Close-Up: Afrosurrealism

"Just Another Word for Jazz": The Signifying Auteur in William Greaves's Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One

Akiva Gottlieb

Abstract

Drawing on material from the William Greaves collection at Indiana University's Black Film Center/Archive, this essay situates Greaves's unstable, chaotic, and long unseen 1968 documentary Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One *within an expanded historical context of black independent cinema. I will explore Greaves's "feature-length we-don't-know" as a referendum on the convoluted subject position—a double-consciousness,* at least*—of the pioneering black independent filmmaker, and the pressure to exploit the communicatory possibilities of a newly democratized medium while resisting its modes of oppression. How strict is the correlation between the one who holds the camera and the one who wields the power? Greaves's aesthetic experiment suggests a subversive and historically resonant form of direction through indirection—a Brechtian "theater of possibility" that turns cinematic self-reflexivity into a multilayered implication of the spectator.*

Shot on location during a busy day in New York's Central Park in the spring of 1968, William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is a film that both documents and formally enacts the major political and identity struggles of 1960s America. This whimsical, polyphonic countercultural time capsule was only recently rescued from obscurity, given its first theatrical release in 2005, and shortly thereafter enshrined as a collectible artifact by the Criterion Collection. The film's long suppression and recent reemergence presents a cinema historian with various quandaries, but a few scholars have greeted it as a significant and somewhat confounding discovery. In an updated preface to his *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, Robert Stam expresses particular regret at not having been aware of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* when writing his book in the early 1980s, admitting that the film "virtually calls for a rewriting of the history of filmic reflexivity."[1] Maria San Filippo, in

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her valuable contextualization of the film as an overlooked milestone of independent cinema, writes that the film's "creation in 1968 qualifies it as one of those rare works too brilliantly in advance of its contemporaries to be understood in its own time."[2]

While *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*'s handful of latter-day champions—and popular critics like Michael Atkinson,[3] Manohla Dargis,[4] and J. Hoberman[5]—are excited to make space for this unclassifiable whatsit within a canon of American cinematic postmodernism, the benefit of hindsight enables historians to consider Greaves's film as a radical landmark of black artistic expression in postwar America. Drawing on the writings, speeches, and documentary films available in the William Greaves Collection, 1968–2003 at Indiana University's Black Film Center/Archive, I will situate *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* in an expanded historical context of black independent cinema.[6] Where previous observers have concluded that the film is primarily an exploration of process and critique of cinematic conventions, I find that Greaves's provocation offers a referendum on the seemingly impossible subject position—a double consciousness, *at least*—of the pioneering black independent filmmaker, and the pressure to exploit the communicatory possibilities of a newly democratized medium while resisting its modes of oppression. The film does not ignore race but improvises a way to render it a *conspicuous absence*, riffing (like a jazz musician) on the concept of racial authenticity. The film's avoidance of stable hierarchies and social categories begs the question, how strict is the correlation between the one who holds the camera and the one who wields the power? *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is an experiment in aesthetics, but it's also an equally subversive act of indirect political resistance—a Brechtian "theater of possibility" that turns cinematic self-reflexivity (with its attendant repetitions, elisions, and tedium) into a multilayered implication of the spectator.

The film would represent a major innovation in film narrative even if it weren't a black director who made it. Greaves combines elements of an acting exercise, avant-garde experiment, and direct cinema[7] documentary, chronicling his attempt to screen-test various performers from Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio for a production of his screenplay, tentatively titled *Over the Cliff*, a shrill, aimless two-hander in the style of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Greaves gives his cast and crew only the vaguest hints about the project's ultimate aim, but the camera operators are told definitively that three 16mm cameras should be rolling at all times—one focused on the actors and the dramatic scene, one focused on the crew shooting the scene, and another capturing all of the above plus any significant activity occurring in the park on the periphery of the film shoot.

Eventually, as a challenge to the seemingly incompetent leadership of Greaves—or, if we must make a distinction, the "Greaves character"—the

crew stages a nonviolent revolt, following the advice of leftist icon Mario Savio and throwing their bodies on the gears and levers of the apparatus, so to speak. Without Greaves's knowledge, they take extra reels of film and repair to a private, smoke-filled room to document their rap session about the director's abuse of power, in an assembly that resembles a meeting of the Students for a Democratic Society. If viewers accept this documentary footage at face value, these sessions serve as snapshots of late1960s New Left[8] collectivism developing in real time, as well as time-stamped meditations on the evolving definition of cinematic authorship. The sequences also provide the film's most heightened moments of reflexivity. At one point, the production manager Bob Rosen turns to the camera and assures the viewer: "The director does not know that we're photographing this scene."[9] (Their stated hope is that Greaves will view this new footage and choose to incorporate it into his film.) Further destabilizing an already self-reflexive project, members of the crew betray their own unshakable faith in the power of the author by acknowledging that their collective intervention may have been what the director intended all along. Maybe they're unwittingly enacting their roles in a larger conspiracy. Or "maybe we're all acting!" admits one member of the crew. The film's opening credits suggestively do list William Greaves, Bob Rosen, and soundman Jonathan Gordon as three of the actors, implying that their roles are more than merely technical ones. When one woman on the crew protests the protest, by saying that "a director's film is his mind photographing the world . . . if you say you're gonna show him what's in his mind or what ought to be in his mind, you're taking away a director's film from the director," she is challenged by what we see onscreen—a plaintive long shot of Greaves walking away from the set alone, lost in introspection. It's an image that exists outside the possibility of "his mind photographing the world," as well as one that underscores the difficulty of "taking away a director's film from the director," since, presumably, Greaves the director chose to create the sound bridge uniting her complaint and this imagery, and also chose to incorporate the crew's footage of the revolt into the film.

To say that *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is a film of its moment—that is to say 1968, the year of its production, rather than 2005, the year it finally received an official release at New York City's IFC Center—requires taking into account the heady swirl of influences that might have accounted for such an unorthodox undertaking: a documentary without a subject, a film without an author, a story outside of a story, a "feature-length we-don't-know." In 1967, Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" was translated and published in an American literary journal, challenging the axiom that an author's identity offered the most productive site of inquiry for distilling meaning from the work in question. A few months later, film critic Andrew Sarris published his seminal essay collection *The American Cinema*, which

took an opposite tack, popularizing for American readers the auteur theory that had emerged from the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, a concept that not only distinguished the director as the author of any given film but sought to applaud such authors where they hadn't been recognized before. The *Cahiers* approach canonized mostly American—and almost entirely white male—directors of popular genre films who were developing their own thematic motifs and aesthetic trademarks while negotiating the commercial demands of the studio system. Of more direct relevance to Greaves's project were the emergence of lightweight synchronous-sound technology and the cinéma vérité style of documentary, which Stephen Mamber defined as "an attempt to strip away the accumulated conventions of traditional cinema in the hope of rediscovering a reality that eludes other forms of filmmaking."[10] He characterized this mode as fundamentally noninterventionist, emphasizing its practitioners' belief that events captured by the camera should dictate the status of the film. Yet, he added, crucially, that since "no film can ever break down completely the barrier between the real world and the screen world, *cinéma vérité* knowingly reaches for unattainable goals."[11]

This sense of "unattainable goals" is crucial both to the forward momentum and the entropy of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. An unfinished film in the most productive sense, its questions remain perennially relevant: Does the crew's successful revolt and Greaves's incorporation of their footage mean that he is less a dictator or outsider than a member of the group, or does his acquiescence—a personal and subjective decision—merely reveal the intractability of the auteur theory? Where can we draw the boundaries between cast and crew, between crew and audience? When does an environment become external? Do the machines we use to perceive our surroundings ineradicably transform our sense of the social?

A Concerned Filmmaker

Greaves was born and raised in Harlem, but his parents were from Jamaica and Barbados. Educated at Stuyvesant High School, Greaves joined the American Negro Theater and Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio (alongside Marlon Brando), becoming a stage performer and character actor in black-cast films. In *Lost Boundaries* (1948), a Louis de Rochemont-produced drama about a light-skinned black doctor's attempt to pass as white in a New Hampshire town, Greaves played a supporting role as a charming black college student named Arthur Cooper who, after being invited by the doctor's white-skinned son to visit New Hampshire, is subjected to quiet bigotry. According to historians Adam Knee and Charles Musser, the debonair black student and musician "who is completely comfortable with his African-American identity as he

interacts with his white counterparts . . . was an image seldom if ever seen in American films prior to that date. Greaves's role here clearly prefigured many of those played by Sidney Poitier in the next decade, and one is apt to wonder whether Greaves would have become one of the crossover stars of the fifties had he remained in screen acting."[12] A crossover star, perhaps, but to what end? In a 1949 essay, Ralph Ellison cited *Lost Boundaries* as one in a cohort of sentimental 1940s Hollywood productions whose portrayals of blacks "constitute justifications for all those acts, legal, emotional, economic and political, which we label Jim Crow."[13] In 1952, frustrated with McCarthyism and a lack of dignified movie roles for black actors, Greaves left the United States to move behind the camera as a documentary filmmaker for Canada's National Film Board. The NFB was initially set up by John Grierson, who has been credited as the first person to coin the term *documentary*, which he defined, with a touch of ambiguity, as "the creative treatment of actuality."[14] Greaves says he was "very taken by [Grierson's] discussion of the social uses of film,"[15] and Knee and Musser write that *Emergency Ward* (1958), the observational documentary about a Montreal hospital emergency room Greaves directed for the NFB, bears the humanistic hallmarks of Grierson's influence. According to Knee and Musser, Greaves learned his craft in Canada but found himself somewhat distanced from his subject matter, for "in the all-white world of a Montreal hospital, black racial identity was not a pressing issue."[16] In 1963, a full decade after leaving the United States, he returned to New York as a public information officer and filmmaker for the United Nations. Shirley Clarke, a white New York avant-gardist who directed ground-breaking independent films about black life, was impressed by *Emergency Ward* and recommended Greaves to George Stevens Jr. at the United States Information Agency. During this period, Greaves made films like *Wealth of a Nation* (1964), intended as a documentary about dissent in America but which the USIA eventually molded into what Knee and Musser call "an essayistic paean to American myths,"[17] and *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*[18] (1966), for which Greaves assumed an increased amount of creative control.

By 1968, Greaves had become that rare—if not unprecedented—cultural figure, a black American independent filmmaker, following in a tradition reaching back to the Lincoln Motion Picture Company of the 1910s, the self-financed trailblazer Oscar Micheaux in the 1920s and 1930s, and Spencer Williams in the 1940s. Melvin Van Peebles's Paris-set debut *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* would be released in July 1968, and Gordon Parks's first film would arrive a year later. The working-class and Third World-oriented "L.A. Rebellion" film movement, informally composed of young black filmmakers (and UCLA film school graduates) like Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, and Billy Woodberry, would begin their careers in the 1970s. As critic Amy Taubin puts it, "For an African-American director to make a

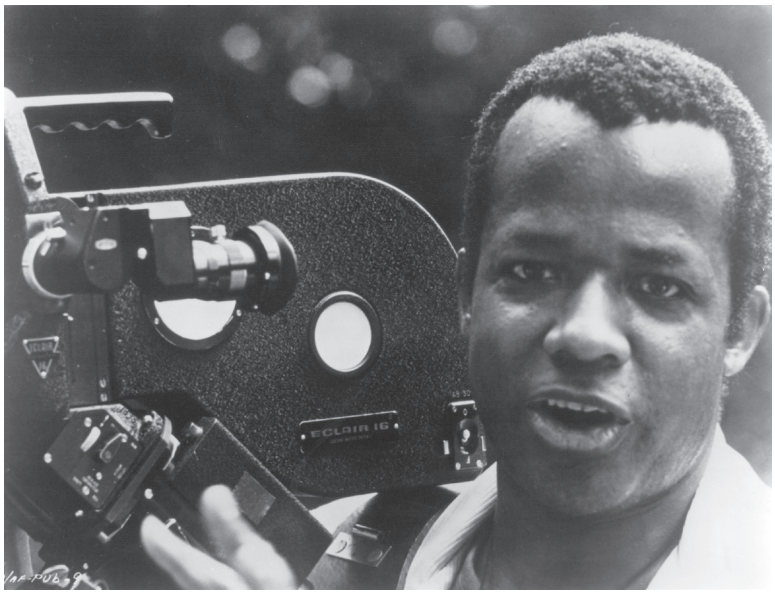

Figure 1. William Greaves, undated photograph. Courtesy of William Greaves Productions.

feature film, let alone one as experimental as a film by Warhol or Godard, could not have been imagined if Greaves hadn't gone out and done it."[19] Despite Greaves's illustrious and pioneering forebears, there was no blueprint for a movie like *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm was shot with about $100,000 of independent financing—thanks in large part to the generosity of an anonymous benefactor[20]—just before Greaves assumed a new role as executive producer on National Educational Television's ground-breaking documentary series *Black Journal*, where he necessarily employed much more conventional filmmaking methods. Studying the documentaries Greaves developed at *Black Journal* and later with his own production company, Knee and Musser have historicized Greaves as the vanguard figure of a pragmatic strain in black filmmaking, one that avoids fetishizing individual work (or individual auteurs), focusing instead on the broader ongoing struggle for civil rights. Knee and Musser also see 1968 as a watershed year for documentary film, "a moment when access to the means of production and distribution began to be more open . . . chip[ping] away at white male hegemony in documentary filmmaking."[21] If Greaves was itching to make a film that liberated itself from the confining structures of institutional documentary practice, he had chosen a propitious moment to make an attempt.

As a black American filmmaker with a secret penchant for experimentation, Greaves must have felt the Barthesian "crisis of authorship" in a distinctly nontheoretical sense. Indeed, although Donald Bogle would refer to

Greaves as "the dean of the independents,"[22] *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* would prove to be the seemingly narcissistic auteurist anomaly in his long, storied, and stylistically self-effacing career as an institutionally sponsored documentary filmmaker. The original lack of critical and commercial interest in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* may well have prevented Greaves from continuing to work in an experimental vein. (And Greaves would not be the only important black filmmaker whose most challenging work remained long buried. Due to legal battles over music rights, Charles Burnett's elliptical neorealist drama *Killer of Sheep*, made in 1977, would not receive a commercial release until 2007, also at New York's IFC Center.) The film was initially rediscovered in 1991, when it fit uneasily but intriguingly into a Brooklyn Museum retrospective entitled "William Greaves: Chronicler of the African-American Experience," which featured most of Greaves's documentaries, along with social activist guest speakers like poet Amiri Baraka and documentarian St. Clair Bourne.

Given the context of Greaves's socially conscious career, the viewer of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* cannot help but be struck by the fact that the film does not directly engage any questions about racial politics. In 1968, the idea of a black filmmaker making a film that didn't confront the burdens of second-class citizenship was almost inconceivable. And one couldn't call Greaves ignorant of the civil rights movement; he was making challenging films about black America at the very same moment. The documentary he made for National Educational Television that year, *Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class* (1968), explored the "lingering mental bondage"[23] of economically successful black Americans who tried to accept white middle-class values. Were they negligent in their response to broader civil rights issues? Was it more productive to attempt assimilation or to develop black cultural institutions? The title *Still a Brother* comes from a statement that associate director of the Washington, DC Urban League, Horace Morris, made in the film about an incident that he says demonstrated to him the "stark realities" of prejudice: in the immediate wake of the Newark riots, Morris had gone to New Jersey to check in on his stepfather and siblings. While in front of his family's apartment building he, his stepfather, and his brother, along with dozens of other African Americans, suddenly found themselves under gunfire from police. Morris's stepfather was mortally wounded and his brother required an operation and extended hospital care. Having barely survived this attack, Morris tried to make sense of its implications, saying "regardless of how far up the economic ladder any Negro goes, that there's still this oppressive thing of prejudice that he's subjected to . . . when it gets down to the nitty gritty, right down to where it really matters you're still a Negro and you're still identified with every other Negro in America . . . you're still a brother and I think we just have to recognize this." Other participants in the documentary discuss the shared fate of African Americans of different

classes, the implications of such an alliance, and the nature of radicalism and social change in America, lending several layers to the film's title *Still a Brother*. Initially conceived by the network as a way of focusing on "good negroes" to counter the previous summer's news imagery of rioting blacks in Detroit and Newark, Greaves's film proved much more complex and controversial.[24] "[NET] had expected an *Ebony* magazine kind of film," Greaves says, "but we brought them this documentary that talked about mental revolution and showed increasing militancy in the black experience. . . . There was a great deal of anxiety because these executives were looking at their mortgages and didn't know whether they would be tossed out of their jobs."[25] The film shares none of the formal radicalism of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* and does not advocate for black separatism, but its rejection of material gain as a path to racial equality was bound to unsettle the liberal bourgeoisie. Narrated by Ossie Davis and populated with middle-class professionals, radicals, and academics—including research chemist Dr. Percy Julian and sociologist St. Clair Drake—the Emmy-nominated *Still a Brother* is a remarkable and still-relevant consideration of the impediments to black economic and political mobility in America. Despite likely reservations about the content, NET premiered the program on April 29, 1968, less than three weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.[26]

Greaves's other films—which collectively serve as a kind of history textbook for the twentieth-century African-American experience—include *From These Roots* (1974), a historical consideration of Harlem's cultural renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s; *Ali: The Fighter* (1971), a behind-the-scenes account of Muhammad Ali's "fight of the century" with Joe Frazier; and the made-for-PBS biographical documentaries *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1989) and *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* (2001). Throughout his career, Greaves's own politics have oscillated between radicalism and liberalism.

"I am furious Black," Greaves began, in a manifesto-style 1970 editorial that covered two full pages of the *New York Times* and sharply contrasts with the nonchalant demeanor of the director in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*. "As an Afro-American film and TV producer, I, for one, haven't time to be either entertained or entertaining . . . [black producers] must develop programming which prepares the minority community for assuming the responsibilities of leadership a sick society is forcing upon them." Greaves seeks to redirect the tensions that arise from social inequality into "psychodramatic and sociodramatic encounter television," putting "the rednecks of Alabama in a direct encounter with the Black militants of Harlem." His stated goal is to use mass media as "an agency for improving mass mental health and social reform . . . a catharsis, a means of purifying the emotional and spiritual life of this country. In other words, for the Black producer, television will be just another word for jazz."[27] At no point does Greaves mention any prior

experiments in the "encounter" format, but his assertion that he lacks the time for entertainment strongly hints that all his recent projects have been attempts at furthering a particular political and aesthetic agenda. He also characterizes leadership as something forced upon the minority citizen by a "sick society," an idea that resonates with *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*'s deconstruction of leadership and group dynamics. The *Times* editorial led *Business Screen* magazine to track down Greaves for an interview feature one month later, titled "A Concerned Filmmaker." Again, despite the interviewer's evident curiosity about Greaves's formal ambitions, his radical project of two summers previous is never mentioned. "Will you stick to making films about Blacks?" he is asked, as if all his projects to date tackled strictly black issues—a characterization he does not challenge. His answer: "Only if Otto Preminger continues to make films about white people."[28] On one level, it is difficult to understand Greaves's reluctance to promote his innovative and underpublicized project, but his caginess seems of a piece with his determination not to intervene in the organic process of his film's development, even after he had called *Take One* a wrap.

Take One

Certainly the incongruities and contradictions of Greaves's stewardship were not lost on the cast and crew of his unremarkable mini-melodrama *Over the Cliff*. What politically engaged artist in the spring of 1968, with war raging in Vietnam, student protests bubbling over into revolt, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s recent assassination, would so perversely set aside time to screen-test a series of dialogues based around a white middle-class married couple's sexual frustration? In addition, this bickering couple's dialogue is fairly rough, filled with the sort of frank and profanity-laced talk about homosexuality and abortions that would keep the supposed work being filmed from ever reaching a mainstream audience. Black director or not, this would be a film without serious commercial prospects.

There is only one moment in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* when Greaves's racial identity is even hinted at. At one point, during a lull in filming of the primary drama, lead actor Don Fellows, no longer in character, but facing one of the documentary cameras, turns to Greaves, and jokes: "You wanted to say a few words for George Wallace?" In response, Greaves gives himself over to nervous laughter, unwilling to lobby a personal protest against a figure he clearly finds repellent. One gets the sense that for Greaves, any overt introduction of the race question would be, in Barthesian terms, a way of imposing a limit upon the text. But the ramifications are more than merely textual. Playfully, almost ostentatiously sidestepping any sense of obligation

about "representing the race," Greaves engages in the reverse of what Gayatri Spivak calls "strategic essentialism,"[29] eschewing the advantageous temporary assertion of a group identity. Unlike the hero of Ralph Ellison's novel, the Greaves of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* attempts to evade fixed projections of identity not through invisibility but through illegibility.

Greaves's onscreen persona is markedly mercurial: sometimes effusive, sometimes nonchalant, often ironic, and always slyly manipulating the terms of any discourse. He presents himself both as a disciplined craftsman and a fount of spontaneity, and challenged the professionals on his cast and crew to absorb the same ethic, in part by asking them to conduct their work in Central Park, normally encountered as a zone of leisure and play. Scott MacDonald notes that Greaves clearly "sees the park as a space that allows people to leave—for a limited time—the rigidity of their workaday schedules and enter a more 'creative' environment."[30] For MacDonald, the film's implicit question, posed toward cast and crew, is whether they can temporarily shake off both professionalism and preconceptions in order to recover the spirit of democratic idealism and aesthetic pleasure intended by Central Park's designers as a respite from Manhattan's grid of capitalist efficiency.

Though apparently wary of precluding spontaneity by overdetermining his film's structure, Greaves seems to be enacting a form of non-direction that is as manipulative as hands-on micromanagement. In interviews about the film, Greaves regularly invokes the Heisenberg Principle of Uncertainty, "for which the analog to the electron microscope is the motion picture camera, which is looking down into the psyche and soul of the actor while the actor is performing, and often times it tends to stiffen and destroy the spontaneity and truthful feelings of the actor as the character they're trying to portray."[31] In *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, Greaves is usually shown holding a large 16mm camera on his right shoulder, clearly aware of its capacity for intimidation—even as he tells his actors "You can do anything you want . . . do whatever it is that's organic to *you*." As he writes in his personal production notes, which pointedly were not handed out to the cast and crew: "Our problem, or rather my problem, is to get out of nature's way and let nature tell her story. That's what a good director is—a person who gets his ego out of his own way, he is at best a collaborator and servant of nature . . . but who, paradoxically, firmly controls the conditions of spontaneity, theatricality, and drama on the set."[32] This is an oddly essentialist conception of the term *nature*, coming from an artist as aware of the contingencies of human behavior as Greaves. But the mission statement suggests a way that Greaves's identity as a black civil rights pioneer may be central to the conditions of his experiment. (Fascinatingly, in considering the personal stamp of black film performers of the 1930s—stars like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Louise Beavers, and Hattie McDaniel—Donald Bogle frames their agency in similar terms: "They built and molded

themselves into what film critic Andrew Sarris might call nondirectional *auteurs*."[33]) By refusing to call attention to his blackness, and to his extradiegetic status as a furious radical, he strips away a layer of easily interpretable, easily dismissible meaning, both for his collaborators and his audience. He refuses to let the film become one man's perfectly appropriate gesture of social protest. Instead, Greaves wants the film's revolutionary energy to manifest itself formally. As the production notes plainly state: "The film is rebellion!"[34] If parts of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* can be examined as a primary source index of debates about power in America in the late 1960s, the fact that the cast and crew's "protesters," some of whom are black men, never mention the ironic fact of their manipulative "oppressor's" race renders it all the more conspicuous. One suspects that if anyone on the film shoot *had* called attention to Greaves's complex and historically unprecedented subject position, the director has consigned the scene to the cutting room floor.

Is Greaves consciously assuming the role of Henry Louis Gates's folkloric "trickster" figure, communicating in double-talk to signify on his actual oppressors? In his comments on the use of the term *signifyin(g)* in black discourse, Roger D. Abrahams calls it a "technique of indirect argument or persuasion . . . a language of implication . . . to imply, goad, beg, boast, by *indirect* verbal or gestural means . . . signifying being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures achieving Hamlet's 'direction through indirection.'"[35] Historians have argued that a particular African-American brand of humor stems from these complex, manipulative ploys—molded by the bondage of slavery—which often mask genuine feeling with mirth and deceit.[36] Greaves is no comedian, but he operates with a similar manipulative skill. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*'s improvisatory nature, its contagious sense of liberation from dominant structures, its emphasis on creative collaboration and the artful assimilation of the unexpected, clearly links the film to the ethos of jazz. Robert Stam notes that Greaves's film "is built, like jazz itself, on signifying 'mistakes.'"[37] What makes Greaves's behavior so surprising, and indeed so subversive, is that while he nominally owns the means of this particular production (and the title of "director"), he refuses to act like the boss. His performance of nondirectional auteurship (and feigned ineptitude) might even be read as a gesture of solidarity with the more obviously constrained black performers of American cinema's past, retaining and reclaiming a storied tradition of oppositional cultural expression while standing at the threshold of potential cinematic liberation.

Late in the film, the crew sits down with Greaves on a patch of grass to directly confront him with their concerns. Greaves handles their challenge with equanimity, and while tipping his hand, explaining his intentions with remarkable bluntness, he makes an ironic rhetorical turn: "This sort of palace revolt which is taking place is not dissimilar to the revolution that is tak-

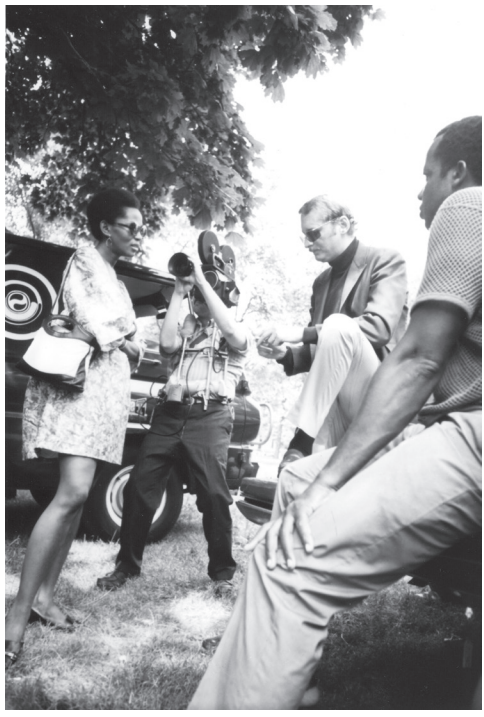

Figure 2. Audrey Henningham, Frank Baker, and William Greaves on the set of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968). Courtesy of William Greaves Productions.

ing place in America today. In the sense that I represent the Establishment, and I've been trying to get you to do certain things which you've become, in a sense, disenchanted with. The important thing is that we surface from this production experience with something that is entirely exciting and creative as a result of our collective efforts." There is something productively perverse about Greaves—the self-proclaimed "furious Black," a man whose entire career testifies to the varieties of black exclusion from the motion picture industry—deciding to openly align himself with the Establishment, and the crew's reluctance to acknowledge the irony adds another wrinkle to the narrative thread. Greaves's acknowledgment of his position as "the man" equates the director with the dictator, and his call for collaboration does nothing to lessen his status as the controller of this text. What should a work meant to reflect the input of "collective efforts" actually look like, and how could it function without a leader? This is a question the film implicitly directs to the New Left student collectives and the civil rights movements as much as to the cast and crew. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is about as superficially uncontrolled an artwork as one can imagine, but somebody had to assemble the footage and transform disorder into coherence. When the film ends, the first credit presented to the viewer is not "Director: William Greaves" but simply "Editor: William Greaves." This apparent "demotion" of duties might be unintentional, but it's almost as if Greaves is hinting at a bedrock maintenance of authorship that can survive even the relinquishment of such ego-boosting job descriptions as "director" and "producer."

If *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is meant to provide an unfettered look at the complete filmmaking process, or even an ironic commentary on documentary filmmaking at a particular historical moment, then the fact that Greaves

does not show us the editing process seems like a particularly glaring absence. His most consequential acts of "dictatorship" are not documented. Granted, a filming of the editing process would pose a unique set of formal challenges, for presumably someone would have to edit the footage of the editing process being filmed. But it would highlight the fact that only Greaves has the power of retrospective revision; though the film's logic is predicated on the interventions of his cast and crew, only Greaves can construct a narrative that grants him authorship over this work of art. For exactly this reason, Frederick Wiseman, the most prominent contemporary documentarian working in the direct cinema mode, has rejected the very concept of direct or so-called observational cinema, arguing that "*cinéma vérité* is just a pompous French term that has absolutely no meaning as far as I'm concerned. The effort is to be selective about your observations and organize them into a dramatic structure."[38] For both Wiseman and Greaves, selection and organization equals authorship.

The fact that Greaves labels the film a "take one" gives the whole project a provisional air: this is not *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: The Director's Cut*. (In a sense, the most accurate title would be *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: The Editor's Cut*.) The viewer is given every indication that the authorial voice considers this a document that can be improved upon—a "take" that can be used or discarded at the editor's behest. The film even ends with the unlikely promise of a *Take Two*, a promise upon which Greaves actually followed through in 2005, with the participation of actor Steve Buscemi and filmmaker Steven Soderbergh, the latter of whom has set the contemporary standard for balancing low-budget experimental projects with pragmatic, commercially viable (and more quietly radical) features.[39]

The title *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* refers to an esoteric term conceived by the social science philosopher Arthur Bentley: *symbiotaxiplasm*. In his *Inquiry into Inquiries*, Bentley used the term to describe a transparent imagined substance that allows interdependent relationships to develop by connecting a series of organisms.[40] Greaves liked the way the term connotes a dialectical relationship between humans and their environment, and inserted the word *psycho* to highlight the mental mechanisms involved in the creative process as the individual negotiates his or her environment. There is a central relationship that exists in the script of the screen test, then a series of relationships affecting the crew and determining the conditions of production, and then another set of relationships hovering outside the social networks we see depicted onscreen. Collaborative aesthetics and individual direction are thus *both* posed as integral and inextricable components of the creative process.

As such, Greaves's film pays particular attention to the environmental conditions that both enable and compromise its creation, and subtly encourages the viewer to do the same. The film begins by considering its ambient

surroundings, taking in young lovers on a blanket, a multicultural group of youths playing soccer. The camera shows us the civic negotiations necessary for a film shoot; we watch the production manager's conversation with a policeman who requests to see the filming permit, and who blithely assents to being filmed on camera. Indeed, a number of people are shown signing their legal release forms, which undercuts the idea that all bystanders caught on camera are acting "naturally." Greaves also shows us his dealings with a group of gawking children. Though he affects a playful manner, telling one girl that she will be famous, since they've got her on film, Greaves also asks the children to be quiet, a subtle form of directorial control disguised as common sense. It's an especially strange request, considering how *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*'s sound is ultimately edited. The soundtrack, for the most part, is muddy, allowing the audience to hear cars and voices in the background of nearly every scene; often the dialogue drops out in the middle of a conversation, and Miles Davis's "In a Silent Way"—itself famous for its psychedelic, genre-bending structure and incorporation of ambient sounds—is pushed into the foreground. The film's heightened awareness of what it means to colonize a patch of a public land on a beautiful summer's day seems to pose a whole host of questions about just what social awareness entails, and the responsibilities that accompany such a potentially transformative realization.

The most compelling "character" in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is, perhaps necessarily, an accidental figure. Unlisted in the film's credits, he's an eloquent self-described drunk named Victor who wanders onto the set to deliver a series of poetic rants against the political order of late 1960s America, and especially Mayor John Lindsay's New York City. When told that the crew is filming a *movie*, he sensibly asks: "Who's moving whom?" (In this context, it's a line too perfect to be scripted.) The cameras stay focused on Victor for an inordinate amount of time, and as it becomes clear that he's a dynamic figure of interest, the production manager asks him to sign a release form. It's only at this point that Greaves and his crew discovers that Victor is homeless and sleeps in the bushes at Sixty-ninth Street. Greaves seems baffled by this revelation and turns to his colleagues. "Did anyone know this?" Did anyone know that people sleep in the park? Bob Rosen, the production manager, claims that he lives mere blocks away, and has never seen anyone sleep in the park. Collectively, they want to know why he puts up with these conditions. "How can I fight politics?" Victor responds. "I'm just one man." As Victor eventually moves on, having collected a few dollars from members of the crew, it becomes clear that another unwitting intervention has been staged—an individual has stepped in and fundamentally reshaped the film's environment, emphasizing that no matter how enlightened and socially progressive the film crew might be, they are still alienated from another level of reality. The meaning of the Establishment has again been recalibrated. That Greaves the

editor, sifting through miles of footage, decided to make this scene the film's penultimate conflict seems quite significant.

What is the crew's responsibility to this homeless man? Why will the crew revolt against the director but not against a social order that causes such a man to sleep in the bushes? If the members of the crew consider their director frivolous (and perhaps morally reprehensible) for shooting a series of seemingly worthless screen tests during one of the most politically and racially charged seasons in American history, then are they not doubly culpable for assisting him in his folly? And what about the passive spectator? Can an audience be judged for judging the crew's indifference to this man's struggle? By casting himself as a self-aware yet banal figure—"Don't take me seriously!" he says at one point, speaking directly to the camera—Greaves is trying to arouse a sense of productive frustration, challenging both the crew and audience to consider assuming new kinds of social responsibility. The film features several occurrences of a camera being aimed back at the viewer, calling attention to the dialogics of the gaze, continually hinting at an imminent breaking of the fourth wall in which we will be called to account as well.

A Blast from the Past

One major challenge to any historical classification of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is distinguishing the elements of parody from the apparent earnestness of the endeavor. Whether intentionally or not, Greaves's film works not only as an experimental documentary but as an ironic or parodic fiction about documentary filmmaking (and protest art) at an explosive historical moment, one that relied on nonfiction motion pictures in the form of news reporting. One can point to the burgeoning cinéma vérité movement as the initial impetus for this exploration of controlled and uncontrolled "reality," but the period immediately anticipating and following *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* also saw a movement of clearly fictionalized "documentaries" that played much more openly with evolving conceptions of cinematic realism and documentary aesthetics, challenging Jean-Luc Godard's formulation that "the cinema is truth at 24 frames per second."

Jim McBride's film *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), to cite one prominent example, presents itself as a cinéma vérité "found document," in which a young, Godard-obsessed and self-obsessed film student (played by L. M. Kit Carson) confesses his daily relationship struggles to a camera in his bedroom, eventually complaining that the camera does not reciprocate his emotional fervor. As Dave Kehr notes: "Where most independent productions are founded on self-righteous claims of truth and honesty, McBride's film wittily observes that Hollywood has no corner on illusionism. Even the black-

and-white, hand-held cinema still lies at 24 frames per second."[41] The film, which credits writer/director Jim McBride and cinematographer Michael Wadleigh—who would go on to direct the *Woodstock* (1970) documentary—does not hide its status as a work of fiction, and clearly derides the pieties of the direct cinema movement. A *New York Times* review from 1973 (when it screened at the Whitney Museum), bearing the subhead "'David Holzman's Diary' Spoofs Cinema Verite,"[42] betrays an understanding of the film's obvious conceit. Other contemporaneous projects, like Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969) and Norman Mailer's *Maidstone* (1970), used cinéma vérité techniques to explore developments in American counterculture, but neither film is referred to as a documentary.

Despite the intricacies of the film's construction, nobody involved in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* has ever publicly challenged its status as an unscripted, unstaged documentary, in which spontaneous behavior dictated the outcome of the plot. Yet, as of February 2011, at least one participant in the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* experiment is still concerned with asserting its veracity, protesting against the idea that he had been "played." In a long but fascinating comment left on a website hosting an interview with Greaves and Soderbergh, a still-passionate Bob Rosen challenges a Wikipedia article's statement that Greaves's supposedly foolish on-set activity led (in)directly to the crew's rebellion and the eventual incorporation of their footage. In other words, Rosen contends that Greaves had nothing to do with the crew's collective decision to film its revolt:

> The crucial thing, as I have tried to point out elsewhere, is that Bill had no way of knowing what we (the crew) would do, if anything. The article glibly slides over this crucial issue: "This footage, of course, ends up in the final cut of the film . . ." What does the Wikipedia writer mean by "this" footage? THIS footage was NOT "because of the constant filming on the set." It was because of the filming WE did OFF the set, in the REAL world, behind Bill's back, without his knowledge. What does he mean by "of course"? He means that ONCE we gave Bill the footage, Bill of course saw what we had done, and made the most of it. As I said to Bill when he stepped out of the elevator on the penthouse floor at Amram's and I handed him those 4 rolls: "Bill, you're going to need this." Meaning: "You won't have a film without this footage."
>
> Now, in this Wiki article, Bill is presented like he was God, that he somehow knew all along that it was only a matter of time before one of us got this "bright idea" to take the film away from him, out of his control, and film behind his back. Is it possible? Sure. Do I know for sure that Bill didn't have this plan in his mind BEFORE we did anything? No, BUT I am almost certain that he did NOT. How do I know? Because that is the way CREATION happens. ALL creation, even God does it that way.

> It's called "evolution." There is no one directing it. No god-like auteur on the set "playing the fool" in order to get other people to complete His idea. I'm not saying Bill WAS a fool. I am just saying he wasn't a god. The "playing the fool" bit is Bill's retrospective revision (or the writer's revision), his attempt after the fact of creation to construct some fake narrative that restores the illusion that Bill knew what he was doing all the time.[43]

Rosen is trying to set the record straight, but in a more important sense, he is also attempting to maintain a sense of authorship, feeling that Greaves, "no god-like auteur," has unfairly been credited with more than he deserves. "Bill, you're going to need this," Rosen apparently says—thus creating what could have been the most dramatic scene of the film, had Rosen thought to bring along a camera and microphone—and the word *need* implies that the apparent ringmaster would have no film without Rosen's intervention. Rosen, of course, is the same figure that in 1968 turns to the camera to remind viewers: "The director does not know that we're photographing this scene." His invocation of "the REAL world," in reference to the crew's backroom meeting, is another fascinating category mistake, since the end of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* seems to critique the self-satisfied nature of the crew's revolt, as contrasted with the political struggle of Victor, the homeless man. Surely to Greaves's amusement, the game set up by the conditions of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is still being played.

By the time Greaves's film was released in 2005, the false documentary, in which fictitious events are presented using the tropes of documentary form, had developed into a sub-genre, and the concept of direct cinema had come to seem outmoded and naïve. A taxonomy of these films might distinguish between wry, self-aware "mockumentaries" like *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), and faux-documentaries like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which dispense with recognizable performers and depend at least somewhat on the spectator's credulity in believing that she is watching "real" footage. Audiences had become used to seeing these postmodern documentary hybrid films, and *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* might now be seen to represent nostalgia for "the real"—especially as seen through the mist of the 1960s—since the film's experiential frisson emerges from the belief in a "reality" that can be fractured, and a narrative center that can shift.

In a day-of-release review in the *New York Sun*, Nathan Lee called the film "a blast from the past that's as fresh as tomorrow," though he also emphasized the datedness of the film's concerns: "[It's] flower-power Pirandello, a High 60s groove on, like, 'supra levels of reality,' man."[44] In a *New York Times* rave, Manohla Dargis admitted that the film feels "very of its experimental moment."[45] Due to the time lapse between *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*'s moment of production and the moment it met the public,

the film seems destined to remain an avant-garde hippie time capsule, not an early landmark of black experimental cinema. But one knows better than to say anything conclusive about a film whose shape continually morphs according to perspective.

Notes

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1. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xviii.

2. Maria San Filippo, "What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been: *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*," *Film History*, 13, no. 2 (2001): 216–25.

3. Michael Atkinson, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One," *The Village Voice*, October 18, 2005.

4. Manohla Dargis, "Film within a Film in 60's Time Capsule? Groovy," *New York Times*, October 26, 2005.

5. J. Hoberman, "It's *Déjà-Vu* All Over Again," *Premiere*, July 1992.

6. The William Greaves Collection, 1968–2003 contains writings, speeches, promotional materials, clippings, and information about the documentary film pursuits of William Greaves.

7. I refer here to the sub-genre of documentary film, popularized by Robert Drew and associates like D. A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers, in which filmmakers attempt to observe and record events while remaining impartial. In an experimental cinema context, "Direct Cinema" is sometimes used to suggest a hands-on manipulation of celluloid, pigments, and perforation on the film's surface.

8. A loosely organized, mostly white student movement in the 1960s that combined elements of liberalism and Marxism in advocating for civil rights, university reform, and an end to the Vietnam War.

9. All quotes from *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* are transcribed from the Criterion Collection DVD released in December 2006.

10. Stephen Mamber, *Cinema Verite in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 4.

11. Ibid.

12. Adam Knee and Charles Musser, "William Greaves, Documentary Filmmaking and the African-American Experience," *Film Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 14–15.

13. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 276–77.

14. John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 13.

15. Knee and Musser, "William Greaves, Documentary Filmmaking."

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. The film chronicled a historic gathering of black artists and intellectuals in Dakar, Senegal, and featured appearances by Katherine Dunham, Duke Ellington, and Langston Hughes. Though the USIA films were not distributed in the United States, Knee and Musser write that the *First World Festival* documentary was popular in Africa.

19. Amy Taubin, "*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*: Still No Answers," *The Criterion Collection*, December 5, 2006.

20. Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 237. In an unpublished interview, MacDonald asked Greaves about his source of funding, but Greaves would not reveal the "angel" investor's name.

21. Knee and Musser, "William Greaves, Documentary Filmmaking."

22. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 301.

23. Quotes from *Still a Brother* are transcribed from a DVD screened at Indiana University's Black Film Center/Archive on March 25, 2011. William Greaves Collection, Special Collection WG, Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington.

24. Knee and Musser, "William Greaves, Documentary Filmmaking."

25. Ibid.

26. Robert E. Dallos, "Negro Middle Class 'Revolution' Subject of Negro-Made TV Show," *New York Times*, April 26, 1968.

27. William Greaves, "100 Madison Avenues Will Be of No Help," New York Times, August 9, 1970. William Greaves Collection, Special Collection WG, Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington.

28. "A Concerned Filmmaker," *Business Screen*, September 1970. William Greaves Collection, Special Collection WG, Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington.

29. Gayatri Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 214.

30. MacDonald, *Garden*, 240.

31. "William Greaves and Steven Soderbergh on 'Symbiopsychotaxiplasm,'" *Fast, Cheap Movie Thoughts*, May 6, 2010, http://fastcheapmoviethoughts.blogspot.com/2010/05/william-greaves-and-steven-soderbergh.html, accessed June 5, 2011.

32. William Greaves, "*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*: Director's Early Notes Prior to and during Production in the spring of 1968," in *Screen Writings: Scripts and Texts from Independent Films,* ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 36.

33. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 37.

34. Greaves, "Director's Early Notes," 34.

35. Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), 66–67, 264.

36. See Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

37. Stam, *Reflexivity*, xix.

38. Kaleem Aftab and Alexandra Weltz, "Fred Wiseman," *Film West* 40 (2000).

39. Soderbergh's self-reflexive, improvised, and critically misunderstood *Full Frontal* (2002), set in the entertainment industry, is clearly indebted to *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*.

40. Arthur F. Bentley, *Inquiry into Inquiries: Essays in Social Theory*, ed. Sidney Ratner (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954).

41. Dave Kehr, "David Holzman's Diary," *Chicago Reader*, http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/david-holzmans-diary/Film?oid=1061408, accessed June 8, 2011.

42. Nora Sayre, "Screen: 'David Holzman's Diary' Spoofs Cinema Verite," *New York Times*, December 7, 1973.

43. "William Greaves and Steven Soderbergh on 'Symbiopsychotaxiplasm,'" *Fast, Cheap Movie Thoughts*. When I wrote Bob Rosen on April 26, 2011, to confirm his authorship of the comment, he sent the following response: "Thanks for your inquiry. But what exactly does it mean to 'confirm' that it's indeed 'me'? Sure, it's me. But how can you be sure? Because I say so? Maybe 'Bob Rosen' doesn't exist at all, just some guy with an email address with the name 'bob' in it, just a fan of the film, as you apparently are, who has found a clever way to participate in the film's afterlife on this guy's blog. Or maybe 'Bob Rosen' is just another one of Bill's Actors Studio buddies who agreed to play the role of 'Production Manager' in the film, and is still playing it. And Bill will laugh when I send him a copy of this email. Isn't that precisely the whole point?"

44. Nathan Lee, "High '60s Groove," *New York Sun*, October 26, 2005.

45. Dargis, "Film within a Film."