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The Flaherty:  
Four Decades in The Cause of  
Independent Cinema

*Guest Editors:*

*Erik Barnouw and Patricia R. Zimmermann*

William Greaves/*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968)/August 8, 1991

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*Jackie Tshaka:* I've seen a lot of your other films, but *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is so different! Where has it been shown?

*William Greaves:* We showed it at the Brooklyn Museum retrospective [April 1991]; we also showed it at the Federal Theater and in Paris at the retrospective of Black American film in 1980. Those are the only three public showings that we've had. The film was never released. We shot it in 1967 and then had difficulty getting money to finish it. We finally got the money for a blow-up in 1971, but then we had the problem of trying to get the film launched. I thought I could get it into the Cannes Film Festival and I flew over to France. The problem was that Louis Marcorelles, the influential critic, went to a prescreening of the film and the projectionist got the reels all fouled up. *Symbio* is already chaotic. It's so fragile that if you mix it up even a little you lose the film. Macorelles and I had dinner after the screening, and he said, "I couldn't understand what the film was about!" I couldn't understand his reaction, but later discovered that his projectionist had screened it the wrong way.

I like to think of that incident as a divine intervention: it has kept this film buried for almost twenty-five years. I was so interested to show it tonight, because almost no one here has seen it.

*Bill Sloan:* I've probably known Bill Greaves longer than anyone in this room. In fact, I saw *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* when it was still in a rough cut back in the sixties. Bill, you had struggled to develop a career as a documentarian, and then, just as you'd gotten things underway, you stopped to make *this* film. What possessed you?

*Greaves:* There are several different answers. I'd been a member of the Actors Studio since 1949, and knew the Stanislafsky system—The Method, Strasberg, that whole approach to theater and acting. I began teaching actors in Canada, and one of my actors there was extremely adroit at

business ventures and became very wealthy. He wanted me to make a feature and said, “Anything you want to make, just tell me.” I began to realize I could put a feature together using some of the actors at the school.

A whole range of other concerns were involved, too. The term “symbiopsychotaxiplasm” is a take-off on “symbiotaxiplasm,” a concept developed by philosopher/social-scientist Arthur Bentley, as part of his study of the processes of social-scientific inquiry. The term “symbiotaxiplasm” referred to all those events that transpire in any given environment on which a human being impacts in any way. Of course, the most elaborate symbiotaxiplasm would be a city like New York. I had the audacity to put “psycho” into the middle of Bentley’s term. I felt the longer term more appropriate to my idea, which was to explore the psychology of a group of creative people who would function as an entity in the process of making a film.

I called it *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* because the plan was to make five symbiopsychotaxiplasms. But we couldn’t even get the first one off the ground, and never developed the others.

*F:* It used to be said about a certain generation of experimental films—I guess mostly in the late sixties, early seventies—that they taught you how to watch the film as you were watching it. In a way *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* does that, because you have your surrogates on the screen reacting in the way that the audience is reacting.

*Greaves:* Well, the function of that first scene—when all hell breaks loose and you are suddenly seeing three separate images on the split-screen, and, in particular, the ambivalent craziness that surrounds this kind of location shooting—was to push the audience into a state of annoyance. When spokespeople (people in the crew) appear on the screen and say, “This is not the way you make a movie!” and “What the hell is this all about?” the audience begins to relax and say, “That’s right!” They find themselves looking for that clue on the screen that articulates what they have just experienced. The crew says, “This is a piece of shit. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. I read the script; it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just bad writing.” And the audience thinks, “Yes, it is bad writing.”

*Lazar Stojanovic:* In 1970, a Yugoslavian writer came back from the United States and told me

about Bill Greaves and this film. He knew that I was very interested in what I call self-analytical movies, movies that consider the medium. I couldn't really get a clear picture of Bill's film—only that it was related to some of Godard's work. Now that I have finally seen *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, I think it's a milestone in the history of the sixties.

*Michelle Materre:* You must have had your ego in a great place to be able to allow the crew to think about you the way they did.

*Greaves:* It was a calculated risk. In general, my livelihood turns on people's perceiving me as a director, and yet, for this particular film, to work, a flawed, vulnerable persona was essential. I must say I feel very good about my relationship with the crew. Even when they spoke about me at their meeting, they didn't speak in anger. They were six characters in search of an author, or like the characters in *Outward Bound* (a play I had a role in when I first started acting), who are on a ship but don't know why, or where they're going.

*Maria DeLuca:* I have a mundane question about the sequence of the crew at their private meeting. Did I miss something? It's one thing for them to say, "Let's get together and have a conference," but film is expensive. How did it happen that they were shooting film?

*Greaves:* We were well-endowed with raw stock. They saw I was burning it up with these three cameras rolling at once, and I guess they figured I wouldn't miss 2,000-3,000 feet! [laughter]

*MacDonald:* Certain ways of critiquing conventional film happen in many places simultaneously. In the sixties, for example, there were a number of different attempts to critique cinéma vérité: Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* [1961], Jonas Mekas's *The Brig* [1964], and Peter Watkins's *The War Game* [1965] and *Punishment Park* [1970] are distinguished instances. The one that strikes me as closest to this film is Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* [1967], which itself was inspired by the work of Andrew Noren. I'm curious as to whether you had any contact with McBride or Noren, or if they had contact with your work.

*Greaves:* I've heard of *David Holzman's Diary*, but I've not seen it. I've been involved in *making* films, and, you know, you stay in an editing room until you're exhausted, then you go home and collapse, and get up and do it again. There was a period in my life when I used to go to the theater

a great deal, and to the movies. But that stopped after I left Canada in 1960.

*Herskowitz:* Did you think of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* as a satire of cinéma vérité in particular?

*Greaves:* At the National Film Board of Canada, I was in the unit that pioneered cinéma vérité on the North American continent. Terry Filgate (the English cameraman in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*) and I were together at the National Film Board at what was called Unit B. We worked on films like *Lonely Boy* [1961], and *Emergency Ward* [1958]. The process of learning to do that kind of shooting made me very attuned to the spontaneous capturing of reality, and certainly laid the groundwork for this film.

But I should tell you some of the other thinking that I had in mind while making *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*. I went to a science high school in New York City and was in general pointed in the direction of science. I broke that off in college, but I continued to be interested in various scientific theories. The Heisenberg Principle of Uncertainty, in particular, fascinated me. Heisenberg asserts that we'll never really know the basis of the cosmos, because the means of perception alters the reality it observes. The electron microscope sends out a beam of electrons that knocks the electrons of the atoms being observed out of their orbits.

I began to think of the movie camera as an analog to the microscope. In this case, the reality to be observed is the human soul, the psyche. Of course, as the camera investigates that part of the cosmos, the individual psyches being observed recoil. Behavior becomes structured in a way other than it would have been had it been unperceived—a psychological version of the Heisenberg Principle. In this sense, my film was an environment in which movie cameras were set up to catch the process of human response.

Another scientific law that interested me was the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which describes the distribution of energy in a system. In *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, the cameras were to track the flow of energy in the system I had devised. If the cameras looked at one person and the level of spontaneous reality began to recede as a result of their observation, that energy would show up somewhere else, behind the cameras in the crew, for example. The cameras were set up to track the flow of energy from in front of the cameras to behind them and back to the front...

*Alan Rosenthal:* Did you look at the rushes in between the filming, or did you just continue shooting?

*Greaves:* Well, we had to look at the rushes to see whether we were getting things on film, but I didn't see the rushes of the crew at their secret meeting until after the shooting was over. Bob Rosen came to me and said, "Bill, we have a little present for you." [laughter]

*Patricia Zimmermann:* In documentary and in certain narrative forms, there's a long history of self-reflexive filmmaking as a political intervention to disengage the traditional power of the director. It's evident at least as early as Vertov. In the sixties, self-reflexivity became an international movement: Godard, Makavejev, Stojanovic, many American and European avant-garde filmmakers, you.... In all these instances, self-reflexivity functioned as a way of disengaging from certain authoritarian power relations to make way for more utopian ways of working in the world. One scene in your film seems to encapsulate this: the scene where you're sitting with your multiracial, mixed-gender crew. And you're an African-American director. Could you situate your method within the politics of the time?

*Greaves:* Well, clearly we were working in a context of the urban disorders of the sixties and the rage of the African-American community against the tyranny and racism of the American body politics. There was that general response, plus the more specific struggles: the Civil Rights marches and the other strategies that were being employed by the African-American community. And, there was the whole Vietnam problem and the growing dissent over it. There was the emerging feminist movement. And Woodstock. There was an unhappiness of massive dimensions over the way in which society had been run and about the covert authoritarianism that was evident everywhere. True, America was no dictatorship, but there certainly were mores, local and Federal laws, social structures in place that inhibited the flowering of the human spirit.

This film was an attempt to look at the impulses and inspirations of a group of creative people who, during the making of the film, were being "pushed to the wall" by the process I as director had instigated. The scene that I had written was fixed, and I was in charge. I was insisting that this scene would be done by the cast and crew, even though it was making them very unhappy. The question was, "When will they revolt?" When would they question the validity, the wisdom,

of doing the scene in the first place? In this sense, it really was a reflection of the politics of the time.

*F:* The issue this film raises for me is individual power versus collective power. At one point in the film, you say, "I represent the establishment." I find that when I'm directing a mixed crew, particularly a gender-mixed crew, I have power relationship problems because of my gender and race. When you as an African-American director said, "I represent the establishment," how did your crew respond?

*Greaves:* I had an excellent relationship with the crew. You have to think in terms of the sixties, when there was a breaking out of a whole lot of ossified thinking. The people who worked on *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* were Age-of-Aquarius-type people, who were in many respects shorn of the encumbrances that many white Americans are burdened with. If you investigated the psychology of these people, you wouldn't discover elements of racism or prejudice. They had a very collaborationist approach.

*F:* Did you expect a counterculture audience for the film? Or did you hope for distribution through commercial theaters?

*Greaves:* When we first had a blow-up, we did show it to a couple of distributors, and their eyeballs went around in their sockets. They just couldn't figure out how to categorize and package it. One of the critics from *Time* had come by my studio in the sixties and said, "Gee, this thing is not going to be acceptable for twenty years." Right now, I have the film with some of the so-called leading lights in innovative distribution, so we'll see.

The audience here at the seminar represents a high level of appreciation. You're all cinema people: filmmakers, cinema scholars, and so on, and that's always an unusual situation. I think that the film will make its way into art theaters and through the college circuit and to whatever film societies are out there. But it will probably get wider consumption in the twenty-first century because of its increasing archival value: there were few films made in the sixties that so effectively tracked the psychological and emotional mechanisms of young people. From a sociological or anthropological perspective, it will have more and more utility.

*Steve Galagher:* What was the reaction of the cast and crew when they saw the film?

*Greaves:* Only three or four of them have seen it. Bob Rosen saw it, and he reacted the same way Muhammad Ali did to the film I made about him [*Ali, the Fighter*, 1971]. That film was shot cinéma vérité, too, and while we were filming, Ali wouldn't cooperate, for legal and other reasons, I supposed. So we used a telephoto lens, hidden mikes, and so on. About a year later, after the fight was over and the film was finished, I got a call from Ali saying, "Listen, I want to see that film you did." So we set up a screening for him, and he sat in the theater saying, "How did you get this shot! How did you do *that!*" He was amazed. Rosen's reaction was similar; I don't think he anticipated the film that he saw. I think (I hope) he was surprised in a pleasant way.

*Jack Churchill:* Did you always know what you were doing while you were shooting?

*Greaves:* There were certain constants that I tried to predetermine as much as possible, and then I released the human consciousness into this field of determinants. It was similar to the way we come into this room. We have all agreed to be here to talk about the film, but what happens takes its own direction.