

PERFORMANCES

Man with a Plan: William Greaves in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*

By Michael Koresky

ON FILM / FEATURES — FEB 5, 2014

We don't often talk about documentaries as featuring performances. But consider the highly performative people at the centers of *Grey Gardens*, *General Idi Amin Dada*, and last year's *The Act of Killing*, or even the seemingly more modest souls in *God's Country* or *Salesman*—all are unquestionably transformed by the camera's presence, making nebulous the sense of reality that the nonfiction form ostensibly supplies. In front of a camera, we all become characters.

William Greaves clearly understood this when, in 1968, he embarked on a curious cinematic project that would become the uniquely titled *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*. Greaves's film takes the form of a documentary, though it's so much more—a singular, metacinematic experiment in nonfiction that foregrounds the “performances” within it and slyly calls into question notions of authority, sexuality, and other forms of social identity. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* documents the shooting of a strange film in Central Park, although Greaves never intended us to see this movie within the movie (which at one point he refers to as *Over the Cliff*). As the director of this film about the filming of a film—the structure and content of which are a mystery even to the baffled crew—Greaves necessarily becomes the central on-screen figure. And although it is never spoken about in the film, the fact that *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* was made by an African-American man in the 1960s cannot be ignored: Greaves's race is unavoidable and ever-present.

Greaves commandeers a crew of mostly white men and women with a deceptively lackadaisical air that itself becomes a sticking point. He has given them an outline rather than a script, and they feel at sea, unsure what the film they're making is all about. What they've been shooting is both perplexing and irritating: different pairs of men and women enacting the same lurid and histrionic breakup scene, in which a woman accuses her husband of being a “faggot” and of forcing her to have abortions. The dialogue is overtly terrible (“You have been killing my babies one right after the other!”), and its ludicrousness is only emphasized by how often we (and the crew) are forced to hear it.

Greaves's resistance to explaining his motives for this bizarre exercise in repetition instigates another film within the film: the crew spontaneously begin shooting themselves behind closed doors as they discuss their frustration and try to suss out just what is going on. The more this anxious collective tries to interpret the behavior of its aloof leader, the more fascinatingly inscrutable he becomes, even as his surface manner remains friendly and breezy. We come to suspect he's playing a part, for them and for us—and what a performance it is.

It's useful to know that Greaves was no upstart. The Harlem-bred filmmaker got his start in acting, both for stage and screen. In the forties, he had been in major Broadway shows as well as small independent movies geared toward black audiences, such as *Miracle in Harlem*, with Sheila Guyse, and *The Fight Never Ends*, with Joe Louis and Ruby Dee; at the same time, Greaves was studying at the fabled Actors Studio in New York, which also produced such stars as Marlon Brando and Shelley Winters. With options for black actors minimal in the U.S., Greaves moved to Canada in the fifties and learned how to make movies while working for the National Film Board there. When he returned to a socially evolving United States in the sixties, he had acquired enough of a reputation to launch his own production company, and he started making documentaries about the civil rights movement, including the superb, multilayered *Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class*, which aired on PBS in 1968. That same year, he was appointed executive producer of the landmark television series *Black Journal*.

The *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project married his adeptness at exploratory nonfiction filmmaking with his lingering fascination with performance, as well as his growing interest in interrogating power structures. Greaves knew that a film set functioned according to a certain hierarchy, and he wanted to call these unwritten rules into question. In doing so, he also happened on a powerful image: himself, an African-American, calling the shots in a medium controlled by whites.

Perhaps what's most unsettling to his crew (which has some black members as well) is the casual confidence with which he wields his artistic identity. Is he a visionary or a scatterbrain? He doesn't have to prove himself to anyone; he doesn't have to explain his thought process. He just wanders around Central Park in that indelible green mesh T-shirt, the wily master of his own strange creation. "I represent the establishment," he says at one unusually explicit moment. When a crew member replies that he doesn't understand, Greaves responds: "It doesn't matter whether or not you understand." Watch Greaves below at his most cagily charming.

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