

# What a long, strange trip it's been – William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*

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In 1968, the Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker William Greaves wrote, directed and produced his first feature, titled *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. Never released theatrically, the film was largely forgotten until a Brooklyn Museum retrospective of Greaves' work in the early 1990's forged its re-discovery. Blending narrative, experimental and documentary filmmaking, *Symbio* was shot on-location in Central Park during the turbulent summer of 1968. Its 'film-outside-of-a-film' format recounts the uprising of a crew against its tyrannical director (Greaves playing himself) as captured by an accompanying documentary crew. This genre hybrid constructs several levels of cinematic reality, making for a fascinating discourse on self-reflexivity and prompting the fascinating question of 'How much is real?'. Presumably too far ahead of its time, *Symbio* seems a clear progenitor of such films as *This is Spinal Tap*, *Living in Oblivion* and *The Blair Witch Project*. The high-60's feel to the film, which incorporates split-screen imaging and a Miles Davis score, also contains discourses on such timely sociopolitical issues as abortion, gay sexuality and pop psychology. Despite numerous festival screenings over the past decade (including Sundance in 1992), critical praise from J. Hoberman and Robert Stam among others, and actor-director Steve Buscemi adopting the film as a pet project, *Symbio* remains without distribution – a little known gem of the American New Wave.

Greaves' resume reveals a modern-day renaissance man, equally and outstandingly entrenched in the often inseparable worlds of the arts

and public service. Called 'the most versatile and durable of African-American independents' by J. Hoberman, Greaves was one of seven children born to a West Indies immigrant cab driver and sometime minister on 135th Street in Harlem, in 1926.<sup>1</sup> He won scholarships to Greenwich Village's Little Red Schoolhouse and Stuyvesant High School and briefly studied engineering at City College, departing to join the renowned Pearl Primus Dance Troupe. Greaves got his start as an actor at the American Negro Theater, which led to a brief stint on Broadway in the late 1940's (*Finian's Rainbow*, *Lost in the Stars*) and eventually brought him roles in several of the black-cast film productions popular at the time. In films such as *Miracle in Harlem* (1947), *Souls of Sins* (1949) and the Louis de Rochemont-produced *Lost Boundaries* (1949), Greaves played progressive, self-assured characters confident in their African-American identities, roles which 'clearly prefigured many of those played by Sidney Poitier in the next decade, [making one] apt to wonder whether Greaves would have become one of the crossover stars of the fifties had he remained in screen acting.'<sup>2</sup> Instead, Greaves became fed up with the Uncle Tom-type roles predominantly available to African-Americans at the time, coming to the realisation that he 'had to get on the other side of the camera because [Hollywood] was messing with the image

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of black people with impunity.<sup>13</sup> Like Melvin Van Peebles and others frustrated by the racial limitations of American commercial cinema, Greaves left the country in order to practice his craft in a less racist climate.

Greaves accepted a position on the production staff of the John Grierson-founded National Film Board of Canada, and over the next eight years worked as editor, writer and director on over 80 films. Among the most notable of these was his 1958 *cinéma vérité* documentary *Emergency Ward*, shot entirely in a Montreal hospital and largely anticipating Frederick Wiseman's *Hospital*, made a decade later. While Greaves' career flourished in Canada, he remained largely unknown back in the United States, as the National Film Board of Canada was rarely able to distribute beyond domestic markets. *Emergency Ward* managed to slip through to the screening rooms of New York's burgeoning underground scene, where it made a strongly favourable impression on pioneering avant-garde filmmaker Shirley Clarke. She recommended Greaves to the head of the United States Information Agency's film division, George Stevens, Jr., who succeeded in luring Greaves back to the US as a freelance director/producer based out of New York's United Nations headquarters.

There Greaves began what was to become a distinguished, prolific career of making films marked by a distinctly African-American perspective of reality, earning him the designation of 'Chronicler of the Black Experience' (a moniker Greaves dislikes, feeling that it 'ghettoises' him as a black filmmaker rather than a filmmaker who happens to be black.) Two of his most acclaimed projects for the USIA were *Wealth of a Nation* (1964), a provocative documentary on the tradition of dissent in America, and *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* (1966), which captured a Senegalese celebration of post-colonialist artistic achievement in Africa and the African Diaspora. Also upon returning to New York in 1963, Greaves resumed training at the renowned Actors Studio, where he had been a long-time member and student of Stanislavski, Method, Strasberg and psychodrama techniques. Greaves also worked as producer and host, from 1968 to 1970, of National Education Television's *Black Journal*, for which he won an Emmy in 1970.

Such a detailed account of Greaves' achievements (and these only through the end of the 1960's) is necessary to consider his curiously under-recog-

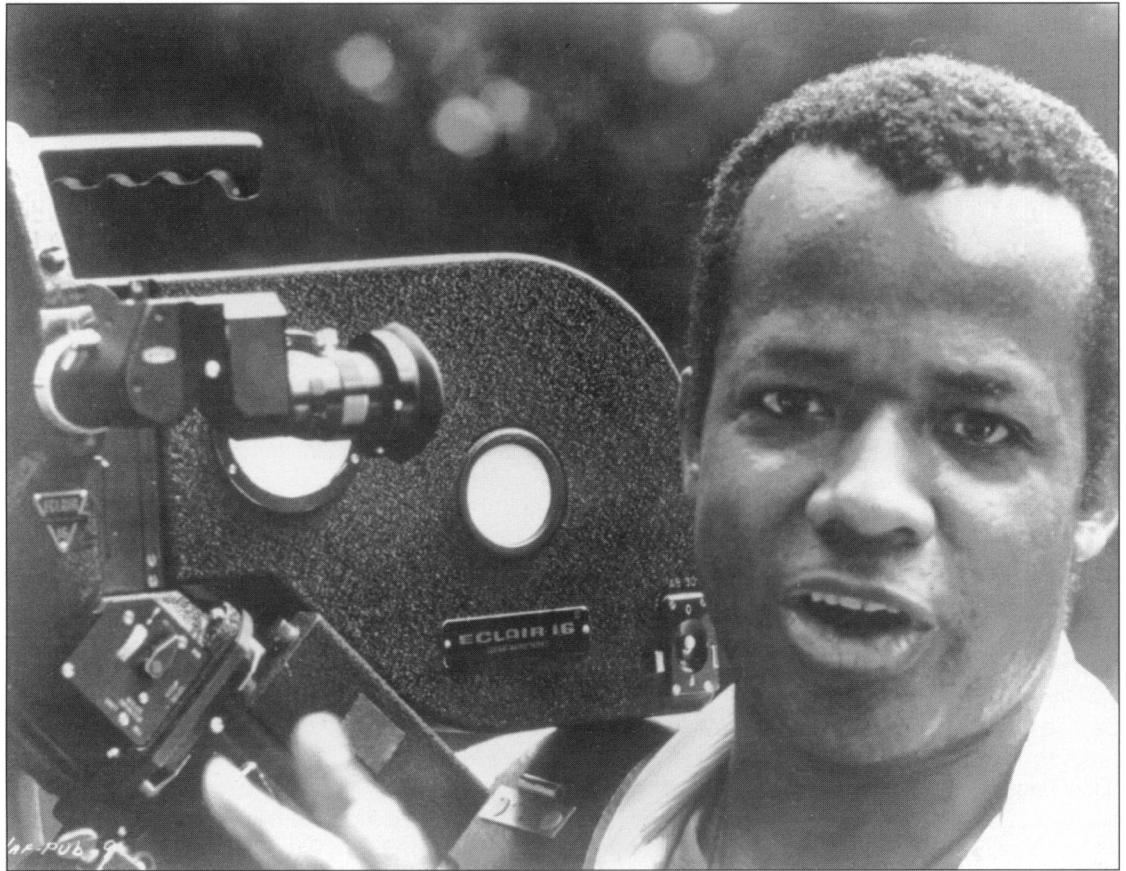
nised reputation. Scott MacDonald notes that Greaves' 'name should be a household word, at least for those who consider themselves savvy about modern film history.'<sup>14</sup> That Greaves, having produced over 200 documentaries altogether (writing and directing more than half), has not been more celebrated seems attributable to several unfortunate realities: the Sisyphean struggles of all documentary filmmakers, but especially those who are African-American; Greaves' resolute decision to remain independent (his sole Hollywood outing was as executive producer on Universal Pictures' 1981 Richard Pryor vehicle *Bustin' Loose*); and the vastly under-appreciated history of Greaves' one film with potential for wide mainstream appeal, 1968's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*.

The year 1968 was tumultuous, not only within the film industry but throughout the world, as social protests and political movements shook the Establishment. Civic unrest infiltrated every corner of the globe, varying in specific movements but all concerned with uprooting authoritarianism in all its political, social and economic permutations. Among those fighting were Marxist-Leninists in Western Europe, Maoists in China, anti-Stalinists in Eastern Europe, anti-imperialists in the third world, and the counter-culture movement in America.

Also in 1968, great changes were taking place within the international cinema community. France's New Wave movement, a decade old, was advancing beyond *Cahiers du Cinéma* criticism to direct activism aimed against patriarchal traditions in filmmaking. Student-led demonstrations shook French universities beginning in May, nearly toppling the De Gaulle regime, as protest against what were considered to be the undemocratic practices of the French film industry. A coalition of filmmakers, led by Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, succeeded in closing down the 1968 Cannes Film Festival, and almost prevented the government-decreed dismissal of New Wave mentor Henri Langlois from his position as director of the French Cinémathèque.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the revolutionary ideas of artistic visionaries such as Bertolt Brecht and Jean Rouch had paved the way for an American New Wave. The Hollywood studio system at the end of the 1960s was suffering from a decade-long downswing brought on by a shifting commercial marketplace and fierce competition from television. The first milestone from the burgeoning American auteur movement had come a year earlier, with

**Fig. 1.** 'Don't take me seriously.' Filmmaker William Greaves shooting in New York's Central Park in 1968. [All photos courtesy of William Greaves Productions.]



Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, though that film suffered a critical and public backlash which slowed its influence. Not until *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), shot on a minuscule budget and directly voicing counter-culture ideology, would Hollywood's new golden age really take off. In 1968, however, the center of attention was still focused on New York's underground scene, where avant-gardists such as Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage were making experimental, low-budget groundbreaking works.

By the summer of 1968, Greaves had secured financial backing and assembled a cast of his Actor's Studio students and colleagues for his first feature film, to be shot on location in Central Park. Greaves gave his cast and crew only a scanty premise of the proposed film's unscripted narrative: an independent director (to be played by Greaves) shoots screen tests with several pairs of actors for a low-budget feature tentatively titled *Over the Cliff*. The scene which Greaves has his auditioning actors read involves an argument between husband and

wife and contains discussion of the wife's abortions and the husband's alleged homosexuality. This scenario was intended as the initial segment of a multi-part project ('take one' of a series of 'takes') described by Greaves as a 'feature-length we-don't-know-what.' Four cameras would be used: one operated by the primary crew and focused on the actors; another on Greaves and his crew as they filmed the actors; and a third quasi-documentary crew shooting any on-lookers or action around the set (Greaves somewhat bewilderingly instructs his third cameraman, 'You're in charge of filming this film being filmed.') Greaves himself used a fourth camera for miscellaneous coverage.

Purposely vague and open-ended, the film's premise was perfectly suited to a low-budget project by a first-time feature director. It could be shot on location, with minimal crew and equipment (natural lighting and handheld camera were sufficient) and continuity was of no concern. The structure of the film was to be created during editing, the crucial step in reining in the disorder of the film shoot to create a

coherent product: 'The film had to be chaos, but chaos of a very special character: intelligible chaos. It had to have a classic flow of some kind. It had to hold your attention, even though it was supposed to be a lousy film.'<sup>5</sup>

There was an additional covert agenda within Greaves' conception of a film which was so vaguely constructed that it prompted frustrated soundman Jonathan Gordon to complain that it contained 'no plot that we can see, no end that we can see, action we can't follow.' Greaves planned, in his role as director, to so antagonise the actors and crew with his chaotic production and purposely inept script and direction that they would be driven to rebel. Adam Knee observes an interesting comparison between Greaves' approach and independent filmmaker and theorist Maya Deren's 'notion of the 'controlled accident,' of allowing events to evolve naturally and spontaneously while keeping them focused and directed.'<sup>6</sup> In striving to create *cinéma vérité*, Greaves was careful not to over-determine whatever course the film might take, and mused on the upcoming shoot in his pre-production notes:

Our problem, or rather my problem, is to get out of nature's way and let nature tell her story. That's what a good director is – a person who gets his ego out of his own way, he is at best a collaborator and servant of nature ... but who, paradoxically, firmly controls the conditions of spontaneity, theatricality and drama on the set.<sup>7</sup>

Greaves' careful description of his directorial strategy runs parallel to Stephen Mamber's often-quoted definition of *cinéma vérité*: 'The filmmaker attempts to eliminate as much as possible the barriers between subject and audience. These barriers are technical (large crews, studio sets, tripod-mounted equipment, special lights, costumes, and makeup), procedural (scripting, acting, directing), and structural (standard editing devices, traditional forms of melodrama, suspense, etc.) *Cinéma vérité* is a practical working method based upon a faith in unmanipulated reality, a refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself.'<sup>8</sup>

Whether *Symbio* truly adheres to Mamber's qualifications of *cinéma vérité* is debatable: Greaves employs split-screen imaging, a fairly sophisticated editing technique which certainly denaturalises the 'unmanipulated reality' that it professes to capture. In addition, *Symbio* has a quite cohesive narrative

structure (mostly the result of editing) which does contain undeniable elements of drama, suspense and character development. A climax could even be plotted as the moment when actress Patricia Ree Gilbert storms off the set, which triggers a turn of events whereby *Symbio*'s disgruntled crew confronts the director and ultimately forges a partial resolution. There is also the crucial paradox inherent to all of *cinéma vérité*, that *not* having a production strategy is in itself a strategy. As Hoberman remarks, 'Of course, it's precisely the manipulative nature of Greaves' nondirection that makes [*Symbio*] so extraordinary – and so comic'.<sup>9</sup>

The title of Greaves' film refers to a term coined by social philosopher Arthur Bentley in his essays on social theory. Bentley used the term 'symbiotaxiplasm' to refer to all the elements and events that transpire in any given environment, which affect and are affected by human beings.<sup>10</sup> By inserting 'psycho' into Bentley's term, Greaves modified it to his specific qualifications, which he defines in the following way:

[*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*] affirms more aggressively the role that human psychology and creativity play in shaping the total environment – while at the same time, these very environmental factors continually affect and determine human psychology and creativity. Thus everything that happens in the [*Symbio*] environment interrelates and affects the psychology of the people and, indeed, the creative process itself.<sup>11</sup>

Two other films made and released in 1968–69 deserve comparison with *Symbio*, both in thematic and stylistic terms and in representing renegade directors' staunch efforts to retain creative control of their artistic vision from studios blind to everything but the bottom line. The ill-fated travails of John Cassavetes' and Haskell Wexler's respective 1968 projects, *Faces* and *Medium Cool*, make the case that perhaps *Symbio* was saved from the studio-mangling fate of these two films by not finding immediate distribution. Additionally, both films share with *Symbio* an unflagging intent to represent realism via the inspired use of improvised dialogue, location shooting and other unconventional techniques.

The similarities between *Symbio* and *Medium Cool* are particularly interesting in that both films are hybrids of fiction and documentary and as such are preoccupied with questions of reality, the visual medium and their own reflexivity. Furthermore, both

films are book-ended by shots of the directors themselves aiming their respective cameras at the spectator, evoking the nearly identical opening shot of Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 *Contempt*, another watershed film in the self-reflexive canon. Godard himself once said that the only completely honest film would show a camera filming itself in a mirror, and while Greaves' experiment in reflexivity is infinitely more entertaining than Godard's proposal would seem, they are based on the same ingenious concept of 'having the pro-filmic camera eye, which in conventional cinema slyly and surreptitiously equates itself with the vision of the spectator, focus on the spectators themselves. It is as if the apparatus itself were nodding at us, in a cinematic equivalent of Brechtian direct address to the audience.'<sup>12</sup> In this way, perhaps *Symbio*'s closest relative is Jim McBride's 1968 film *David Holzman's Diary*, which models itself on Godard's axiom by being a pseudo-autobiographical portrait of a beatnik cinephile who delivers a protracted monologue into the camera, visible in a mirrored reflection.

In breaking the proverbial fourth wall, Greaves acknowledges and celebrates the power of the filmic image (and the process of making images) to transfix viewers. Footage of gawking passers-by are incorporated throughout the film to humorous effect, and one amusing sequence shows a policeman on horseback approaching the crew to verify their shooting permit. After assenting to being filmed, he inquires with barely contained curiosity, 'What kind of picture are you making?' One boisterous group of children are attracted to the set like moths to light. They scramble for the crew's attention before one precocious girl succeeds in soliciting an impromptu screen test: 'I know you're looking for a new star, a new face,' she announces, 'Let me introduce myself.' Film's ability to transform not only life but *lives* is not lost on the city youths. 'We've already got you on film,' Greaves drolly tells the young girl, 'so you'll be famous.'

Furthermore, the film's reflexivity asserts the power of the director, he who corrals the multitude of available images into a pared-down, personal vision of reality. In an early sequence, as Greaves instructs his crew on shooting desirable extraneous action, he spots an elderly woman walking her dog and suggests filming her. Instantaneously, the screen splits to show the congruous images of Greaves' directing his crew's attention alongside the old woman and dog being filmed.

Greaves' Brechtian 'nod' to the spectator occurs towards the end of *Symbio*'s thoroughly captivating opening sequence, which introduces the film's preoccupation with reflexivity, voyeurism and experimentalism and quickly establishes itself to be unlike any film made before or since. *Symbio*'s initial sequence interrupts a couple mid-way through a scene of marital discord, and several anomalies are immediately apparent within the *mise-en-scène*: visible time code, choppy editing, awkward camera angles, jerky or unmotivated camera movements, rather trite dialogue, and actors who appear to be reading woodenly off cue cards. Before such incongruity can fully register, however, the screen splits into two images, different angles of the scene at hand, and just as quickly alternates among split-screen shots of several other pairs of actors continuing the same sequence of dialogue. The screen finally widens back to full size as actors Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert hurl curses and accusations. By displaying scenes (in duplicate) of duplicated dialogue, performed by duplicate actors, Greaves immediately alerts the spectator to the duplicity of the images being shown. MacDonald notes that 'the switch from one level to another in the preface sets up the overall rhythm of the film.'<sup>13</sup> By 'levels', MacDonald is referring to the multi-tiered representation of 'reality' which *Symbio* constructs.

Theories which link the cinematic spectator to voyeurism posit the necessary identification, on the part of the spectator, with the image from which s/he is to derive pleasure in looking. The denaturalised technique of split-screen imaging prevents the spectator from identifying wholly with the spectacle (as conventional cinema is wont to do): 'since the images are 'hung' on the screen like paintings in a gallery, we are forced to choose which image to contemplate, yet the very multiplicity of images makes it virtually impossible to 'lose' ourselves in any one.'<sup>14</sup> The use of split-screen thus inhibits scopophilia yet, paradoxically, in providing a multiplicity of images (more and more to see) feeds the spectator's demand for visual pleasure.

In his definition of *cinéma vérité*, Stephen Mamber refers indirectly to Brecht's technique of distancing (of both the spectators from the characters and of the actors from their roles.) As a long-time actor and teacher of actors, Greaves is fascinated by the constructedness of acting and incorporates this into *Symbio*'s discourse. Mamber notes that even within *cinéma vérité*, acting is necessarily arti-

ficial: 'Perhaps the most common criticism of direct cinema is that a person constantly subjected to a camera can never truly forget its presence, that he is never 'natural.'<sup>15</sup> Acknowledging this inevitability, Greaves nevertheless strives for authenticity by urging improvisation and by keeping multiple cameras focused on his actors even when not 'performing', in the hope of capturing spontaneous emotion. The screen test dialogue itself is purposely banal – Greaves refers to it as 'neutral' – yet his intention, as expressed in his pre-production notes, is for it to become 'transformed into something truly important and rewarding when the actors become inspired.'<sup>16</sup> The increasingly testy relationship between actors Fellows and Gilbert is, in fact, the catalyst that induces their performed argument to gradually seem more 'real.'

Though Greaves does ultimately succeed in provoking inspired performances from his actors, *Symbio's* opening sequence is a prime example of the hackneyed histrionics responsible for much of the film's tongue-in-cheek humour, which is referred to in a cleverly reflexive way when Freddy tells the melodramatic Alice, 'Stop acting, will you?' This poses the question of whether Fellows and Gilbert are in fact poor actors, or instead were directed by Greaves to act poorly. Additionally, is Greaves merely playing himself or is his role as director also a performance? With both questions, the latter options seem likely, though it is difficult to tell within the confines of the film. Consider the scene in which Gilbert, in discussion with Greaves, puzzles out the motivations of her character: 'I have the feeling, you see, that she's going home. She's going home, she's moving ... so what I'll try to do is walk slow but look like I'm walking fast ... I don't know how to do that.'

Gilbert's words can alternately be construed as the artistic pretensions of an incompetent actress, or the clever role-playing of a good actress *portraying* a bad actress. Certainly the debut performance of Susan Anspach, a talented actress who would go on to star in several iconic films of the 1970's including *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970) and *Play It Again, Sam* (Woody Allen, 1972) suggests that Greaves urged his actors to play with notions of 'good' and 'bad' acting. Greaves seems to be making the point that acting, particularly in a performance intended to evoke 'realness', is not so easily quantifiable as good or bad; nor does banal dialogue automatically constitute a flaw ('Human life isn't necessarily well written,' the film reminds us.)

Greaves himself admits that in order to instigate the desired crew revolt, he must be perceived as incompetent, that 'for this particular film to work, a flawed, vulnerable persona was essential.'<sup>17</sup> A veteran actor, Greaves is successful at rendering this flawed version of himself, as commented on by Terry Filgate, director of photography, during one of the crew's meetings: 'What throws me is that [Greaves] has in a sense written himself a part in the film, and as soon as you turn the camera on, he turns on. And he's like a bad actor – and he doesn't turn off into his natural self until the camera stops.' Indeed, Greaves himself warns the spectator, in direct address to the camera during his first appearance on-screen, 'Don't take me seriously.'

As the camera lingers, within the opening sequence, on the last pair of couples to be introduced, we become aware of a steadily increasing hum distorting the soundtrack. The camera cuts away to a candid shot of two on-lookers whom, it is revealed, are not eavesdropping on a public quarrel but are instead watching a film shoot in progress. Thus the spectator, initially unaware that what he is viewing is not the film itself but a film-within-the-film, falls prey to the reflexive 'gag' (a technique employed memorably by Preston Sturges at the start of *Sullivan's Travels*.)

*Symbio's* title sequence, which follows the prologue discussed above, continues this discourse on cinematic voyeurism. Accompanied by Miles Davis' score (as well as the persistent whine of the faulty sound equipment, cleverly mixed in to the soundtrack), the camera acts as a veritable Peeping Tom by alighting on park-goers of all ages, races and sexes, but notably lingering on several amorous couples. Within this sequence, a series of images shows progression through the life cycle, a cinematic trick memorably performed by Dziga Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). A couple is spied kissing passionately, followed by new parents shown with their baby, proceeding on to shots of playing children, then grown men and women enjoying various recreations. Greaves himself acknowledges this in a remark directly following the title sequence: 'The important thing is that I want to make sure that everything that happens on the set, whether it's off-camera or among the crew, or whether it's being shot ... we should constantly be relating to sexuality.'

The articulation of sexual anxieties which constitutes the crux of the couple's quarrel was highly

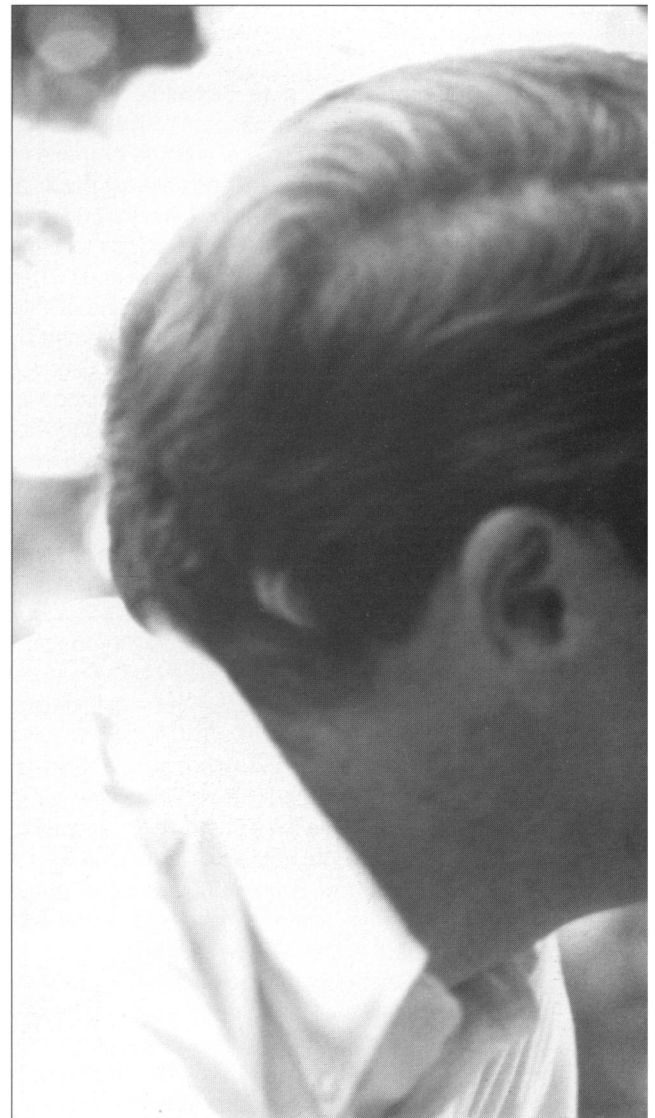
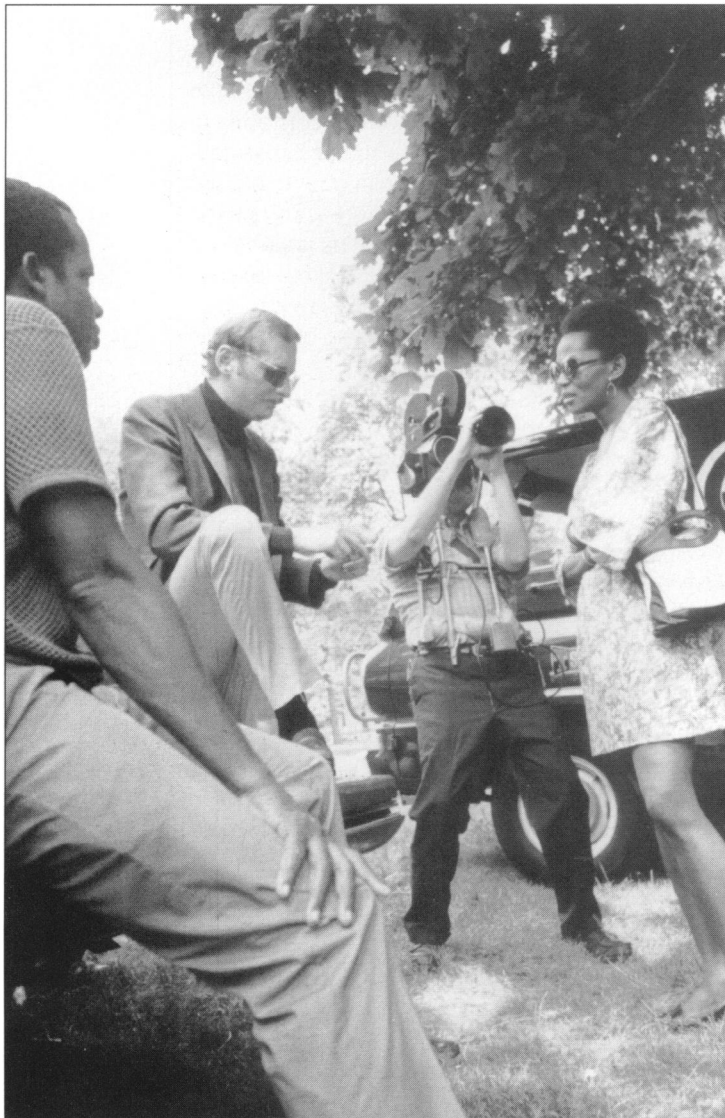


**Fig. 2.** (below left) 'How much is real?' Greaves encouraged his actors to improvise and his crew to unite against him in a filmed rebellion, in protest against his inept script and tyrannical direction.

incendiary for its time ('You've been killing my babies one after another,' Alice berates Freddy, 'Ever since we've been married I've had abortion after abortion.') Viewing the film from today's standpoint does not quell the impact of these blunt sexual proclamations, which continue to break taboos and shun political correctness. 'Listen, you skinny little faggot', the character Alice rails at Freddy, her husband. 'I am fed up, I am absolutely fed up with this happening every time we go out, wherever we're going...you're trying to get with somebody, or on somebody – I don't know what it is you boys do.' Freddy answers her harshly: '...[A]ll I can say is it's about time *you* started [therapy] because *you* need it. Just remem-

ber, the person who says the other one is sick is always the sickest of all, baby.'

*Symbio* thus trains a careful eye on late 1960s' sexual discourse, when psychotherapy had trickled down to mainstream society in bastardised pop psychology form. 'You're projecting, Alice,' Freddy says in response to Alice's accusations of his infidelity and homosexuality. 'You're trying to see things in me that you see in your own self.' Greaves does not hesitate to turn an equally unflinching eye on his performers themselves, out of role but still on-screen. Puzzling out his character's sexual personification, actor Fellows is recorded saying, 'I don't know whether to act a little faggy,' as, mischievously,



we're shown voyeuristic footage of a strapping young man rowing bare-chested across the lake. 'I have explored that kind of thing,' Fellows continues, 'and I don't know whether this is a faggy fag or a butch fag.'

That it was so sexually and reflexively defiant is one possible explanation for the lack of fanfare that greeted Greaves when he began in the early 1970's to seek a distributor for the completed *Symbio*. Not only had the American public never seen such a confounding hybrid of film genres (fiction, documentary, experimental, avant-garde, cinéma vérité) but, as Robert Stam notes, critics are immediately wary of reflexive films, which 'form an object of paranoia



for mainstream critics, who see reflexive filmmakers as spoilsports who deprive the cinematic game of its illusion.<sup>18</sup> Pulling back the curtain to show the spectator what goes on behind camera was Greaves' intent – though not as a romanticist paean to filmmaking, as is the design of many reflexive films (Fellini's *8 1/2*, Truffaut's *Day for Night*), or even purely for purposes of satire and parody (*Sullivan's Travels*, Robert Altman's *The Player*). Rather, Greaves was concerned primarily with inspecting the presence of the curtain itself.

The two so-called 'palace-revolt' sequences, in which Greaves' crew secretly meets and films themselves discussing their dissatisfaction with the production, are the most complex moments of reflexivity in the film. The first of these sequences opens with a disclaimer from production manager Bob Rosen, who explains their motives thus: 'We're just going to rap a little bit about the film. We'll get into it and when we get into it the people out there [*looks and motions into camera*] will understand and we'll explain it as we go along.' These sessions, in which Greaves' crew functions as a kind of Greek chorus, constitute the cinematic equivalent of what Walter Benjamin termed the 'art of interruptions,' referring specifically to reflexivity in epic theatre. More than any other moment in the film, these sequences call attention to the artifice and operations of cinema by insistently posing the question of how much of what we're watching is real. The single most successful technique used to this effect is that of Rosen's employment of direct address in assuring the spectator, 'The director does not know that we're photographing this scene.' In his discussions of the film, Greaves maintains that this was indeed the case, saying 'I had no idea that they were doing this. It was only later that they came to me and handed me this big pile of film.'<sup>19</sup> Yet, even this reality is essentially unknowable, as Bob Rosen goes on to speculate, 'For all anybody knows, [Greaves] is standing right outside the door, and he's directing this whole scene...Nobody out there [in the viewing audience] knows whether we're for real.'

The crew's rebellion constitutes the main thread of political allegory which runs through *Symbio*, intended as a satirical commentary on both the patriarchal ideology imposed by conventional commercial cinema and the rigid hierarchical structuring of film productions (which elevate the director to revered, godlike status.) It is interesting to note that in *Symbio*, the African-American Greaves directs a

**Fig. 3.** (left and facing page) 'Real life isn't necessarily well-written.' Actors Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert play bickering married couple Freddy and Alice in *Symbio*'s film-within-the-film.



largely white cast and crew, quite exceptional in 1968. 'The film is rebellion!', exalts Greaves in his pre-production comments, 'Rebellion against traditional cinema form. The hippies on the crew are for love and rebellion, in contradiction to the screen test characters, Alice and Freddy, who are suburbanites, caught in a life of conformity.'<sup>20</sup> The appearance of Victor, the touchingly eloquent homeless alcoholic who wanders onto the *Symbio* set, voices a poignantly nihilistic stream of consciousness against the increasingly oppressive world order of the late 60's. *Symbio* is foremost intended as a paean to rebellion against oppression in the world at large, as Greaves tells his crew when they assemble to confront him: 'This sort of palace revolt which is taking place is not dissimilar to the sort of revolution that's taking place in America today, in the sense that I represent the establishment, and I've been trying to get you to do certain things which you've become in a sense disenchanted with.'

Ultimately, *Symbio* seems to reinforce the director's paramount authority in the filmmaking process, primarily by Greaves according himself an impenetrable, lofty omnipresence over the production. According to the idealistic musing of one crew member who argues against the palace revolt, 'A director's film is his mind photographing the world, and I think if you say you're going to show [Greaves] what's in his mind or what ought to be in his mind, you're taking away the director's film from the director.' That this declaration is voiced over accompanying footage of Greaves wandering dejectedly, tortured genius-like, along the set's periphery and is followed by another crew member responding, 'The thing is, we wonder if the director *knows* what's in his own mind' lends the point some comic buoyancy. Yet, within every frame can be found luminous illustration of Greaves showcasing his considerable auteurism. Even the palace revolt sequences, allegedly filmed without Greaves' knowledge, were selected by him for inclusion in the finished product. Films are a collaborative effort, *Symbio* seems to be saying, but they arise and are borne along by the director's singular vision.

Among the accoutrements which give *Symbio* its high 60's feel is the jazz score composed and performed by Miles Davis. However, jazz was chosen less for its evocation of an era than for its improvised, radical nature, as Greaves explains: '[*Symbio*] was heavily influenced by jazz, which, to me as a black man, is an attempt on the part of an

enchained human spirit to break free from the prison bars of mechanical tempo and to liberate itself. Analogically, traditional dramatic structure was for me a conventional prison from which I sought to escape with the free style of the film.'<sup>21</sup> In his brief but adulatory mention of *Symbio* in the preface to the new edition of *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, Robert Stam notes the film's crucial relationship to jazz: 'The film is built, like jazz itself, on signifying 'mistakes': the film runs out, the camera jams, and the actors become restless and irritable. The film analogises jazz's relation to the European mainstream by performing a filmic critique of dominant cinema conventions and subtly evoking, in a *tour de force* of improvisation, multiple resistances against diverse authoritarianisms and oppressions.'<sup>22</sup>

Greaves' filmmaking career is fifty years young and still going strong. His most recent project is a documentary on Dr. Ralph Johnson Bunche, who served as Undersecretary General of the United Nations for two decades and was the first African-American to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1950. *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* was broadcast on PBS in February 2001. Meanwhile, *Symbio* remained in obscurity for 22 years until Brooklyn Museum curators unearthed the film's only print for a 1990 retrospective of Greaves' work (titled, of course, 'William Greaves: Chronicler of the African-American Experience.') The screening garnered a highly enthusiastic response, and Greaves was urged to search for distribution along the film festival circuit. To date, *Symbio* has been screened at the Sundance, Munich, San Sebastian (Spain), Sydney, Paris, San Turino (Italy), Graz (Austria), Göteborg (Sweden), Denver, Hamptons International, and the Lake Placid film festivals.

Accepted as a non-competitive entry into the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, *Symbio* was screened to an audience that included actor-director Steve Buscemi (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Trees Lounge*) who remembers being duly impressed by both the film and the performative experience of the screening itself: '...[W]hile I was watching this movie, the projector broke down, and Bill [Greaves] came walking down the aisle and said, "This may or may not be part of the film".'<sup>23</sup> Buscemi would go on to star in 1995's *Living in Oblivion*, the Tom DiCillo-directed independent feature about independent filmmaking that shares with *Symbio* its preoccupation with the multi-layeredness of reality and its self-deferential, tongue-in-cheek humour (making it seem all the more

impressive that *Symbio* was made three decades earlier.) Buscemi has pledged his active support to securing distribution for the film, accompanying Greaves to the Hamptons International festival screening and expressing interest in starring in and co-directing a *Symbio* sequel. Such a high-profile spokesman for the film's cause is an invaluable asset, as is the infinitely greater access allowed African-American independent filmmakers today (for which we are significantly indebted to the early 1990's renaissance in this area, led by independents Charles Burnett and Julie Dash.) Also of great benefit is the recent success of *The Blair Witch Project*, which in hitting the box-office jackpot opened the doors for more experimental films like it.

*Symbio*'s creation in 1968 qualifies it as one of those rare works too brilliantly in advance of its contemporaries to be understood in its own time. As Robert Stam notes, 'The film is only now being appreciated as the prophetic text that it is. Indeed, the film virtually calls for a re-writing of the history of filmic reflexivity.'<sup>24</sup> With the benefit of a postmodernist hindsight and what J. Hoberman terms 'the post-Warhol sense that life itself is a movie,' *Symbio* should finally be given its due. Hoberman goes on to remark that *Symbio* 'is a movie that enters American history so decisively it seems like it's always been there.'<sup>25</sup> The news is that for the past thirty years, it *has* been there – and still is, just waiting to be discovered. ♦

## Notes

1. J. Hoberman, 'It's Déjà-vu-vu All Over Again,' *Premiere* (July 1992): 33.
2. Adam Knee & Charles Musser, 'William Greaves, Documentary Filmmaking and the African-American Experience,' *Film Quarterly* 45.3 (Spring 1992): 14–15.
3. *Ibid.*, 15.
4. Scott MacDonald, 'Sunday in the Park with Bill,' *Independent Film & Video Monthly* (May 1992): 24.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*, 28.
6. Adam Knee, 'Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One: Film History Revised,' *Sightlines* (Fall 1992): 11.
7. Scott MacDonald, *Screen Writings: Scripts & Texts by Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 36.
8. Stephen Mamber, *Cinema Verité in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 4.
9. Hoberman, 33.
10. Arthur F. Bentley, *Inquiry Into Inquiries: Essays in Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), 12.
11. MacDonald, *Screen Writings*, 47.
12. Stam, Robert, *Reflexivity in Film & Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 59.
13. MacDonald, 'Sunday in the Park with Bill', 28.
14. Stam, *Reflexivity*, 227.
15. Mamber, *Cinema Verité*, 89–90.
16. Quoted in MacDonald, *Screen Writings*, 48.
17. Quoted in MacDonald, 'Sunday in the Park with Bill,' 26.
18. Stam, *Reflexivity*, 129.
19. Quoted in Anderson, John, 'An Obscure Film that Won't Die,' *New York Newsday* (8 October 1997).
20. Quoted in MacDonald, *Screen Writings*, 34.
21. Quoted in MacDonald, *Screen Writings*, 47–48.
22. Stam, Robert, *Reflexivity in Film & Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992; first published 1985), xix.
23. James, Caryn, 'Sound Bites from Sundance,' *New York Times* (2 February 1992).
24. Stam, *Reflexivity* (rev. ed.), xviii.
25. Hoberman, 33.