

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One and Take 2 2 ½

By Robert Chilcott



On the set of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*

An Interview with director William Greaves

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One (1968) is a unique experiment that deconstructs the acting process and film crew power struggle during the shooting of a screen test of a couple in crisis. With the help of admirers Steven Soderbergh and Steve Buscemi, *Take 2½* (2005) was financed and produced. A double disc DVD is released this month. Director William Greaves talked to Vertigo after the films LFF screening.

Robert Chilcott: Your film has been categorised as experimental, or avant-garde, but it's not really...

William Greaves: It is and it isn't. It's a series of paradoxes. There is no creative predecessor of this film. It has a multiple set of aesthetics, which draw on different concepts – improvisation, cinema vérité, traditional Hollywood film styles. It's a collage, a smorgasbord, a series of

metaphors, like jazz, or like how a lot of music is developed. In other words, you can't pigeonhole this film, which is partly my intention anyway.



William Greaves and Steve Buscemi during the filming of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2*

RC: In the 1968 version they have a very serious debate where everyone is academicising, though this is much less so in the present-day version, where there is more of a technical discussion. Do you think that kind of passionate semiotic analysis has been somehow lost today?

WG: In *Take 2½* there isn't that kind of confrontation. *Take One* has a lot of conflict in it. *Take 2½* was just an attempt to allow whatever was going to happen to happen, without them trying to find out what my motives are. There's still a lot of confusion, a degree of chaos, because they're all intelligent people trying to rationalise some clarity of why the film is being done, but there wasn't any conflict in relation to me as authority that they were challenging, as there was in *Take One*. In 1968, everything was being questioned – civil rights, woman's issues – so it was a metaphor for America during that whole period, particularly the war in Vietnam, and the anger of American youth. In *Take 2½* there hasn't been that kind of dissent, although after we made the film it was beginning. *Take 2½* reflects the passivity of the crew. The actors also did not challenge me in front of the camera, as they had done in *Take One*.

RC: How did Soderbergh and Steve Buscemi get involved?

WG: Steve Buscemi was at Sundance. We had the screening, and the projection failed. The theatre went black, so I had to announce to the audience that it was not a part of the film, even though the film was somewhat unorthodox! Steve was in the audience – we became friends, and he said he would try to help the film. He wanted to be a part of it in some way, and so I invited him to be co-executive producer with Steven Soderbergh, who was putting up the funds for me to finish *Take 2* with these two actors. We had done the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* series – take 1, take 2, take 3, take 4, take 5 – each time with a different pair of actors. Shannon and Audrey were the actors for take 2. Soderbergh wanted to know more about take 2, so I decided to use the

first part of take 2 with these two actors, then, some thirty years later – what developments had taken place in their lives in the intervening years, both from the standpoint of the fictional situation as well as themselves as actors. So I mixed those two levels of reality that ran concurrently, then when we came to the moment of climax, the psychodramatic component, again it's like a smorgasbord, a jazz combo, a riff, a spontaneous moment. I wanted to yield to any wild idea I got through the process of shooting the film. At one point the scene on the bridge with the two actors, I saw Marsha with these sunglasses on, watching from afar, and I thought she looked like some supernatural being come down to earth to look at this cosmic event – what can I do to use her in this scene to mediate this conflict between the two actors. I gave in to that intuition - it would play very interestingly in the film, so I had them walking up these stairs, which in my mind was going up to another level of reality, and when they got up there she explained, in psychodramatic terms, what she was going to do to deal with the basic conflict that was developing in the screen test. What happened then was invariably you find the psychodramatic event, the relationship of the individual to some moment of karma, and they utilise their own spontaneity.



Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One, 1968

The psychodrama process is much more profound, much more immediate – it quickly moves the individual into this area of empathy, and what you get is a terrific performance. It's like cinema vérité, not like conventional Hollywood shooting where you can do the scene again – it's a one-time event, which if it happens you have to be there to catch it, there's no second take. Because the actors are very skilled actors, they collaborated on this moment, using the psychodramatic components, mixed with the method, and it worked very well. What happened then, of course, is that people who are in the audience become somewhat confused – are they acting? Is this true? My feeling is that it's a very rich, human moment.

RC: Do you think a lot of actors resist that kind of non-acting, because when they finally see it they go “but I wasn't acting!” and they want to be able to justify the acting craft?



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WG: Yes, but it's also an eye opener for the actor because they discover there are more emotions and richness in their real life than they realise. They cannot predict that they will find that level of emotion, but to be exposed to it, to become part of it. I think these two actors have become somewhat changed, discovering feelings they did not know were available to them, in front of a camera. A camera is a very intrusive element that tends to make people nervous. Like the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty, the means of perceiving often destroys the thing that's being perceived. In other words, the camera is focussed on the actors, and the actors become distracted from the basic circumstances they are supposed to be involved in, with the intrusiveness of the camera. You realise the camera investigates the psyche, the soul of the actor, in a way that makes the actor extremely self-conscious. So, the means of observing, as with Heisenberg, the electron microscope destroys the atom, so you never know what reality ultimately is.

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