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FILM REVIEW

Film Within a Film in 60's Time Capsule? Groovy

By Manohla Dargis

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Made in 1968, when the moon was in the seventh house, and American troops were in Vietnam, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take I" represents a fascinating and unfortunately forgotten blip on the American movie screen. Produced, directed and edited with finesse by William Greaves, this fiction-nonfiction hybrid is an experiment in form that playfully takes itself apart scene by scene, code by code in a bid to reveal how cinematic illusions -- including that of the auteur -- are manufactured.

Set principally in the leafy green haven of Central Park, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm" is, at its simplest level, a document of a screen test. For much of the time, we watch two actors (usually Patricia Ree Gilbert and Don Fellows) rehearse -- and rehearse again -- some borderline-humorous turgid dialogue, mostly having to do with the woman's suspicions about the man's sexual orientation. Again and again, his character chases her character in the park and pulls her aside, and the two talk, jest, attack and rage. All of this improvised messiness is further complicated because while one camera crew is shooting the screen test, a second camera crew is documenting it -- going behind the scenes to record rehearsals and so forth -- while yet a third camera crew is documenting the film and the film within the film. Got that?

If all this sounds a bit nuts, dangerously self-indulgent and very of its experimental moment, it is. But it's also highly entertaining and, at moments, revelatory about filmmaking as a site of creative tension between individual

vision and collective endeavor. Mr. Greaves, who often appears front and center, wearing a groovy net shirt and a slightly amused expression, initially appears somewhat overwhelmed by all the different cameras and the often pushy cast and crew members who seem suspicious of his methods and, at times, downright mutinous. (The often funny, off-site scenes of the crew criticizing the film and its director are studies in why the group process is so often doomed to failure.) Gradually, it emerges that Mr. Greaves is less the dupe of this orchestrated madness than its ringmaster.

"Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 1" was never released theatrically, which is too bad for Mr. Greaves and for the audience he never got a chance to cultivate. The film is being presented by the director Steven Soderbergh, whose occasional and comparatively restrained forays into experimental narrative suggest that he might have been influenced by Mr. Greaves's mischievous deconstruction. At the Sundance Film Festival last January, Mr. Greaves presented an equally diverting follow-up to his earlier film called, naturally, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2." In this newest feature, the director returned to Central Park with two of the actors from the first film for another go-round. "Take 2 1/2" is oddly moving because the film reveals not only how time has affected everyone in the intervening years but also how very straight filmmaking in this country has become.

It's a wonderful gift to us that "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 1" has finally made it into theaters. But how about its equally far-out sequel?

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 1 Opens today in Manhattan

Produced, directed and edited by William Greaves; directors of photography, Terry Filgate and Stevan Lamer; music by Miles Davis; released by Janus Film At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 72 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Patricia Ree Gilbert, Don Fellows, Jonathan Gordon, Bob Rosen and

William Greaves.