderstood."

After the meeting, Tom Hayden angrily confronted me. "Michael," he told me, "you are a white person and you have no business speaking to the chairman of the Black Panther Party that way. We can't bring you to future gatherings with the Panthers, because if you challenge their leaders you will endanger our fragile relationship that we are building." I said to Tom, "That's no way to be a real ally. To be a real ally requires you confronting people when they do something self-destructive." By the way, I told the same thing to Horowitz years later when he became a sycophant to the Panthers in the 1970s, playing up to them and closing his eyes to some of the distortions and abuses amongst some of them that he would later attribute to all of them.

A short while after that Seale incident, Bobby was indicted in New Haven for allegedly ordering the execution of someone suspected of being an agent. I could easily imagine how his loose use of a rhetoric of violence may have played a role in that incident. And this happened in the period that your movie covered, so that aspect of Panther reality should have been confronted in the movie.

**Van Peebles:** I didn't try to make the Panthers into good guys or bad guys. What I tried to convey was a bunch of young people in the ghetto who tried to make a difference and what happened to them.

**TIKKUN:** What do you think young Black people should learn from your film?

**Van Peebles:** We did some market research in the Black community and many young Blacks came away from this film feeling much more sober, thinking about the danger of drugs and violence and how that could undermine just what our community needs. David Horowitz predicted the film would lead to violence and a bloodbath. But in fact there has been no violence connected to this film—there is a whole lot more violence connected to America's football games or to championship soccer tournaments in Europe.

**TIKKUN:** Why didn't this film get a better reception?

**Van Peebles:** Well, the film represented the Panthers in a more sympathetic way than some of the media would have wanted. And it was viciously attacked. David Horowitz and his operation took ads condemning the film and warning about its potentially destructive impact, not only in *Variety* and in the *Hollywood Reporter* and even on the Sony building's news circular around Time Square. He seemed to have more money

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## TRAVELING WITH CHILDREN

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Matriarchs were good Jewish wives. But I am suggesting here that we can reclaim such pacification texts themselves as locations for a feminist ethics that takes account of the ordinary: a risky choice methodologically. This is not some organizing tool (although it is critical to imagine a feminist theory that is politically useful and usefully accessible).

Gestures of the daily are prophetic, not because that is all that women have, although this may have been also true, but because theologically the moral gesture of the

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price paid for such deferred lives, for any parent, could never seem a fair one.

And there was something else. I had often—as in the writing of this essay—taken great pleasure in being able to say: “I’m a single parent raising three children by myself.” When I said it, I knew, I had done so with a pride not unlike the pride I felt when talking about scoring a key basket, or winning a tennis match. Though I often regretted not having a spouse to help me raise my children (more for their sake than for mine), I knew, too, that I sometimes loved the fact of raising them myself as much as I loved raising them, that I loved not having to consult or confer with anyone else about them, and that—a determined, competitive American man to the bone—I loved, simply, being able (most of the time) to have things *my way*.

I may have lost to my son in a game of one-on-one, but his mother, by not having known her children, day by day,

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for his ads to denounce this movie than our distribution company had to advertise it. The media was anxious to “dis” the movie, given the right-wing mood swing at the moment in the country and the desire of the media to seem responsive to that mood.

But I’m not surprised at this. I’m not in business to make money. What America is seeing right now are light comedies. It’s like the Depression era. People are not wanting to see *Grapes of Wrath*, they want something to cheer them up, and so I can’t credit Horowitz with defeating this movie, because it’s the nature of this period not to want to respond to this kind of serious movie that makes people rethink their world.

What was surprising was that usually when people take

daily heroic act makes possible sacred acts in ordinary time and space. Why Naomi’s response, or Esther’s house cleaning are key moments of spirituality is the regard that such recognition affords us, the reader with the baby in her arms. It is the design, the warp and weave of the world that is honored, a recognition that the spiritual journey begins again each morning, like bed-making or breakfast, work that is undone by the simplest act of turning in the night, by our own new hunger, like the milk in my breast again, waiting for the baby’s cry. □

through the formative years of their lives, had surely wound up losing bigger. Although, for a dozen years, I had fought and won, mostly, for my children—to get them through while earning the trust and affection I hoped would be ours for the rest of our lives—I had, I knew, in the part of me that remained bitter and embattled against their mother, won for myself too, and this victory, despite its sad edge, had often been precious to me.

I was able, then, to return to Northampton without the fears that had, for a brief period, plagued me, not so much because I’d been in touch with my womanly nature, but because before, during, and after this might have occurred, I’d been quite deeply in touch with my life as a middle-class American man. I was, by virtue of this fact, well practiced at knowing how to accept any responsibilities that came my way, how to persist and to succeed and to win—for myself, as well as with and for my children—at most jobs to which I set my mind, heart, and will. □

out an ad to critique a movie it is because they are feeling attacked. Asian Americans might take out an ad to critique a movie that has a negative portrayal of their community, or other ethnic groups might do that. But here was a white guy taking out an ad to say, “I don’t like how you Blacks see yourselves.” That’s a real leap. And he talks about the killing of someone in 1974 by some people associated with the Panthers, but our movie ends in 1969.

*USA Today* interviewed David Hilliard and Elaine Brown, who liked the movie, and also Bobby Seale (who is making his own movie on the Panthers), and David Horowitz, who didn’t like the movie, and then it only quoted the people who were negative. They put their negative assessment on the front page. But this wasn’t the main problem. The main problem is that today Americans want to see light fare. □