THE NEW YORKER

The Daring, Original, and Overlooked "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One"

By Richard Brody
February 5, 2015

What if they made a revolution and nobody saw it? That's what happened in 1968, when William Greaves filmed one of the most daring and original movies of the time, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One." He completed it in 1971, but it wasn't shown publicly until 1991, when it became a new entry in the history books but wasn't the rewriting of them that it should have been.

Greaves, who was then working as a documentary filmmaker and television producer (notably of public television's "Black Journal," where he was also an on-camera host), made a film about a couple in a state of sexual and romantic crisis. It's also a film about the attempt to make that film, and its frame-breaking, frame-multiplying reflexivity lends the small-scale action a vast, world-embracing scope. It's anything but a cramped theoretical exercise; fuelled by the power of Greaves's vision and the energy of his character, it's an intimate film that feels bigger than life.

Its originality lies partly in its mode of production—which is itself one of the movie's central subjects. It's one of the greatest movies about filmmaking ever made, and one that would have spoken to young independent filmmakers of the time. It's a vision of filmmaking that didn't get seen when it could have made a decisive difference for a new generation.

“Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One” is now readily available (there is a Criterion edition). It will be screened this Saturday at “Tell It Like It Is: Black Independents in New York, 1968-1986,” which runs February 6th through 19th at Film Society of Lincoln Center. And it was screened and discussed on Monday evening at the Brooklyn Historical Society. I had the privilege of taking part in the discussion with the filmmakers Shola Lynch and Su Friedrich, following an introduction by Steve Buscemi, who saw the film at Sundance in 1992 and had a hand in making its sequel (which was released in 2005). A special and unexpected delight was the presence of Greaves’s widow, Louise Greaves, and his son, David Greaves (who co-edited the film with him), who took part, from their seats among the audience, in the discussion.

Here’s the story that Louise Greaves told. (Greaves himself tells a version of it in his 1994 interview with Scott MacDonald in “A Critical Cinema 3.”) After completing the film in 1971, William Greaves believed that he had made a masterpiece, and that the only place to première it was the Cannes Film Festival. So he carried the print to France himself, where it was screened for programmers. The projectionist made the mistake of showing the reels out of order—though, as Louise added, the film would likely have been hard for them to grasp even in its proper order. The film was turned down. Greaves came home, figured he had made a mistake, and put the film in his closet.

Flash ahead, Louise Greaves said, to the early nineteen-nineties. The Brooklyn Museum was organizing a complete retrospective of Greaves’s films. The curator, having seen all of Greaves’s films that had been released, asked whether there was anything else. He explained that there was an undistributed film that she needn’t bother with, but she told him that she didn’t mind, it was her job to see everything. Upon viewing it, she declared that this film, “Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One,” was the one for the opening night of the retrospective. Louise Greaves didn’t name this inspired and inspiring curator, who is a secret hero of the history of cinema.

The ingenuity of William Greaves’s film is his singular ability to turn the story of its production into a central and natural element of the film. Greaves wrote a text—a brief scene, about ten or fifteen minutes long, that’s a fight between a man and a woman, Freddie and Alice. She angrily flings two grievances at him: he has forced her to have an abortion each time she’s become pregnant, and she says that his unwillingness to commit to their life as a family is because he’s a closeted homosexual (she repeatedly calls him a “faggot”). Filming in Central Park, Greaves gets several pairs of actors to play the scene, as if doing screen tests, until settling on one pair, Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert, who are white, seemingly in their mid-to-late thirties, middle class in their style and tone. They play like cut-rate versions of Jack Lemmon and Shelley Winters.

There are three cameras on the action. One is filming the actors as they perform, and one is filming Greaves working with the actors and whatever else seems to be of interest in the surrounding environment. Then Greaves himself has a camera, and he films whatever captures his fancy. His explanation to the cast and crew of these rules of the game is itself in the film. Much of the action is what takes place when the actors aren’t doing their scene—it’s a documentary about the crew on location. The actors are playing their roles and themselves as actors; Greaves, the camera operators, sound recordists, and other members of the crew are playing themselves. The situations that come up in the course of the shoot—such as a police officer trotting up on horseback and asking to see the crew’s permit, or a crowd of teen-agers gathering to watch the shoot—are integrated into the action.

At times, Greaves shows the simultaneous footage of two or three cameras at the same time, not exactly through split screens but by means of a black matte, as if in a photo album, that gives the multiple screens multiple windows. The film also includes three remarkable interludes—called X-1, X-2, and X-3— that are lengthy scenes that the crew shot of themselves in the production office, in Greaves's absence and without his knowledge. There, members of the crew debate the merits of the film, scrutinize and interpret Greaves's methods and motives, criticize his abilities, intuit his ideas. The result isn't quite a mutiny or a revolt—they continue to work on the film with undiminished engagement—but it is a boldly independent act to use his equipment and resources to make a film of their own within the film, which they then offer Greaves as part of the film.

The scenes shot by the crew were a part of their calculated surprise—they say, on camera, that Greaves didn't know that they were doing it, and in the scenes they address him directly, into the camera, and wonder whether he'll care to include these discussions in the film. Greaves voted, so to speak, with his editing table: they're in the film and they're crucial parts of it.

At the Brooklyn Historical Society on Monday, Shola Lynch wondered onstage how Greaves reacted when he saw this footage for the first time, and asked David Greaves about it. The answer is that Greaves told his son of his great regret that he wasn't filming himself in his editing room to capture his own reaction to seeing it. Greaves had been told that a surprise was in store for him, but the surprise that he got far exceeded his expectations.

The essence of great direction is great production. Original filmmakers are, above all, ones who reconsider and reinvent the process of filmmaking to make it fit with their own needs, desires, impulses, ideas. In the studio system, directors had to fight to take control of the process—they often had to become producers as well. Independent filmmaking is an open field; directors are usually, of necessity, their own producers, or working in close sympathy with producers who share their vision—which is why it's all the more surprising when independent filmmakers don't give the impression of rethinking the filmmaking process but merely impressing their subjects and styles on ready-made structures.

The matter is all the more urgent in modern cinema, where the veil of fiction—the opaque wall of narrative—is lifted to reveal the ostensible wizard behind the curtain. Pushed to its greatest extreme, the newfound method of production would be integrated into the film itself, would even be its very subject. Greaves realized that ideal, concretely and passionately and personally, in "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One," but his modernism is no arid abstraction. He doesn't eliminate characters but multiplies them, turning even the crew—including himself—and even passersby into characters. He doesn't suppress stories, he proliferates them, giving relationships among the cast and crew and passersby a weight to equal that of the scripted action.

At the center of the action is Greaves, who had been an actor (he studied at the Actor's Studio). Here, he evokes a classical comic cinema, that of the director as antic performer, starting with Max Linder and Charlie Chaplin, Erich von Stroheim and Orson Welles, Jacques Tati and Jerry Lewis—and the trope is apparent to his crew, who, in one of their production-office discussions, cite his theatrical nature and his efforts to explore his own multiple masks and identities.

Yet the movie is no mere self-exploration or self-reflection but a vision of the times, a crucial work of late-sixties politics in action. First of all, the collective organization that Greaves generates, through his plans and his personality, his ideas and his instincts, is a sort of artistic utopia. It's a notion of nonauthoritarian leadership that is nonetheless oriented by a charismatic

leader, a structure that offers rules and makes room for its participants to bend them, in which uncertainty is a given, self-questioning is central, and open-mindedness, spontaneity, flexibility, and curiosity are prime values.

Greaves tells the crew that everything in the movie is meant to connect to the idea of sexuality. At the time of the shoot, abortion was illegal in New York State (it wasn't legalized until 1970—New York was one of the first states to do so) and so was homosexuality (the state's sodomy laws weren't struck down until 1980). The couple's sexual troubles are power troubles, the emotional exactions or physical threats by which Freddie gets Alice to have illegal abortions (which, as she says, put her health at great risk).

One technician looks beyond the anti-homosexual prejudice to see the gender stereotypes that the couple is perpetuating—that Alice is attempting to puncture Freddie's power and also to diminish him by challenging his ability to satisfy her. The speaker also translates Greaves's rather euphemistic middle-class, nearly middle-aged dialogue into blunt and raw sexual terms; he wants to hear Alice and Freddie talk frankly about performance, about pleasure and satisfaction, about their sex organs, about orgasm and endurance, to strip the gender battle to its primal sexual essence, to de-socialize it and get to the elements that aren't a part of polite society.

What of poverty, what of prejudice? Greaves is a magician; he pulls a rabbit out of a hat, but, being a real magician rather than a fake one, he doesn't plant the rabbit there but finds it there by chance. The movie's climactic scene stars Victor, a homeless man living in Central Park, whom the crew randomly encounters. Victor is an artist and a displaced person, a crude man of casual hatred and a flamboyant man of exaggerated refinements, a bohemian who places himself twenty years ahead of his time and a vestige of an era that was kinder to the bohemian. Rising rents forced him out of his home and onto the streets. Yet he's no street angel; he's an angry man filled with free-flowing contempt, a frustrated creator fuelled with an urge for destruction. Victor is a living vision straight from the works of Céline, a force of unresolved and worsening class conflict, a raving poet of the psychic underworld, a roving madman and a stunted genius and a frustrated bore. Victor is, in a way, the counterpart to Greaves himself, the man without a structure, the energetic person left to his own devices; his rage is the alternative to efforts to construct a better organized, more supple societal order.

What difference would it have made had Greaves's film come out in a timely way—had it been screened at Cannes, and appeared here in the early nineteen-seventies? For starters, it would have exalted the very notion of an independent filmmaker as a process-oriented filmmaker, of a political filmmaker as a personal filmmaker—and of a black filmmaker as a sophisticated aesthete and a master of complexity, as an intellectual artist of the first rank.

Greaves was up there with John Cassavetes and Shirley Clarke in the blend of sophisticated modernism and emotional fury, of self-implication and formal innovation, of self-revelation and revelation of the heart of the times. Greaves is even more extreme in his formal explorations; the only work of the era that's comparable is Orson Welles's "F for Fake," from 1974. Greaves was the founder of a movement that didn't happen, the center of a collective that didn't coalesce, the father of a generation that—well, I was tempted to say that it wasn't born, but he is at least the symbolic patriarch of dispersed acolytes. One such acolyte is Kathleen Collins, who was a production assistant on "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One." Her nearly lost, unreleased film "Losing Ground" opens the Lincoln Center series on Friday.

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