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50 Years Later, We Still Don't Know Whether This Film Is Fact or Fiction

In his 1968 film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*, William Greaves turned cinéma vérité on itself, never making it clear whether the story was in fact fiction, nonfiction, improvisation, or some combination of the above.

[Shelby Shaw](#) February 16, 2018



William Greaves, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One* (image courtesy Criterion and Janus Films)

In 1968, filmmaker [William Greaves](#) took a small crew and his camera equipment to Central Park and made a nonfiction film about making a nonfiction film about the making of a fiction film. If this sounds confusing, it's because it is. To break it down: first, a crew shot a short film; then, a documentary captured the crew making the short film; finally, the overall film, titled [Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One](#), captured the making of the documentary of the short film. By using the documentary format as a means to test the boundaries of the documentary genre, Greaves turned cinéma vérité on itself, never making it clear whether the film was in fact fiction, nonfiction, improvisation, or some combination of the above.

Harlem-born Greaves, who died in 2014 at the age of 87, started his career as a dancer and stage actor in New York City with both the American Negro Theater and the Actor's Studio. He honed his filmmaking skills when he moved to Ottawa to work with the National Film Board of Canada. When he returned to the States as a filmmaker for the United Nations, the United States Information Agency, and National Educational Television (the predecessor of PBS), he became a nonfiction trailblazer. Over the course of his career, he produced, wrote, directed, and/or edited

over 200 documentaries. He was also deeply involved with Civil Rights activism, using his filmmaking to shed light on the lives of such important figures as Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells, and others. It was for producing and co-hosting [*Black Journal*](#), the pioneering public-access show created primarily for and by African Americans, that won Greaves an Emmy.



William Greaves, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One* (image courtesy Criterion and Janus Films)

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One was Greaves's debut feature film, although it never received a theatrical release upon completion and was not widely seen until a screening at the Sundance Film Festival in 1992. There, it gained the attention of Steven Soderbergh, who approached Greaves to create [*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take 2 1/2*](#) with him in 2005. And now, for the 50th anniversary of *Take One*, [the Maysles Documentary Center in Harlem will be screening the 1968 film](#) on Sunday, February 18 in conjunction with Carnegie Hall's city-wide program, [*The '60s: The Years that Changed America*](#).

The film tracks the production of a short film in Central Park, for which the director ("played" by Greaves) has assembled a crew ("played" by the crew of the overall documentary) and hired several pairs of actors to try the roles of a discontented couple, who broach sexuality, abortion, and use "cunt" as an anatomical term. When the crew confronts Greaves about his poorly written script, he evades making changes and avoids directing the actors. As filming continues with no apparent progress, the crew develops suspicions that Greaves doesn't have a plan at all — suspicions that they discuss seemingly in private, but which they decide to record on film without explaining why. They openly wonder about what Greaves might think when he watches their conspiratorial meeting. "Rumors of unrest and revolution in the crew should develop, should lead to encounters with the director," Greaves wrote in his production notes to himself.



William Greaves, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One* (image courtesy Criterion and Janus Films)

Greaves duped his crew (who are also filming themselves playing a crew) to be part of a dud film so unsalvageable, they *had* to question its validity. It was like a test: if nobody from Greaves's crew had ever brought up their lack of faith in the film they thought they were shooting "for real," then *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* would have failed being anything *other* than a conventional documentary. It would have simply been a film about a crew making a movie, and not a film about a crew suspecting they are being set up by their director. Its success is how it forces its participants to think for their own best interest as a whole, regardless of being individuals under one authority. As Greaves loses control of the film and he relies on everyone else to create it for him — by doing their parts and not asking questions — it's not hard to see how discontent with a power figure quickly grows into distrust and mutiny.



William Greaves, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One* (image courtesy Criterion and Janus Films)

In one scene, we hear the crew complain about Greaves's inability to direct while we see a solitary Greaves walking away from the camera at a distance, alone in the park. When we discover that Greaves himself edited the final film, it begs the question whether he knew what he

was doing from start to end — whether he was improvising the entire shoot, whether the suspicious crew was really being candid in their so-called private meetings, or whether the entire thing was scripted and contrived. Is it a documentary of a fiction, a fictionalized documentary, or is it pure reality? As Greaves put it in his production notes, “The piece, i.e., this film, must be susceptible to analysis, and yet it must be as unfathomable as the cosmos.”

[Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One](#) by William Greaves screens at Maysles Cinema (343 Malcolm X Blvd, Harlem, Manhattan) Sunday, February 18, 4pm–7pm. There will be a talkback session with Greaves’s widow, Louise Greaves, his son and president of William Greaves Production, David Greaves, and visual artist Aisha Cousins.

<https://hyperallergic.com/427776/william-greaves-symbiopsychotaxiplasm-take-one/>