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Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Two Takes - Criterion Collection

[The Criterion Collection](#) // Unrated // December 5, 2006

List Price: \$39.95 [Buy now and save at [Amazon](#)]

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Review by [Preston Jones](#) | posted December 4, 2006 | [E-mail the Author](#)

The Movies

Filmmakers have been creating self-reflexive works about the art of making movies for nearly as long as the medium has existed -- from **Man with a Movie Camera**, Dziga Vertov's 1929 stylistic deconstruction of filmic language to Federico Fellini's luminous 1963 opus **8 1/2** to Francois Truffaut's love letter to the silver screen, 1973's **Day For Night** -- and nearly all of them survey the often tortuous process as a journey worth taking, an artistic pilgrimage that results in transcendent experiences. However, few films have ventured where avant-garde African-American auteur William Greaves' little-seen but unforgettable 1968 work **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** dares tread: turning the "film-within-a-film" conceit inside out, Greaves goes a step further than merely paying homage to the power of cinema, but rather tears the medium apart, pulling at literal and figurative film until it very nearly falls apart under inspection.

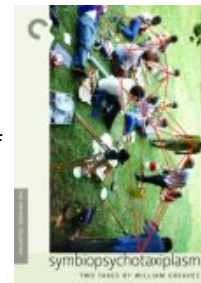
Put simply, **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** is a hybrid of fiction and fact revolving around a film crew's attempts to capture a screen test (ostensibly for a feature-length work tentatively titled "Over The Cliff") in Central Park, all while being filmed themselves by a ragtag team of documentarians. It's an exercise in meta-reality, one which blurs the lines between on- and off-camera -- a dense, intricate puzzle of race, sexual politics, creative struggles and roiling emotions, **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** is simultaneously a documentary, a drama, a sly satire, a searing piece of cinema verite and a biting slice of performance art. Greaves collapses all these elements into his film, leaving the viewer to piece together precisely what it means; will the screen test film crew revolt and take the power away from Greaves? Is the rehearsal a means towards feeling genuine emotion? The potency of certain words and phrases are mullied over, picked apart and analyzed from every angle, much like the very language of film itself: Greaves employs split screens, multiple angles and unconventional set-ups to toy with the audience and suggest that reality is as malleable as this film perceives real life to be.

If it all sounds too academic and heady, it certainly flirts with pretension: there are moments where Greaves's film threatens to dissolve into labored, intense discussions of themes and intent, arguing over whether

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human life "can be scripted," then playing out a bitter, vicious argument over and over, implying that wounding words are perhaps calculated, rather than spontaneous. Greaves explodes several traditional filmmaking conventions throughout this lean, 80-minute work, not the least of which is the auteur theory, more or less discarded as his collaborators begin to take more and more of a hand in crafting the finished product; it may be Greaves's project as the film begins, but it's not nearly as singularly authored by its conclusion. Groundbreaking in its day and little seen until recently, **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** is just as revelatory and mind-expanding 37 years later as it was upon completion.

Filed in 2003 and much more documentary-minded than its predecessor, **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2** was produced by actor Steve Buscemi and cinematic firebrand in his own right Steven Soderbergh, blending footage from **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** and picking up the ostensible narrative thread some three decades later, employing the same actors and continuing the slender storyline. The first 40 minutes of **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2** is, quite literally, a continuation of events that were faded out upon at the conclusion of the 1968 film; transitioning from the Sixties into modern day New York, **Take 2 1/2** leaves a screening and follows Greaves as he prepares to pick up where he left off. In a fascinating twist, many of the questions left unanswered in **Take One** are addressed here, leaving the 2003 film to function as a bookend, rather than another chapter in a series. One gets the sense that Greaves likely won't continue his **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm** series, that perhaps he's said all he needs to say -- the bittersweet sense of closure provided by the graceful final shot of **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2** would certainly suggest as much.

Social philosopher Arthur Bentley first coined the phrase "symbiotaxiplasm," which, by definition, "refers to all the elements and events that transpire in any given environment, which affect and are affected by human beings." Greaves augments the term with the word "psycho," which the director says invokes the mental aspects of the creative process and their impact upon those grouped together. Layer upon layer of seeming spontaneity gives much of **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** (and to a lesser degree, **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2**) its electric energy, rendering it at once impenetrable, fascinating and intoxicating -- it's a virtuoso exploitation and embrace of the cinematic form, a singular, undeniable work that stands as one of America's most vivid explorations of an endlessly flexible form.

The DVD

The Video:

Don't pop **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** into your DVD player expecting Criterion's usual level of visual excellence -- you'll be somewhat let down. That said, Criterion is delivering precisely what director William Greaves is intending, as per the booklet: "At the behest of director William Greaves, corrections to the picture and sound were kept to a minimum, in order to retain the 'authentic' look and spontaneity of the original film. One of the theories behind the making of the film, Greaves notes, was that any 'mistake' that was consciously or unconsciously made during filming or afterward would add to the immediacy of viewers' experience, by involving them more directly in the filmmaking process." Whew -- all that means is that scratches, flecks and dirt abound in this 1.33:1 fullscreen presentation. Aside from the deliberate flaws, this is an otherwise solid image.

The more recently produced **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2** is presented with a soft, unremarkable 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen transfer, which while it doesn't suffer from the afflictions plaguing **Take One**, certainly does not look as sharp, clean and clear as a three-year-old film might. Filmed on digital video in the newer sequences, **Take 2 1/2** blends 30-year-old footage into its narrative for the first 40 minutes and here, it looks much cleaner than it does in **Take One**. Again, the ultimate quality of the picture is determined by Greaves, so any noticeable flaws

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are very likely intentional.

The Audio:

Both films are equipped with Dolby 1.0 mono soundtracks that more than do the job: dialogue and sound effects are smashed together with little regard for clarity or intelligibility, along with several aural quirks (crackling static and whining feedback), yet the soundtracks relay every pained exchange or harsh rebuke with sterling fidelity. There is a slight tendency for the more heated exchanges or overlapping conversations to sound a little strident, but it's fleeting and not wildly distracting. The **Take 2 1/2** soundtrack is much smoother, cleaner and fuller, with dialogue heard with minimal drop-out or distortion. Optional English subtitles, for both films, are also included.

The Extras:

In trademark Criterion Collection fashion, **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Two Takes** arrives on DVD with a carefully considered selection of supplemental material that does an exceptional job of further fleshing out William Greaves' often seemingly impenetrable cinematic exercise. The first disc houses the 61 minute documentary "Discovering William Greaves," an overview of the avant-garde filmmaker's life and career, featuring interviews with Greaves, his wife/producer Louise Archambault, actress Ruby Dee, filmmaker St. Clair Bourne and film scholar Scott MacDonald. It's an expansive, informative piece that gives those who may be unfamiliar (which could be quite a few picking up this set) with the man and his work a clear, concise primer. The theatrical trailer for the 2005 re-release of **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** completes the first disc. On the second disc, the only bonus is a 12 minute, 40 second interview with Steve Buscemi, who appears fleetingly in **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2**; the set is completed with a 34-page booklet with an essay by noted critic Amy Taubin and Greaves's production notes for **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One**.

Final Thoughts:

Layer upon layer of seeming spontaneity gives much of **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One** (and to a lesser degree, **Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2**) its electric energy, rendering it at once impenetrable, fascinating and intoxicating -- it's a virtuoso exploitation and embrace of the cinematic form, a singular, undeniable work that stands as one of America's most vivid explorations of an endlessly flexible form. Criterion's considered package provides context and clarity for those unfamiliar with or those tirelessly searching for this seminal piece of avant-garde cinema. Highly recommended.

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