

Amy Taubin, “Still No Answers”

[Reprinted from the booklet accompanying the Criterion DVD release of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* and *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 ½* in 2006; we have eliminated a paragraph about Greaves’s background.]

The tumultuous New York film and theater world of the late 1960s oscillated between two opposing ideas: the auteur and the collective. The American version of *Cahiers du cinéma*’s auteur theory inflated the idea of the director as “auteur” into that of an individual artist whose stardom could eclipse that of any mere actor and whose power was greater than the Hollywood studio system. On the other hand, the sixties counterculture at large, and in particular its political wing—the overlapping civil rights movement and the New Left, which was primarily an anti-Vietnam War movement—idealized the collective, the commune, and the group, notwithstanding the fact that its image was built around its leaders and stars. In this crazy, mixed up moment, the films of the radical documentary collective New York Newsreel (soon to become Third World Newsreel) showed at the Filmmakers Cinematheque side-by-side with the works of such avant-garde filmmakers as Andy Warhol and Stan Brakhage, the cinema-verite films of Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and Albert and David Maysles, and Elia Kazan’s 1956 *Baby Doll*, made with a cast of Actors Studio members and at that point still condemned as pornographic by the Legion of Decency. Early in 1968, Leacock and Pennebaker’s company acquired Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise* and brought the celebrated French new wave director to the United States to tour with the film. Godard returned to Paris just in time to take to the streets in May of 1968, but he returned to the United States in the fall of that year—his identity now split between JLG the auteur and JLG a member of the Dziga Vertov Film Group—to collaborate with Leacock and Pennebaker on *One American Movie (One AM)*, a project he abandoned in postproduction. JLG’s on-screen instructions to the crew at the opening of *One American Movie* bear a striking resemblance to William Greaves’s on-screen instructions to his crew at the opening of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, the film Greaves shot in the

late spring of 1968 (several months before *One American Movie*) but that would not receive its first screening until 1971.

Greaves's film was certainly of its moment, and the director was perhaps uniquely situated to appreciate the various currents that informed it. He had a connection to all the worlds mentioned above, and a foot in several others as well, yet he remained something of an outsider to these groups, apart from any overriding political identification, except for his abiding, and at times quite practical, concern with civil rights, a cause he has quietly and effectively championed throughout his career, often in groundbreaking ways. At the time he shot *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, he had just been appointed executive producer of National Educational Television's public-affairs series *Black Journal*, then the only national television series dealing with African-American life. (Greaves became executive producer after the staff staged a walkout to protest white control of the show.) He also had his own documentary film production company and was a member of the Actors Studio, where he participated as a director, actor, and teacher.

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What was immediately striking about *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* was that it did not directly engage race or racism, although the fact that Greaves is both the film's director-writer-producer and its on-screen protagonist—the focus of almost every scene—guaranteed that the viewer, regardless of race, had to confront whatever racial stereotypes she or he held. Quite simply, in 1968, there were at best a handful of African-American directors working in television and no African-Americans directing feature films. For an African-American director to make a feature film, let alone one as experimental as a film by Warhol or Godard, could not of been imagined if Greaves hadn't gone out and done it.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One uses a single situation as the basis for a theme-and-variation structure that interrogates every aspect of the filmmaking process as well as the categories of fiction and documentary. The film is posed as a screen test, not for a film that is yet to be made but as an end in itself. In Central Park, on a beautiful summer day, a film crew is assembled to record two actors playing a scene that has the ring of a hack imitation of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or one of Tennessee

Williams's vitriolic marital battles. This scene is an irritant (at one point, the soundman attacks Greaves for making him listen to something so ugly through his headphones over and over, for days), like the grain of sand in the oyster.

On-screen the director (Greaves) outlines the responsibilities of the crew. The film is being shot by three 16mm cameras, each equipped with a zoom lens and a magazine that holds eleven minutes of film, and all three synced, in the clumsy technology of the day, to reel-to-reel sound recorders. One cameraman, Greaves instructs, is to focus solely on the actors playing the scene; another cameraman is to film the crew that is shooting the scene; and the third is to include the actors and the crew, as well as onlookers and anything interesting that's happening in the park. (Sometimes Greaves himself wields a fourth camera.) Since the theme of the film is sexuality, Greaves explains, the third cameraman should try to capture anything that relates to it: Look, there's that woman with the tits," he says, and as the camera whirls to show us a woman on horseback, he continues, "Get her, get her, they're bouncing." "Greaves, you're a dirty old man," jokes one of the crew members, and Greaves, once again in the center of the shot, responds with no trace of embarrassment, "Don't take me seriously."

Indeed. Well, how exactly are we meant to view a director who is behaving, in the lingo of the day, like a sexist pig? That is the question the film raises right from the start. Who is this director? Is he the "real" William Greaves, or is he a fictional construct, or partly both, or are they one and the same? Is he, in addition to being outrageously sexist, as incompetent a director as his sometimes confusing instructions suggest, or is he playing at being sexist and incompetent in order to provoke the crew? And what about that bit of badly written psychodrama? Given that in May of 1968 the war was raging in Vietnam, students were occupying university buildings, the French left had almost staged a successful takeover of the government, and a string of assassinations had begun, this drama would be absurdly reactionary if it were taken at face value. Is the crew's eventual antagonism, then, part of his master plan to dramatize the other major, though not explicitly stated, theme of the film: power, in particular the power struggle between the leader and the group?

The scene that Greaves has written to test the actors' chops also limns, however crudely, another familiar power struggle. A woman named Alice is in a rage at her

husband, Freddy. She attacks him for being a “faggot” and forcing her “to have one abortion after the other.” The scene is written to call attention to its stagey quality. At one point, the husband even tells the wife to “stop acting,” which is as hilarious a double entendre as is Greaves’s “Don’t take me seriously.” But Greaves seems determined to find what is referred to, in Actors Studio terminology, as the inner reality of the scene and the characters and, to that end, stages it again and again, interrupting it to give directions to the actors, who become increasingly bewildered and frustrated. “I don’t know whether to play a bisexual... a butch fag, or a faggy fag,” says the actor playing Freddy, before concluding, “I’d like to play him as a closet fag, so I’ll just play it straight.” As he continues, a loud bleep censors what is rapidly turning into an exposé of homophobia. One of the most interesting aspects of the film’s focus on sexuality is that, at this point in 1968, the political discourses around feminism and homosexuality were only beginning to be articulated. One wonders, first, if Greaves has written this supposedly spontaneous riff spoken by the actor playing Freddy, and if so, does he mean it as a provocation? Or is the actor playing Freddy speaking as himself and unaware of what today seems blatantly homophobic? Similarly, some of the crew members trash Alice for doing what women are programmed to do, “cut off a man’s balls,” a thesis with which none of the female crewmembers take issue. If this film is about sexuality, as Greaves claims, is it possible that he was attuned to what at that moment was a largely inchoate feminist and gay consciousness that would soon challenge the male heterosexual privilege that every man involved in the film seems to take for granted?

Built on such an unstable social/political/psychological ground, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* invites endless speculation both from the audience and from everyone on the screen. Increasingly restive, the crew decide to film themselves criticizing Greaves and his film, wondering all the while if the director has manipulated them into becoming his antagonist. They give him the footage they’ve shot of themselves, and, whether or not he instigated their acting out for the camera, it makes its way into the finished film. To add to the confusion, Patricia Ree Gilbert and Don Fellows, the actors who play Alice and Freddy, are sometimes replaced by other actors, among them the then unknown Susan Anspach, who carries a parasol and sings Alice’s lines as if she were Catherine Deneuve in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*.

If the production process sounds like a recipe for chaos, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is anything but. Thanks to Greaves's lively, innovative editing (involving some of the most surprising contrapuntal double and triple split-screen images in the history of movies), the film has the polyrhythmic elegance of its Miles Davis score. More than mere background music, the score is the abstract model for the film's improvisations on a theme and also an expressive element in its own right.

Greaves shot about 130,000 feet of 16mm film (roughly fifty-five hours) for the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project, which he originally conceived as a series of five movies. *Take One*, in fact, ends with a close-up of Audrey Henningham, briefly seen in the role of Alice, and the words: "Coming soon: *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Two*." But with no distributor adventurous enough to give *Take One* a theatrical release (for three decades, it received only occasional museum and festival screenings), it was impossible for Greaves to follow through with his plan. Nevertheless, he held onto the original footage, which, being 16mm color reversal (the workhorse stock for avant-garde and documentary filmmakers in the sixties), didn't decay. In 1992, Steve Buscemi saw a screening of *Take One* at Sundance, and ten years later he and Steven Soderbergh (who has manifested in his own narrative experiments something of Greaves's teasing humor and desire to expose the ghosts in the machine) offered to help produce at least one sequel.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 ½ combines material shot in 1968, and originally planned for *Take Two*, with an update shot thirty-five years later. Actors Audrey Henningham and Shannon Baker, who play the interracial couple in one of the "screen tests" at the end of *Take One*, are reunited as themselves and as their characters, Alice and Freddy. In the fiction, Alice, who has had a successful career as a singer in Europe, returns to New York in response to a desperate phone call from Freddy, who is dying of AIDS and wants Alice to adopt a teenage girl he has been fostering. He rationalizes his request as his way of giving Alice what she once wanted—a child. But Alice sees the request as Freddy being presumptuous and imposing his needs on her, as he always did. That a happy ending can be wrested from what at first seems like an impasse is a credit to both the actors and Greaves's direction. And, indeed, the consonance of fictional and documentary reunion and resolution in the film makes it in some ways resonate more forcefully—and poignantly—than *Take One*. If *Take 2 ½* lacks the minimalist audacity of

Greaves's original conception (imagine seeing the clunky Alice and Freddy dialogue repeated over five films), it has a bitter sweetness that testifies to how much has been lost and found by everyone on the screen—and us as well.